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Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASM) Instructional Manual

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ABSTRACT

One hundred and twenty-five foster youth enrolled in CASA of Monterey County agency are not receiving the advocacy they need. As a result, the creation of the Instructional Manual within the department of the Court Appointed Special Mentor (CASM) was implemented. The Instructional Manual is a strategic educational project that will provide interns, especially CASMs, with simple and thorough guided information that can assist them with unanswered questions. Moreover, it will provide everyone within the agency with consistently communicated instructions on how to perform essential tasks for their job duties. In other words, it will standardize workplace practices, especially related to critical files that contain important information about foster youths' chances of obtaining an advocate. To demonstrate the effectiveness of the Instructional Manual, first, CASMs must demonstrate an understanding of how to navigate the agency's database "CASA Tracker." Second, CASMs must adhere to the check list of responsibilities and expectations form, and complete the case file report. Third, all the essential information must be updated in the selected foster youths' files. Lastly, data was collected and analyzed to determine its effectiveness. After three months of implementation, the number of foster youth on the wait list decreased from 125 to 93 foster youth. Thus, it was recommended that CASA of Monterey County agency should continue implementing the Instructional Manual as it is an important tool for the agency's CASMs, but most importantly, for the foster youth who are on the wait list whom they serve.

Keywords: *CASA of Monterey County, Foster Youth, Wait List, Instructional Manual*

Agency and Communities Served

CASA of Monterey County is a non-profit 501(c) 3 public benefit agency located in Salinas, California. It was founded by Seattle Judge David Soukup in 1977; however, the Monterey County branch was not established until 1995, and its first Court Appointed Advocate (CASA) class graduated in 1996 (CASA Monterey County, 2017). The agency's mission is to transform the lives of abused or abandoned children in foster care by providing their CASAs, who are community volunteers, with adequate support and training that enhances their ability to uphold the children's rights. This support helps CASAs advocate for foster youth while pursuing a healthy, safe and permanent home. The purpose of CASA of Monterey County is to serve every child in the foster care system who has suffered from abuse or neglect. So far, CASA of Monterey County has trained over 1,000 advocates, and served over 1,100 children (CASA of Monterey County, 2017). Their guidelines are to follow the rules of the state and local courts in addition to the rules of the National CASA Association; the rules are subjected to be annually reviewed and revised. The agency's values are to stand up, be the voice, and provide consistency for all those foster children they are advocating for in order for the children to succeed and receive vital services (CASA Monterey County, 2017).

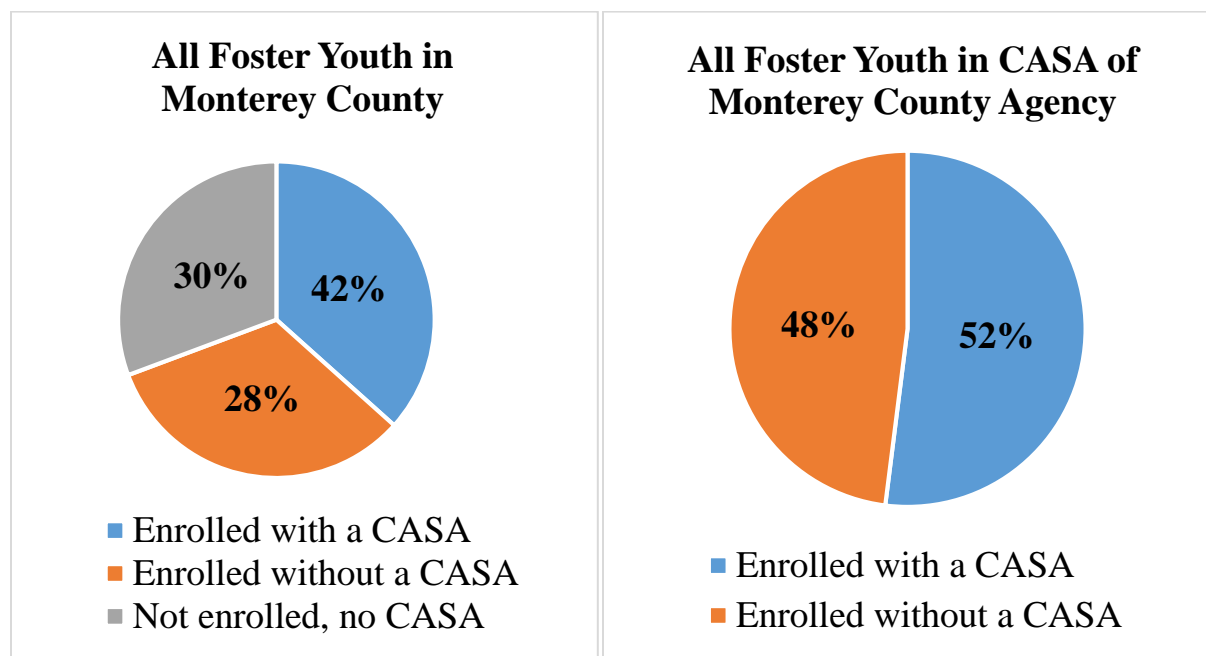
CASA of Monterey County agency serves foster youth who have been placed in the foster care system due to experiencing some sort of abuse or neglect (Prevent Child Abuse New York. n.d). The reasons the foster children enter the foster care system are many, yet the most recognized ones are experiencing physical abuse, where the child is being left with marks on his or her skin, and being restrained or placed in a locked closet or other space (Prevent Child Abuse New York. n.d). Other reasons include sexual abuse, when a parent or caregiver is having an inappropriate sexual relationship with the minor; or neglect, when the parents fail to take care of

the child’s basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. A final reason may be that parents are suffering from a mental health issue, substance abuse, or addiction that prevents them from taking care of their children (Prevent Child Abuse New York. n.d).

Problem, issue or need

One hundred and twenty-five foster youth enrolled in CASA of Monterey County agency are not receiving the advocacy they need. In 2015, there were 450 youth enrolled in the foster care system within Monterey County (Kids Data, 2015). As of 2017, CASA of Monterey County serves a total of 262 children; of these children, 137 have a CASA and 125 are on the waiting list (CASA of Monterey County, 2017). This means that 30% of foster youth in the county are enrolled in the agency and have a CASA who can advocate on their behalf and support them through the issues they are struggling with, whereas 28% are currently on the waiting list to be assigned to a CASA and 42% are neither enrolled in the agency’s program nor have an advocate (CASA of Monterey County, 2017; KidsData, 2015). See Figure 1 below for more details.

Figure 1. Foster Youth Advocacy Rates in Monterey County.



Being enrolled in the foster care system can have a huge impact on any child, let alone a foster child who lacks advocacy. The causes of foster youth lacking the advocacy they need are numerous, but the primary causes this paper will focus on are the lack of advocacy and positive influence, aging out of the system, and the lack of consistency and accuracy of delivering information. The first cause is the lack of advocacy and positive influence. Foster youth could benefit greatly from having an advocate who can support them and help them through their educational journey or with any issues that arise. According to the National Center for Youth Law, “Without an educational advocate, [foster youth] often do not receive the educational opportunities they are entitled to” (n.d. para. 1). Currently, 78% of foster youth within the agency do not have an educational right holder; some might have an assigned CASA who does not hold the child’s educational rights (CASA of Monterey County, 2017). This means that only 28% are receiving the advocacy they need (CASA Monterey County, 2017). Although some of those foster youths’ parents are still their educational right holders, advocating for their children’s education may not be a top priority. If the agency had more CASAs, perhaps there might not be such a huge lack of advocacy for these foster youth.

The second cause is aging out of the system. When foster youth turn 18 or 21, depending on which state they reside in, they suddenly go from being a part of the system, where they received all sorts of help, to being on their own. According to Reuters (2017), “When children age out of foster care, they become ineligible to receive state assistance with housing, food, and medical care under the foster care system” (para. 2). Additionally, when foster youth age out of the system, and without a stable positive influence in these young adults’ lives, they may begin down a dark path that is often hard for even some adults to overcome. As a result, nearly 60% of the aged out foster youth males have been convicted of a crime, around 45% of the young

women have children, and almost a quarter experience homelessness at some point in their lives (Fessler, 2010).

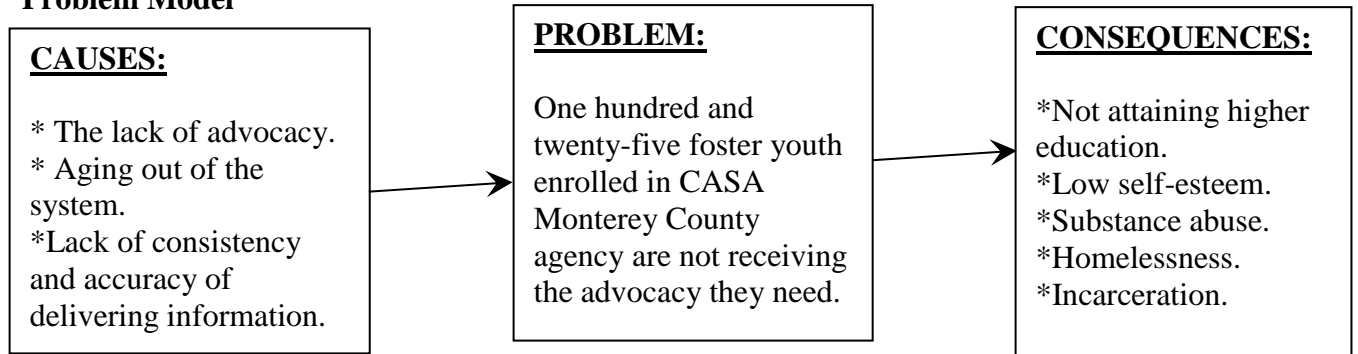
The last cause is the lack of consistency and accuracy of delivering information. Within the CASA of Monterey County agency some foster youths' files are missing important components that are critical to their chances of being assigned to a CASA. Additionally, some foster youth will not receive the support they need because their CASM who is monitoring their file mistakenly misplaces important information. Thus, it is essential for all CASMs, volunteers, and staff members to pay close attention to details, and to have a consistent answer when entering, adjusting, or changing any information from a foster youth's file within the agency's database.

Unfortunately, with any problem comes consequences. The first consequence is the lack of advocacy, which will affect foster youths' chances of attaining higher education, receiving the assistance needed within school, and gaining some positive skills from an advocate who can teach them about life and transitioning into adulthood.

The consequence of aging out of the system are various, yet the most known are having high rates of poor physical and mental health; being homeless or not being able to afford adequate housing; having difficulty forming secure attachments as a result of constantly moving from one foster home to another, and experiencing low self-esteem (Mentoring Partnership, 2011). Moreover, most young adults aging out of the system are not ready to be responsible, nor wise enough to differentiate between right and wrong. According to Baugh (2008), "Approximately 20,000 children 'age out' of foster care each year" (para. 1). As a result, several of them use some sort of substance abuse due to peer pressure, self-medication due to the lack of health care, or to simply cope with their hardships. Others end up incarcerated (Baugh, 2008).

The last consequence of the lack of consistency and accuracy of delivering information is that foster youth end up staying on the waiting list for such a long period of time. For example, last semester, a CASM mistakenly misplaced a few pieces of information within a foster youth's file, which resulted in the youth not being assigned to a CASA. Such small misplacement of critical information left that child on the wait list for over two years. Sadly, foster youth who are on the wait list are not assigned to an advocate who can support them, help them overcome some of the obstacles they are struggling with, and above all, prepare them to transition into the "real world" in terms of continuing their education or simply finding a job.

Problem Model



Capstone project description and justification

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASMs) Instructional Manual.

The Instructional Manual is a strategic educational project that will provide interns, especially CASMs, volunteers, as well as staff members, with simple and thorough guided information that can assist them with unanswered questions. According to Kum, Cowden, & Karodia (2014), "A training manual is a critical process, which seeks to improve the performance of workers in the organization" (para. 1). Furthermore, the Instructional Manual will provide everyone involved with consistently communicated instructions on how to perform essential tasks for their job duties. In other words, it will standardize workplace practices, especially related to critical files that contain essential information about foster youths' chances of

obtaining an advocate. According to the United Bureau Community for Law Review and Franchise (2012), “Consistency is the key to creating a successful and credible business” (para. 2).

Creating the Instructional Manual was an idea that received significant support from all the staff members, interns, volunteers, and court liaisons because it was such a needed element within CASA of Monterey County agency. To implement the project, sixty random foster youths’ files were selected to work with in order to determine where the lack of advocacy begins. After that, the data from the manual files and the database was compared. Next, the collected data was analyzed to see what information was consistently missing. Then, a categorization of the amount of the missing information and how often from each file was recorded. Thereafter, a check list of responsibilities and expectations form (See Appendix A), and case file report (See Appendix B) on selected foster youth were created. Soon after that, the distribution began of the responsibilities and expectations check list and the case file reports to all interns, especially CASMs. Then, to discover the findings, a collection of the data and the analyzed information was processed. Lastly, a face-to-face interview with my mentor and a few advocate supervisors was scheduled to learn about any additional useful information or ideas that would be beneficial to include. For more thorough information, check the method and scope of work in Appendix C.

In the gathering of information stage, there were no obstacles that caused any major inconvenience. However, some potential challenges did arise. For example, if a foster youth who is on the wait list relocates to another county within the tri-county area due to a new foster family placement, then assigning the child to an advocate is complicated, especially if his or her new foster home is extremely far away. Another potential challenge was if the foster youth on the wait list is constantly running away from his or her placement; this will affect his or her chance

of obtaining an advocate. To account for such situations, a creation of separate files for the various foster youth who run away, the ones who get relocated, and the ones who stay in the county was made. Such categorization will give the person who is in charge of the record keeping a broader understanding of why the foster youth did not get assigned to an advocate within a timely manner.

Project results

The outcome measures used to assess the effectiveness of the Instructional Manual are first, observing and analyzing CASMs' full understanding of how to navigate the agency's database "CASA Tracker." In other words, familiarity with the most essential tabs that pertain to locating the latest information regarding each assigned foster youth was conducted. Also, measuring the awareness of which tabs must be used every time CASMs make a change, enter new information, adjust a status, or add more information to their assigned foster youths' file was observed. This is essential so others, such as educational right holders, court liaisons, or advocate supervisors, can locate the changes easily.

The second outcome measure was observing CASMs' adherence to the check list of responsibilities and expectations form and case file report was performed. For instance, every two weeks, CASMs gathered all of their filled out forms and discussed what they liked or disliked while using the check list responsibilities and expectations form and case file report. Their feedback has helped me view their evaluation of the forms, which was extremely useful in adjusting them.

The third outcome measure was verifying that all the necessary information had been updated in the foster youths' files. In other words, noting if each CASM had filled out all of the missing information on their assigned foster youth's file with the most current information:

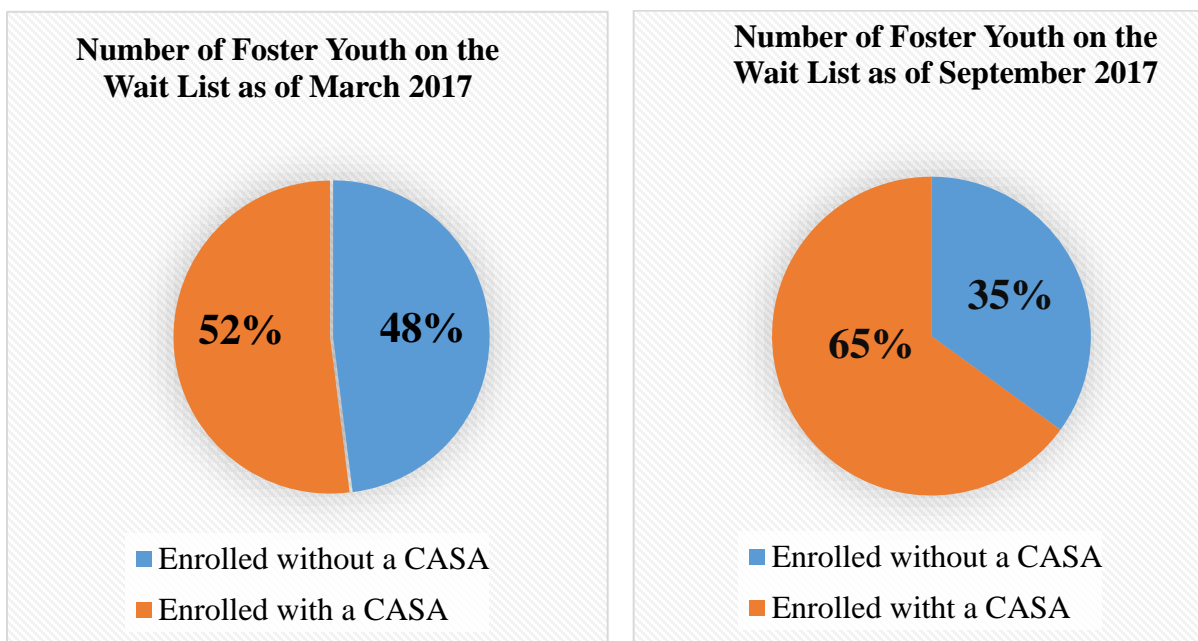
- Personal information (e.g., date of birth, gender, ethnicity, number of siblings, and disposition date)
- Placement name (e.g., Peacock Acres, Hope Services)
- Holder of the foster youth's educational rights
- Grade and school (e.g., name and address of their elementary, middle, high school, or college)
- Permanent plan (reunification, adoption)
- The date and the type of abuse that led the foster youth to be removed (e.g., physical, sexual, emotional, neglect, death of a sibling, or act of cruelty.)
- Next court hearing
- Status in CASA Tracker
- Duration on the wait list
- Notes from the social worker, lawyer, and therapist

The last outcome measure was the creation of pie charts that present the total number of foster youth who were on the wait list as of Spring 2017, and the current number of foster youth who are still on the waist list as of Fall 2017. Additionally, the pie chart could be categorized for all foster youth who are on the wait list by their gender, age, and ethnicity, which could provide a quick, direct way to present the information, in a way that is visually dynamic and of interest to the audience. In this case, the pie chart emphasized the key findings of the data to CASMs and the agency's staff and board members. Furthermore, a pre and post questionnaire was distributed to all CASMs about what missing components were found from all of their foster youths' files who were on the wait list that CASMs were monitoring. Such

findings provide new perspective of how critical it is for CASMs to pay close attention to details, as missing components could easily delay a foster youth’s chance of obtaining a CASA.

As the Instructional Manual was completed, the results were momentous. At the beginning of the project, there were 125 foster youth who were enrolled in CASA of Monterey County agency without a CASA, a person who can advocate on their behalf. After three months of the implementation of the Instructional Manual, the check list of responsibilities and expectations form, and the case file report, the number of foster youth on the wait list has dramatically decreased to 93 foster youth. See Figure 2 below for more details.

Figure 2: Number of Foster Youth on the Wait List



Such consistency from the CASMs has been shown through their advocacy within the agency’s quarterly Match Meeting, where each CASM was aware of his or her foster youths’ needs and how critical each case was. Furthermore, all CASMs improved their work ethic by being more effective and efficient by researching all the missing components from their foster youths’ files. To begin with, CASMs maintained the check list of responsibilities and

expectations form by contacting all of their foster youths' professionals, such as social workers, lawyers, therapists, foster parents, and education right holders, biweekly. Next, CASMs continued keeping a manual record, in addition to an electronic record, for each foster youth they were monitoring; such work ethic provided consistency amongst all CASMs and their supervisors and eliminated numerous errors, thereby contributing to the decreased number of the foster youth who were on the wait list. According to Roberts (2016), "Consistent action leads to consistent results" (para. 1). That is why it is essential for all CASMs, agency staff members, and court liaisons to be consistent, as it helps achieve a great outcome, which is lowering the number of the foster youth who are on the wait list.

The success of the project design was the creation of the check list of responsibilities and expectations form, and the case file report. Soft-expansion states that, "Forms provide a standardization of written communication" (2009). The check list of responsibilities and expectations form provided CASMs with thorough guidance regarding which important information they can search for, in addition to whom they need to contact and how often when needing specific information. According to Universal Class, "Every business should have a document that clearly states how things should be done" (2017). Additionally, the case file report form assisted CASMs to keep a manual record of their assigned foster youths' essential information such as the location of their placements, preferred activities, school grade level, hobbies, behavior, and progress of their permanency (whether they are going to reunify with their parents, be adopted, or remain in the foster care system). Being familiar with most of the foster youths' general information has helped CASMs to have a better understanding of their foster youths' overall needs. Thus, when it was time to advocate on their behalf at the agency's Match Meeting, CASMs were well aware of each foster youth's intense need to obtain a CASA.

The only challenge the Instructional Manual project came across is trying to adjust the screen shots of the CASA Tracker steps used for each tab to a medium size. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the pictures of the CASA Tracker were screen shots, it was extremely difficult to adjust them to smaller size and then print them out without being blurry. Thus, a creation of two Instructional Manuals: first, an electronic one that CASMs can use to see clearly all the pictures with the directions on how each tab must be used; second, a printed Instructional Manual that give CASMs directions with bigger pictures that unfortunately could not be sized properly due to the style used when they were screen shot from the agency's database.

Personal reflection/final thoughts

As the project came to an end, I believe that the results were momentous to myself and to all other agency staff members. The creation of the Instructional Manual has taught not only CASMs, but some other staff members, how to be consistent, work effective and efficient, discover new innovative ways to communicate, and most importantly, pay close attention to details when entering, updating, adjusting or changing data within a foster youth's file. Thus, the Instructional Manual project should be continued within the CASA of Monterey County as it has helped current CASAs, office volunteers, court liaisons, educational right holders, and most importantly, CASMs, as an essential tool. Additionally, the Instructional Manual is useful when a CASM is uncertain or needs some visual guidance to navigate the agency's database in order to fill out all of the missing information from his or her foster youths' files.

Throughout my internship period, I was able to discover a lack of advocacy within various foster youth's files that I was monitoring. As a result, I took the initiative to create the Instructional Manual. To begin with, I selected over sixty random foster youths' files to determine where the problem began. Next, I categorized the amount of missing information and

how often it was missing from each file. To discover trends, I collected data and analyzed information. Soon after that, I decided to create a check list of responsibilities and expectations form, and a case file report to be distributed to all CASMs; that way the forms can guide CASMs to be more consistent when dealing with their foster youths' critical information within their files, and who they need to contact in case vital information is needed. After three months of the Instructional Manual's implementation, the number of foster youth on the wait list has decreased from 125 to 93; such outcome has impacted CASA of Monterey County agency in a positive way. Paying attention to details and filling out the missing information has changed numerous foster youths' lives for the better. As a result, they obtained a CASA, a person who can advocate on their behalf and help them overcome some of the obstacles they are facing.

My project addressed the lack of advocacy for foster youth who are on the wait list. After witnessing that some foster youths' files were missing vital information, I realize that their chances of being assigned to a CASA was extremely slim. Yet, with the guidance of the Instructional Manual, that gap has been reduced and more foster youth have been assigned to a CASA, which impacted their lives in positive ways. For instance, some foster youth are now receiving the needed help in their school, others have found jobs, and one particular foster child has graduated high school and is thinking about applying to college.

CASMs can continue the positive effect of my capstone project by recruiting more CASAs, especially men, as the agency is lacking male enrollment as CASAs. Such recruitment can be extremely beneficial for young foster boys. We all know that increasing men's involvement in caring is clearly desirable; yet, unfortunately, various foster boys do not have that sort of role model in their lives. Hence, recruiting more men could teach some of those foster boys how to better understand what they are experiencing as a young man. Also, such support

would make a positive difference in many lives as it is evident that male role models offer much-needed support in the most important years of a young boy's life, and in this case foster boys' lives.

As I look back on this whole process, and through my internship opportunity with CASA of Monterey County agency, I can see that I have developed personal and professional skills that enable me to broaden my learning abilities in order to help the underserved. Therefore, the advice I would give to future capstone students working at my agency is to become immersed into the agency as there are numerous wonderful and intellectual people who work there that can provide an array of projects, advice, and outlook on the field. Not all interns are cut out to be a CASM, but all interns have the opportunity to learn and grow through this agency. So when it is time to start, remember to communicate professionally, collaborate more, ask questions, and if you find yourself lost, seek immediate support without feeling shy or embarrassed to do so. Last but not least, Good Luck on your new endeavor!

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Appendices

Appendix A:

CASMs check list of responsibilities and Expectations Form

Read the files for the children you are assigned to and formulate your baseline info using:

- Child's file
- Existing CASA Tracker Data
- Staff input if available
- CASM update form (submit to Field Mentor monthly)

Contact the Social Worker to:

- Introduce yourself
- Explain your role
- Confirm the info we have and update as necessary
- Gather new info

Contact Caregiver to:

- Introduce yourself
- Explain your role
- Gather new info on how the child/youth is doing

Meet or contact the child/youth (if appropriate):

- Introduce yourself
- Explain your role
- Gather the information they feel is important that we know about them
- Ask how they feel they are doing in their placement and school
- Try to get a sense of who they to help make it easier to find a CASA for them

CASA Tracker and Child's File:

- Regularly ensure the data in the child's record (digital and physical) is current by:
 - Check the file room for any new documents pertaining to your assigned children
 - Update CASA Tracker with notes from emails and documents that are in the file room
 - Review notes from hearings
 - File all docs in the child's file

Check-ins with your field mentor:

- Review status of your communications with SW, CG...weekly
- Review status regarding your assigned child...bi-weekly
- Ask for assistance as needed

Review with your Field Mentor:

- CASA email and CASA Tracker access
- Establish assigned children
- Acquire required reporting docs
- Confirm office days, times, and participation in Matching Meeting
- Confirm due dates for submission of required student docs (MLOs, evaluations, Capstone...)

Appendix B:

CASMs Case File Reports Form

CASM UPDATE:					
Child's Name		CASM		Total hours on case	
Birth Date		Date of this Report			
J#		Date of last Report			

PERSONS CONTACTED:

RECORDS REVIEWED:

Observations or information received in these areas:

- General (how is the child doing, what do they enjoy, what are their needs, personal info...)
- Placement (where, what type, concurrent or non, contact info, status...)
- Education (school, grade, needs...)
- Progress towards permanency (status of the case, FR, adoptions, guardianship, LTFC...)
- Behavior (stable, at-risk...)

Description of the needs and wishes of the child (if available):

Peer relationships /permanent connections/ extra-curricular activities (if available):

Personal Assessment/Recommendations:

CASM Advocate: _____
Field Mentor/Advocate Supervisor: _____

Appendix C:

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline	Estimated Completion Dates
Research foster youths' files.	Note the most important elements that need to be entered in the system.	July	07/30/2017
Compare data from files to the database.	Record how much information is missing and how often from each file.	Aug	08/08/2017
Create check list of responsibilities and expectations, and case file reports for CASMs.	Distribute the responsibilities and expectations check list, and the case file reports.	Aug	08/14/2017
Data Collection	Data	Sep	09/12/2017
Analyze Data	Analysis of the Data	Oct	10/10/2017
Complete Capstone	Ready to present	Nov	11/1/2017