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CASA Foster Youth Low Engagement on Program Activities

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### **Abstract**

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is an agency that serves families and children that are in the dependency court system in Santa Cruz County. The advocacy program helps children have a person advocating for them at all times. The advocates will advocate for the children's best interest and provide children in a safe and healthy environment. Youth in the foster care system are less likely to engage and attend program activities. The problem will be addressed by CASA participating in creating more events for foster youth. CASA will work closely with other organizations in the community to engage youth to attend events. A needs assessment was created for foster youth between the ages of 12-21 to determine what kind type of event, the time, location and days that worked best to increase the participation rates. The expected outcome is for youth to attend the event and the possibility of attendance to increase by double. Due to COVID-19 CASA will not be having an event. In the future when events are allowed in the county the needs assessment will be used to determine the CASA event.

*Keywords:* Low engagement, foster youth, CASA, needs assessment, COVID-19

### **Agency & Communities Served**

The agency Court Appointed Special Advocates of Santa Cruz County (CASA) is known for making a difference in a child's life. The mission statement for Court Appointed Special Advocates of Santa Cruz County is, “ advocates for children providing court appointed volunteers so each child in the dependency court system feels cared for and connected with the people, families and resources they need to heal and flourish into adulthood” (CASA, 2019). CASA provides advocacy, support, and hope to children who were exposed to abused and neglected. Also, CASA advocates for children who are in the dependency court system. This is done by having volunteers be a voice for the children. CASA provides necessary resources for the families. This program is available for children who are referred from the Watsonville Courthouse by a judge. Social workers can suggest for children who are in the dependency court system to be referred to this program. Although, the judge will be the one to make the final decision.

CASA volunteers go through a 35 hour training. Once the volunteer completes the training and is sworn in by a judge they have the opportunity to be an advocate for a child in the dependency court system. CASA states:

CASAs are community volunteers, just like you, who stand up and speak out to help children and youth in foster care. Our CASA program belongs to a network of 951 independent community-based programs that recruit, train and support citizen-volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in courtrooms and communities. (2019)

The volunteers are being trained on how to support and advocate for foster children and youth. The volunteers will have a good understanding of the courtroom process and advocate for the best interest of foster children.

The advocate will create a safe environment for the foster youth and will implement activities. For example, the advocate is responsible for meeting with their “CASA Child” once a week for about three to four hours. For ages birth to three visits will be held either in the caregivers home or the home of the child. However, ages 4 to 17 visits can be arranged in the caregivers home or outings in the community, even the CASA office. Also, for young adults ages 18 to 21 advocates will play the role as a mentor and assist the young adults in transition to independent living.

The population that is being served at Santa Cruz County are ages between 0 to 21 years old. According to the CASA Annual Report, “12% are ages 0-2, 16% are ages 3-5, 28% are ages 6-12, 31% are ages 13-17, and 13% are ages 18-21” (CASA annual report, 2017). Youth between the ages of 13 to 17 are being served more in Santa Cruz County. There are 270 children being served and 300 active volunteers annually. CASA of Santa Cruz County states “CASA of Santa Cruz County currently serves over 270 children and youth annually - and the need doesn't go away” (CASA, 2019). Every year there is a good amount of volunteers helping the community but the need still continues to happen in our society.

### **Problem Description**

Court Appointed Special Advocates youth are less likely to engage and participate in program activities. This is an issue because youth are less likely to graduate from high school, have a harder time building relationships and are at higher risk of trouble with law enforcement

in the long term. Usually, youth have a lack of engagement in activities because they have different issues going on in their life. However, the engagement of CASA with the foster youths is very important. “Court-appointed special advocates should be encouraged to provide support for extracurricular participation, including outreach to community organizations to develop partnerships, educating the court and legal counsel about the importance of participation to healthy development” (Youth Law Center [YLC], 2019, pg. 24). It’s important that CASA participates in creating activities for foster youth. CASA should work closely with other organizations to provide solutions for youth to engage in extracurricular activities. Collaborating with other nonprofit organizations that served youth will benefit the youths engaged in activities and create a healthy development.

### **Contributing Factors**

CASA youth have a harder time engaging in CASA activities because of scheduling, transportation and parents are in denial. A contributing factor is scheduling, because usually the CASA house closes at 5pm which makes it harder for youth to participate in the activities that are being held at CASA. For example, youth will be in afterschool and will be released from around 5pm. CASA will host most of their activities in the afternoon around 12pm but the youth are in school. Which makes it harder for both the CASA advocate and their child to participate in the CASA events. The Youth Law Center states:

Young people in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems often have their schedules filled with court dates, visits with parents and siblings, appointments with probation officers, and other services. These appointments are often scheduled without any

consideration of the youth's own schedule – and when a class trip conflicts with a court date, the court date often takes precedence. (2019, pg.16)

Foster youth have a hard time participating in activities due to the fact that their schedules are filled with appointments, court hearings, parent visits and other services. The foster youth have no control over their schedule at times which is hard for them to be part of any activity.

Parents play a big role when it comes to supporting their child be part of extracurricular activities. Most of the time parents are in denial to support their children and be part of any activity. Cohen, states,

Another problem was the refusal of many foster parents to transport their foster children to and from friends, activities and games. Most of my clients, like more than half of D.C. foster care youth, live in the Maryland suburbs, since there are not enough foster homes in the District of Columbia. (2015, Para. 4)

Usually, parents are in denial to support their youth when it comes to the youth to participate in an activity. For example, parents will not want to transport their foster youth to a friends house, activities or games. The parents didn't want to transport their children because they lived too far. However, the support and the effort of a parent is much needed and appreciated especially for those foster youth that are having a hard time getting adjusted to their new daily routine.

### **Consequences**

The consequences for CASA teens that are less likely to engage and participate in program activities are social isolation, low academic performance and delinquency. One of the consequences is social isolation. foster youth will have a difficult time engaging with other

people in the world. The youth will feel lonely and will not like to participate in any social events. American Academy of Pediatrics states, “To develop into a psychologically healthy human being, a child must have a relationship with an adult who is nurturing, protective, and fosters trust and security” (2000, Para.9). In order for a person to develop into a psychological healthy human being the child must have a good relationship with an adult. It’s important for a youth to bond with other individuals and build those relationships. Having attachment between themselves and another person can bring long term relationships.

In addition, these youth are also at risk of lower academic performance. Most of the time foster youth will have a low GPA and are less likely to be engaged in activities. Klitsch states, “If any children can benefit from extracurricular activities, it is foster youth. On average, foster youth tend to have worse academic performance and more behavioral problems than other students. Thirty percent of foster youth perform below grade level” (n.d, Para.2). Youth who are in foster homes are more likely to need extracurricular activities because they performed bad in academics. For example, youth would benefit from this because if they are involved in activities at school, they are required to have a good standing GPA in order to continue being part of the activities. However, if they are not part of any extracurricular activity than the foster youth is more likely to perform badly in school.

Also, delinquency is a consequence for CASA teens that are less likely to engage and participate in program activities. Delinquency has a strong connection with academic performance because youth are more likely to behave badly in school. When they tend to behave badly in school then their grades decrease as well. Youth Law Center states, “Without intervention, these youth are less likely to graduate from college or be gainfully employed and



are more likely to be involved in the adult criminal justice system” ( 2019, pg.7). Foster youth are less likely to graduate from high school and not attend college when there are no interventions which will be difficult for them to get a job. Those youth are more likely to be involved in adult crime and will experience violence when transiting to their adulthood.

### **Problem Model**

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Scheduling issues with CASA and Youth	CASA youth are less likely to engage and participate in program activities	Social isolation
Transportation		Low academic performance
Parent is in denial		Delinquency

### **Capstone Project Description and Justification**

#### **Capstone Project & Project Purpose**

A way for Court Appointed Special Advocates youth to be more likely to engage and participate in program activities is by creating different events throughout the year. There will be three events held in Santa Cruz County for the CASA advocates and their children. The goal is to create events for the CASA child and the Advocate to build a relationship and to increase the participation rates. The problem will be addressed by creating events for the youth and working with their schedule. There will be three events held at different times and that will determine what day and time works best for youth. The first survey will be used to determine how many people had an issue with not attending an event due to scheduling. The needs assessment will determine which events youth would like to see at CASA. The survey will be optional for youth to fill out and they will be able to list the times, days and activities they would like CASA to host

yearly with their Advocates. Klitsch defines, “Change needs to happen at multiple levels to increase foster youth participation in extracurricular activities” (n.d, para.16). The goal is for youth to be involved in activities that interest them and for them to participate in the activities to eliminate barriers. It’s important for youth to be able to attend the CASA events because they are able to interact with other CASA youth, be involved in activities and can eliminate stress. Also, the goal is for CASA to increase their participation from the youth to attend the CASA activities.

### **Project Justification**

Creating multiple and different assessments can be effective because it provides insight for the participants. People are more likely to participate or attend an event when they have an insight on the event. This can be related to determining the schedule, the kind of events, the location and the type of food there should be. Creating a needs assessment can be helpful for the person who is creating an event because it can give the creator a more stable location, schedule and type of food they should provide. There has been research done to determine the importance of creating a needs assessment. The Novisurbey states:

Whether it’s finding out that there is a training deficit or reasons for poor performance or low productivity issues, a needs assessment survey can help you to find out these answers and more. There are many other reasons your organization should be conducting a needs assessment survey, these include:1) To learn in depth about what your group needs are. A good online survey can be tailored to ask the pertinent questions you need answers to, and people are far more likely to answer completely honestly when they’re doing so electronically, rather than in person. A good survey is excellent for supplementing

existing observations, and can provide you with crucial, detailed information from your target group of people. (Elizabeth, 2017, Para. 3)

A needs assessment survey is important because it helps an organization have an in-depth understanding of what the target group needs. Being able to provide an online survey can help an organization by asking questions and determine the factors of the issue. Most of the time the survey will give the organization detailed information about the target group and this can be observations, answer the questions and determine different factors of the issue.

### **Project Implementation**

One of the project tasks was to create a needs assessment with 10 questions that asked youth about the type of events they would like CASA to host. The survey was delivered at the Christmas Party for youths ages 11 and up. The youths were able to fill out the survey either at the Christmas Party event or online through a link. The link was sent to the supervisors and the supervisors asked the advocates to fill out the survey. Everyone had at least one month to complete the survey. At the end of the survey there was a section for youth to provide their email. The email was used to contact the youth for their raffle prize. Every person that fills out the survey will be able to enter the raffle, but they need to provide an email or phone number. The support was needed from mentors, supervisors and the advocates. The mentors guided the process and provided feedback. The supervisors delivered the email and the survey link, and the advocates helped and informed the youth about the survey. The results of the needs assessment can be seen in Appendix B.

The first idea was to create three events for the youth to attend. Due to not having enough time the events needed to be shortened down to just one event. The one event was going to be a

movie event since there were more responses from the youth wanting a movie or video game event. However, since the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk does require a large number of participants to be able to rent the Arcade that was impossible. The second option was the movie theater and the owner from the Green Valley Theater was very helpful and understandable. She offered CASA a good discount for the youth and the advocates to be able to see a movie in the theater. The event was planned for March 25, 2020 but one week before the event it was cancelled due to Coronavirus pandemic. Since the event was cancelled the results from the assessment will be used for the upcoming event once the “shelter in place” order is released and events are allowed.

The resource company that would be funding the raffle is Target. A written report was given to the Target Company Human Resources manager to be able to receive the funding for the raffle. The report included the tax ID number, the organization's mission, the project's purpose and the type of event. Most of the funding would be from CASA because they have a grant strictly designed for the youth.. There is the possibility of getting a movie that will entertain all the youth and the food will be included with the movie purchased for each youth and advocate. Although, there will be a choice of the youth or advocate just receiving a ticket without the food. It will be the youth and advocates preferred choice.

The event for March 25, 2020 was cancelled due to COVID-19. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

### **Assessment Plan**

The plan was for two needs assessments that would determine if the project was effective. The first needs assessment had questions for youth to answer based on their experience

with CASA in their events. For example, one of the questions will be “Have you ever been to a CASA event? If so, what did you enjoy and what did you dislike?” Youth had the opportunity to list the events they would like CASA to host for them. There was a section where they listed the times they were available and the days. The event would’ve had a sign in sheet where youth could've signed in before they leave the event. The signed in sheet would’ve determined the amount of people that would’ve attended the event. To measure effectiveness there was going to be a comparison between the past events that CASA created vs the ones that would’ve been created. The second needs assessment would’ve given youth an option to provide feedback on the event. A raffle would’ve been provided to motivate youth to complete the needs assessment

A RSVP link would’ve been distributed for the youth and the advocates to confirm their attendance. Since the tickets needed to be purchased before attending the event the youth and advocates needed to confirm their attendance. The RSVP link would’ve been sent out in the monthly newspaper email and the advocates would’ve received an email from their supervisors with the link as well. There would’ve been flyers in the office to inform the youth and advocates about the event and it would’ve included the time, date, type of movie and location. Since the event was going to be open to the public, anyone was able to purchase their tickets but in order for the youth and their advocates to receive the discount they would’ve needed to complete the RSVP link.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcome was for the participation rates to double for the upcoming events. The participation rates can be measured by having a sign in sheet for each event. The sign in sheet will help CASA determine how many youth and advocates attended the event. At the end

of the event there will be a comparison that will help CASA determine the type of events that youths were interested in and observe the days, times and location that worked best. The goal is for at least 12 people to attend the following CASA events. CASA will like for youth to be more involved in the events and build friendships. Being able to spend time with other youth can help them see things a little different and notice that they are not alone. CASA will like to see all the youth satisfied with the upcoming events.

### **Project Results**

Due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) the event was postponed until further notice. The world is currently going through the COVID-19 Pandemic. The virus is spreading quickly and affecting everyone. At the moment, there is no treatment for the virus and many people are dying daily. The virus is being spread by person to person and due to reducing the spread the government decided to implement “shelter in place” order. Which means that every person who is non-essential needs to stay at home. All events are cancelled, parks and beaches are closed in the county. There is no official date of when this “shelter in place” order will end at the moment. The government has been extending the order date and at the moment it is predicted that everyone stays at home to at least the first week of May.

Although part of the project was completed. The youth completed the first needs assessment that determined the type of event, the time, location and days that worked best. The second survey and the RSVP link were not distributed because the event had to be postponed due to the COVID 19. But the results for the first need assessment will show that the youth decided on having a movie event on a Wednesday in the afternoon.

Also, the Target Company decided to approve the writing report. The manager approved a \$100 gift card that she would be distributing between 10 gift cards of \$10 each. The Green Valley Theater approved of hosting the event. There are no limitations on the movie the youth and advocates can choose the movie. A special discount was granted \$6.50 for the movie ticket or \$10 for the movie ticket and a small meal that includes a small porcon, soda and a candy. The price was granted for the youth, advocates and staff members of CASA. Since the event was not able to happen on the original date it will be planned for the summer or the winter depending on the COVID-19 status. Both the theater and Target are aware of the situation and are open to rescheduling the event until further notice.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

A google document was created for CASA to use in the future for the planned events. The goal for the google document is for CASA to have an easy understanding of what's needed to make the event happen once events are permitted in the county. The document is categorized in three ways starting with company name, contact information and tasks or description of what's needed. The google document has information about the owner of the theater and the websites used to create a follow up invitation and flyer to advertise the event. Also, the document has information about the Target store manager since they will be donating money for the event. The gift cards will be for the youths that attend the event.

The results showed that CASA needs to work closely with other organizations to advertise the events. Also, informed the youth and the advocates about the events that CASA is trying to host for the youth. Having more input from the advocates can help CASA have an understanding of what's needed for the youth and the advocates to know about the events. One

of the recommendations for CASA is to schedule the events on days that the youth can attend and use the google document to host the event in the future.



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## Appendix A

### Scope of Work

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Deliverables</b>	<b>Timeline/Deadlines</b>	<b>Supporting Staff</b>
Capstone Approval	Google Document Brainstorm	September 2, 2019	Ana Guzman & Cita Rausl
Create a needs assessment for CASA Youths & Advocates #1	Google form	November 26, 2019	Cita Rausl & Ana Guzman
CASA needs assessment print copies and estimated #	Google form	December 2, 2019	Ana Guzman
Have youths fill out the needs assessment at the Christmas Party	Google sheets/Paper copy	December 4, 2019	Ana Guzman
Calculate the results from the forms and insert them in a google spreadsheet	Excel form	December 5, 2019	Ana Guzman
Send a needs assessment email to the supervisors	Google email	December 9, 2019	Cita Rauls
Supervisors reviewed the needs assessment and provided feedback	Google sheet	December 13, 2019	Alma Rocha
Revise the needs assessment and accept feedback #2	Google forms	December 19, 2019	Alma Rocha
Send the approved for the needs assessment to the supervisors and deliver the needs assessment	Google forms	December 22, 2019	Alma Rocha
Send a friendly reminder to not forget to fill out the needs assessment	Google email	January 4, 2020	Cita Rauls
Review needs assessment & the winner	Google sheets and name app	January 7, 2020	Cita Rauls
Narrative planned to contact the local business	Word Document	February 14, 2020	Jimmy Cook
Contact Green Valley Theater Watsonville Attempt #1	In person/ organization boucher	February 14, 2020	Cita Rauls
Contact Target Company Attempt #1	In person/ organization boucher	February 14, 2020	Cita Rauls

Contact Green Valley Theater Watsonville Attempt #2	Phone	February 17, 2020	Cita Rauls
Planned the event & received approval	Emails	February 22, 2020	Cita Rauls and Jimmy Cook
Contact Target Company Attempt #2	In person/ organization boucher	February 22, 2020	Cita Rauls
Informed the Green Valley Theater of approval or denial	Phone	March 1, 2020	Cita Rauls
Choose the movie	Green Valley Theater Website	March 5,2020	Cita Rauls
Make the reservation with the date and time	Green Valley Theater phone	March 6, 2020	Cita Rauls
Writing report Target	Word Document	March 6, 2020	Cita Rauls
Movie Event flyer	Canva App	March 8, 2020	Cita Rauls
Movie Event RSVP link	Canva App	March 8,2020	Cita Rauls
Movie Event invitation	Canva App	March 8,2020	Cita Rauls
Contact Target & Green Valley Theater to reschedule the event	Phone/Email	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Cita Rauls
The plan for the Movie Event and the contact document with the instructions about the event.	Google Document	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Cita Rauls
Movie Event	Green Valley Theater	Unable to Continue Due to COVID-19	Cita Rauls

### Appendix B

#### Needs Assessment Results

Chart 1: The chart shows the days that work best for the youth and the advocate. The results are that the youth and the advocates are available on Wednesdays being the first choice and Friday being the second choice.

What days work best for you and your Advocate to attend CASA teen and older youth events?  
13 responses

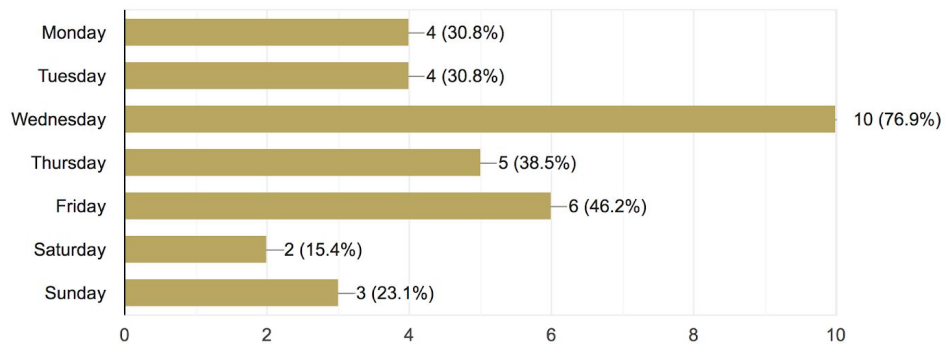


Chart 2: The chart shows the time that works best for the youth and the advocate. The results are that the youth and the advocates are more available in the afternoon and the second choice would be the evening.

What time works best for you and your Advocate to attend CASA teen and older youth events?  
13 responses

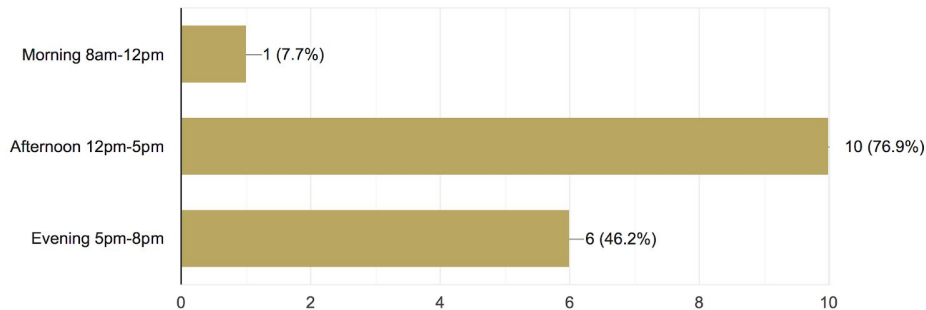


Chart 3: The chart shows the type of activities that the youth are more likely to attend. The results are that the youth wanted a movie event and the second choice being a video games and boardgames event.

What kind of activities are you interested in?  
13 responses

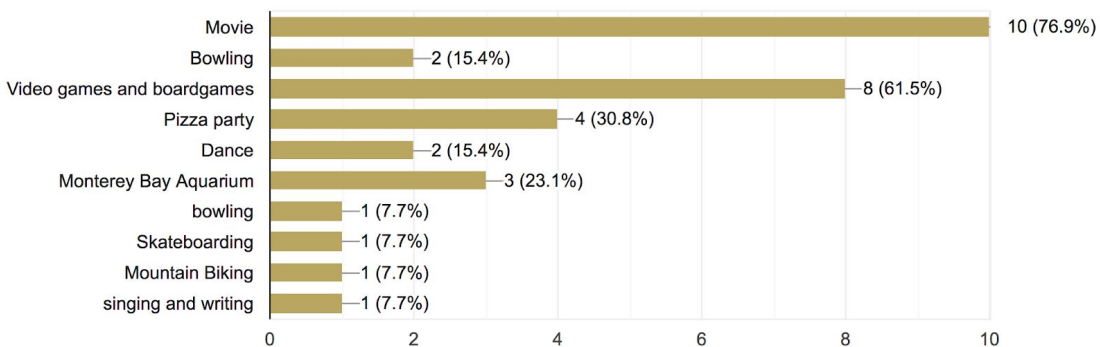


Chart 4: The chart shows one of the reasons why youth are not attending the events. This chart shows how most of the youth are unfamiliar with the CASA events. CASA is not advertising or letting the advocates for youth know about the events.

If you did not attend a CASA event please state why?

13 responses

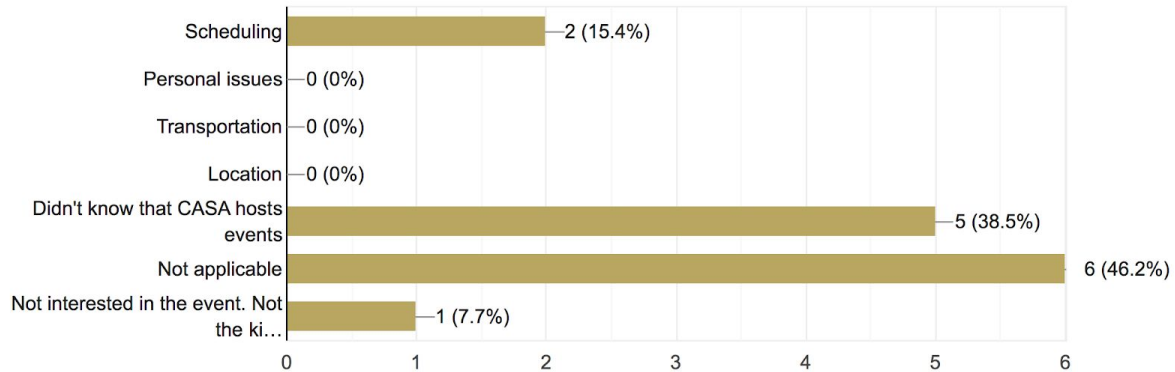


Chart 5: The chart shows what youth would like to see differently in the upcoming events. The highest results are that since all the events are held in the CASA office youth want a different location.

If you did attend a CASA event please state what you would like to see differently next time?

13 responses

