



## **Purpose Statement**

Hill Country CASA's volunteer policies and procedures are presented in this document. Historically, Hill Country CASA handled policies individually; creating policies as needed and reviewing each periodically to comply with Texas and National Standards. This document, created August 2018, is designed to bring all Hill Country CASA's operational policies together for cohesiveness and more thorough Board oversight.

The last edit of this document was conducted by Dr. John Sheehan and Stephanie Cash in May 2019, and approved at the Board of Directors Annual Meeting in July 2019.

## **Goals and Objectives**

### **GOALS:**

The goal of HCCASA is to provide well-trained community volunteers to give advocacy for children involved in the judicial system in Kerr, Bandera, Kendall, and Gillespie Counties. HCCASA's first priority will always be children who are in custody of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (TDFPS). Our goal is to serve 100% of the children removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect in our four-county service area.

On order of the Courts, HCCASA volunteers will investigate cases, monitor children's situations and provide the judiciary with factual, concise reports focused on what is in the best interest of each individual child. The mandate of CASA volunteers is to provide each child the individual attention needed to facilitate necessary services and safe, timely, permanent placement.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

Our objectives are to provide legal and personal advocacy to children involved in the judicial system, to speak to the Courts "in the best interest" of each child, and to help assure that these children find safe and permanent homes in as timely a manner as possible.

To that end, HCCASA will actively recruit volunteers from all segments of our community and we will strive to be as inclusive as possible in our recruitment. Volunteers are carefully screened before being trained in accordance with national and state CASA guidelines.

Hill Country CASA volunteers will be trained to achieve our goals and objectives through an initial 30-hour training course, which will include background on the following:

- An overview of judicial and child welfare systems, including observation of live court proceedings
- Facts about child abuse and neglect
- Relevant state and federal laws
- The role and responsibilities of CASA volunteers
- The role and responsibility of TDFPS
- TDFPS permanency planning and family preservation
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity
- Child development
- Interviewing and report writing
- Family violence/Sexual assault

After this initial training, CASA volunteers are sworn as Officers of the Court and are appointed to appropriate cases by one of the local presiding Judges. Active CASA volunteers will be expected to attend 12 hours of continuing education each year.

Hill Country CASA's Executive Director will make herself available at all times to volunteers for guidance and counsel. She will also have the responsibility for final oversight over court reports to ensure clarity and accuracy.

**EVALUATION:**

HCCASA's Executive Director will send an annual written evaluation to volunteers, judges, and the Ad Litem Attorney pool. Results of this evaluation will be studied by the Board of Directors of Hill Country CASA to help identify program strengths and weaknesses.

Additionally, there will be frequent contact between HCCASA's staff, the courts and TDFPS in regard to the progress of individual cases and the conduct of CASA volunteers/staff.

**GRIEVANCES:**

Hill Country CASA's Board of Directors has established grievance policies for volunteers and staff. Copies of these policies are available at the offices of Hill Country CASA and within this document.

## Table of Contents

|                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Mission Statement .....                              | 5  |
| Organizational Chart.....                            | 6  |
| Court Appointment Order- GAL.....                    | 7  |
| Advocacy Actions.....                                | 9  |
| Discrimination/Harrassment policy.....               | 10 |
| Whistleblower Policy .....                           | 11 |
| Conflict of Interest Policy .....                    | 13 |
| Weapons Policy .....                                 | 14 |
| Drug Free Workplace .....                            | 15 |
| Social Media Policy .....                            | 16 |
| Media and Crisis Preparedness.....                   | 17 |
| Confidential Information and Records Retention ..... | 19 |
| Diversity Plan.....                                  | 23 |
| Job Description.....                                 | 24 |
| Advocate Commitment.....                             | 27 |
| Program Guidelines.....                              | 29 |
| Support and Supervision of Advocates.....            | 32 |
| Dos and Do Nots.....                                 | 34 |
| Pledge of Confidentiality.....                       | 37 |
| Transportation policy.....                           | 38 |
| Termination of Volunteer.....                        | 39 |
| Certification of Volunteer Policies .....            | 40 |
| Model Release .....                                  | 41 |

## **Mission Statement**

Hill Country CASA provides trained, court-appointed volunteers who passionately advocate for abused and neglected children in Kerr, Kendall, Bandera and Gillespie Counties.





**Court Appointment Order- GAL**

**CAUSE NO.**

**IN THE INTEREST OF**

§  
§  
§  
§  
§  
§

**IN THE DISTRICT COURT**

**JUDICIAL DISTRICT**

**CHILDREN**

**KERR COUNTY, TEXAS**

**APPOINTMENT OF A VOLUNTEER ADVOCATE**

1. Appointment of Volunteer

Pursuant to Texas Family Code §107.031, the Court appoints \_\_\_\_\_, approved Volunteer Advocate, to appear at court hearings on behalf of the child(ren) the subject of this suit as the Volunteer Advocate for the Guardian Ad Litem, Hill Country CASA, Inc.

The Volunteer Advocate shall assist the Guardian Ad Litem in conducting an investigation into the circumstances affecting the best interest of the child(ren), interviewing the child(ren) at any place the child(ren) may be found, appearing at all hearings in this cause, and providing appropriate assistance to the child(ren).

The Volunteer Advocate shall maintain any information received from any source as confidential and will not disclose the same except as allowed by law. The Volunteer Advocate named above has submitted to state and national background checks through DFPS on XX/XX/XXXX, DPS on XX/XX/XXXX, social security verification on XX/XX/XXXX and completed their pre-service training on XX/XX/XXXX. Hill Country CASA conducted the background checks and training, and verified the Volunteer Advocate’s fitness to serve the court in the capacity of Guardian Ad Litem.

2. Release of Confidential Information

The Court finds that it is in the best interest of the child(ren) the subject of this suit, is essential to the administration of justice, and is not likely to endanger the life or safety of any person to release all files, reports, records, communications, and

working papers used or developed in the investigation or in the providing of services to the child(ren) by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to the appointed Volunteer Advocates.

**IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED** that the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services make this information available to the appointed Volunteer Advocate, without the necessity of redacting any information made confidential by Texas Family Code §261.201.

Upon presentation of this order to any law enforcement or other agency; public or private hospital, school or health facility; medical or mental health provider (including doctors, nurses, psychologists, counselors and their staff), the Volunteer Advocate is hereby authorized to inspect any records relating to the above-named child(ren).

**WARNING**

**§40.005 of the Texas Human Resources Code provide that a person who is authorized to receive confidential information shall maintain its confidentiality and shall prevent disclosure of the information to a person who is not authorized to receive the information. It is a Class A misdemeanor to disclose, without authorization, confidential information contained in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services records, papers, files, or communications.**

The Clerk of the Court is ordered to forward copies of this Order to all attorneys of record and pro se parties.

SIGNED on this the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, YEAR

\_\_\_\_\_  
ASSOCIATE JUDGE CATHY MORRIS

**CC: HILL COUNTRY CASA  
P.O. BOX 290965  
KERRVILLE, TEXAS 78029**



**Advocacy Actions:** Advocacy for children is defined by Hill Country CASA as any CASA-GAL approved activity that promotes the best interest and permanence of children to whom we are assigned.

**CHILD FACE TO FACE CONTACT:** Children appointed to be served by HCCASA must be seen face-to-face in accordance with Texas CASA's Standards:

|                                                             |                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Child placed less than one hour's away                      | Monthly Face to Face Contact Required          |
| Child placed more than one hour, less than three hours away | Once every 90 days Face to Face Contact Req'd  |
| Child placed more than three hours away                     | Once every 180 days Face to Face Contact Req'd |

**CHILD OTHER CONTACT:** Other types of contact with appointed children is encouraged as developmentally appropriate. This may include written correspondence, phone/text contact, video chat or other age-appropriate methods.

**MONTHLY CASE CONTACTS:** Regardless of the distance of the child's placement, CASA makes contact with parties and significant non-parties involved in the child's case in accordance with Texas CASA's Standards:

|                              |                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Caregiver                    | Face-to-Face, Phone/Text/Video Chat, Email contact with the child's primary caretaker regarding the child's status (educational, medical per below)           |
| CPS Caseworker or Supervisor | Face-to-Face, Phone/Text/Video Chat, Email contact with the child's primary caseworker regarding the child's status (educational, medical, legal per below)   |
| CASA Supervisor              | Face-to-Face, Phone/Text/Video Chat, Email contact between CASA volunteer and supervisor regarding the child's status (educational, medical, legal per below) |

**EDUCATIONAL / MEDICAL / LEGAL ADVOCACY:** Texas CASA has no specific guidelines for advocacy actions; thus Hill Country CASA has developed the following list of advocacy actions that meet the child's educational, medical and legal needs throughout the case. This is not an exhaustive list; as our children are unique there may be additional actions needed to advocate for the individual.

| Educational Advocacy                                                                                            | Medical Advocacy                                                                                                    | Legal Advocacy                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participation in a Family Group Conference, in which educational needs were discussed                           | Participation in a Family Group Conference, in which medical needs were discussed                                   | Participation in a Family Group Conference, in which permanence or parent service plans were discussed |
| Participation in school meetings (ARD, 504)                                                                     | Participation in treatment plan meetings or other medical staffings                                                 | Participation in mediation or other permanency-related staffings                                       |
| Discussion of child or parent educational needs with education professionals, case parties or child's placement | Discussion of child or parent medical issues or needs with medical professionals, case parties or child's placement | Discussion of child's best interest with treating professionals, case parties or child's placement     |
| Meeting with child's teachers or school counselor                                                               | Meeting with child or parent treatment providers, therapists, or doctors                                            | Meeting with parent or child attorney to discuss case                                                  |
| Service as the child's educational decision maker                                                               |                                                                                                                     | Report to the court on status of parent service plan completion or permanence                          |
| Report to court/recommend on educational status or needs                                                        | Report to court/recommend on medical status or needs                                                                | Report to the court/recommend on status of child's ID (for ages 14+)                                   |

## **Discrimination and Harassment**

The Board strives to provide all employees with a workplace that is free from any unlawful discrimination, harassment, intimidation, hostility, or other offenses which might interfere with work performance. Unlawful discrimination or harassment, whether physical, sexual, or verbal, is strictly prohibited, and will not be tolerated by any employee, volunteer, or CASA client. Discrimination or harassment includes, but is not limited to, racial slurs, ethnic jokes, posting or emailing of inappropriate remarks, posters, cartoons, words, signs, pranks, intimidation, unwelcome physical contact, violence, or other similar conduct. Behavior prohibited by this policy also includes requests to engage in illegal, immoral, or unethical conduct. All such conduct will not be tolerated and constitutes grounds for immediate termination of employment or dismissal.

### Staff:

Hill Country CASA is an equal opportunity employer. In recruiting, selecting and promoting staff, Hill Country CASA does not discriminate against any individual on the basis of race, gender, religion, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, or country of national origin.

### Board of Directors:

In recruiting, selecting and confirming members of the organization's Board of Directors, Hill Country CASA does not discriminate against any individual on the basis of race, gender, religion, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, or country of national origin.

### Volunteers:

In recruiting, selecting, training and swearing-in volunteer advocates, Hill Country CASA does not discriminate against any individual on the basis of race, gender, religion, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, or country of national origin.

## **Whistleblower Policy**

### **General**

Hill Country Court Appointed Special Advocates (“HCCASA”) requires its employees to observe the highest standards of professional and personal ethics in the conduct of their duties and responsibilities. As representatives of HCCASA, HCCASA’s employees must practice honesty and integrity in fulfilling and complying with all applicable laws and regulations. It is the responsibility of all employees to report violations, or suspected violations of the same in accordance with this Whistleblower Policy.

### **No Retaliation**

No employee or volunteer who in good faith reports a violation of any applicable law or regulation shall suffer harassment, retaliation, or adverse employment consequence. An employee who retaliates against someone who reports such a violation in good faith in any manner shall be subject to discipline up to and including termination of employment. This Whistleblower Policy is intended to encourage and enable employees and others to raise serious concerns within the organization prior to seeking resolution outside the organization.

### **Reporting Violations**

HCCASA has an open door policy and urges employees and volunteers to share their questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about other employees, including HCCASA’s Executive Director. In most cases, the Executive Director is in the next position to address an area of concern. However, if an employee is not comfortable speaking with the Executive Director or the employee is not satisfied with the Executive Director’s response, the employee may contact the president of HCCASA’s Board of Directors. For suspected fraud, or when an employee is not comfortable following the open door policy, individuals may contact the HCCASA’s current President of the Board.

### **Compliance Officer**

The Executive Director serves as HCCASA’s Compliance Officer for purposes of this policy. The Compliance Officer is responsible for investigating and resolving all reported complaints and allegations concerning violations of ethics, fraud, etc. and shall thereafter advise the Board’s Executive Committee. The Board’s Executive Committee shall, in consultation with the whole Board, make decisions regarding violations of compliance.

## **Acting in Good Faith**

Anyone making a formal complaint under this policy must be acting in good faith and have reasonable grounds for believing the information disclosed indicates a violation of ethics or fraud or applicable law or regulation. Anyone making an allegation(s) that proves not to be substantiated and, which proves to have been made maliciously or knowingly to be false, will be considered a serious offense which may result in discipline or termination from employment.

## **Confidentiality**

Reports of violations or suspected violations will be kept confidential to the extent possible, consistent with the need to conduct an adequate and thorough investigation.

## **Handling of Reported Violations**

The Compliance Officer will notify the complainant and acknowledge receipt of the reported violation or suspected violation within five business days. All complaints will be promptly investigated and appropriate corrective action will be taken if warranted by the investigation.

## **Conflict of Interest Policy**

Employees, volunteers and members of the Board of Directors of Hill Country CASA shall not use their authority inappropriately, nor condone any illegal act or unethical practices related to the Hill Country CASA program or community. They may not use their association with CASA to promote personal gain or to avoid any type of penalty.

### **Board of Directors:**

So as not to create any conflict of interest, Hill Country CASA does not purchase items of value or contract for services with any member of the Board of Directors.

### **Staff:**

A Hill Country CASA staff member shall not be a voting member of the Board of Directors, nor be related within the third degree of consanguinity or affinity to any parties or litigants involved in cases assigned by the Courts. Hill Country CASA Staff members' immediate relatives shall not be CASA volunteers for Hill Country CASA. Employees should not engage in outside employment incompatible with his/her employment duties and shall have no interest arising by contract or other relationship with service providers that creates a conflict of interest with their duties. An employee should report, in writing, to the Executive Director, any situation which he/she feels may become a conflict of interest.

### **Volunteers:**

No Hill Country CASA volunteer or employee shall provide direct services to a child or his/her family that could lead to a conflict of interest or potential liability or cause a child or family to become dependent on the CASA volunteer for services that should be provided by other agencies or organizations. Volunteers shall not accept appointment to a case where there is a pre-existing relationship of any sort with the families involved with the exception of being assigned as a volunteer in a prior case involving a family, or in case of previous work with the family in another community service capacity. Volunteers should not be employed in a position or with an agency that might create a conflict of interest with their CASA duties. A volunteer should report to their Case Supervisor any situation which he/she feels may become a conflict of interest.

### **Nepotism:**

In compliance with the Uniform Grant Management Standards – UGMS (Subpart B, .14 State Assurances (a) (1), page 62) HCCASA does not allow board members and/or staff to employ or confirm the employment of their relatives within the third degree of consanguinity or affinity. **Failure to comply** with HCCASA's policy governing conflict of interest will result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from the program's board, staff or volunteer force.

## **Weapons Policy**

No guns or weapons of any kind will be carried or transported by CASA employees, volunteers or board members while involved in any CASA related activities. This prohibition includes those weapons carried under license issued by the State of Texas. (Law enforcement officers are exempt from this rule.) Violation of this policy may result in dismissal from employment or removal from volunteer or board service.

While not allowing its volunteers or employees to carry firearms, Hill Country CASA is mindful of volunteer and employee rights to assurances of a safe working environment. To that end, if an employee or volunteer is concerned about their security in any interview or home visit, Hill Country CASA will arrange for law enforcement to monitor said matter.

## **Drug Free Workplace**

Hill Country CASA hereby notifies all employees that the unlawful manufacture, distribution, dispensing, possession, or use of any controlled substance is prohibited in the workplace and disciplinary actions will be taken against employees for violation of such prohibition.

## **Social Media Policy**

Hill Country CASA (CASA) recognizes the freedom of our employees, volunteers and board members (collectively referred to herein as “Representatives”) to participate in social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). CASA also believes it is important that Representatives who engage in social media and online conversations understand the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of cases. Representatives must, at all times, maintain the confidentiality of the information in the cases they work and this Social Media Policy clarifies proper use of social media.

### **I. Regarding Organizational Social Media:**

CASA will maintain a website and social media to increase awareness of this nonprofit organization and to provide volunteers with a reference site for CASA related activities and trainings.

Staff shall not post any information about specific children, cases, or volunteers on this website.

### **II. Regarding Personal Social Media:**

Representatives shall not post any information to social media relating to their CASA work to include children’s names or likenesses (unless model release has been signed and with express approval of the Executive Director); any case information, to include names of parties or non-parties; or anything else related to CASA, Child Protective Services, or court personnel.

Further, representatives shall not interact with children or case parties on social media (including being “friends” with children, private messaging, or posting on their accounts). If a child reaches out to you via social media, do not respond, and tell the CASA office immediately.

Any violation of this policy will be considered a serious issue and could result in discipline, to include termination for a CASA employee, or immediate removal for an advocate or board member.

## **Media and Crisis Preparedness**

There are two primary reasons that Hill Country CASA would have exchange with media sources.

It is, we hope, likely that most of our contact with local media will be Informational/ public relations oriented. In this case our organization would approach the media, or they us, with the intent of getting the message of the CASA program out to the community. This "message" could be about a variety of issues; to explain the program, to call for volunteers, to raise funds, to differentiate CASA from other child advocacy programs, to give thanks for support and/ or to give recognition for service to community. This type of contact is usually friendly and rewarding to both entities.

The second type of contact between this CASA and the media would be generated by a crisis situation involving either the local CASA program or another program that might somehow be identified with CASA. This type of interaction is usually much less pleasant/ more stressful than the first type of contact and it is extremely important that it be handled correctly.

To that end Hill Country CASA has formulated the following policy on media contact: ANY SCHEDULED MEDIA INTERVIEWS OR PRESS RELEASES CONCERNING HILL COUNTRY CASA MUST BE APPROVED BY THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OR THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF HCCASA. No volunteer, staff, or Board of Director shall give interview or press release about the program without the knowledge/approval of the Executive Director or the Board of Directors.

In the event of a crisis situation; the staff of HCCASA will attempt to give information and guidance to any CASA or Board member who might be asked to give media comment. It is our hope that all associated with HCCASA would be familiar with the afore stated Media Policy and would direct media sources to the Executive Director.

Finally, the following guidelines will direct the interaction of Hill Country CASA with all media sources:

- \*Always tell the truth - good and bad news
- \*Be prepared - direct and simple answers are best
- \*Present a professional attitude/appearance to the media

## Hill Country CASA Operating Policies and Procedures

### \*Avoid "No Comment"

- Cite legal practice "Our practice is not to discuss pending litigation."
- Cite HCCASA's policy "Our policy is not to discuss personnel matters."
- Cite timing "It is premature to answer your question at this time, however, when the information is ready/available, we will get it to you."

### \*Do not repeat a negative

### \*Never use profanity, racial, gender, religious or nationality remarks

### \* Don't participate in "no-win" stories

**\*REMEMBER THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "OFF THE RECORD" WITH A REPORTER**

## **Confidential Information and Records Retention**

Hill Country CASA is required by Texas and National CASA Standards to maintain records for personnel (staff, volunteers, board members) and case files for all cases to which we are appointed Guardian Ad Litem (child/family, court, medical/educational files).

### **HCCASA Standard Practices for Handling Confidential Information:**

- All personnel are required to maintain a current, signed statement of acknowledgement of confidentiality policies upon initial orientation, and at the acceptance of each new case
- Anti-malware, anti-virus, and offsite cloud backup are installed on all HCCASA owned computers / tablets; backups and malware scans run continuously
- Quarterly, contracted IT comes onsite to conduct systems checks, password updates, and ensure the server, anti-malware/virus and cloud backup systems are working in proper order
- Only authorized users of ABCS and FBC have access to view actual background check records; each staff with access use their own log in information and background checks are only run once written authorization is received
- All HCCASA computers are password protected; passwords are changed every 90 days
- All HCCASA staff delete emails from the server at the close of business weekly

### **HCCASA utilizes an online database management system to maintain all confidential information records:**

- Hill Country CASA's office-maintained case files shall be the official files of record
- No physical (paper) files will be maintained on case or personnel records (except required staff records)
- All case and personnel records will be held within the online database system HCCASA currently uses
- Online database management system conducts offsite backup of entire database daily
- Any paper records received will be uploaded to the online database system (per parameters below) and then shred through HCCASA's contracted shredding service

- HCCASA Program Director shall be the Security and Privacy Officer designated to work with contracted IT to oversee security maintenance
- HCCASA staff and volunteers have graduated levels of access to the database, on a “need to know” basis; volunteers only have access to the cases they personally work
- HCCASA staff and volunteers are permitted to access the online database management system through their personal devices; information in the HCCASA case file is not to be shared outside the conditions allowed in the confidentiality policy

### Regarding Required Records to Keep on File:

#### For cases:

- Hill Country CASA staff assigned to the case will be responsible to maintain a complete case file, per Texas and National CASA Standards, in the online database system
- Staff will not maintain physical records of cases
- Staff will be responsible to upload case information (court documents, contacts, other documents) as soon as possible following receipt of documents / contact; and no later than 5 business days after the receipt / contact
- Volunteers are allowed access only to the cases they serve; access is revoked immediately upon dismissal of the volunteer, or once the case assessment is complete following case closure

#### For personnel:

- Hill Country CASA will maintain complete personnel records for volunteers, staff and board members, per Texas and National standards, within Optima – no physical files will be kept
- HCCASA Executive Director will maintain a physical personnel record for each staff member that contains sensitive information not appropriate for storage in the online database (performance evaluations, disciplinary actions, IRS records, etc); these records are kept in the Executive Director’s locked office
- Monthly audit for required updates to personnel records (background checks) will be conducted by each Executive Director, Program Director, Volunteer Coordinator and Program Assistant at regular intervals monthly

#### For financial / administration:

- Per auditor, complete financial records must be kept for no less than 4 years

- All transactions must have supporting documentation, kept in physical files by line item in the Executive Director's locked office
- Administrative documents (both program and volunteer) are maintained electronically and updated/board approved annually

### Regarding Retention of Closed Cases:

- Hill Country CASA staff will maintain closed case files within the online database system, only accessible by our request to the online database vendor
- Closed case file information is only available to the child(ren) subject of the suit or through court subpoena
- Request for closed case file information must be made in writing, and a five-business day turnaround is expected (though if information is available sooner we will provide)

### Regarding conversion of tenured volunteer Fingerprint Background Checks into DPS' rap-back system:

Hill Country CASA learned that DPS would not be able to convert fingerprint background checks conducted before June 2015 into their "rap-back" system. Texas Administrative Code and DPS require that all CASA volunteers, staff and Board are fingerprinted and part of the rap-back system in order to remain current on statutorily required background checks.

Thus, Hill Country CASA:

1. Will contact DPS to verify the names of volunteers who must be reprinted.
2. Will contact local Identogo (fingerprinting service) and set up a voucher system to allow volunteers to be reprinted at a time convenient for them, and without spending out of pocket.
3. Will discontinue running name-based checks on volunteers printed before June 2015, as of August 31, 2018. Name-based checks are valid for two years from the run date.
4. Once voucher system is in place, will send mass communication to all those identified in item 1 from the Board President, explaining the need for refingerprints to be done.

5. Will individually communicate with Board, staff and volunteers currently serving cases to print as soon as possible once the voucher system is in place.
  
6. Will require volunteers in item 1 not currently serving cases to be reprinted before taking their next appointment, provided a location for fingerprinting is available within our service area. Otherwise, prints will be conducted preservice for all new volunteers, and name-based checks will be maintained on all continuing volunteers until they are able to travel to a fingerprinting location.

## **Diversity Plan**

The most recent demographic figures show Hill Country CASA's four county service area to be overwhelmingly Anglo in makeup (78%) with Hispanics and other minorities representing about 22% of the population. Our caseload of children is also an Anglo majority. The percentage of minority children we serve fluctuates but has averaged 20% to 25% for many years.

These minority children are chiefly of Hispanic or Hispanic-Anglo ethnicity. Our caseload is generally of equal distribution, male to female and the vast majority of the children we serve have socio-economic backgrounds that are characterized by chaos and poverty.

Hill Country CASA's program endeavors to be an inclusive organization whose volunteers, staff and Board members reflect the diversity of the children and the communities we serve in terms of gender, ethnicity and cultural/socio-economic background. This is a difficult task and the following policy has been implemented to accomplish this goal.

- Hill Country CASA will offer training on a cultural diversity topic at least once a year, available for volunteers, staff and board members. This training will be general in overview but will emphasize the issues of diversity most common to our area; Hispanic culture, the culture of multi-generational poverty and cultural/economic bias.
- Hill Country CASA will take positive action to achieve equal opportunity for all persons in filling staff positions. This action will include contact with various organizations in the community, including minority group organizations, regarding our agency's employment needs. Any advertisements for employment opportunity will state that Hill Country CASA is an equal opportunity employer.
- Hill Country CASA will continue to recruit men and women of varied ethnicity and throughout our four-county service area to serve as volunteers and sit on the organizations Board of Directors. Assignment to cases or selection to the Board will not be made on the basis of ethnicity alone.
- Hill Country CASA staff and Board will give presentations and make outreach throughout the four-county service area to recruit potential volunteers and leadership candidates. This outreach will focus on building a volunteer base and board of directors that reflect the diversity of the children we serve.

## **Job Description, CASA-GAL**

Responsible To: Case Supervisor and/or Executive Director/Program Director

### **PURPOSE OF POSITION:**

1. To recommend to the court, based on fact-finding and investigation, actions that are in "the best interests of a child". CASA volunteers primarily provide legal and personal advocacy to children who are in the custody of Child Protective Services.
2. To work for and to achieve the goal of CASA - that every child has the right to a safe, stable, drug free, violence free permanent home.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE POSITION:**

1. Interview all parties and the professionals involved, as well as the child/children involved in the assigned case.
2. Maintain accurate records of all findings. This includes using the data base, Optima for documenting all contacts you make in your case.
3. Confer with Case Supervisor or Executive Director/Program Director on a regular basis (a minimum of once each month) and prior to any final decisions.
4. Attempt to attend all meetings concerning the child if available, or arrange for Hill Country CASA staff to attend such meetings in your place if you are not available.
5. Discuss court reports with Case Supervisor or Executive Director/Program Director prior to preparing report. All reports must be co-signed by the volunteer advocate, Executive Director or Program Director, and the Case Supervisor prior to being filed with the court.
6. Prepare court reports in a timely fashion so that they may be edited, signed, and distributed to appropriate parties at least 5 days before the court hearing and legally filed with the District Court the Friday prior to the hearing.
7. Appear in court to speak to the child's "best interest" or arrange for Hill Country CASA staff to attend in your place.

8. Monitor the case to ensure that the court's orders are being carried out, that services are being furnished to the child, and that placement is appropriate.
9. Monitor the care given the children you serve in the institutions and/or foster homes where they may be placed.
10. Work with TDFPS for timely permanency for each child; whether that permanency is reunification with the biological parents, adoption by a family member, adoption by a non-related caregiver/foster home, or independent living.

**REQUIREMENTS OF POSITION:**

1. Must be at least 21 years of age.
2. If employed, secure permission in advance of basic training for time off from work to attend periodic hearings and/or inform Hill Country CASA staff of possible time constraints.
3. Complete application for position and give consent for background checks. All volunteers must submit to state criminal background check, national criminal background check, child abuse registry and national sex offender registry checks, and finger printing. These checks will be run, at a minimum, every four (2) years.
4. Make appointment and come to the office for an interview prior to initial training.
5. Complete initial training course of 30 hours and participate in courtroom observation of 3 hours.
6. Appear before the local judiciary to be sworn in as a Court Appointed Special Advocate and follow the charge of the oath you take.
7. Monitor case proceedings and appear at all hearings or arrange for Hill Country CASA staff to cover for you.
8. Complete a minimum of 12 continuing education hours each year.
9. Sign STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT to serve a minimum of one year as a CASA volunteer.

10. Sign PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY and be strictly bound by the same.

**QUALIFICATIONS OF POSITION:**

1. Willingness to work within the guidelines, policies, and standards of Hill Country CASA and Texas CASA, Inc.
2. Good human relations skills and the ability to be objective.
3. Must have a strong conviction of the importance of providing for the best interest of children.
4. Must have enough time, interest, and energy to do the job.
5. Must have access to transportation.
6. Must have the ability to stand up for your convictions in a strong but reasonable manner.
7. Must have a willingness to receive guidance and direction, as you will work as part of a team.
8. Must be sensitive to cultural/ethnic differences.

## **Advocate Commitment**

Upon signing this statement, I am making a commitment to **HILL COUNTRY CASA** and to the child(ren) with whom I will serve as a CASA advocate. I will:

1. Serve at least one child, from the time of the court assignment to the implementation of a permanent plan for the child, for a period of at least 12 months.
2. Give all the time necessary to provide the Court with the information necessary to make an informed placement decision for the child, and to assure that the child receives adequate representation as to his/her best interests. The time required could be anywhere from six to 100 hours, including field visits, telephoning, report writing, court appearances, and training and supervision.
3. **Maintain strict confidentiality.** To maintain confidentiality means that a CASA volunteer:
  - A. **Does not** discuss his/her child's case with spouse, children, friends or other relatives.
  - B. **May only** discuss his/her child's case with a CASA supervisor, or persons who are **party to the case.**
4. Uphold CASA's transportation policy. It is **not** permissible for the CASA volunteer to invite and/or receive clients into his/her home, or the homes of the CASA's family or friends.
5. Attend a minimum of twelve (12) in service education hours per year because these sessions will:
  - A. Improve my ability to deal with abused children and their families.
  - B. Increase my knowledge about family violence, child abuse and other related topics.
  - C. Enable me to earn twelve hours per year of in service credit to remain a CASA advocate. If I am unable to attend the mandatory in service training offered by CASA, I will substitute an alternative community training with prior supervisory approval.
6. Contact my supervisor by phone either weekly or biweekly to inform him/her of my child's status and review my casework goals.
7. **Record all case-related data in Optima database system as soon as possible following contacts.**

## Hill Country CASA Operating Policies and Procedures



8. Turn in court reports in a legible form and on time (about a week prior to the hearing).
9. Attend all court hearings, PPM's, and other meetings regarding my assigned child's future.
10. Dress in an appropriate, professional manner while representing CASA.
11. Notify my supervisor if I cannot perform any of the above commitments.

**HILL COUNTRY CASA** makes the commitment to:

1. Provide ongoing training, supervision and help in evaluating my work.
2. Provide the professional consultation and necessary support in order to promote appropriate interventions into the child's situation and to facilitate appropriate recommendations about his/her placement.

This agreement is entered into for the purpose of providing the best possible advocacy for the child(ren) with whom I work. I fully understand that failure to complete or comply with any of the above requirements may result in my termination from the advocate staff of **HILL COUNTRY CASA**.

## **Program Guidelines**

The following guidelines have been developed to provide the support and structure needed for effective and professional CASA work. It is very important that these guidelines are followed.

1. You are appointed by the court to work as the child's advocate. We hope that this does not conflict with family reunification. However, it is essential that you remember that the child is your primary concern.
2. No child or family member of the child to whom you are assigned may visit in your home or the home of any of your family members. There are absolutely no exceptions to this rule.
3. Discuss any plans for gift giving with CASA staff prior to acting. A gift may be appropriate; however, other issues may need to be considered-such as other children in the foster home, the wishes of a foster parent or parent.
4. Discuss any "sensitive" case-related topics with CASA staff prior to acting. A good example of a "sensitive" issue is birth control/sexual education. There are many others. Always consult your supervisor before choosing to have these conversations with the child or caregivers.
5. Assure that you follow every caution and safety procedure when your child is traveling in your car with you or attending a function (no speeding, use seat belts, use infant seats, a lifeguard is on duty if swimming, etc.).
6. Do not accept any responsibilities that you are unable to manage. Your personal schedule and your wellbeing are important to all of us. If you need support in meeting a schedule that you feel is important in the child's case, ask your supervisor for help.
7. The CASA staff is there for you. If you need an immediate response, please ask that a phone call or meeting be interrupted. If not, your call will be returned as quickly as possible. Please make an appointment when coming to the office to consult with your supervisor. Staff will make every effort to be available at times most convenient to you. If the office is closed, the answering machine will take your message.
8. Do not release your phone number or address. Exceptions can be made. Please consult with your supervisor.

9. Do not release the phone numbers of foster parents, biological parents, other parties in the case unless given permission, and do not include in written reports to the court.
10. Contact your CASA supervisor for approval prior to any efforts to solicit goods and/or services for your child.
11. On going training is mandatory and part of the commitment of each CASA advocate. 12 hours of continuing education is required every calendar year after the year you are initially trained. The CASA office will make sure that you have many opportunities to complete these required trainings.
12. If you become involved in any legal or public social service process, contact the CASA office to discuss any possible conflicts or interest.
13. Court reports are to be discussed only with professionals related to the case. Court reports are not given to children or parents. Court reports are given to the TDFPS attorney, TDFPS supervisor, TDFPS caseworker, attorneys for the parents, the attorney ad litem for the child(ren) and the judge. An attorney may choose to show your report to his client.
14. All information related to your case is confidential. With the exception of CASA staff, and other professionals on your case, you may not discuss your case. If you are describing what you do as a CASA advocate to friends or family, you must describe work in broad generalities, never using real names or specifics.
15. Foster parents are supervised by TDFPS and/or by contracting private licensed foster agencies. Initial contact with the foster parent should be made early in the case and your CASA supervisor will make sure the foster parents and their licensing agency are aware of your appointment as the guardian ad litem for the child. If problems develop with a foster parent or other placement of the child, discuss this with your supervisor before taking action.
16. Under no circumstances may you have “ex-parte” communication with a judge. A communication is said to be ex-parte when it is taken or granted at the instance and for the benefit of one party only and without notice to others that might be adversely interested.
17. Do not ever give legal advice to the child(ren) you serve, parents, relatives, or foster families; you’re a CASA volunteer, not an attorney.

## Hill Country CASA Operating Policies and Procedures



18. Do not ever try to provide therapeutic counseling, which is not your role when doing CASA advocacy, even if you have the required credentials.
19. Keep all case files confidential.

## Support and Supervision of CASA Advocates

At Hill Country CASA, the Executive Director, Program Director, Volunteer Coordinator, Case Supervisor, Program Assistant and Master Trainer are responsible for maintaining a support system that works to keep our advocates active but not overwhelmed by their case assignments. CASA staff is consistently available to advocates for assistance, direction, or offer advice.

A protocol for contact and case review has been established between the staff of Hill Country CASA and our advocates. Most advocates welcome this support and truly recognize their need to have a sounding board regarding case issues. One of the greatest values the CASA advocate brings to the process is their ability to “think outside the box.” Learning to harness that creative thinking and present it as a positive team member at staffings and court hearings can be a challenge to some advocates. Hill Country CASA’s staff works to assist our volunteers in this process as we try to prevent burnout and preserve enthusiasm for future advocacy for children.

After investigation and contacts on behalf of their cases, advocates must present a written court report prior to each hearing. Hill Country CASA has established protocol for these reports. **All** court reports shall be formatted in Hill Country CASA’s standardized template and shall be reviewed by Hill Country CASA’s Executive Director or Program Director and the appropriate Case Supervisor **prior** to submission to the Court. The staff who reviews the court report, along with the volunteer advocate who wrote the court report, will sign off on the final edited version before filing that document in the District Clerk’s office and distributing to the appropriate parties in the case.

Should concerns arise about the contents of any report, the advocate will discuss their position with the supervising CASA staff and/or the Executive Director/Program Director. We will work to reach an agreement. However, should an impasse develop, the advocate will defer to CASA staff regarding the matter. It is not the role or intent of CASA staff to control the content of reports, but rather to assist the advocate in understanding the appropriate way to present information to the Court. It is also CASA staff’s responsibility to protect advocates from accusations of slander or libel.

Hill Country CASA staff tries to give regular recognition to the work of its advocates and we encourage local authorities to do likewise. We also are committed to ongoing, professional continuing education for our advocates and work to facilitate the same. We recognize that our hardworking advocates are the real heart of our CASA program and we do all we can to support them.

At Hill Country CASA we encourage a diversified advocate base. We are hampered some in this effort by our four county service area's overwhelming Anglo ethnic makeup. The children we serve are also an Anglo majority. However, the Hispanic population of the area is growing and we work to recruit both Hispanic advocates and bi-lingual advocates. In addition to public awareness media campaigns and speaker presentations; we utilize advocates and Board members to recruit advocates.

## Do and Do Nots for CASAs

### DO:

- Report any suspicion that a child has been mistreated. You are not to judge whether the child is in danger-leave that to the investigator. The number to call is 1-800-252-5400. CASA staff can assist you with making your report, at your request.
- Meet all parties involved with your case in person.
- Be a friendly advocate. Remember how to most effectively advocate. Be assertive, but not aggressive. Other CASA advocates will also have a case involving the same professional, so we all need to “put our best foot forward”.
- Keep in mind that TDFPS will make the basic decisions on the case. All professionals have responsibilities on the case. Others’ performance or judgments should never be discussed in the presence of family members or children.
- Discuss any areas of disagreement with others with your supervisor. Options for proceeding with conflicts are:
  - \* Talking with the person’s supervisor.
  - \* Calling a staffing of the involved individuals and their supervisors.
  - \* Working it through with CASA staff and deciding to let it drop.
  - \* Making appropriate recommends to the court.
- Call your CASA supervisor whenever you:
  - \* Are stuck in your case.
  - \* Are unsure of how to proceed
  - \* Are confused about an issue or procedure
  - \* Need to know resources or options available
  - \* Need assistance or consultation on any matter
  - \* Need a listening ear
- Ask your CASA supervisor to go with you if you are unsure or a little uncomfortable getting started on your case. CASA supervisors can accompany you on a first visit to an area of town in which you are unfamiliar, to your first ARD, PPT, ISP, etc.

- Be aware of, and adhere to, appropriate interaction and contact with children at all times, but especially when you are alone with a child (for instance, during transport or on a one-on-one visit).
- Use the CASA business card provided to you. Tell parties that “this is your office, and you can be reached at this number”. We will send your message to you as soon as they come in.
- Submit a written court report for each hearing on your case.
- Call the CASA office immediately if you move or change your phone number. Inform your supervisor if you will be out of town for periods of longer than a week.
- Leave an emergency number with CASA office/staff.
- Keep all case files confidential.

### **DO NOT:**

- Take a child to your home or on an overnight outing.
- Give expensive gifts.
- Make promises-you may not be able to keep them. Don't even suggest things like “I'll see what I can do”. A needy and often desperate child can easily misinterpret your intent.
- Give legal advice.
- Make placement arrangements for a child – that's CPS's job, not ours.
- Let the parties become too dependent upon you. When you are no longer there, these parties will not have become able to help themselves.
- Do anything with which you are truly uncomfortable. Call your supervisor to discuss any problem or hesitancy.
- Interact with children to whom you're assigned on social media.
- Contact children to whom you're assigned via text message.
- Give medicine, aspirin, or vitamins to a child.

- Authorize medical treatment for a child. All hospital and/or doctor visits must be authorized by the custodial parent or TDFPS caseworker.
- Give treats or even feed the children without checking first on any dietary restrictions with the primary caregiver.
- Surprise us! Surprises create chaos in a CASA program. Problems of a personal nature will be held in the strictest confidence. Do call us if you:
  - \* Go on vacation
  - \* Have surgery
  - \* Get married or divorced
  - \* Lose your job or get a job
  - \* Have family problems
  - \* Get involved in any situation, which may affect your ability to be a responsible CASA advocate

## **Pledge of Confidentiality**

Hill Country CASA maintains confidentiality of all records and information regarding cases, children and families we serve, and our staff and volunteers. All involved with Hill Country CASA as staff, volunteer or Board of Director will maintain confidentiality in accordance with the following statement. Volunteers will reaffirm this statement by signing it at the acceptance of each new case.

I promise that I shall hold in confidence all pertinent information. I will not violate the confidential relationships between Hill Country CASA, its volunteers, related agencies, courts, and all parties interviewed. I will not remove from the office of CASA, without expressed permission, any written records.

I will return all information that I have gathered, together with any printed matter to notions relevant to any and all cases to which I have been assigned, at the close of a case or if my service to Hill Country CASA comes to an end.

I accept full responsibility for maintaining the confidential and private nature of all records and information. I understand that I am personally responsible and liable for any violation of this agreement.

## **Transportation Policy**

Hill Country CASA has an agreement with TDFPS which allows our volunteers to transport the children to whom they are assigned by court order. We have made it clear to CPS that CASA is not to be considered as a regular transporter for scheduled appointments, visitation with family or other matters where the department or the child placing agency has primary responsibility for transportation. However, CASA may agree to help out in an emergency and/or CASA volunteers may choose to take their assigned children out for a meal or a movie or some other event.

Not all CASA volunteers want to transport children – the decision is an individual one. If you are not comfortable having a child in your car then let us know you will not be transporting.

Any volunteer who wants to transport children must discuss the matter with their case supervisor. The case supervisor will contact the CPS caseworker to inform them of the CASA volunteer's plans. Once that is done the volunteer will be notified. If you transport, please remember that you have taken on a tremendous responsibility and follow every caution and safety procedure when your CASA child is with you. If you transport remember to always use seat belts, use infant/toddler seats, never speed or take any chances with safety.

Always remember that no child or family member of the child to whom you are assigned may visit in your home or the home of any of your family members. CASA is restricted from ever taking children on outings that require overnight stay. There are absolutely no exceptions to these rules.

CASA Standards require that we keep copies of a current driver's license and auto insurance in your volunteer file. Please help us remember to update your records; we will also reach out to you as your current cards expire and appreciate your prompt response. Hill Country CASA's liability insurance package includes "non-agency auto" coverage that acts as a secondary policy after the limits of your personal auto insurance coverage.

## **Termination or Discharge of a Hill Country CASA Volunteer**

Appropriate grounds for dismissal include:

- A. The advocate takes action without program or Court approval which endangers the child and/or is outside the role or powers of a CASA
- B. The advocate violates a law, any of HCCASA'S program policies or any rule of the Court
- C. The advocate demonstrates inability to effectively carry out CASA duties
- D. The advocate initiates ex-parte communication with the Court
- E. The advocate falsifies advocate application or misrepresents facts during the screening process
- F. The existence of child abuse/neglect allegations against the advocate or a criminal charge that will compromise the advocates ability to serve
- G. The existence of a conflict of interest that cannot be resolved

**At any time after a CASA advocate has been sworn, the Executive Director of Hill Country CASA has the authority to terminate and/or suspend any CASA advocate for any of the reasons mentioned above or for violation of Hill Country CASA's Policies and Procedures that are presented to every advocate during their initial training.**

**If any CASA advocate wishes to contest termination or has grievance to express; Hill Country CASA provides an established protocol for the same. A copy of this grievance protocol is presented to every advocate during their initial training and, additionally, can be obtained from CASA staff during business hours.**



## HCCASA Model Release

For Consideration herein acknowledged as received, and by signing this release I hereby give HILL COUNTRY CASA, INC. (HCC) my permission to license the Content and to use the Content in any Media for the purpose of recruiting and fund raising to support the mission of HCC, which may include, among others, advertising, promotion, marketing and packaging for any service. I agree that the Content may be combined with other images, text, graphics, film, audio, audio-visual works; and may be cropped, altered or modified. I acknowledge and agree that I have consented to publication of the ethnicity(ies) and gender as indicated below, but understand that other ethnicities or gender may be associated with me by HCC for descriptive purposes.

I agree that I have the rights to the Content, and if I am not the Photographer, I have the consent to execute this release from the photographer. I acknowledge and agree that I have no further right to additional consideration or accounting, and that I will make no further claim for any reason to HCC or Assigns. I acknowledge and agree that this release is binding upon my heirs and assigns. I agree that this release is irrevocable, worldwide and perpetual, and will be governed by the laws (excluding the law of conflicts) of the State of Texas.

It is agreed that my personal information and the personal information of any person depicted in the Content will not be made publicly available but may only be used directly in relation to the licensing of the Content where necessary (e.g. to defend claims, protect rights or notify trade unions) and may be retained as long as necessary to fulfill this purpose, including by being shared with sub-licensees / assignees of HCC and transferred to countries with differing data protection and privacy laws where it may be stored, accessed and used.

I represent and warrant that I am at least 18 years of age and have the full legal capacity to execute this release. If Model is a minor or lacks capacity in the jurisdiction of residence, Parent warrants and represents that Parent is the legal guardian of Model, and has the full legal capacity to consent to the Shoot and to execute this release OF ALL RIGHTS IN MODEL'S CONTENT. I further warrant that I am the legal parent of any child or children depicted in the Content and have the authority to execute this release on behalf of such child or children, and that no governmental agency has any rights or authority over the child or children depicted.

### Definitions:

"ASSIGNS" means a person or any company to whom HCC has assigned or licensed rights under this release as well as the licensees of any such person or company.

"CONSIDERATION" means \$1 or something else of value I have received in exchange for the rights granted by me in this release, which may include my desire to assist in the furtherance of the mission of HCC.

"CONTENT" means all photographs, film, audio, or other recording, still or moving, taken of me, any other adult members of my family and any of my children.

"MEDIA" means all media including digital, electronic, print, television, film, radio and other media now known or to be invented.

"MODEL" means me and includes my appearance, likeness and voice, and the appearance, likeness and voice, of any other adult members of my family and any of my children.



# Hill Country CASA Operating Policies and Procedures

“PARENT” means the parent and/or legal guardian of the Model. Parent and Model are referred to together as “I” and “me” in this release, as the context dictates.

## Parent(s)/Releaser(s) Information:

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Residence Address : \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

ZIP Code : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Residence Address : \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

ZIP Code : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Signed (DD/MM/YEAR): \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Creation of Media:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Location of Creation of Media: City/State: \_\_\_\_\_; Shoot Country & Region/State

## Name(s) of Persons Depicted in Media:

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

Witness to Model/Parent(s)' signature (NOTE: All persons signing and witnessing must be of legal age and capacity in the area in which this Release is signed. A person cannot witness their own release)

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_