ALAMEDA COUNTY CASA: GROUP HOMES PROJECT

Advocating for Group Home Youth and Supporting Emancipating Youth

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SUMMARY

Alameda County has the largest number of children in foster care in the San Francisco Bay Area with 3,602 children in 2006. Of these children, about 15 percent, or 632, live in group homes (460) or institutions (172). There are approximately 45 dependency group homes and two institutions in Alameda County.

The California Department of Social Services defines group homes as:

“Group homes provide the most restrictive out-of-home placement option for children in foster care. They provide a placement option for children with significant emotional or behavioral problems who require more restrictive environments. The licensed group home is defined as a facility of any capacity which provides 24-hour non-medical care and supervision to children in a structured environment, with such services provided at least in part by staff employed by the licensee. Group homes run the gamut from large institutional type environments which provide an intense therapeutic setting, often called “residential treatment centers,” to small home environments which incorporate a “house parent” model. As a result, group home placements provide various levels of structure, supervision and services.

“Group homes may offer specific services targeted to a specific population of children or a range of services depending on the design of their program. These services include substance abuse, minor-parent (mothers and babies), infant programs, mental health treatment, vocational training, mental health day treatment, sex offenders, wards only, emancipation and reunification. Many programs provide more than one service and list their primary service function as reunification of children with the biological family. A high number also list their primary function as emancipation.”

Although this definition indicates that group homes are placement options for children with significant emotional or behavioral problems, the Group Homes Project has observed that many youth who do not exhibit significant emotional or behavioral issues are nevertheless placed in these facilities, possibly because of the lack of available foster home placements in the County. Without a supportive family environment, lack of consistency and with little access to existing resources, these young people often lack the necessary skills and guidance to prepare themselves for emancipation, which is evident in poor emancipation outcomes documented nationwide.

Historically, the Alameda County Court Appointed Special Advocates (ACCASA) program seldom matched volunteer advocates to older youth living in group homes, since most volunteers preferred to be matched with younger children. Older youth and the group home environment can pose special challenges that volunteers are less willing to take on. As a result, the population most critically in need of intervention and advocacy has been more likely to languish on waitlists, and many of these youth emancipate from care before they can be matched with a volunteer. While early intervention is very important to ensure positive
futures for younger children in the foster care system, it is crucial that transition-age youth gain the benefits that can be derived from the adult advocacy, assistance and support offered through CASA and its volunteers.

In 2003, Alameda County CASA determined that it was imperative to advocate for and address the needs of group home youth and improve emancipation outcomes. A grant from The California Endowment and Zellerbach Family Foundation funded the conception and implementation of the Group Homes Project. As a result of this project, Alameda County CASA became the first County in the nation to formally appoint volunteers to group homes, rather than to individual children. By assigning volunteers to group homes, they could advocate for all Alameda County youth residing in the group homes, even those not on the CASA waitlist.

Our goals were to serve a greater number of youth, particularly those who had been waitlisted for our services for a long period of time, and to improve their emancipation outcomes. Specific objectives included:

- Recruiting new volunteers
- Placing 70 adult volunteers in 30 Alameda County dependency group homes
- Encouraging volunteers to work with more than one youth simultaneously. This was one of several requirements that departed from the traditional CASA model.

Although we were initially successful in recruiting a large number of volunteers (80 in total) into 32 group homes, at the conclusion of the project we had 24 volunteers assigned to 17 participating group homes. Nevertheless, our volunteer program led to significant improvement in emancipation outcomes for youth in the areas of housing, employment, and education.

In addition, we provided technical assistance to group homes in reproductive health and nutrition education, created a curriculum and training kit for volunteers and group home
staff, documented best practices and lessons learned, and compiled recommendations for policymakers, group homes, and the Department of Children and Family Services. We gathered recommendations from volunteers and youth during a three-year period to examine ways to improve best practices in group homes and emancipation outcomes for group home youth.

CASA always knew there was a need to advocate for group home youth, but the intensity of the need was not known. After working with group home youth for three years and evaluating the project’s results, the Alameda County CASA leadership were overwhelmingly convinced that group home youth advocacy by volunteers should become a permanent program, since it would enable us to serve a greater number of youth and positively impact emancipation outcomes. We also came to believe that the program components would be easy to replicate across the nation, and we are designing our program model and curriculum so that it will be practical and useful for other counties across the United States.
BACKGROUND

Established in 1987, the Alameda County Court Appointed Special Advocates’ (ACCASA) mission is to promote and support quality volunteer advocates to speak for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the dependency court system.

Throughout our history, CASA volunteers have helped to meet the emotional and physical safety needs of thousands of abused and neglected children. Volunteers advocate on behalf of the children’s educational, mental health, medical/dental, and family/sibling visitation needs, and work to increase the likelihood that the children are placed in homes and with families in which they will thrive. In a sometimes-bewildering sea of child welfare workers, attorneys, therapists and caregivers, the CASA volunteer is a consistent and caring adult and advocate for the child. The one-on-one relationship that forms between the volunteer and dependent child is often the only stable, positive relationship the child has while in foster care.

The CASA program strives to serve all ages of children in the dependency foster care system. However, before the Group Homes Project, our program primarily served youth less than 14 years of age. In response to older youth not being assigned a CASA volunteer before their dismissal and the ensuing poor emancipation outcomes, the CASA staff and advisory board met in 2002 to discuss strategies for serving older youth. These discussions led to the conclusion that group home youth are among the foster children most in need of advocacy services. The chairperson of the advisory board met with the presiding judge of Alameda County and asked for his support and approval to begin developing a protocol to assign volunteer advocates to group homes and to more than one youth within a particular group home.

During the same time, Casey Family Programs conducted a focus group with foster youth primarily from Alameda County’s Chapter of the California Youth Connection (CYC), who also identified group homes as their top issue. CASA, Casey Family Programs, CYC, Community Crime Prevention Associates (CCPA) and Movement Strategy Center (MSC) decided to collaborate jointly and formed a work group to define the project and identify sources of funding. CYC agreed to be the lead agency, and The California Endowment and Zellerbach Family Foundation funded the project.
OBJECTIVES

There were three objectives for the Group Homes Project:

1. To recruit, train and place a diverse group of at least 70 adult volunteers by July 2005. These volunteers were to provide referral and case management services that would link 80 percent of youth in at least 30 project group homes to health, mental health and other services. In addition, the volunteers would provide technical assistance and consultation to group home staff by the end of the grant period.

2. To develop a curriculum and training kit for volunteers to use with group home staff that would cover normal adolescent physical and emotional development, the impact of early trauma and loss on adolescent behavior, health issues, and skills that included conflict resolution, mediation, and anger management by the end of the first year of the program.

3. To document the best practices and lessons learned for potential replication by other CYC and CASA chapters by the end of the grant period.
METHODOLOGY

In 2003, Alameda County CASA (ACCASA), Casey Family Programs, California Youth Connection (CYC), Movement Strategy Center (MSC) and Community Crime Prevention Associates (CCPA) convened a work group to define the project.

Deputy Director Tara Beckman of Alameda County CASA took the lead for the Group Homes Project and subsequent implementation of the project. There were several key components that included:

1. Identify and engage stakeholders
2. Develop a work plan
3. Determine which group homes would participate
4. Develop a process for volunteer assignments
5. Identify volunteer responsibilities
6. Recruit, train, and support volunteers
7. Develop technical assistance programs
8. Track and measure outcomes
9. Create project awareness within Alameda County agencies and communities

Identify and Engage Stakeholders

As a first step in creating the project model, we identified and engaged key County stakeholders. These included:

- Alameda County Courts
- Department of Children and Family Services
- Community Care Licensing (CCL)

Determine Group Homes for Participation

The Group Homes Project recruited dependency group homes to participate in the project from the approximately 45 dependency group homes in Alameda County. The Group Homes Project assigns volunteers to 32 dependency group homes and to two Transitional Housing Placement Programs (THPP) for 16-19 year-olds. We obtained a memorandum of understanding (MOU) from each group home director/manager, which explained the role of a Group Home CASA volunteer, described the project, and required a signature from both the group home director/manager and the CASA case supervisor.

The Group Homes Project works with dependent youth placed in Alameda County group homes as well as, when possible, Alameda County youth who are placed in out-of-County group homes. Dependents of the foster care system are children who have been removed from that care of their parents/caregivers because of abuse and/or neglect.
Meeting with Group Home Providers and Staff

Once the group homes were identified as potential participating group homes, the case supervisor met with the following parties:

- Group Home Director
- Group Home Manager
- Case Manager if applicable
- Group Home Social Worker if applicable
- Clinical Director if applicable
- Other staff members

Topics discussed at the meetings included understanding the group home’s program, the recommended approach for working with CASA volunteers, volunteer roles and responsibilities, and the group homes’ previous experiences with CASA volunteers. We took special note of feedback the group homes had for CASA and incorporated it into our project.

Volunteer Assignments

The Group Homes Project does not use the traditional CASA referral process, in which referrals are received from child welfare workers, attorneys, judges and commissioners. Under the new model, the courts appoint CASA volunteers to one or more specific group homes, eliminating the need to obtain referrals and to wait for the court appointment (30-60 days), which allows us to serve youth immediately.

Rather than match one volunteer with a single child, the project matches one to three volunteers with each group home. This allows CASA to serve a much larger number of youth than through the traditional one-to-one matching system and to address the challenge of serving the older youth who in the past remained longer on the CASA waitlist.

The number of assigned CASA volunteers is determined by the needs of the group home youth and the number of youth that a volunteer is able to work with at one time. Ideally, each CASA volunteer would work with one or two youth in the group home so volunteers are not overwhelmed with responsibility. The group home director and CASA case supervisor determine with whom the volunteer works. Matches between volunteers, group homes and youth are made based on geographical concerns, interests, skills, the background of the volunteer, and the needs of the youth.

Once the youth and volunteers are matched, CASA volunteers collaborate with staff to determine how to address the areas of greatest concern for each youth.

Recruit, Train, and Support Volunteers

We developed a plan to increase volunteer recruitment by hiring a group homes’ recruiter to focus on recruiting volunteers who want to work with older youth and with those who reside in group homes. We also raised awareness about the needs of youth residing in group homes and the support needed for emancipating youth. To increase the recruitment of Group Home volunteers, the case supervisor conducted the group homes’ training during each volunteer’s training. The case supervisor emphasized the poor emancipation outcomes of these youth and the need for volunteers to support them during this difficult transition. The
case supervisor also discussed the challenges that group home youth encounter, including high staff turnover, limited individual outings, and the lack of privacy.

One tactic to train volunteers is to schedule them to make presentations to other volunteers about their experiences in group homes that support transition-age youth. Group home youth also speak about their experience in the foster care system and the support that volunteers provide during their emancipation process.

We developed specialized training for Group Home volunteers that consisted of two hours of group home dynamics training and covered the following topics:

- Meeting with group home staff members
- Communicating with staff members
- Understanding the guidelines for working with youth
- Medical records/psychotropic medications
- Communicating with child welfare workers
- Clarifying the requirements of a Group Home CASA volunteer

Several support documents for volunteers were also created. These included:

- Group Home Guides
- Group Home Volunteer Checklists
- Group Home Case Plans
- Resources for Emancipating Youth
- Scenarios that may occur to Group Home volunteers and how to address the issues presented

**Volunteer Responsibilities**

The basic responsibilities of Group Home volunteers are listed below. However, each youth’s needs are unique and the scope of a volunteer’s responsibilities may change to best meet the individual youth’s needs.

- Make recommendations to the court regarding the best interests of the assigned youth
- Support youth in understanding court proceedings
- Gather information regarding the youths’ situations and perspectives
- Review all records and reports including, educational, dependency and/or delinquency records, medical and mental health services records
- Assist youth in achieving permanency
- Assist youth in maintaining their placement
- Identify, explore, and advocate for potential resources that will enhance the youths’ lives
- Support youth in making and maintaining healthy relationships and connecting them with other permanent adult connections
- Assist youth in obtaining a GED/High School diploma by meeting with school counselors, child welfare workers, and educational rights holders. It may in some cases be necessary to transfer youth to schools where they can obtain a diploma before their 19th birthdays
- Extend youths’ time in the foster care system so they can obtain their GED or High School diploma
- Monitor the education plan
- Facilitate family/sibling visitations
- Monitor medical and mental health status and facilitate referrals as necessary
- Secure support for extracurricular activities
- Facilitate referrals to the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)
- Assist in completing college or vocational school applications and financial aid forms
- Help with securing employment preparation services, internships and/or employment
- Assist in securing transitional housing and child care if appropriate
• Help to obtain vital records, including a California ID card, birth certificate, social security card, transcripts, medical records, and proof of being in the foster care system

• Assist in obtaining a driver’s license

• Obtain grants for youth to pay for work clothing, fees for college applications, household items for emancipated youth, and other practical necessities

• Assist with creating budgets and setting up a banking/checking account

Technical Assistance Programs

In conjunction with the Alameda County Public Health Department, we developed education programs on reproductive health and nutrition education. These programs are offered to all Alameda County youth placed with the 32 dependency group homes.

Tracking and Measuring Outcomes

A protocol and data collection system for tracking youth emancipation outcomes, specifically in the areas of housing, employment, and education, was developed and implemented. The system assesses the youth at the time of CASA assignment, at emancipation, and on a quarterly basis post-emancipation until the youth is 21.

Creating Awareness within County Agencies and the Community

A communication plan and public relations materials were developed to create awareness of the program within various County agencies. We made a number of presentations, conducted media outreach, and disseminated materials to the community. Some of our contacts included:

• The Alameda County Public Health Department
• Community Care Licensing
• The Independent Living Skills Program
• The First Place Fund for Youth (transitional housing)
• Workforce Investment Board (employment services for foster youth)
• Child Abuse Listening, Interviewing and Coordination Center

“I am grateful that CASA exists to provide youth in foster care a voice they desperately need. Working as a CASA volunteer has been a challenging yet meaningful experience as I advocate for my youth to get their needs met. “ — Grace Atukpawu

• An “It’s My Life Conference, 2003” presentation in Sacramento
• A presentation in Oakland to the California Adolescent Health Conference, 2006
• Merritt College presentations to students majoring in social services
• Print media placement of a story about a Group Home CASA volunteer and her CASA youth in the Oakland Tribune on February 9, 2005. Entitled “Foster Kids Find Help with Life Lessons,” the article highlighted the work the volunteer has done to help the youth to emancipate
• A segment for “Best Kept Bay Area Secrets” on Comcast TV (April 14, 2005), which ran for four consecutive weeks
• Materials that were disseminated to community organizations
• Four community events attended by CASA members, including the Zucchini Festival, the Solano Stroll in Albany, the Art and Soul Festival in Oakland, and a tennis competition in Palo Alto. CASA set up a booth and offered handouts and displays about its programs
While our principal success was improving emancipation outcomes, the project yielded many other benefits to CASA and our stakeholders. These include:

- Developing technical assistance for reproductive health and nutrition education
- Forming a partnership with the Alameda County Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission
- Creating a Web-based resource tool kit
- Developing group home specific materials for program education, training, and implementation
- Assisting with updates to the Health and Education Passport (HEP)
- Developing partnerships with California Youth Connection (CYC), Casey Family Programs, Community Crime Prevention Associates (CCPA), the Movement Strategy Center (MSC), The First Place Fund for Youth, and the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)
- Improving relationships with group homes
- Founding a youth speaker’s bureau, which includes current and former group home youth and youth residing in foster homes

Preliminary Emancipation Outcomes

Approximately 15 percent of Alameda County’s foster children live in group homes or institutions. The Group Homes Project has observed that many older youth in care are often placed in group homes. This has critical implications as they exit the system. At least 60 percent of youth emancipating from foster care in Alameda County become homeless within one year, according to the Alameda County Ombudsman’s Office. According to the Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles, 50 percent of former foster youth will become unemployed. Fewer than 10 percent enroll in college and only one percent graduate. Twenty-five percent of emancipated youth will become incarcerated within two years of emancipation.

Results

- During the Group Homes Project, 25 youth emancipated from foster care with CASA support. We collected data on these youth at two intervals: at emancipation and again one year later. While the sample is small, we have impressive outcomes to report. Ninety-nine percent of the youth were in stable housing and employed, and 40 percent enrolled in community college.

- We believe these outcomes are directly related to the Group Homes Project and the positive impact volunteers make to ensure that the emancipation checklist is completed and to offer their support to youth after emancipation. Post-emancipation outcomes tracking is now a permanent part of our program. We are continuing to monitor these youth and have increased our data collection intervals to once per quarter after emancipation.

Technical Assistance: Reproductive Health and Nutrition Education

We believe health education with children must be addressed early in their lives so they can make informed decisions regarding their health. Many group home youth do not have parents or caregivers to help them with these important issues. It is vital for them to have easy, confidential access to health professionals who provide them with information that can help them make informed decisions and live longer, healthier lives.

In April 2005, Public Health Investigators Arnette Hayes and Georgia Schreiber, and Director of the STD Education and Prevention Unit Gay Calhoun of the Alameda County Public Health Department began providing educational sessions on a range of sexually-related health issues, including personal hygiene and sex education. Additionally, they offer
voluntary STD screenings and counseling, pregnancy tests and follow-up treatment. Program Specialist Darlene Pratt of the Alameda County Public Health Department also arranged for dieticians to provide training to both youth and staff members about a range of nutrition topics, including how to choose healthy food for meals and snacks, discussing the Food Guide Pyramid, understanding nutrition labels and making healthy decisions when eating out.

Results

- Increased group home youths’ knowledge of reproductive health and nutrition. The training evaluation surveys completed by youth indicate that they found the training beneficial and wanted more in the future.

- Increased participation of youth in health education training. Transportation was a key roadblock for youth to receive health education, since transportation is often difficult to provide by group homes that are short staffed. We addressed this challenge by offering the technical assistance trainings at the group homes. In addition, when there is a crisis, trainings and meetings at off-site locations may be cancelled.

- Increased the rate of STD detection and treatment among group home youth. The Alameda County Public Health Department provides free, confidential STD testing and pregnancy tests. If a youth test positive for Chlamydia or Gonorrhea, a public health nurse can distribute the medications directly to the youth, eliminating the need to go to a clinic and wait for an appointment. This protocol also eliminates the need for a staff member to pick up the prescription and administer it to the youth, preserving the youth’s privacy and improving the rate of STD detection and treatment.

- Established an ongoing training program. The Reproductive Health and Nutrition Education Trainings have been so well received by group home youth and staff that we are currently developing a program to offer the trainings as a permanent part of the Group Homes Program.

Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission, Group Home Sub-Committee

In response to the challenges youth face in group homes, CASA Executive Director Regena Jones has worked collaboratively with the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission (JDPC), Social Services Agency (SSA), Community Care Licensing (CCL), and Youth Led Evaluators (YLEP) to develop a protocol for youth to make formalized complaints about their group home concerns. The JDPC, under Alameda County Presiding Judge Carl Morris, formed the Group Home Sub-Committee to oversee all facilities that house children in Alameda County.

- The Alameda County Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission is comprised of citizens who independently conduct their operations under the authority and direction of the presiding judge of the Alameda County Superior Courts, as well as the State of California. One purpose of the Commission is to inspect all juvenile facilities that operate under the authority of the Court, as well as to evaluate public and private operations within the County that provide resources and support for juveniles (Welfare and Institutions Code 229.5).

This sub-committee addresses issues, needs, and challenges of youth in Alameda County group homes. The sub-committee’s goals are to increase the quality of life for group home residents, and to ensure that foster youth rights are not violated and that they have access to essential services.
The Intervention Hearing Board consists of two Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commissioners, one representative from a community-based organization or agency, (e.g., the Inter-Agency Children’s Council (ICPC), the Mentors Program, etc.) and one emancipated foster youth.

Before sitting on the Intervention Hearing Board, one must attend an orientation and training session provided by the following sources:

1. **Community Care Licensing representative**
   - Provides an overview of the group home program statement, sections 2, 3, 4 & 5

2. **Social Services Agency (SSA) Group Home Placement Supervisor**
   - Provides an overview of the Children and Family Services placement process
   - Provides an overview of group homes’ dynamics

3. **California CASA (CalCASA) Director of Advocacy**
   - Helps potential board members understand the Foster Youth Bill of Rights

4. **Potential board members are required to visit various levels of group homes and are accompanied by a Community Care Licensing (CCL) representative**

The intervention hearing process includes responding to juvenile complaints, along with hearings with group home providers. This process may also serve as a follow-up to assist in resolving these complaints. If the complaint is determined to have merit, group home providers may be asked to provide the Intervention Board with a corrective action plan that addresses the deficiencies. If the Intervention Board determines that the complaint has no merit or is adequately addressed by the group home provider in a timely manner, the Board will notify the Court and relevant County agencies of its determinations.

The Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission (JJDPC) created a plan of action distilled from previous months of collaboration that addresses the issues that arise in our effort to provide quality care and how to effectively address these issues.

**Results**

- Established the intervention hearing/complaint process
- Created the group home referral/complaint form and brochure, called *Voices for Change*. The form should be given to youth who have complaints or to those who wish to make a formal referral to the commission about their treatment in the group home.
COMPLAINT/HEARING PROCESS

ALAMEDA COUNTY
JUVENILE JUSTICE/DELIQUENCY PREVENTION COMMISSION
400 Broadway, Room 415
Oakland, CA 94607

OBJECTIVES:
1. To provide a confidential venue where youth voices are heard without fear of retaliation
2. To maintain confidentiality at all times
3. To hold all entities responsible for their actions

COMPLAINANTS NAMES WILL REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL AT ALL TIMES

1. All referral/complaint forms received are sent to the commission’s office, where they are read and cataloged.
2. Calls are made to complainants to acknowledge receipt of the forms and to gather additional information.
3. All forms are mailed to Community Care Licensing (CCL) to determine whether the complaint is a regulatory or compliance issue.
4. The Intervention Board will verify with Social Services Agency (SSA) or the probation department to determine if the particular issue/complaint with this group home is being addressed.
5. The Intervention Board will review remaining referral/complaint forms. For group homes under consideration for investigation, the team will request a program copy from CCL. The Board will review all information and design a plan of action, which may include the following:
   • Write a letter to the director outlining the concern for the welfare of the house
   • Call and arrange a home inspection to take place within 24 hours of notification
   • Talk with the director regarding the needs for services, such as trainings to achieve positive relief in problem areas
   • Dismiss complaint if resolved as determined by Board findings
   • Recommend termination of placement in that home until there is positive resolution
6. All notes and reports will remain confidential and be kept on file at the Office of the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission.
Web-based Tool Kit

As the CASA staff members and our volunteers obtained valuable information about community resources, it became important to create a database that centralized this material and improved access. Moreover, volunteers needed easy access to forms and report templates. Using a Web-accessible volunteer tool kit as a repository for community resources, downloadable forms, and other information has been an effective way to manage and share information. Our online tool kit allows us to maintain current, easily accessible information for volunteers at a low cost. We were fortunate to have the database created on a pro bono basis, saving significant funds.

Results

• Easy, low-cost method to manage and share valuable information.
• CASA staff and volunteers can engage in an interactive process of resource sharing.

Volunteers Trained and Youth Served

The Group Homes Project has trained 80 volunteers and served more than 105 group home youth.

Results

• Increase in the number of youth served over a shorter period of time.
• Volunteers assisted 80 percent of youth with emancipation support.
• Advocacy services yielded improved emancipation outcomes that have made a positive difference in youth’s lives.

Health and Education Passports

One of the grant requirements for the Group Homes Project was to develop a protocol for CASA volunteers to track the health outcomes of their assigned youth. However, a centralized system for tracking health and education information – Health and Education Passport (HEP) - already existed. Since the HEP forms track much of the data we needed, we met with Alameda County Social Services to determine a protocol for obtaining the HEPs and submitting updates. In addition, since the passports are often incomplete, this was a good opportunity to assist Social Services in bringing the passports up-to-date.

Results

• Forty Passports have been completed.
• HEP record keeping has been improved.

Diversity Table

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<table>
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<th>Percentage of youth served by the project</th>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>82 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
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Outcome Tracking and Reporting

The need to track our youth after emancipation is critical in documenting our long-term success. We developed a protocol and data collection system for tracking and measuring our outcomes by youth from the inception of volunteer assignment to age 21. Areas of outcome measurement include education, housing, and employment.

Results

- We are currently tracking all CASA youth still in foster care and are successfully tracking 20 youth who have emancipated while in the guidance of a CASA volunteer.
- The system allows us to measure and demonstrate improved outcomes with CASA advocacy services.

Specialized Materials

New materials were needed for the Group Homes Project, including two recruitment brochures, a training curriculum and manual, case planning guides, emancipation guides, and other tailored project resources for Group Home volunteers.

Results

- These materials enable the program to be quickly and easily replicated in other counties.
- With adequate support documents, volunteers have been able to more effectively advocate for the needs of older and emancipating youth.

Partnerships

The Group Homes Project has worked closely with The First Place Fund for Youth, the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP), and other youth-serving agencies to link emancipating youth to housing and other services.

Results

- Increased enrollment of youth in skill-building programs that offer post-emancipation support and link youth to other permanent adult connections.

Group Home Relationships

We designed a collaborative approach to work with the group homes to ensure the most effective and successful delivery of services and support to youth. By encouraging and teaching volunteers to create positive relationships with youth and staff, the group home is more inclined to trust the volunteer and work cooperatively to support the youth.

Results

- Volunteers have been able to persuade group home providers to rescind seven-day eviction notices.
- Volunteers have encouraged group home providers to become more involved in the youths’ education and pre-emancipation planning.
Youth Speakers Bureau

The Youth Speakers Bureau was created in June 2006 to use current and former foster youth to speak at CASA recruitment presentations. Youth must be at least 18-years-old unless they have their child welfare worker’s written consent to participate in the Bureau. All youth must sign a contract, which includes agreeing to adhere to policies about cancellation, absences, and terminations, along with information about the stipend paid to speakers.

A training curriculum was created to assist youth in acquiring public speaking skills. Participants attend a 12-hour training that consists of six weekly sessions of two-hours each. The participants receive a stipend and certificate upon completion of the training.

The CASA program has enabled four current group home residents, two emancipated youth, and one youth from a foster home to speak at recruitment events. Their training began in October 2006.

Results

- Speakers help to accurately present the realities of working with group home youth.
- Presentation training and experience empowers youth, develops confidence, and helps them be successful in other settings, such as college and work.
Foster/Group Home Youth Have a Right To:

- Live in a safe, healthy and comfortable home where you are treated with respect
- Be free from physical, sexual, or mental abuse by anyone
- Be given adequate healthy food and adequate clothing
- Receive medical and dental care
- Keep your own money and have your own bank account (unless prohibited by case plan)
- Make and receive confidential phone calls; send and receive unopened mail (unless prohibited by court order)
- Receive and attend Independent Living Skills program services if you are 16 or older
- Attend your court hearings and speak to the judge
- See your Social Worker, Probation Officer, attorney and/or CASA
- Attend school
- Attend religious services of your choice
- Make a COMPLAINT

Make a complaint to the JJDPIC if you feel any of your rights have been violated or ignored. We will keep what you say confidential!

Know Your Rights and Let Your Voice Be Heard

Foster/Group Youth We Want To Hear From You
As a Foster/Group Home Youth, You Have the Right to Live in a Safe, Healthy and Comfortable Home Where You Are Treated with Respect!

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

COMMISSIONERS
Reverend Sally A. Bystroff-Chair; Marion Sims-Vice Chair; Dr. Barbara Cannon; Lois Brubeck; Arthur Cossey; Grace Driver; Newell Erwin; Clarence Johnson; Michelle Mathews; Kamal Nair; Froilan (Roy) Panlilio, M.D.; Charles Simkins, Ben Tapscott and Fatima Almaweri
Alameda County
Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission

FOSTER/GROUP HOME CARE REFERRAL FORM
CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENT

All foster/group homes are licensed by the State of California to protect and promote the welfare of the child(ren) in their care. We are committed to the protection of Foster Youth Rights and of the child(ren) placed by Alameda County Social Services Agency and the Probation Department. The Alameda County Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission, which is empowered by the State of California Welfare and Institution code, sections 225 to 231, and 270, will conduct investigations and/or hearings regarding services provided to youth by state licensed facilities.

Date __________________________________
Complaint ______________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
(attach additional sheet inside if necessary)

Name of Foster/Group Home
____________________________________________________________________________
Address _______________________________________________________________________
Phone _________________________________________________________________________

It is important to be able to contact you. Your name and this information will be held in CONFIDENCE. If you have provided us with your contact information, we will respond to you within 30 days.

Your Name ________________________________________________________________

How may we contact you? Please, give clear instructions on how we may check back with you.
Phone Number(s) ___________________________________________________________
E-mail Address ______________________________________________________________

Another way, please give name and phone number (i.e., parent, teacher, advisor, counselor or CASA worker)
____________________________________________________________________________

Your Opinion Matters to Us!
Together we work for change!
PROGRAM GOALS FOR 2007

Increase youth and group homes served

During the next year, CASA plans to expand the reach of the Group Homes Project beyond its current 17 group homes. Our goal is to serve all 32 group homes and 160 youth in 2007.

Recruit and train an additional 55 volunteers for a total pool of at least 80 Group Home volunteers

We have found that being a Group Home volunteer requires an intensive commitment that only a limited number of individuals are prepared to make. For these reasons, we are undertaking ongoing recruitment through numerous venues. We are also working to diversify our volunteer base to include more men, people of color, and other underrepresented groups.

We have added several components designed to provide additional support to volunteers—including a volunteer newsletter, regular support groups, and more volunteer recognition activities—to help volunteers remain engaged and committed to CASA. We thus hope to retain more volunteers over longer periods of time and, as a result, serve larger numbers of youth.

Develop strategies to serve out-of-County youth

Alameda County CASA does not currently work with out-of-County youth, because they are not under our jurisdiction. We met with several judges/commissioners and members of Alameda County Social Services to discuss the high number of Contra Costa and San Francisco County youth residing in Alameda County group homes. We expressed interest in examining ways for volunteers to work with out-of-County youth and the reasons they need advocates.

This group supported the idea and recommended that the collaboration begin with the Courts and Social Services. In 2007, Alameda County CASA will begin contacting San Francisco County and Contra Costa County agencies (including the CASA organizations in both counties), the Courts, and the Department of Children and Family Services to begin exploring solutions for supporting out-of-County youth who reside in Alameda County group homes.

Identify partnerships to promote project replication by other CASA programs in California and nationally

Alameda County CASA will collaborate with the California CASA Association (CalCASA) to determine the feasibility of replicating the Group Homes Program in other counties. CASA has already developed a very detailed implementation manual as a guide to other regions interested in implementing a Group Homes Program. In 2007, we plan to work with CalCASA, the National CASA Association, and other partners to develop a plan to promote project replication and increase awareness of our innovative approach.
Secure motivational speakers for group homes

We are working to secure motivational speakers to give presentations to all 32 Alameda County dependency group homes. The intent of this program is to motivate youth in group homes to pursue their dreams, stay in school, take part in extracurricular activities and eventually enroll in college or vocational programs.

Secure music lessons for group home youth

Enrichment activities help youth improve social skills, build self-esteem, and give youth an outlet to expand their creativity. The Group Homes Program is currently exploring the possibility of working with three Alameda County musicians to provide lessons to group home youth, free of charge, at the group home. The musicians will participate in the 36-hour CASA training and complete the appropriate background checks.

Partner our former group home foster youth with group home volunteers

Alameda County CASA is exploring the idea of partnering our former group home foster youth with group home volunteers. We believe that current group home youth will connect with former group home youth who can provide them with support and motivation. In addition, the former foster youth can help volunteers understand the needs of group home youth.

Develop and distribute a new resource guide for transition-age youth

Transition-age youth must navigate a wide array of disparate systems to successfully transition to adult self-sufficiency. Many are not aware of the rules and regulations that govern their lives, nor do they know their legal rights. Although there are some resources available to Alameda County youth to assist them with these issues, there is no step-by-step guide that combines all the information in one central document. CASA intends to develop such a guide in 2007 for the project to distribute to all youth living in group homes in the County.

Provide regularly scheduled health trainings for youth and staff members at all group homes in Alameda County

We plan to continue the technical assistance presentations in 2007, and to develop a protocol to offer ongoing training to dependency group homes.
LESSONS LEARNED

During the three-year pilot project, the case supervisor carefully evaluated the model so that both youth and volunteers could be supported adequately. It became clear that to ensure that objectives were met, volunteers were trained adequately, and collaboration between CASA and group homes were improved, certain changes were necessary.

Protocols needed to be modified, support documents had to be created, and new trainings had to be developed and implemented. These modifications enabled objectives to be met, and volunteers provided the case supervisor with positive feedback regarding the additional support.

Multiple volunteer assignments would overwhelm youth

Our initial goal was for volunteers to be assigned to a group home and work with one to three group home youth with more than one CASA volunteer per youth. When court reports were due, the recommendation was for volunteers to write the court reports together. This was impractical for two reasons. From previous experience in working with group home youth, we knew that they often have other support people in their lives. Assigning one to three CASA volunteers to work with them could be confusing. For example, if two volunteers were working with the same youth and not communicating regularly, they might ask the youth the same questions and work on the same advocacy issues, possibly overwhelming the youth with a repetitious barrage.

Asking volunteers to write the court report together could also present challenges because of differences of opinion about what is in the youth’s best interest. Issues around scheduling meetings and effort could also arise during the report writing. For example, if one volunteer was not available or felt that the other volunteer involved was not putting forth enough effort, it could cause conflicts between the volunteers. We therefore decided that one volunteer would work with one to three group home youth without any overlap, alleviating the potential problems associated with having multiple volunteers for one youth.

The volunteer caseload assignment should not be too large

Project leaders also proposed that volunteers work with up to three youth, but the case supervisor realized that in the beginning of the project the needs of group home youth could be complex and time consuming. For this reason, the case supervisor generally encourages the volunteer to begin working with one youth, and then to assess after three to six months if they are ready to take on another case.

Volunteers should continue to work with youth when appropriate as they change their placements

The willingness for volunteers to remain at the group home if youth transition to another placement is one of the initial requirements of a Group Home CASA volunteer. In some cases, this has been appropriate, such as when youth reunified with parents or former foster parents. However, when the volunteer and youth formed a bond, we realized we needed to develop a protocol to address the volunteer transitioning with the youth to continue the advocacy efforts.

We modified the original appointment order to include all participating group homes, which allows the volunteer to move with the youth when it is deemed appropriate. If a CASA youth moves to a foster home or a placement with relatives, the volunteer is encouraged to remain with the youth if
a relationship has been established in which continued advocacy is in the youth’s best interests. If the child were placed in a foster home or a placement with relatives, the volunteer would formally be assigned to the individual child as a traditional CASA volunteer.

Conflicts will inevitably arise between volunteers and group home staff

We anticipated that conflicts would arise between staff and volunteers and that regular communication was essential to resolving them. The case supervisor encouraged group home staff members to contact CASA if they had any concerns regarding their assigned CASA volunteer. When issues did arise, the case supervisor made every effort to resolve the issue with the director/manager as soon as possible. If volunteers had concerns, they contacted the case supervisor, who determined if a meeting should be scheduled. If a meeting was determined unnecessary, the case supervisor provided the volunteer with advice to resolve the situation. When issues could not be resolved, the CASA executive director and case supervisor met with the group home director and other appropriate managers to attempt to resolve the issue.

The Group Home Model requires specialized materials and training

Working to emancipate youth requires volunteers to be provided with practical information that includes emancipation checklists, and information about transitional housing, employment and continuing education. This is critical for the volunteers to achieve positive outcomes and provide youth with useful guidance.

Volunteers should be trained in Community Care Licensing (CCL) regulations before they are assigned to a group home. This enables them to familiarize themselves with CCL regulations for group homes.

The Technical Assistance training expectations must be clearly outlined

In scheduling the technical assistance training, trainers need to create an “Expectations of Group Home Youth and Staff” list before the trainings.

Obtaining information for Health and Education Passports (HEP) is often difficult and time-consuming for volunteers

The Health and Education Passports (HEP) have often been incomplete with out-of-date information. Group home managers and staff frequently did not take the necessary documents to the youth’s medical and dental appointments nor fill out the necessary educational information. Often, this information has not been in a centralized location, which has made it difficult for volunteers to obtain current information. Similarly, our volunteers encountered challenges when attempting to contact the directors and managers because they were not available and often did not return telephone calls. For these reasons, it has often been time-consuming and frustrating for our volunteers to obtain the required information.

The Group Home Program requires more staffing for optimal success

Adequately staffing the program is crucial. The Group Homes Project should hire a project coordinator, as well as a group homes case supervisor. The coordinator should implement the project while the case supervisor manages volunteers and coordinates the monthly volunteer meetings. A group homes recruiter was hired in 2004 to recruit volunteers for the Group Homes Project and a group homes case supervisor was hired to implement the project and supervise volunteers. In April 2006, a group homes case manager’s assistant was brought on board to help the group homes’ case supervisor develop the curriculum, complete the HEP forms, and assist in other case supervision responsibilities.
BEST PRACTICES AND COMMON ISSUES OBSERVED IN GROUP HOMES

Our work with group homes over a three-year period proved illuminating. Volunteers were able to observe what practices were most successful in supporting youth emancipation, along with which issues hindered youths’ progress.

Group home best practices included:

- Mandatory study time for one hour each night.
- Staff who assist youth with schoolwork.
- Group homes directors/managers who attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and other educational meetings.
- Group homes that request weekly/bi-weekly progress reports from the school.
- Directors who arrange for a tutor to assist youth with homework at least twice a week.
- Mandatory Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) attendance for youth 15 ½ and older.
- Mandatory weekly meetings for youth and staff in the group home, in which youth voice their concerns to the group home director to attempt to resolve issues or conflicts.
- Group home directors/managers who consistently enroll youth in summer camps and other extracurricular activities.
- Group home staff members who take youth clothes shopping and teach them how to budget their money.
- Group home staff members who require youth to sign off for their allowance each week and record their weekly allowance in a binder.

Common issues we observed in group homes are listed below. It should be noted that these issues were not observed in all Alameda County group homes, but were common.

- Violations that do not respect youth rights (see Foster Youth Bill of Rights in the Appendix) and/or group home regulations (Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations). For example:
  - Strict and regimented rules that make it difficult for youth to secure employment or enroll in night school.
  - Youth who are interested in attending extracurricular and enrichment activities but are not provided assistance with enrollment or transportation.
  - Youth who do not receive an adequate amount of clothing.
  - Youth are entitled to a monthly allowance (22 CCR Sec. 84077 (2)) and should receive at least a portion of that allowance each month. If staff wish to withhold a portion of the allowance from group home youth, they need to adhere to the law (22 CCR Sec. 84026 Safeguards for Cash, Personal Property and Valuables), which defines the requirements that must be met to withhold a portion of a youth's allowance.
  - Volunteers often observed that youth had to purchase their own hygiene products. Group homes are required to purchase these products from the funding they receive each month, unless the request is unreasonable, as determined by Community Care Licensing (CCL).
  - Youth have the right to refuse their medications (Foster Youth Bill of Rights) and should not be evicted from the home for doing so. However, if a doctor or judge says the youth must take his or her medications, then the group home should take the appropriate steps to ensure they take their medications regularly.
Many group homes did not report AWOLs when the youth was gone longer than 24 hours because they felt that the youth would eventually come home.

- Lack of planned outings for youth to participate in on a weekly basis.
- Staff who require youth to ride BART and buses in the dark or in heavy rain to get to ILSP and other enrichment activities.

**Lack of support for emancipating youth**

- Emancipation support was often listed as one of the primary functions in many of the Group Home Plans, but the support was not consistently provided.
- Too many group homes did not adequately teach life skills, such as doing laundry, cooking, and budgeting. Staff members often assist with or do these tasks themselves, rather than provide guidance that can lead to independence.

**Lack of privacy and personal time for youth**

- Staff members who did not allow older youth to have time alone (e.g., taking walks, spending time outside, etc.) We understand there are safety concerns; however, youth need time to themselves and privacy is often unavailable when there are five other residents in the group home.

**Lack of consistency and professionalism by staff**

- Staff who actively engage in power struggles with youth. Often the problems can be de-escalated, but since some staff do not have appropriate training, the situations often escalate.
- Staff who don’t support volunteers in teaching positive and healthy social behaviors, such as refraining from profanity and yelling, and having good manners in general.
- Staff who don’t model how to effectively communicate without yelling or arguing.
- Staff who handle issues inappropriately, such as calling the police on a youth when the issue could have been de-escalated without such intervention.

**Lack of collaboration with CASA**

- Staff who perceive CASA involvement as a threat, rather than a support or resource.
- Group homes resistant to CASA volunteers’ involvement because they view them as watchdogs or feel that outside entities disrupt their programs (i.e., some staff feel that CASA volunteers overstep their boundaries, when in reality they are usually doing what is required of them as volunteers).
- Staff who don’t notify volunteers when youth have been given a seven-day notice, which gives Alameda County Social Services seven days to move the child out of the home, as well as staff who do not report a crisis in the home to volunteers, even though they have been reminded on several occasions to do so.
- Group home directors who give seven-day notices without attempting to resolve the issue through mediation or other interventions.
RECOMMENDATIONS TO GROUP HOME PROVIDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

1. **Judges/Commissioners’ continuing jurisdiction when appropriate.**
   - Judges/Commissioners’ continuing jurisdiction if they find that the County Welfare Department has not met the requirements of subdivision (b) (California Welfare and Institutions Code) and the termination of jurisdiction would be harmful to the best interests of the child. The California Welfare and Institutions Code states that the court may terminate jurisdiction if the County Welfare Department has offered the required services and the child either has refused the services or, after reasonable efforts by the County Welfare Department, cannot be located.
   - Child welfare workers, group homes and the courts also need to ensure that group home youth receive adequate support to secure these services. Offering the services to the child is only a part of the process.

2. **Implement post-emancipation support programs in the County.**
   - In response to the poor emancipation outcomes of group home youth, programs need to be created to support youth after emancipation. This recommendation pertains primarily to policymakers.
   - Programs should include financial assistance and increased advocacy support in securing housing, day-care, employment services, drug treatment, enrolling in college, and other activities that promote a successful transition to adulthood.

3. **Site visits from Community Care Licensing (CCL) should return to one time per year. The current requirement is a minimum of once every five years.**
   - Site visits every five years are not adequate to assess if group homes are in compliance with CCL regulations.
   - Site visits should include brief surveys or an interview with each child in the facility to discuss concerns, as well as things they like about the home.

4. **Offer increased assistance with youth’s preparation for emancipation.**
   - If group homes have 16 to 19-year-old residents and youth are not attending ILSP, then Social Services and the courts need to ensure that group homes are teaching the youth life skills they will need to transition to adulthood.
   - Group homes should encourage youth to secure employment, transitional housing and to enroll in college or vocational programs, and staff members should assist them with these tasks.
   - Group homes should encourage youth to obtain driving permits.
5. **Hire qualified staff to work with youth who have mental health and behavioral issues and who need support with emancipation skills.**
   - Staff should be required to attend two weeks of training on topics such as conflict resolution and working with children who have mental health issues before they work at a group home.
   - Staff should be required to attend 50 hours of continuing education per calendar year on topics that include sexual abuse, psychotropic medications, education, anger management, and emancipation preparedness.
   - Staff should be at least 23 years of age to work in a group home. Age does not necessarily demonstrate maturity, but when youth know that staff members are only a couple years older than themselves, it can create a difficult dynamic.

6. **Increased involvement in the youths’ education.**
   - Staff should be more involved in the youths’ education, which includes attending IEPs, securing tutoring, and purchasing computer-based tutorial services.
   - Staff should sign off on youths’ homework each night.
   - Staff should encourage youth to complete applications to two and four-year colleges or vocational programs.

7. **Group home directors/managers should meet with all youth on a weekly basis.**
   - As a best practice, directors/managers should have one meeting per week with each youth to constructively discuss concerns.

8. **Implement a corrective action plan for youth who are not complying with program rules.**
   - Group homes should have a written warning process, which includes first and second warnings and outlines a corrective action plan for each written warning. This plan must include changes that the youth needs to make to continue to reside in the home. The plan should be signed by both the youth and the group home director. The warning process should take place before a seven-day notice, and if the youth violates the corrective action plan, then the group home can elect to issue a seven-day notice.
   - The plan should include mandatory enrollment in support programs when needed, such as anger management or drug treatment, to help youth improve their behavior.
   - Consider mediation once a month for group homes so that youth and staff can discuss issues with one another. This would empower youth and give them an opportunity to resolve issues by talking about them rather than by acting out and/or running away. Staff should also encourage mediation for issues between residents and between residents and staff members.

9. **Encourage youth to attend court hearings.**
   - Group home directors/managers should remind youth of court hearings, encourage youth to attend their hearings, and provide transportation.

10. **Encourage youth to attend extracurricular activities.**
    - Group homes should encourage youth to attend ILSP and assist them with the enrollment process.
    - Group homes should work with the youth to identify areas of interest and enroll them in activities and summer programs.
11. **Provide transportation for enrichment activities and to youth with children.**

- Group homes should transport youth to ILSP and extracurricular activities, such as sports and academic clubs. If they cannot personally transport the youth, bus and BART passes should be provided immediately.

- Parenting teen girls should receive additional transportation support to reduce the amount of time spent on BART and the bus with infants or toddlers, particularly in bad weather when the children are more vulnerable to colds and flu. Reducing the time spent on public transportation would also increase the amount of quality time youth spend with their children.

12. **Adequate allowances and clothing for youth.**

- Staff should be consistent with how they handle youths’ allowances. Youth should sign their names in a book every time they receive an allowance.

- If staff members withhold a portion of the allowance from a group home youth, they need to adhere to the law (22 CCR Sec. 84026 Safeguards for Cash, Personal Property and Valuables), which defines the requirements that must be met to withhold a portion of the child’s allowance.

- Allowances should be age appropriate, (e.g., 50 cents per week is not adequate for a 17-year-old).

- Group homes should purchase clothing for youth at scheduled intervals. For example, it could be helpful for youth to receive a $150 clothing allowance in July and December.

- Group home staff should not purchase clothing for youth. Youth should be given the opportunity to purchase clothing for themselves and learn how to budget the money that has been allocated for their clothing allowance.

13. **Keep a record of items purchased for residents.**

- Group homes should maintain a record of items purchased for youth with receipts attached and youth signatures. Often youth state they haven’t received any clothing since residing at the group home and staff disagrees. Maintaining accurate records will eliminate this conflict.

14. **Inventory clothing when a child arrives and every six months thereafter.**

- It is important to make sure that youth have clothing that fits them well, is appropriate for the weather and is in sufficient quantity.

15. **Group homes should allow youth to form their own beliefs.**

- Group homes should not enforce their beliefs or religions on youth. If they do so, they should be cited by Community Care Licensing (CCL) for violating youth rights.

16. **Encourage healthy diets and purchase food items for youth who have special diets.**

- Group homes should be conscious that some youth have different dietary habits and recognize that youth may legitimately request different food items than what the group home normally purchases.

- Group homes should be more consistent in purchasing nutritious food.

- Group homes should support youth who are overweight or obese in losing weight. This includes providing healthy meals, offering exercise programs and encouraging youth to enroll in weight loss programs.

- Group homes should provide reproductive health and nutrition education to all youth in their home.

17. **Increase consistency in communicating concerns to CASA volunteers.**

- When youth are given a seven-day notice, they should be notified by the group home director/manager. It is inappropriate for a child welfare worker to show up unexpectedly and ask the youth to pack his or her bags.

- Group homes should also notify the CASA volunteer of AWOLs and other crises that occur with their assigned CASA youth.
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

1. Increase support for emancipating youth and ensure that a transitional independent living plan (TILP) is created and implemented.
   - Emancipation meetings need to be incorporated as a policy within the Social Services Agency for all youth of 16-19 to ensure that youth have employment, housing and assistance with college before being dismissed from dependency.
   - Meetings need to focus on the transitional independent living plan (TILP), goals for the youth, current challenges, and methods to identify and address the pertinent issues.
   - The transitional independent living plan (TILP) must identify the target date of completion for each item along with the person responsible for assisting youth to complete the items (e.g., child welfare worker, CASA volunteer, group home, etc.).
   - Child welfare workers should complete the transitional independent living plan (TILP) with the support team and review it with the youth at their monthly meetings to make sure that the youth is progressing.
   - The courts are required to ensure that child welfare workers have completed the requirements of the California Welfare and Institutions Code 391, which lists items that must be completed before a youth’s dismissal from dependency (e.g., Medi-Cal extensions, assistance in applying for admission to college, and help in securing transitional housing and employment).

2. Form an Emancipation Taskforce Committee.
   - In response to the poor emancipation outcomes of Alameda County foster youth, a committee should be formed to develop strategies and additional support services for transition-age youth.
   - Members of the committee could include the following entities and individuals: Children and Family Services, ILSP, Beyond Emancipation, The First Place Fund for Youth, Project Independence, CASA, Public Defenders, Foster Youth Liaison’s Office, California Youth Connection (CYC), Workforce Investment Board, Laney College, group home directors, former foster youth, etc.

3. Develop an Emancipation Unit for transition-age youth.
   - By creating an Emancipation Unit, all emancipating youth in Alameda County will have adequate support during their emancipation process.
   - To ensure that youth receive emancipation support, all foster youth 16-19 years of age should have a child welfare worker in the Emancipation Unit, including youth in foster homes and placements with relatives.
   - Ideally, once a youth is transferred to this unit, the same child welfare worker would remain with youth until they transition successfully and are dismissed from dependency.
4. **Ongoing efforts to locate family members for older youth and to place youth in therapeutic foster homes when appropriate.**

- While we applaud the efforts that are being made by the Alameda County Social Services Agency to recruit additional foster homes, we also see the need for the Agency to continue to search for relatives who could be a potential placement for youth. After an initial search, the Agency should conduct ongoing family finding searches to ensure that all appropriate efforts are made to reunite youth with a family member.
- If relatives cannot provide housing, the Agency should explore the possibility of the family member becoming a permanent adult connection in the youth’s life. Professionals must work in partnership with youth to develop lifelong relationships that are permanent, secure and healthy.
- To ensure a successful transition to relative placements or foster homes, Children and Family Services should develop a gradual transition plan and identify supportive services for the family and youth, before a youth is placed.
- Attention needs to be focused on a successful transition, which may happen more slowly, but in the long-run will be healthier and more effective.

5. **Sibling visitation should be consistent for group home youth.**

- Youth have the right to visit with and contact their siblings. Visitation arrangements should be more consistent and arranged between the group home and child welfare worker. Group homes should be provided with a clear plan for sibling visitation, including days, times, and transportation.
- The visitation plan needs to be clearly outlined in the child welfare workers’ court report, which should include frequency of visits, supervised or unsupervised visits, transportation, etc.
- Child welfare workers should check up to see how visitations are going and to ensure that the visits are scheduled.

6. **Follow-up on youths’ education more closely.**

- Child welfare workers should request the youths’ grades more often than every six months to ensure that they are not failing or skipping classes.
- If youth change placements, their right to remain in their school of origin must be respected, if it is thus determined by the courts, child welfare worker, public defender and CASA volunteer to be in their best interests (AB490). When placements are in group homes, the home should be required to provide transportation to school or facilitate transportation with bus or BART passes. Child welfare workers should ensure that these services are provided.
- Child welfare workers should encourage group home youth to attend two and four-year colleges or vocational programs.

7. **Evaluate other educational plans for youth who are not on target to graduate with a high school diploma.**

- Child welfare workers should explore alternative school options with the educational rights holders, CASA volunteers and youth. These include adult education schools, GED programs, and other accelerated academic programs for youth who are enrolled in a regular high school and are not on target to graduate by their 19th birthday.
- When appropriate, child welfare workers should create an educational plan with the youth to enroll in alternative schools or adult education schools to ensure that youth will graduate by their 19th birthday with either a high school diploma or a GED.
8. Carefully examine issues with youth in group homes before making placement changes.
   - Youth should be involved when the child welfare worker is determining a new placement, which may help to reduce chronic AWOLs (see Foster Youth Bill of Rights, #19 in the Appendix).
   - Team decision making (TDM) meetings should take place for every placement move and be enforced by Social Services.

9. In-County placements should be a priority for group home youth, especially when a CASA volunteer has established a relationship with a youth.
   - Out-of-County placements should be considered very carefully and, if an out-of-County placement is identified or considered, a team decision making (TDM) meeting should be mandatory. The purpose is to ensure collaboration, determine if the placement is appropriate, and to create a plan to facilitate a successful transition.

10. Visit youth on a regular basis.
    - Child welfare workers should visit youth as required by law, which is usually on a monthly basis. Many issues arise with emancipating youth, and it is imperative that child welfare workers are involved in youths' lives so they feel comfortable addressing concerns with them.

11. Encourage youth and caregivers to attend court hearings.
    - Volunteers have observed that some child welfare workers do not encourage youth or caregivers to attend court hearings. Child welfare workers should encourage caregivers and youth to attend court so the youth have the opportunity to address the judge.
    - By encouraging all parties to attend, the judge is provided with a more detailed report of the case.

12. Identify strategies to reduce the number of child welfare workers for youth in foster care.
    - Based on the specialized training that child welfare workers receive for their designated unit, we realize the need for youth to be placed with the appropriate child welfare worker. However, this also causes youth to be assigned to multiple child welfare workers and often does not allow time to establish a consistent relationship.
    - Group home youth often lack consistency due to placement and school changes so it is crucial that Children and Family services attempt to provide more consistency for youth and when possible, allow them to maintain the same Social Worker while in care.
    - The case plans of emancipating youth must be continuously monitored to encourage successful transitions. Changing child welfare workers during the emancipation process can cause delays and frustration for youth during a very critical time in their lives.

13. Develop placements that are appropriate for the needs of the youth.
    - Currently, there are two Residential Treatment Facilities (RCFs) in Alameda County that do not generally accept youth 16-18. This is unfortunate, because youth who have mental health or behavioral issues could benefit from these services. Older youth who need a higher level of care are typically transferred out-of-County or are placed in a group home setting that may not address their needs.
    - Many youth could benefit from therapeutic foster homes that provide a family setting. Many foster family agencies that have this component provide foster parents with 24-hour on-call crisis support, in-home support assistance, ongoing training and skills development, foster parent support groups and substantial financial support. This support benefits both foster parents and youth.
- Children and Family Services should provide supportive services similar to foster family agencies. This would help to ensure continuity of care in homes where foster children are placed.

14. **Modify the child welfare worker court reports to reflect key issues.**

- Although the child welfare worker court reports are thorough and contain relevant information, they are often unclear about the key issues and next steps to address these issues. A resolution to this may include adding a section titled “Key Issues.”

- Example of modification for court report:
  
  **Key Issue:** Youth is not on target to graduate by her 19th birthday. She is 18-years-old and has 115 credits.

  **Next Steps:** Explore alternative schools and discuss GED with youth.

  **Responsible Party:** Child welfare worker and CASA volunteer. (This ensures accountability and gives other professionals a contact name in case they want to follow-up on the status of the issue.)

15. **Update Health and Education Passports (HEP) on a monthly basis.**

- Develop a protocol for group homes to submit medical, dental and educational information directly to the HEP unit on a monthly basis.

- This will ensure that timely and accurate information is included in all Health and Education Passports (HEP).

16. **Make a concerted effort to communicate with the CASA volunteers on a regular basis.**

- Volunteers often obtain information that may require a child welfare worker’s attention. Child welfare workers should be more consistent in responding to CASA volunteers’ communications in a timely manner.

- Child welfare workers should provide CASA volunteers with their communication preferences – phone, fax, or e-mail – to facilitate regular updates about youth.

17. **Convene an all-day workshop for organizations and professionals who work with foster youth.**

- Participants should include Children and Family Services, the Public Defender’s Office, CASA, The First Place Fund for Youth, Foster Youth Liaison’s Office, group home directors, California Youth Connection (CYC), etc.

- Speakers from various agencies can address specific topics and then answer related questions.

- Potential topics include team decision making (TDM) meetings, role of a CASA volunteer, emancipation support, foster care legislation, sibling visitation, education topics, best practices for mental health treatment, permanency and stability, engaging collaborative partners, etc.

- The goal is to clarify roles and responsibilities, create dialogue and discuss strategies for intra-agency collaboration.
CONCLUSION

It is increasingly recognized that the foster care system in California is in crisis, and that the needs of youth who are emancipating from the system are not being met.

While the average young adult does not become fully self-sufficient until he or she reaches 26, youth in foster care are expected to fully emancipate from the system at or around their 18th birthday. Youth living in foster care have usually faced childhood abuse, neglect or abandonment, sometimes followed by years of instability as they are moved from one foster care placement to another. With few resources, little support or permanent connections to caring adults, a shockingly high number of these youth transition from foster care into homelessness, with at least 60 percent of youth emancipating from foster care in Alameda County becoming homeless within one year (Alameda County Ombudsman’s Office).

According to the Children’s Law Center of Los Angeles, 50 percent of former foster youth will be unemployed within one year of exiting the system and will earn an average of $6,000 per year, below the national poverty level of $7,890. Fewer than 10 percent enroll in college, and only one percent actually graduate. Sadly, an astounding 25 percent will become incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.

Living in a group home provides many challenges to transition-age youth. Although some homes provide excellent care and transcend the difficulties and barriers to providing a positive living situation, there are homes that struggle to provide adequate support. Monitoring and oversight of these homes is inadequate and issues often go unresolved since youth are not often given the opportunity to voice their concerns in a constructive manner.

Group home staff members usually have little or no information about the youth before their placement, and they experience a constant stream of residents coming and going from multiple placement changes. Staff are seldom trained in adolescent development and mental health and often do not understand the dynamics of children who have been victims of abuse and neglect and the consequent behavioral, emotional and sexual manifestations, nor are they skilled in conflict mediation and negotiation.

High level of staff turnover at the homes leads to further instability and lack of continuity in services and relationships. The ways in which staff wield authority can exacerbate the difficulty in responding appropriately to the needs of their young residents and result in youth being given a seven-day notice, forcing them to move yet again. High child welfare worker caseloads and frequent case reassignments result in little time to develop relationships and to assist youth in making placement changes—changes that are sometimes involuntary.

In most cases, youth living in group homes do not get the assistance they need to address an array of critical difficulties and transition successfully to adulthood and self-sufficiency. In a youth-led evaluation of Alameda County group homes completed in 2006 by California Youth Connection (CYC), 42 percent of youth surveyed felt that the care provided by their group home was not helping them succeed in school.
Foster youth are often not informed of their educational rights, higher education options, and other educational and vocational resources. As a result, approximately half fail to graduate from high school. In addition, youth living in group homes often do not obtain access to appropriate medical care and, with 50 percent of foster youth suffering from chronic physical medical conditions and 50 - 60 percent experiencing moderate to severe mental health problems, this presents a serious challenge.

Transition-age youth are also likely to have had no job training or experience and poor knowledge of nutrition and reproductive and other sexual health issues. In many cases, youth lack basic documents such as birth certificates, educational records and social security cards, which are required for them to obtain employment, public benefits, or to enroll in educational or training programs.

As we make the Group Homes Project a permanent program in Alameda County, our goals are to improve emancipation outcomes for group home youth, help create best practices in group homes, increase youths’ access to valuable resources, help to create consistency, and to make sure that group home youths’ needs are met. We are hopeful that by building positive working relationships with group homes and child welfare workers, the quality of life for youth in group homes and youth who are emancipating will improve.

Our mission is to provide advocacy, and that through this advocacy youth won’t be forced to resort to living in homeless shelters or on the streets after emancipation. We strive to help our foster youth enter adulthood with confidence and hope rather than with fear, knowing that they have a CASA volunteer or other adult connections to support them during this difficult transition to independent adulthood.

The technical assistance training offered by the Group Homes Project will help youth to access valuable health education. The Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission’s (JJDPC) goal is to increase the quality of life for group home residents and to improve their access to essential services. This commission will allow group home youth and adults to make formal complaints concerning group homes and, when necessary, provide a corrective action plan that addresses any deficiencies identified by the Board.

These recommendations to group home providers were presented before the Group Homes Presentation at the group home provider’s meeting in May 2007. Recommendations were presented to the Assistant Agency Director at Children and Family Services in April 2007. These presentations will enable CASA and the agencies to engage in open dialogue, and for all parties to give one another feedback about improving best practices in group homes and the outcomes for emancipating foster youth.

The Group Homes Project has made a difference in the lives of many group home youth. Volunteers are serving more youth and impacting the lives of many undergoing the emancipation transition, extending youths’ time in the dependency system and enabling many to obtain their high school diplomas. Volunteers have helped youth to complete college and employment applications, and to enroll the children of our youth in day care. Our volunteers have maintained youths’ placements by meeting with group home directors and youth to identify the areas in need of improvement, which has resulted in creating a stable placement for youth while in foster care.

Our CASA volunteers have had a tremendous impact in improving group home youths’ outcomes. We look forward to strengthening and enhancing CASA and serving many more group home youth in the years to come as we continue to work with group home directors, the courts, policymakers, Children and Family Services and others to improve the best practices in group homes and the outcomes for emancipating foster youth.
Volunteer Stories

Pat Rodda

“It doesn’t matter the age that these individuals enter the foster care system, the fact remains that these CASA youth have not been exposed to what I call “layering,” says Pat Rodda, a CASA volunteer since April 2005. “Layering is the consistent, repetitive life lessons that functioning families pass to their children about how to become self-sufficient and survive in the world. You combine this with the fact that most 18-year-old youth, no matter what their situation, are not prepared to take on the world. These combinations make life a continuous uphill battle.

“I’ve learned that what appears to be ambivalence in following up on things such as job interviews or taking action that can positively impact the future, is really fear, insecurity and lack of knowledge about how to proceed. They’ve never been taught these important life skills. In my short period of time as a CASA volunteer, my objectives have been to continually encourage the youth that I work with and to focus on the positive attributes that will increase self-esteem, while also applying firmness and accountability.

“When I first got my assignment, I was amazed that the 17-year-old youth I was assigned to did not have some basic necessities, such as a birth certificate, Social Security or California ID card. One day I noticed he was squinting and asked the obvious. He had not had glasses in over six months! Only one year from graduation, he only had 50 of the 190 units needed to graduate. So many life essentials missing were combined with the emotional deficits of being in foster care.

“My CASA youth is now 18-years-old and lives with a relative. He’s still receiving financial support from the County. He’s working hard to make up his high school credits through independent study so he can graduate before turning 19-years-old. We identified when he was 17-years-old that he wouldn’t graduate in a regular high school, and we enrolled him in an alternative high school. He will now be able to graduate in June 2007.

“With CASA’s support, he has also secured employment and transitional housing and is on his way to emancipating. Some of his fears have been alleviated, knowing that he will have housing and employment when he is dismissed from dependency. I continually encourage him and work to fill up his emotional void. I’m very optimistic that the work we’re doing together is helping him to get that psychological and practical kick-start that will move him into another axis that wasn’t available to him before.”

Sherrie Smith

“I have been a CASA volunteer for about 2 ½ years and have experienced a variety of relationships in different group homes,” comments CASA volunteer Sherrie Smith. “With these varied experiences, some wonderful, I have run into many challenges. Some of these challenges include the amount of support I’ve received from the homes. There were times when staff said, “You’re doing too much for this youth,” and my response was, “That’s what I do, advocate for this youth’s best interests” with a smile on my face. In many of these homes staff aren’t supportive or patient, so it is common for youth to not have the appropriate therapeutic services or interventions. Another challenging situation is when staff provokes the youth’s behavior or attitudes, which means that youth aren’t receiving the appropriate role models.
“Being a CASA is one of the best experiences I’ve had, and I do my work out of love and passion. I can help make a difference in the lives of others, which I truly love. The youth teach me just as much as I teach them; we have a partnership and commitment to one another.”

Kitty Harvey

“The first time I met my CASA youth he would not look at me and cursed me under his breath, saying he did not need a CASA,” recalls Kitty Harvey. “He had recently attended a court session in which the judge had an incomplete picture of his current school situation; the paperwork mistakenly indicated that his attendance record was excessively truant. He had moved to his new group home placement months earlier and his old school had not released him from their roster and considered him still enrolled. In actuality, he was excelling at his new high school, obtaining the affection of his teachers, and earning grades.

“My CASA youth was incredulous and not confident enough to speak up for himself that day in court as the judge reprimanded him about his “poor effort” at school. These misinterpretations are commonplace for our group home youth, who cannot always effectively speak for themselves in the harsh and intimidating world of a courtroom. It took awhile for me to earn his trust and friendship. It was heartwarming to eventually see him sitting up straight in court and conversing comfortably with the judge, letting her know what he wanted, as I proudly watched from the courtroom gallery.”

Claudia Jenkins

“I have been a CASA volunteer for almost two years,” says Claudia Jenkins. “Out of all the volunteer programs I have worked with, CASA is the most impressive. The organization trains us to provide a lasting impact on the lives of youth in foster care. Most important, as advocates, CASA trains and encourages us to give a voice to those who would otherwise go unheard.

“Over the past two years, I have worked mostly with teenage girls facing emancipation. The most crucial challenges for these teens are bridging the gap between dependent and independent living. Although initially most of these youth express an intense desire to be emancipated, as emancipation looms near fear sets in. These 18-year-olds are faced with the overwhelming reality of being thrust into the “real world” and, for the first time, being responsible for their livelihoods.

“This would be difficult for any teenager, but it’s even more so for youth who have never received the benefits of a “traditional” family environment. As a result, community resource programs such as The First Place Fund for Youth and the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) are fundamental to helping these youth acquire the necessary skills to live on their own and obtain low-cost housing.

“Equally important is to help make sure that these youth are on track for high school graduation, or at least working toward their GED. Once secondary education has been achieved, I believe it’s important to instill in these young adults the importance of obtaining a college education. Most have never had anyone encourage them to finish high school, much less attend college.

“Despite all the challenges, I am honored to work with CASA staff and youth. I truly feel that doing so enables me to make a difference in the lives of the abused and neglected children in foster care.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alameda County CASA would like to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for their support and participation in this project.

- The California Endowment, Funder for Group Homes Project
- Zellerbach Family Foundation, Funder for Group Homes Project
- California Youth Connection (CYC)
- Casey Family Programs
- Community Crime Prevention Associates (CCPA)
- Movement Strategy Center (MSC)
- Department of Children and Family Services
- Judge Carl W. Morris, Superior Court of California, County of Alameda (Former Alameda County Presiding Juvenile Court Judge)
- Commissioner Paul Seeman, Superior Court of California, County of Alameda
- Dave Kears, Director of Alameda County Health Care Services Agency
- Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission (JJDPC) members
- Group Home CASA Volunteers, Alameda County CASA
- Jude Koski, Program Coordinator, Youth Led Evaluation Project (Northern Region Supervisor for California Youth Connection (CYC))
- Janet Knipe, Executive Director, California Youth Connection (CYC)
- Youth Led Evaluation Project (YLEP), Youth Evaluators
- Valerie Patton, Group Homes Unit Supervisor, Department of Children and Family Services
- Saxon Turner, Licensing Program Analyst, Community Care Licensing (CCL)
- Gay Calhoun, Director of the STD Education and Prevention Unit, Alameda County Public Health Department
- Arnette Hayes, Public Health Investigator, Alameda County Public Health Department
- Georgia Schreiber, Public Health Investigator, Alameda County Public Health Department
- Darlene Pratt, Program Specialist, Alameda County Public Health Department
- Dianna Lake, former Adolescent Case Supervisor, Alameda County CASA
- Lori Goldman, former Case Manager Assistant, Alameda County CASA
- Derek Garnier, Volunteer
- Ann Garnier, CASA Volunteer
- Alameda County Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP)
- The First Place Fund for Youth
- Staff, Alameda County CASA
Superior Court of California, County of Alameda
Juvenile Court Administration
400 Broadway, Room 205 Oakland, California 94607
QIC Code 22811
Phone: 510.268.4104
Fax: 510.268.4169
Email: carl.morris@alamedacourts.ca.gov

FROM THE DESK OF
Honorable Carl W. Morris, Presiding Judge - Juvenile

DATE: April 11, 2006

TO: Public Stakeholders, Juveniles, Adults

RE: Findings and Conclusions of the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission

The Alameda County Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission is composed of citizens who independently conduct their operations under the authority and direction of the Juvenile Court of the Alameda County Superior Courts as well as the State of California. The purpose and policy of the Commission is to inspect all juvenile facilities that operate under the authority of the Court as well as to evaluate public and private operations within the county that are providing resources and support for juveniles.

The increasing number of juveniles being referred to the Court and County agencies has caused the Commission to increase its activities in order to assist in the evaluation of County agencies and others, to determine where additional attention needs to be focused on problems with regard to juveniles. The Commission, not being constrained by operational considerations due to departmental and agency mandates and restrictions, is able to bring together and help coordinate Countywide programs in a manner which individual departments could not do on their own.

The Commission has met with County agencies and determined that there is a need to address problems of young people in group homes. Some group home providers are recognized as having particular problems in maintaining satisfactory services to their charges and to the agencies that license them and direct juveniles to their care. The Commission has initiated a Group Home Inspection Process and Intervention Hearing Process, which includes conducting inspections of group homes, holding hearings to assist in addressing complaints/referrals submitted by public stakeholders (juveniles and adults).

The policy of the Commission is to bring group home providers into compliance with their stated programs and to provide such assistance as will enable the group home providers to maintain their programs. The Commission is issuing a Group Home Intervention Hearing Referral Form (available at Alameda County facilities), which may be sent to the Commission by any person, juvenile or adult, who alleges that the rights of juveniles in a group home have not been properly protected. The Commission does not prejudge the merits of any complaint but will attempt to verify the validity of such complaints and will work with the group home provider to correct any conditions that require remediation.

CWA/BC:dmrg
Superior Court of California, County of Alameda
Juvenile Court Administration
400 Broadway, Room 205 Oakland, California 94607
QIC Code 22811
Phone: 510.268.4104
Fax: 510.268.4169
Email: carl.morris@alameda.ca.gov

FROM THE DESK OF
Honorable Carl W. Morris, Presiding Judge - Juvenile

DATE: April 11, 2006

TO: Group Home Providers and Others As Appropriate and Necessary

RE: Group Home Inspection Process and Group Home Intervention Hearing Process

Group Home Inspection Process
The Alameda County Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission is authorized by statute (W&I 229.5) to conduct such inspections as deemed necessary to determine operational conditions in group homes, which are operating in loco parentis to the juveniles in their care. If the Commission requires access to a group home, it will give the group home provider at least 24 hours advance notice of the visit, during which it may interview residents and staff, and, may require the group home provider to meet with the Intervention Board comprised of Commissioners and other interested individuals selected by the Commission. The Intervention Board process is intended to assure that the juvenile residents of the group home are provided care consistent with the group home provider’s commitment to the State of California Community Care Licensing and County of Alameda agencies, which employ the provider.

Group Home Intervention Hearing Process (copy of Group Home Intervention Hearing Referral Form attached)
The Intervention hearing process includes responding to juvenile and adult complaints. Intervention Hearing Referral Forms are available for this purpose. Intervention hearings with group home providers shall or may serve as follow-up to assist in resolution of these complaints. Group home providers may be asked to provide the Intervention Board with a Corrective Action Plan that addresses deficiencies identified by the Board. If the Intervention Board determines that the complaint has no merit or is adequately addressed by the group home provider in a timely manner, the Board will notify the Court and interested County agencies of the results of the Intervention Board’s actions.

CWM/B/Comg

attachment
The Foster Youth Bill of Rights
Welfare & Institutions Code Section 16001.9

“(a) It is the policy of the state that all children in foster care shall have the following rights:

1. To live in a safe, healthy, and comfortable home where he or she is treated with respect.

2. To be free from physical, sexual, emotional, or other abuse, or corporal punishment.

3. To receive adequate and healthy food, adequate clothing, and, for youth in group homes, an allowance.

4. To receive medical, dental, vision, and mental health services.

5. To be free of the administration of medication or chemical substances, unless authorized by a physician.

6. To contact family members, unless prohibited by court order, and social workers, attorneys, foster youth advocates and supporters, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and probation officers.

7. To visit and contact brothers and sisters, unless prohibited by court order.

8. To contact the Community Care Licensing Division of the State Department of Social Services or the State Foster Care Ombudsperson regarding violations of rights, to speak to representatives of these offices confidentially, and to be free from threats or punishment for making complaints.

9. To make and receive confidential telephone calls and send and receive unopened mail, unless prohibited by court order.

10. To attend religious services and activities of his or her choice.

11. To maintain an emancipation bank account and manage personal income, consistent with the child’s age and developmental level, unless prohibited by the case plan.

12. To not be locked in any room, building, or facility premises, unless placed in a community treatment facility.

13. To attend school and participate in extracurricular, cultural, and personal enrichment activities, consistent with the child’s age and developmental level.

14. To work and develop job skills at an age-appropriate level, consistent with state law.

15. To have social contacts with people outside of the foster care system, such as teachers, church members, mentors, and friends.

16. To attend Independent Living Program classes and activities if he or she meets age requirements.

17. To attend court hearings and speak to the judge.

18. To have storage space for private use.

19. To be involved in the development of his or her own case plan and plan for permanent placement.

20. To review his or her own case plan and plan for permanent placement if he or she is 12 years of age or older and in a permanent placement, and to receive information about his or her out-of-home placement and case plan, including being told of changes to the plan.

21. To be free from unreasonable searches of personal belongings.

22. To confidentiality of all juvenile court records consistent with existing law.

23. To have fair and equal access to all available services, placement, care, treatment, and benefits, and to not be subjected to discrimination or harassment on the basis of actual or perceived race, ethnic group identification, ancestry, national origin, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, mental or physical disability, or HIV status.

24. At 16 years of age or older, to have access to existing information regarding the educational options available, including, but not limited to, the coursework necessary for vocational and postsecondary educational programs, and information regarding financial aid for postsecondary education.

(b) Nothing in this section shall be interpreted to require a foster care provider to take any action that would impair the health and safety of children in out-of-home placement.

(c) The State Department of Social Services and each county welfare department are encouraged to work with the Student Aid Commission, the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges to receive information pursuant to paragraph (23) of subdivision (a).”
BIOGRAPHIES

**Tara Beckman.** Deputy Director, joined the CASA staff in March 2004. Tara coordinated the Group Homes Pilot Project, which was created to address the needs of older youth, with an emphasis on supporting emancipating youth. The project is also the first CASA program in the nation to provide post-emancipation support to youth who have been dismissed from the foster care system. Prior to working at CASA, Tara worked with severely emotionally disturbed children and their families at Seneca Center as a Therapeutic Behavioral Specialist. In addition to Tara’s staff position with CASA, she also volunteers for the organization and has advocated for a youth for three years. Tara has a deep understanding of the foster care system, as she herself was in the system for eight years. This life experience is a strong, motivating factor to give back to children by providing them with advocacy and resources to support them while they are dependents in the foster care system.

**Regena Jones.** Executive Director, Alameda County CASA, joined the CASA staff in April 2004. Prior to working at CASA, Regena was the Supervising Administrative Specialist for Alameda County Children & Family Services. She has been dedicated to Alameda County for twenty-two years. Currently, Regena is a member of the Friends of Alameda County CASA Board, member of the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission Group Home Sub-Committee, and a member of the CASA Advisory Board. Regena has worked collaboratively with the Juvenile Justice/Delinquency Prevention Commission (JJDPC), Alameda County Social Services Agency, Community Care Licensing (CCL), and Youth led Evaluation Project (YLEP) to develop a protocol for youth to make formalized complaints regarding group home concerns. Regena is passionate about advocating for the needs of children in foster care. During the last three years, Regena has developed a great deal of respect and admiration for those individuals who volunteer to become an advocate. CASA Programs empower people in the community to advocate for the best interests of foster children and youth.