

CASA of JACKSON and JOSEPHINE COUNTIES

My name is Grace M. Zilverberg, PhD, and I have been a CASA for 3.5 years. I have found the CASA role to be extremely important for the benefit of children in foster care. Usually the child or children have been removed from the home by the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) and made a ward of the state by the court.

ODHS's mandatory and primary goal is to reunify the children with one or both of the child's biological parent. The process may take from one to up to four years of a team effort that involves the ODHS caseworker(s), lawyers for the children and parents, and a multitude of non-profit organizations. Ideally, a CASA is available for appointment by the court. While ODHS and the parent's lawyer work toward the parent's goal to have their children returned to their care, the children's lawyer's role is to advocate for what the child wants, which may or may not be return to parents. The non-profits may offer drug and alcohol rehabilitation (residential or out-patient), parenting classes, anti-domestic violence classes, etc. depending on what the judge orders.

The CASA's one and only goal is to advocate for what is best for the child regardless of what the parent(s) or child(ren) want. That involves being in close contact and building trust with the child, obtaining updates from the resource parents, tracking the parent's progress in their court-ordered actions, and working with the caseworker. This gives the CASA a wholistic overview, an ability to perceive problems that may have been missed, and an opportunity to work with those involved to solve perceived problems. In short, the CASA fills out and balances the team while increasing communication between team members in order to find the best family solution for the child.

Example 1: These parents were extremely angry that their children were removed from their care. But they worked so hard to attend every visitation, every court-ordered action that their children were returned to them within the year. They found that their relationships with each other and their children had improved dramatically as a result of the experience.

Example 2: This was a case where the mother of three children was the abuser. The oldest had a different father, and the two younger siblings were the children of the mother's partner. She wound up in jail for strangling him. ODHS got involved, but all three stayed in the home of the step-/biological father. CASA's discussions with the older children revealed that they did not want visitations at ODHS with their mother and felt traumatized all over again every time that they were forced to see her. Discussions with the father/step-father confirmed traumatized and acting-out behavior after every visit. The CASA and the children's lawyers were able to convince the judge to stop the visitations. The bio-father of the oldest child lived on the east coast and hadn't parented her for 14 of her 15 years. He was also an alcoholic and rarely called his child. Not only was he clearly not a suitable parent, but his child did not want to live with him. Nevertheless, the ODHS caseworker kept trying for reunification with him. The CASA was able to fight against that reunification, the father was able to gain legal custody of his two children and to adopt his step-child.

Example 3: Another case involved a married couple with a young daughter. The couple had split up and both became homeless – the father with another woman. The mother drifted around homeless for about a year, missing her visitations, losing her phones, not participating in her court-ordered actions, and lying about having jobs. She credits the CASA for giving her the courage to enter residential rehabilitation. So after nine months of being clean and sober and finding an apartment, she and her daughter were reunified. It was a joy to see how happy mother and daughter were to have each other again.

Example 4: This case involved a young couple with two very young children. For nearly a year and a half they were homeless, missing visitations, losing phones, and clearly still on drugs and alcohol. We thought that they would never be able to get their children back. After two local resource parent placements, the brother of the father and his wife offered to care for the children. Somehow the bio-parents found their way to the Rogue Retreat with its shelter and surrounding services. Despite not finishing their court-ordered actions, they became sober and clean and were able to move closer to the brother's family. The CASA and ODHS recommended guardianship to the brother and his wife until the bio-parents were able to care for the children. The result has been that these two little children have two sets of parents – the kind of resolution that lifts one's heart.

Example 5: Each case is different and challenging. This CASA's current case is extremely challenging and involves working closely with the ODHS caseworker, the tribal caseworker, and the service providers. It involves three children, two known bio-fathers and one unknown bio-father plus other relatives. Many of the adults are melodramatic, violent, dishonest, drug and alcohol users, and use the children as weapons against each other. Determining the appropriate home(s) for these children without separating them from each other, and we don't know yet how this case will be resolved. Nevertheless, the CASA, ODHS and the tribal caseworker are working extremely hard to work through this case and find the best solution for these children.