
Guidance for Volunteers



WAYS TO SAFELY STAY IN TOUCH WITH CHILDREN

While we are making many resources available to state organizations and local programs, in the forefront of all of our minds is the welfare of the children we serve and our need to ensure they are well while at the same time balancing the health and safety of our volunteers. We are providing guidance on a number of program and volunteer functions in light of the coronavirus (COVID – 19), while at the same time know you will be following the direction you are receiving from your court, state CASA/GAL organization, child welfare agency and governing authority. This guidance below is not meant to take precedent over direction from these authorities.

In these changing times we want to offer guidance on volunteers communicating with children in an effective and safe way.

While National CASA/GAL Standard (Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs 2012 version - Standard 7.E.5.f.) for volunteers to visit the child in person with the child once every 30 days at a minimum, please be reminded that the standard also allows for an exception to this practice. During this time National CASA/GAL is encouraging programs to consider alternatives that will ensure the safety of children, volunteers and staff.

ALTERNATIVES TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Texting: If texting with a child, no confidential information that would disclose specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed. Texting should be limited and during reasonable hours. Text conversations should not be deleted until after the case is closed. CASA/GAL volunteers should be aware that any messaging, texting, emailing may be discoverable by the court. Please be sure to review state laws and court rules to determine if text messaging is discoverable in court.

Video Conferencing: Skype, FaceTime or other online video chat applications between CASA/GAL volunteers and children may be utilized for volunteer meetings with children. No confidential information that would disclose specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed. If online video chat applications are utilized, these additional parameters should be followed:

- Ensure you are in a private location with no other people around.
- No recording may take place (audio or visual) by either party on the call.
- Online video chats should not be conducted with children under the age of 13.

All calls should be prefaced with a verbal disclosure agreement to verify the above parameters are met and agreed upon at the beginning of each call. Remember that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using video chat technology.

Phone Calls: When talking to a child on the phone, the CASA/GAL volunteer must follow many of the same recommendations as with video chat technology including ensuring you are in a private location with no other people around, that there is no recording taking place, and that no confidential information that would disclose the specifics about a child's identity or the case should be discussed.

CHILDREN IN CONGREGATE CARE

CASA/GAL volunteers should take extra precautions when meeting with children in group homes, emergency shelters and other congregate care placements. Precautions may include alternative to face-to-face meetings like texting, video conferencing and phone calls as well as remaining at a safe distance and following proper hygiene including handwashing for both the child and CASA/GAL volunteer. The CASA/GAL volunteer may wish to discuss proper handwashing, covering of the mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and other safeguards with the child that may be particularly important in congregate care.

We care deeply for our program staff and volunteers and recognize that many of them are older individuals who are at higher risk for serious illness resulting from COVID-19. We need to take care in protecting them as well.

TRANSITIONING YOUTH AND YOUTH WITH CHILDREN

During the COVID-19 crisis, youth in foster care who are in independent living and youth with children are especially vulnerable. These youth will need even more support if schools close and transition to virtual learning. Many youth in foster care rely on schools for meals and often do not have access to the internet or technology to support virtual learning. Helping youth and young parents to find community resources for food assistance, health care and helping them to identify ways to access virtual learning (such as libraries) will help them through this difficult time. Youth in foster care living independently also often work hourly as a requirement for housing. These youth will need advocacy and support should businesses close and the youth not be able to protect their housing and access to assistance. Youth often also rely on cell phones. Helping them to advocate to keep their phones on should they not be able to pay their phone or other utilities is another way to support foster youth. Finally, ensuring that youth know where to access local health and safety resources will help ensure that our youth have the protection they need to weather this crisis.

COURT HEARINGS AND CHILD WELFARE MEETINGS

CASA/GAL volunteers shall follow the precautions and procedures recommended by the court for all court hearings. The CASA/GAL program may wish to discuss with the court the ability for the CASA/GAL volunteer to appear telephonically in court if necessary. The same should hold true with child welfare meetings. If the agency has issued procedures concerning these meetings, the program and CASA/GAL volunteer should adhere to those procedures. If not, the CASA/GAL volunteer may wish to participate via conference call.

PROGRAM OPERATIONS

There are other requirements for personal meetings as part of the *Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs 2012* version. When that is not possible, we recommend the use of Skype, FaceTime or other online video chat applications for one-on-one meetings. For group meetings, such as meetings of the Board of Directors, we recommend the use of technology such as conference calls, Zoom or WebEx.

Certain Standards require signed or written documents, for example, that volunteers and staff sign statements of confidentiality upon case acceptance and hiring, respectively, and that job applicants complete a written application. Programs do not have to meet in person to obtain signatures or for people to complete written documents. Instead you can meet these requirements through electronic signatures or sending documents through the mail.

Other Standards require that programs maintain their records and keep certain records available at any time. If the program office shuts down, the program can maintain and access their records electronically, with appropriate security, can maintain their records in the office with a staff person coming in occasionally, if safe, or move records to another facility.

The Standards require that programs have personnel policies in place, and comply with those as well as employment laws. Programs should monitor changes to employment laws as the US Congress, state legislatures, and city and county councils consider legislation to protect workers impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Also, programs should review their current employment policies, particularly relating to time out of office, and make sure staff are aware of the policies.