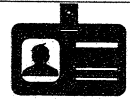


An Introduction to the CASA/GAL Volunteer Court Report



The CASA/GAL volunteer court report is the most essential aspect of your work as a CASA/GAL volunteer. The report outlines, in a standard format, what the CASA/GAL volunteer has discovered, the volunteer's assessment of the child's situation and what the court needs to do to help the child achieve a safe, permanent home. It is your primary tool in effectively communicating the child's perspective. The report also ensures professionalism, consistency and objectivity.

The court report is the vehicle through which you present the information you have gathered about a child's situation and your recommendations about what services will meet the child's needs. The facts stated throughout the report are the foundation of your recommendations and should be clear, concise, and easily distinguished from opinions and assumption. When writing the document, it is imperative 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 recommendations. You will have greater success defending your written documentation and representing the best interests of the child if the report is free from bias.

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

Judges rely on the information in CASA/GAL volunteer court reports as they make their decisions. You will submit reports for most hearings. The CASA/GAL volunteer 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 your written documentation, which is made record at each court hearing. CASA/GAL volunteer court reports are shared with all parties to a case and any other individuals who are authorized by law to receive them.

All CASA/GAL programs require that court reports be submitted to the CASA/GAL program office prior to court. Staff will review all CASA/GAL 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.

An Introduction to the CASA/GAL Volunteer Court Report, Cont'd.

Keys to a Successful Report

- Be thorough and specific.
- Get your information firsthand.
- Report the facts.
- Make specific recommendations that flow from the facts.
- Use the court report format provided by your program (which you will learn about in the next chapter).
- Submit your report on time so CASA/GAL program staff can review and comment on your report.

Key Elements of a CASA/GAL Volunteer Court Report



Identifying Information

Include the child's name, ethnicity, tribal enrollment status (if family is of Native American ancestry), the case number, the petition date and the hearing type.

CASA/GAL Volunteer Activity

Describe visits with the child (how many, dates and places), contacts with others involved in the case (dates and type) and reports or records requested or reviewed.

Brief Family Background/Reason for Removal

Briefly recount the incidents leading up to the removal, including reasons the child came into care and history of referrals or arrests related to child's removal.

Placement Information

Briefly describe how many and what types of placements have occurred since the child was taken into custody, including dates and lengths of stay.

Case Plan

Describe basic elements of the case plan.

Case Status

Describe parental progress (or lack thereof) toward the case plan and agency compliance with the goals of the case plan, including whether reasonable efforts have been made.

Status of the Child

Describe how the child is doing in school, the physical and social development of the child, the health of the child, whether the child is in therapy (and if so, for what), independent-living services that are being provided to the child (if relevant), whether and how the child's cultural needs (if any) are being met and the child's expressed wishes.

Key Elements of a CASA/GAL Volunteer Court Report, Cont'd.

Family and Community Resources

Describe strengths, skills or previous successful coping instances of the biological family and any resources within the extended family to provide connection, respite or additional help. Identify community resources that might provide additional support or services.

Issues and Concerns

Consider addressing any of the following:

- The case and/or permanency plan, including obstacles to its implementation
- Current or continuing problems in the case
- Participation in and progress of provided services; services still needed
- Ability of current placement to meet child's needs
- Visitation or lack of visitation

Best Interest Recommendations

Provide a short list of recommendations to meet the child's needs that are specific and are based on information previously documented. Recommendations should include, but not be limited to, placement, services and permanence.

Tips on Writing Effective Court Reports

In writing a report, the following steps are imperative:

- Use the court report format provided to you in training.
- Begin to work on the report at the beginning of your information gathering.
- Maintain detailed and chronological notes.
- Make the report child-centered.
- Be accurate. This means presenting exact information, free from unfamiliar acronyms, grammatical errors and misstatements.
- Check your spelling—not only in the body of the report, but also the names and titles cited in the report.
- Use the active voice (“CASA/GAL volunteer visited the home...”).

Key Elements of a CASA/GAL Volunteer Court Report, Cont'd.

- Report objectively and factually; eliminate opinions or diagnoses.
- Use quotations if you have them, but make sure they are accurate in word and citation.
- Use the fewest number of words possible to describe an action or occurrence.
- Eliminate negative emotions/subjective phrases, check for personal bias and refrain from inserting personal judgments.
- Relay only the most relevant and pertinent information.
- Do not transcribe information from other reports directly into your report; paraphrase information using your own words.
- Report incidents in chronological order of occurrence. The report should be uniform, flow from section to section and be easy to understand.
- Do not assume the reader knows the information you know.
- Ensure the basis for recommendations are supported by detailing the observations and information that led to those conclusions.
- Make sure to address placement, permanency, visitation, education, physical and mental health, necessary services for the child or family and the child's wishes.
- Ensure that the report addresses the case plan and any information about court-ordered services, actions, etc.
- Consider the hearing type and what recommendations are appropriate/timely.
- Scrutinize your report as the parties' attorneys will; do not leave room for unanswered questions.
- Play devil's advocate: Question subjective opinions and push for compelling arguments.
- Submit your report according to the deadline. Keep in mind that the report has to be edited and filed in a timely manner for dissemination to all parties.
- After submission, talk with your volunteer supervisor to discuss ways to improve report writing and be open to constructive criticism.

