

Writing Effective Court Reports

The CASA volunteer court report is the most essential aspect of your work as a CASA volunteer. The court report is the volunteer's primary tool in effectively communicating the child's perspective. The report also ensures professionalism, consistency and objectivity.

Keys to a Successful Report.

- Child-focused
- Fact-based
- Current information
- Firsthand information
- Recommendations flow from facts
- Picture of child included
- Current *What I would like the judge to know* form attached
- Current *Family Tree* form attached
- E-mail draft report to Volunteer Coordinator 10 days prior to the hearing

The facts stated throughout the report are the foundation of the CASA volunteer's recommendations. The facts stated throughout the report should be clear, concise and easily distinguished from opinions and assumption. When writing the document, it is imperative for the volunteer to respect all of the individuals involved in the case. A report written from an honest and objective view can eliminate defensive attitudes and ease implementation of the volunteer's recommendations. The volunteer will have greater success defending their written documentation and representing the best interests of the child if the report is free from bias.

Court reports provide visible documentation of a volunteer's involvement. Court reports that provide visible documentation of a volunteer's involvement and that are presented in a consistent format increase a CASA volunteer's ability to give children a voice in the decision-making process.

As a CASA, you promote effective communication between all parties. Please contact the parties to the case and the adults who have knowledge of the child regularly to get a current status. If you have any concerns, please contact the caseworker prior to submitting your draft court report. The caseworker may have updated information or be able to address your concerns. If a parent's attorney has denied your access to a parent, please note that in your report.

Judges rely on the information in CASA volunteer court reports as they make their decisions. You will submit reports for most hearings. The CASA court report provides a way to systematically organize pertinent information and give the court a clear mental image of the child's situation. Most of the information the court receives is derived from the CASA volunteer's written documentation, which is made record at each court hearing.

All CASA programs require that court reports be submitted to the CASA program office prior to court. Staff will review all CASA volunteer court reports to ensure the recommendations are supported by facts and all relevant information and documentation has been included. Staff may make suggestions about wording to make your report clearer.

Key Elements of a CASA Court Report.

- **History.** From the Petition, please list a summary of when and why the children were placed into foster care.
- **Records Reviewed.** List all records reviewed. For example, DHS records, court records, school records, etc.
- **Summary of Interviews.** List the names of the people you interviewed since the last hearing, the date of contact, relationship to the child, and a summary of each interview.
- **Needs of the Child.** From the information you gather from the caseworker, foster parents, medical providers, teachers and others who work with the child, please list the following needs of the child:
 1. **Wishes of the Children.** List the current wishes of the child.
 2. **Placement.** How is the child doing in the current placement?
 3. **Visitation.**
 - How is the child's interaction with parents at visitation?
 - How is the parent's interaction with child at visitation?
 - When are the visits scheduled?
 - Do the parents attend all of the scheduled visits?
 - If a visit was cancelled, why was the visit cancelled?

4. Education.

- What are the strengths of the child in education?
- Are they doing well in school?
- Does the teacher have concerns?
- Attendance of child in school.
- What does the teacher say about the child?
- How does the child interact with others?
- Does the child have special needs? Have they been addressed?

5. Psychological.

- Is the child having behavioral issues?
- What is the child like, happy, stressed?
- If the child is in counseling, how is the child doing?
- If the child is not in therapy, does the child need therapy?

6. Medical/Dental.

- Does the child have any medical/dental needs that need to be addressed?
- What medical/dental needs are currently being addressed and has the doctor recommended follow-up.

7. Child Development.

- Are there any concerns regarding child development
- Are concerns being addressed?
- **Family Supports and Strengths.** Report any family supports and strengths; e.g., does the family have friends, relatives, church members, etc., who provide the family with needed support. Is the parent making progress in court ordered services? Does the parent have housing, employment, etc.?
- **Concerns.** List any concerns you have for the child.
- **Recommendations.** Your fact-based recommendations are based on the information you provide in your report. For example, "Child needs to see a dentist. (Did you state why the child needs to see a dentist under the Medical section above?)

To ensure timely permanence for a child, please:

- Ensure the courts and all parties fulfill their obligations to the child in a timely manner; and
- Monitor all court orders to ensure compliance.

Following each court hearing, please note:

- What is agreed to at the hearing for items to be completed; e.g., is the caseworker supposed to make a referral for counseling, etc.;
- Who is responsible for making a referral or completing an item;
- A timeframe for completion if noted; and
- The next court date.

When drafting your next court report, please talk to the parties to get a status of items to be completed so you can give a status to the judge in your next court report. This ensures timely permanence for the child.

Thank you for making a difference for these children. Remember, one of the most helpful things you can do as a CASA is to stop, sit and listen to these children. Children will sense that you are there just for them, and will know you care about them.

Please contact your Volunteer Coordinator if you need help identifying resources to meet the needs of the children and parents on your case.