

POLICY AND PROCEDURE MANUAL

FOR VOLUNTEERS/STAFF



Seward County CASA
P.O. Box 215
Seward, NE 68434
402.643.3695
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WELCOME TO SEWARD COUNTY CASA!

Dear Volunteer/Staff,

Seward County CASA is pleased to welcome you as a volunteer/staff with our program. Since **1996, Seward County CASA** has advocated for children in our court and welfare systems. Therefore, as a volunteer/staff, you are a critical component in the advocacy efforts of this program.

This manual will provide you with the policies and procedures of this CASA program. This manual is not a contract and does not guarantee any fixed terms and conditions of a volunteer/staff's participation in the CASA program. It is information that we would like you to become familiar with and follow, because your commitment to these policies and procedures will make **Seward County CASA** a stronger and more effective program. It will also help us maintain a level of professionalism, which is an integral part of CASA.

Your service as a volunteer/staff will last only as long as you agree. However, **Seward County CASA** is looking forward to having a long and beneficial relationship with you.

We encourage any suggestions you may have for improving our services or our policies and procedures manual. We have an "open door" policy. Therefore, if you have any problems or questions concerning the policies and procedures outlined in this manual, we want you to feel comfortable enough to take the matter up directly with me.

The policies and procedures in this manual applies to all staff, Board members and CASA volunteers

Sincerely,

Director

General Program Policies and Procedures

Purpose of Policies and Procedures

The **purpose** of these policies and procedures is to provide overall guidance and direction to volunteers/staff serving as CASA volunteers/staff for **Seward County CASA**. They do not constitute, either implicitly or explicitly, a binding contractual or personnel agreement. **Seward County CASA** reserves the right to change any of these policies and procedures at any time and expect adherence to the changed policy. Areas specifically not addressed by these policies and procedures shall be determined by the Director and/or the Board¹. Volunteers/staff will be required to sign an acknowledgement indicating that they have read, understood, and will comply with all the policies and procedures. Volunteers/staff will be notified of any changes made to this policy and procedure manual.

Under particular circumstances, certain exceptions may be made to the policies and procedures of this program. Such exceptions will be made at the discretion of the Director and/or the Board.

Discrimination/Harrassment

Recruitment, selection and promotion of its volunteers/staff will be free of discrimination or harassment.

Seward County CASA promotes equal employment opportunities to all applicants/employees/volunteers for reasons of recruitment, selection and promotion by prohibiting discriminatory policies concerning any individual or group based on race, religious creed, national origin, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, color, gender, age, marital status, political affiliation, or veteran status.

Staff and volunteers are admonished that racial slurs, ethnic jokes or other disparaging remarks or conduct based on race, religious creed, national origin, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, color, gender, age, marital status, political affiliation, or veteran status are never appropriate in the work place.

Seward County CASA will take prompt and immediate action to investigate instances of reported misconduct. Any employee or volunteer found to be in violation of this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Sexual Harassment

¹ The term "Board" is meant to include a Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, or any other oversight board or committee.

Seward County CASA affirms that all women and men are to be treated fairly and equally, with dignity and respect. We strive to achieve a working environment that is professional and supportive to all individuals.

Sexual harassment is defined to be any unsolicited behavior, which asserts a person's sex as a factor of his/her function as an employee, or volunteer. It includes any unwanted sexual behavior, comments, suggestions, physical contact; propositions backed by implied or actual threats of losing or lowering work, and/or forced sexual relations. Sexual harassment does not include personal compliments welcomed by the recipient, or social interaction or relationships freely entered into by the individuals involved.

Seward County CASA will take prompt and immediate action to investigate instances of reported misconduct. Any employee or volunteer found to be in violation of this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

Alcohol/Drug Use

Seward County CASA is committed to providing an environment that is safe. Staff and volunteers are role models for persons using this program's services. **Seward County CASA** endorses the philosophy that the workplace should be free from the detrimental effects of alcohol and/or illegal drugs. There will be no differentiation between someone who illegally uses drugs and someone that sells or distributes drugs.

Being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs is prohibited and is cause for disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

VOLUNTEER/STAFF RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

The following information shall be included in the volunteer/staff application: educational background; employment history; personal experience with child abuse or neglect; full name, AKA's, and maiden name; social security number; date of birth; and residence for the previous 5 years. Once an application is received a one-on-one interview will be completed with the prospective volunteer by staff.

Also included with the volunteer/staff application will be the names and addresses for three references and release of information forms to be sent to the Nebraska Child/Adult Abuse/Neglect Central Registry, the Nebraska Trial Courts Case System, and the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles. If the prospective volunteer has lived outside of Nebraska, appropriate checks will be conducted in those States. Once the initial training is complete the volunteer will

be required to be fingerprinted and the FBI fingerprint background check completed before the volunteer is assigned a case.

Once the Director receives and reviews all aforesaid information, a Director may determine that an applicant does or does not qualify to become a volunteer/staff. If the Director determines a volunteer/staff does not qualify, the Director will send a letter notifying him or her that he or she does not qualify to be a volunteer/staff.

The Director may determine at any time during the screening and training process, including prior to assigning the volunteer/staff to a case that the volunteer does not qualify to be a volunteer/staff. The Director will notify the volunteer/staff if such a determination is made. Disqualification by the Director prior to a case being assigned may not be appealed to the Board, unless it can be shown that the Director disqualified a volunteer/staff in violation of **Seward County CASA's** policy on discrimination or sexual harassment. Staff are encouraged to take a case only one time. This is to give the staff person experience as a CASA Volunteer. After the case ends, the staff person will not be allowed to take another case.

VOLUNTEER/STAFF FILES

A file of all the volunteers/staff and applicants shall remain confidential and will be maintained in a locked file cabinet and/or in a secured database on a computer in the program office. However, such files may be shared with other programs or the Nebraska CASA Association, if the circumstance arises. Volunteers/staff have access to their files except for the reference checks and may contact the Director to view the file at any time. All volunteer/staff files shall contain the following: application; background checks; references; volunteer oath; statement of commitment; the letter of acknowledgement from the policy and procedure manual; evaluations; and documentation of any disciplinary action. All volunteers/staff are responsible to report any changes of address, telephone or other pertinent information to the Director.

The Director will send a quarterly notice of active and inactive volunteers to the Nebraska CASA Association. Such notice will contain the number of volunteers disqualified prior to being assigned a case, the number of volunteers dismissed and the number of volunteers that resigned.

VOLUNTEER TRAINING

SEWARD COUNTY CASA provides volunteers/staff with at least 30 hours of training. Topics include: the roles and responsibilities of a volunteer and other

professionals; permanency planning; confidentiality; cultural awareness; child abuse and neglect; juvenile court process; and observation of court. Once training is complete, the volunteer/staff will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and a letter of commitment. *All volunteers/staff must complete the training before they will be assigned a case.*

Upon successful completion of training, the volunteer/staff will be sworn-in as a Court Appointed Special Advocate by a judge of **Seward County Court**.

Continued training is essential to ensuring a volunteer/staff's success. **Seward County CASA** is required to offer twelve (12) hours in-service training throughout the year and all volunteer/staff are expected to participate. However, if a volunteer is unable to attend specific in-service training, but is able to participate in relevant programming on his or her own, **Seward County CASA** will count those hours towards the 12 hour requirement. Volunteers/staff are responsible for having such programming authorized by the Director prior to attending. Volunteers/staff will be required to provide documentation that the volunteer/staff attended the programming. Stipends may be available to volunteers/staff to attend in-service training. If the program pays a registration fee and the volunteer/staff does not attend, the volunteer/staff is required to reimburse the program. Online training is available through our website.

The volunteer/staff will be required to attend 4 of the 12 support group meetings hosted by the program staff each year. A support group meeting is held each month.

VOLUNTEER CASE ASSIGNMENT

The Director will try to match a volunteer with a case based on the preferences of the volunteer. A volunteer has the right to refuse a case assignment for any reason.

Once a volunteer accepts a case, he or she must sign a certificate of acceptance to be maintained in the case file. The volunteer will then receive any documentation necessary to manage his or her case, including, but not limited to, the court order appointing him or her as the CASA. The Director is responsible for introducing the volunteer to all the parties of the case, verifying the volunteer's appointment.

The volunteer shall maintain a case file at his or her residence. Such file must be placed in a secure place to ensure that all information remains confidential. The Director will also maintain an office file of the case in a locked file cabinet.

Volunteers must submit a court report or some other documentation at all court hearings. The Director may make exceptions to this. The Director shall review all court reports, documentation, and correspondence, and the Director is responsible for distributing the reports to all the parties to the case. The Director is unable to alter court reports without the knowledge and agreement of the Volunteer.

Case Consultation - Volunteers are required to maintain a minimum once a month in-person consultation with the staff member assigned to the case, regarding the progress of the case, or more often depending on the circumstances surrounding the case. In the event an in-person contact does not occur in any given month, the Director may allow one of the following to occur in its place: phone, memo, report or email. The Seward County CASA Program will make an attorney available to the volunteer for the purpose of answering legal questions related to his or her specific case or general questions as to federal, state, or tribal laws; court procedure; or the justice system.

Case Activity – Volunteers are required to have two visits per month with the child they are appointed to. This contact must occur outside of the courtroom. One contact must be at the child's placement and the other contact must be in person at any other location deemed appropriate. In the event that the child is placed more than 180 miles from the volunteer's home, the two contacts may be made by phone, letter or email and the volunteer must make one phone call to the foster parent or agency staff to check on the welfare of the child. More contact with the child is strongly encouraged. Volunteer must be willing to commit at least six (6) hours per month of volunteer time. Volunteers will not be allowed to be appointed to more than two cases at one time. The volunteer should use the CASA office mailing address and fax number for correspondences. CASA staff will forward mail/faxes to you as needed.

Court Reports - Court reports/documentation should be completed for review and provided to the Director no less than ten (10) working days prior to the court hearing, unless the volunteer makes other arrangements with the Director. By order of the Court, court reports are due to the Court seven (7) working days prior to the court hearing.

At the conclusion of the volunteer's involvement with the case, including resignation by or termination of the volunteer, the volunteer shall return the entire case file to Seward County CASA staff within five (5) business days of case closure. This includes, but is not limited to, all original documentation of the volunteer's appointment to the case, court documents, documentation of phone calls or other interviews, any correspondence, medical records or other assessments, and any and all personal notes on the case.

PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Ultimate responsibility for all CASA cases rests with the Director. However, the volunteer also represents **Seward County CASA**, and what you say and do in the courtroom and in the community reflects on the program. Please always conduct yourself in a manner that reflects favorably on **Seward County CASA**.

Dress – volunteers/staff should dress appropriately for court and meetings with other community agencies. If you have any questions about what to wear, please call the Director.

Gift Giving – volunteers/staff cannot give money, expensive gifts (must be less than \$10.00), or clothes to the child. The CASA volunteer has access to an activity fund through the Nebraska CASA Association. The volunteer may request a form from Seward County CASA staff. This does not prohibit the volunteer from sending cards. If you have any questions about gift giving, please contact the Director.

Providing Direct Service – volunteers are restricted from providing direct services such as, but not limited to: **transporting parties**, care giving, intervening in domestic disputes, providing counseling, giving legal advice, offering to provide funds for food or other necessities, taking parties to your house or place of employment, etc. Volunteers are facilitators; volunteers advocate for the direct service agencies to provide these services to the families the volunteers advocate for.

Volunteers shall not provide direct service delivery to any party involved in their cases that could (a) lead to a conflict of interest or liability problems, or (b) cause a child or family to become dependent on the volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations.

Public Speaking/Media – volunteers are encouraged to speak about the program in general throughout the community. However, inquiries concerning **Seward County CASA**, its policies, practices, or clients must be referred to the Director. Volunteers are prohibited from making any statements to the media involving the program or on behalf of the program. If Volunteers are asked to give a presentation in the community, you must have approval from the Director to give the presentation.

Involvement with the Legal/Welfare System – volunteers must immediately notify the program if the volunteer or immediate family member is charged with or convicted of a criminal offense, or becomes involved in any other court proceeding which might cause a conflict of interest or adversely affect the

volunteer's ability to effectively advocate for a child. This includes notifying the program if the volunteer or any member of the volunteer's immediate family becomes involved in a case with allegations of child abuse or neglect. Seward County CASA Program reserves the right to perform background checks on Volunteers at any time.

Decline Appointment, Withdraw or Request Assistance - volunteers that recognize that they may not have the time or ability to effectively advocate for a child should decline to be appointed, withdraw or request assistance.

Conflict of Interest – volunteers' effectiveness and standing in court depend on them maintaining professional relationships with children and families. Volunteers should not become personally involved with the children and their families. This includes not being related to or developing intimate, social or other nonprofessional relationships with any person connected to the case or being employed in a position that might result in a conflict of interest.

Communication with Parties – volunteers are prohibited from giving counseling; legal advice; misrepresenting the role or position of a volunteer; or engaging in any *ex parte*² conversation with a judge.

Confidentiality – volunteers become officers of the court upon appointment to a case. Any information pertaining to the children or families, including the foster families, which the volunteers receive in the course of their duties is strictly confidential. Discussion of the case may only take place with those directly involved with the case. No discussions of any children or family situations of any kind are to be held in hallways, elevators or other public places. Should there be a question as to whom volunteers may speak to about the case, please contact the Director.

Duty to Disclose: Exceptions to Confidentiality – volunteers are not protected by privilege, like a doctor-patient or lawyer-client relationship. It is the volunteers' responsibility to transmit the information they collect to the parties and the court. At the beginning of the case, volunteers should carefully inform all the parties regarding what records will be maintained about them and what information will be shared, with whom, and under what circumstances.

Volunteers have a duty to immediately disclose in instances where the volunteers suspect (1) Child abuse and/or neglect; (2) Someone may harm her/himself or others. Such disclosure should be to the Department of Health and Human Services at 1-800-652-1999 or the police. Volunteers that have information to disclose should contact the Director immediately.

² The Nebraska Supreme Court has stated that "an *ex parte* communication occurs when a judge communicates with any person concerning a pending or impending proceeding without notice to an adverse party." *State v. Lotter*, 255 Neb. 456 (1998)

COMPLAINTS AND GRIEVANCES

Every effort should be made to solve problems cooperatively and informally before presenting them as a formal grievance. Should informal efforts fail, the following policy and procedure is set forth in order to provide an outlet for complaints and a systematic means to resolve grievances. All complaints will receive thoughtful consideration and will be discussed. Complaints and grievances may arise from external (outside the immediate program) or internal (within the program).

External – Because volunteers/staff are involved with work that impacts the future lives of children and families, this emotionally charged work evokes a wide range of feeling from all the parties involved. It is therefore common and expected that there may be criticism from the parties. Should a complaint arise from someone outside the **Seward County CASA** program, the Director will discuss the complaint with the volunteer/staff. The Director is responsible for deciding if the complaint has any validity and may request a written statement from the party initiating the complaint. In addition, the Director, with the advice from the board, may determine what action, if any, should be taken.

Internal – When a volunteer/staff wishes to make a complaint with a policy, practice, condition or Director's decision, it is encouraged that the volunteer/staff should first try to discuss the matter informally with the Director. If this is not an option or the problem is not resolved to the volunteer/staff's satisfaction, he or she should contact the board chair to discuss the issue. If the issue is still not resolved, the volunteer/staff should place the complaint in writing to be submitted to all the members of the board for discussion. The board must provide the volunteer/staff with a written response outlining its position to the volunteer/staff and to the Director.

If the volunteer still feels that the problem is not resolved to the volunteer/staff's satisfaction, he or she should contact the Executive Director of the Nebraska CASA Association, 315 S. 9th St., Suite 213, Lincoln, NE 68508, 402-477-2788, or by email at: gwen@nebraskacasa.org.

EVALUATIONS

Volunteers will be evaluated. Periodic evaluations help **Seward County CASA** sustain long and mutually productive relationships with our volunteers. If **Seward County CASA** determines that its best interests are not being served, it may work with the volunteer to develop a plan to improve his or her efforts or may choose to terminate the relationship.

Evaluations may also come as the result of a sequence of verbal or written warnings.

Volunteers are encouraged to use the evaluation sessions to discuss areas of concern and to make suggestions about improving the volunteer program.

All evaluations will be maintained in the volunteer's file.

DISCIPLINE

The purpose of discipline is to correct volunteer misconduct or to improve performance. Depending on the circumstances, misconduct will result in disciplinary action, which may include a verbal warning, written warning, or dismissal. The Director will administer verbal and written warnings and a record of such will be placed in the volunteer's file.

DISMISSAL

Dismissal of a volunteer will normally follow **Seward County CASA** evaluation and discipline policies. Dismissal of a volunteer is the responsibility of the Director, who reserves the right to dismiss "at will," the final decision, of which, cannot be appealed to the Board.

Immediate dismissal will take place only in the most serious of circumstances. Grounds for dismissal may include, but are not limited to:

- (a) Taking action without **Seward County CASA** or court approval that endangers the child or is outside the role of the volunteer or the program;
- (b) Knowingly and intentionally violating a program policy, court rule or law;
- (c) Demonstrating an inability to effectively carry out the duties of a volunteer;
- (d) Demonstrating gross misconduct or insubordination;
- (e) Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs while performing the duties of a volunteer; or
- (f) Lying or falsifying records or any other documents.
- (g) Initiating an ex-parte communication with the Court.
- (h) Existence of child abuse or neglect allegations against a Volunteer.
- (i) Existence of a perceived conflict of interest that cannot be resolved.

RESIGNATION OR LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Volunteers/staff may at any time, for whatever reason, decide to resign from their volunteer service with **Seward County CASA**. It is requested that the volunteer/staff resign orally or in writing. The Director will then send out a letter of verification to the volunteer, of a copy of which will be placed in the volunteer's file.

Should a volunteer want to become active again without repeating the initial training, he or she must contact the **Seward County CASA** program within one (1) year of resigning. They may have to participate in an interview with the Director. If the volunteer fails to contact the program within one (1) year, then he or she must repeat the initial training and may also have to go through the screening process. A volunteer may continue to be on "inactive" status for two (2) years. However, such volunteer must continue to participate in in-service training and attend four support group meetings per year. Failure to do so will result in an automatic dismissal.

Once a volunteer "closes" a case, he or she may choose not to be immediately appointed to another case. He or she should notify the Director of such either orally or in writing. The Director will then send out a letter of verification to the volunteer, of copy of which will be placed in the volunteer's file.

SAFETY

These safety procedures have been established in order to give volunteers guidelines on avoiding possible harmful situations during visits:

- (a) Dress in a fashion that is casual and not conspicuous. Avoid wearing or exposing expensive jewelry. Do not carry a large sum of money.
- (b) Exercise maximum care and good judgement at all times to prevent accidents and injuries. If any kind of accident or injury does occur, the volunteer should report it to the Director.
- (c) Before going on a visit, verify the appropriate route with the Director or become familiar with the area a few days prior to stopping for a visit.
- (d) If you are concerned about visiting a home or any other place, ask the Director or another experienced volunteer to go with you on a visit.
- (e) Always let someone know where you are and how long you plan to be gone on the visit.

- (f) Visits with children should take place in a public place or with other adults in the near vicinity to avoid claims of misconduct.
- (g) If you have a cellular phone, take it with you and have it on.
- (h) Upon approaching a building or other area, if you do not feel totally comfortable for whatever reason, **DO NOT ENTER** the building or the area. A visit can be made at another time and arrangements can be made to have someone accompany you.

LETTER OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

TO: **SEWARD COUNTY CASA**
P.O. Box 215
SEWARD, NE 68434

I have read **SEWARD COUNTY CASA's Policy and Procedure Manual revised on 7/15/2008**. I understand its contents and agree to follow the policies and procedures as set forth in it.

Print name: _____

Sign name: _____

Date: _____