

Tips for Writing Effective CASA Court Reports

Preparation is Key

DO:

- Work with your CASA staff to identify the months during a given year that your case will most likely have a scheduled hearing. Use the Legal Case Timeline and an annual calendar to write down the months that you anticipate submitting a court report. (Expect to prepare at least 4 reports each year)
- Gather information from an independent perspective. It is important to ask others what they have seen or observed, but it is critical for CASA to have first -hand information and perspective by seeing, observing and talking in person and reviewing all written information available to assure CASA is able to provide an independent perspective.
- Make a list of people that you should be in contact with. Make a list of documents and reports you should review. Make a list of meetings that you should attend. Do this for each time period between court hearings.
- Develop a process that works for you to document your information.
- Review a CPS court report – for a TMC case (Status or Permanency Review Hearing report) and for a PMC case (Placement Review Hearing report).
- Review a CASA court report.
- Gain an understanding of what the Judge is supposed to review at the different types of hearings – Status, Initial Permanency, Permanency, and Review hearings.
- Gain an understanding of the time you will have in court to speak and present information and recommendations. This will underscore the need and importance of the written information and advocacy your court report provides.
- Talk with your CASA staff about the most important things to discuss in each report in each of the areas that you should be providing information
 - Child's needs and issues;
 - Child's placement;
 - Child's well-being issues – medical and mental health and educational advocacy areas particularly
 - Parent's progress;
 - Service plans and updates;
 - Visitation;
 - Permanency plan and concurrent plans;

(At different points in a case, there may be issues that become more important or CASA may have a different perspective and need to more fully explain the basis for that perspective) Check to be sure you have gathered all the information and observations to support your advocacy.

- Be sure you have asked a LOT of questions during your work between court reports and hearings.
- Be sure you have shared information with others and asked others to share information with you. Let the CPS caseworker know about important developments or recommendations that may cause surprise or controversy.
- Be sure you have taken the time to truly understand the child and the wishes of the child.
- IF you have gathered a lot of information you will most likely have a lot you want to share with the court. Prepare to share what is most important to help the case move toward a the goal of permanency and the child out of the system. Prepare to share important information about the child to assure the child's well-being needs are being met while in care.

DON'T:

- Start thinking about your report a few weeks before the hearing. (CPS is supposed to submit their reports to the court at least 10 days prior to the hearing. CASA reports as agreed in the statewide MOU should be submitted at least 5 days prior to the hearing.)
- Think that it is not that important to write down information following meetings, visits, conferences with teachers, observation of visits.
- Think that it is not important to prioritize your time to be sure you are gathering information and asking questions about all the things and areas important to moving the case forward.

Writing the report

DO:

- Begin early.
- Review what your court report said last time. Court reports are like chapters of a book. They should have new information that advances the "story" - the child's journey to a safe, permanent home and provides critical information about the child's well-being while in care
- Write down key points and important information in each section of your court report format and discuss with your CASA staff. This is your "draft" and will help you see where additional information may be needed or where more information is needed to support a position or recommendation.
- Write down your recommendations. Be sure you have information that supports each of your recommendations in your report.
- Be concise. The Judge will greatly appreciate a report that explains well but does so in a straightforward, factual way that is easily read.
- Provide factual information not judgmental or opinionated comments.
- Consider your report from the perspective of all parties to the case.
- Use words that you are comfortable with. Check your spelling and grammar.

- **Be respectful with names. Be consistent with names and titles. Assure names and titles are correct.**
- **Be sensitive to confidentiality and safety when providing information in your report. Check with your CASA staff about using foster parent's names.**
- **Provide information about who you have contacted, seen in-person, and the reports and information you have reviewed and the meetings you have attended. Do this in a concise and accurate manner. This is important as it lends credibility to your report and recommendations.**
- **In each report, at a minimum have a recommendation regarding:**
 - **Placement;**
 - **Services (the child or parent needs - that are not already ordered or that the child or parent has yet to receive); and**
 - **Visitation**
- **Ask your CASA staff to review your draft report at least 2 weeks prior to the hearing – 3 weeks is better!**
- **Be sure to sign your court report.**

DON'T:

- **Be afraid of writing a court report. It is one of the most important tools in your advocacy toolbox.**
- **Hesitate to ask for guidance and assistance from your CASA staff. Your objective in asking for this guidance is to help you feel more comfortable in the current report and future reports that you will write, and to understand how best to impart your important information to others.**
- **Have any “surprises” in your report for your CPS caseworker. It is okay and expected that CASA and CPS may have different recommendations and/or perspectives on some issues. Just be sure you have shared the information and the basis for a different position or perspective with your CPS caseworker and asked for theirs.**

AND FINALLY:

Gain an understanding of how your local CASA program provides CASA court reports to the court and to the different stakeholders and parties on the case.

Know that your CASA court report will become part of the official court record on the case.

Each case is very different – talk with your CASA staff about how an older child on your case can or should read/review/access your court report. Talk with your CASA staff about whether or not older children in your area can submit their own court reports. CASA represents “best interest” but CASA also ensures children have a voice in the court and decision making process.