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Life After Reunification Fails

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Abstract

Court Appointed Special Advocates of Monterey County pairs community volunteers with foster youth so the youth has someone who can advocate for them in their personal lives, while pursuing a safe and permanent home. The primary goal of foster care is to reunify youth with their biological families, but this does not always work out. Some of the reasons children come into foster care include the opioid crisis, current immigration policy issues, and general child abuse/neglect. Youth are often confused about what their options are after reunification fails. This confusion causes some youth to have mental health issues, gang involvement, or other criminal activity. Barriers to service include, the lack of appropriate foster families as well as the housing crisis. My capstone project was to create the curriculum for a training that would explain the options after reunification fails to our CASA volunteers so they can be better prepared to help their youth through these transitions. The training was successful in that I saw a 20% increase in knowledge on the topics that were discussed. My recommendation would be to send out email blasts about the training as early as possible to increase participant turnout and survey responses. I would also change the phrasing for some of the questions on the post-survey to be more answer friendly.

Keywords: child neglect, foster care, failure, family reunification, foster youth, post-foster care options

Agency & Communities Served

Court Appointed Special Advocates of Monterey County is a non-profit organization that works directly with foster youth. They pair volunteers from the community with children in foster care so they can advocate for them to all the important people in the child's life. This can be resource parents, teachers, or even social workers. An advocate's job is to make sure the child's needs are being met. Whether that be emotionally, academically or even socially. Foster youth are a marginalized group and are in need of stable adults they can rely on to help guide them through the chaos of the foster care system. CASA's mission statement is as follows, "To train and support community volunteers who advocate for abused or neglected children placed in foster care, upholding the children's rights while pursuing a safe and permanent home" (CASA, 2020). CASA believes we have a social responsibility to these children and we can't rely on the system to take care of them. The organization also believes that they have a duty to educate the public on the issues regarding child maltreatment. Another goal of theirs is to make sure that all children return to a safe, permanent, loving home.

As for demographics, CASA works with foster youth ages 0-21 of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In Monterey County, there were 368 children in foster care in 2019. Of those children, 64% were Latino. 11% of the children were White and 9% were Black (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2019). The age groups of the children in care vary but of the 368 the children, the largest age group were children between the ages of 11-15 years old. This makes sense for CASA, as many of the children on my caseload fall into this group. 26% of the children fell into the 11-15-year-old age group. The next largest age group was 6-10-year-olds, with 22% of the children falling into this category (CWPI, 2019). These numbers are

difficult to come to terms with, especially considering the reasons why these children were likely brought into care which will be discussed later.

Problem Description

There are too many children in the foster care system. When a youth enters the system, the primary goal is to try and reunite them with their biological families. However, this does not always happen which can lead the child to feel confused and scared. These children are often in the dark about what kind of options they have when reunification fails. Children are coming into care for many different reasons and while removing children from abusive homes is the right choice, it has become clear that many are staying in the system for far too long. The rates of children in foster care are slowly increasing. The number of youth in foster care rose for the fifth year in a row, to 443,000 in 2017 (ChildTrends, 2019). Not only are children continuing to enter care but many of their cases get lost in the shuffle on a social worker's busy caseload. When this happens, it can cause a child to stay in care for years, even to the point of them aging out of the system. Research has also shown that those who do age out of the system are less prepared for adulthood than those who were adopted or reunified with their biological families. By the time youth age out of the system, only 1 in 2 will have sufficient employment by the time they reach 24. There is also a less than 3% chance that youth who age out of the system will receive a college education during their lifetime (GoodShepard, 2018). Unfortunately, reunifying with the biological families is not always possible and when this happens it can be difficult for a youth to understand why.

With so many children entering the system, it is difficult for organizations like CASA to keep up with the demand. CASA has a long list of foster youth on the waitlist who are eagerly waiting for a volunteer to choose them. At the Monterey office alone, there are 40 children on

the waitlist. However, CASA does not have as many volunteers as they do foster youth. The growing number of youth entering the system directly affects CASA as it is hard for smaller nonprofits to keep up with the ever-growing need for volunteers. Nonprofits like CASA rely on the dedication of community volunteers to keep their organization viable. Without community engagement, CASA would not be able to support the growing foster youth population. Because there are so many children in the system, caseworkers are often overworked. This leads to a lack of adults to explain to foster youth what their options are when reunification is no longer viable. This is where CASA can have an impact. Our trained volunteers can offer guidance to the youth in explaining what their options are when returning their biological families doesn't work out.

Contributing Factors

It is important to understand why there are so many children coming into care as it directly affects CASA's need for trained volunteers. They are adults who can play an important role in the child's life by explaining the chaos of the foster care system. Some of the reasons that explain the growing number of children in foster care include sexual abuse, physical abuse, or general neglect of the child. In Monterey County, a majority of children come into care because of general neglect by their parents or guardians. According to California state law, "Neglect is frequently defined as the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm" (ChildWelfare, 2019). When the neglect becomes so apparent, that is when social services become involved and a child is brought into care. Oftentimes the neglect is reported by someone significant in the child's life. Many professionals who work with children are required by law to report child abuse or neglect. For example, teachers are considered to be mandated reporters and must report suspected abuse to

the proper authorities. In Monterey County neglect was the number one reason why children were brought into care at 79.9% (Kidsdata, 2018). Clearly, child neglect is a huge contributing fact to the rising number of children in foster care.

Another factor that is adding to the problem is the issue regarding the opioid crisis. More and more children are being sent into the foster care system because of parents' misuse of opioids. According to the Center for Disease Control, in the years ranging from 2000-2015 more than half a million people died due to an overdose. At present, 91 people die on a daily basis because of overdoses of prescription or illicit opioids. This leaves the children of these parents particularly vulnerable. Baltimore, where the opioid crisis is particularly apparent saw an increase in foster care placements by 30% from 2014-2017 (Collier, 2018). Many parents are dying due to drug overdoses, leaving their children with no familial support. Because of this, they are forced to enter the foster care system, uncertain of what their future will hold.

Another factor that is contributing to the growing number of children in foster care has to do with the new immigration policies President Trump has put into place. The Trump administration has made it clear that they want to restrict the number of immigrants that are allowed into this country. The administration has also been making headlines in the last few years for separating families and deporting undocumented parents. In 2018, President Trump initiated a zero-tolerance policy for immigrants who might try to cross the border without proper authorization. The policy change led to millions of children being separated from their migrant parents (Silva & Flynn, 2020). When these parents are deported, that leaves no one to care for the children left behind. This then contributes to the growing number of children in foster care. These children are traumatized by the sudden separation from their families. They are then forced into a confusing system with no one to explain to them what is going on. Many of these

new immigration policies have forced children into the foster care system. Statistics have demonstrated that there has been an increase in the number of migrant children being placed in long term foster care by at least 35% (Crea et al., 2018). But the foster care system cannot keep up with the influx of children coming into care. They are already struggling due to a lack of resources and funding. The system is already struggling to find safe housing conditions for the 500,000 children already in care. While the number of children entering the system has been growing for the last four years, there has not been an increase in social workers that would be able to find them satisfactory living situations. (Atkins, 2018). Obviously, these are only a few of the contributing factors leading to the growing number of children in foster care. It is more important than ever that we try and understand why this is happening because the more children enter the system, the higher the demand for nonprofits like CASA to provide volunteers. These volunteers can provide support to the youth as well as explain to them why they are not reuniting with their biological families. This reality can be difficult for a youth to face which is why it is important they have a trusted adult they can lean on during such a confusing transition.

Consequences

The foster care system can be very grueling on a child. You are constantly being moved around from home to home with no form of stability. Many of these children do not have an adult in their lives they can trust. This can cause trust issues later in adulthood. Additionally, it is likely some of them were never provided with treatment as to how to deal with the trauma they likely endured that got them placed in foster care in the first place. A majority of these children have experienced some type of trauma that was severe enough to bring it to the attention of Child Protective Services (Chadwick et al., 1998). Foster children are also at a higher risk for mental health issues because of the trauma they experienced by being separated from their families. A

child who has been abused has likely formed an unhealthy attachment to their abuser. So, when a child who has been suffering from this abuse has been suddenly removed from the abuser's household, he or she suffers from the inability to separate in a healthy way. Attachment during childhood is very normal but when that attachment forms because of unhealthy behavior it can make it that much more difficult for a child to understand why he or she is being removed. In their mind, the way they were being treated might be their version of "normal." Because of this, it's important that foster children get the proper mental health services to help them deal with their issues. This will help them to flourish into healthy adults.

Another problem that can arise for children who are in foster care has to do with what can happen if they do not get reunified or adopted. When children remain in the system, they are placed in long-term foster care. This means they often bounce around from home to home with no form of stability. Because some of these children never gain the consistent love and support needed to become healthy adults, they often look for that support elsewhere. This often happens when foster children age out of the system at 18. These kids are obviously going through a big transition when they turn 18. They no longer have to be in the system if that's what they want. The department offers continued services until the age of 21 if the youth is interested. However, there are conditions such as maintaining employment or going to school. Sadly, this is not always of interest to the youth. Another factor that comes into play is that a lot of them have to make these life choices alone. This is when the appeal of joining a gang can come into play. Foster children can feel a sense of security and protection when joining a gang. This is a feeling that was likely lacking in their home lives which is why gang life can look so appealing to them (Alvarez, 2016). Foster youth are particularly vulnerable to gang involvement because of what they think a gang can provide to them. Foster children have spent much of their lives feeling

unwanted and disposable which is why when a gang reaches out to them, it gives them a false sense of security.

Gang involvement obviously leads to criminal activity. So now foster youth have not only joined a gang as a replacement for a family but are putting their lives at risk in order to continue their relationship with the gang. American children in the foster care system face a high risk of incarceration. In fact, within two years of leaving care, one-quarter of foster care alumni will be involved in the criminal justice system (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). This is called the foster care-to-prison pipeline. Children in long term foster care are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, 90% of youth with five or more placements will enter the justice system (Juvenile Law Center, 2018). Some of the criminal activities foster youth have been proven to be involved in after leaving care are drug selling, assault, and carrying a weapon. They also have a higher rate of antisocial personality diagnosis (Vaughn et al. , 2008). Foster youth lack the support needed to learn how to make the right decisions for themselves. This is especially true when they age out of the system with no support from anyone. This is what makes them so vulnerable to crime and gang involvement. It is just another reason why it is so important that foster youth have strong advocates that can explain their options, particularly when reuniting with their biological parent does not work out. Having this support and information could stop them from making horrible decisions with serious consequences. Making sure they are aware of all of their options will help foster youth to feel more in control, which is a feeling they have been lacking the entire time they have been in care.

Barriers to Service

Children in foster care face a lot of uncertainty in their lives. Their home situation is constantly changing which can be challenging for developing youth. One of the biggest obstacles

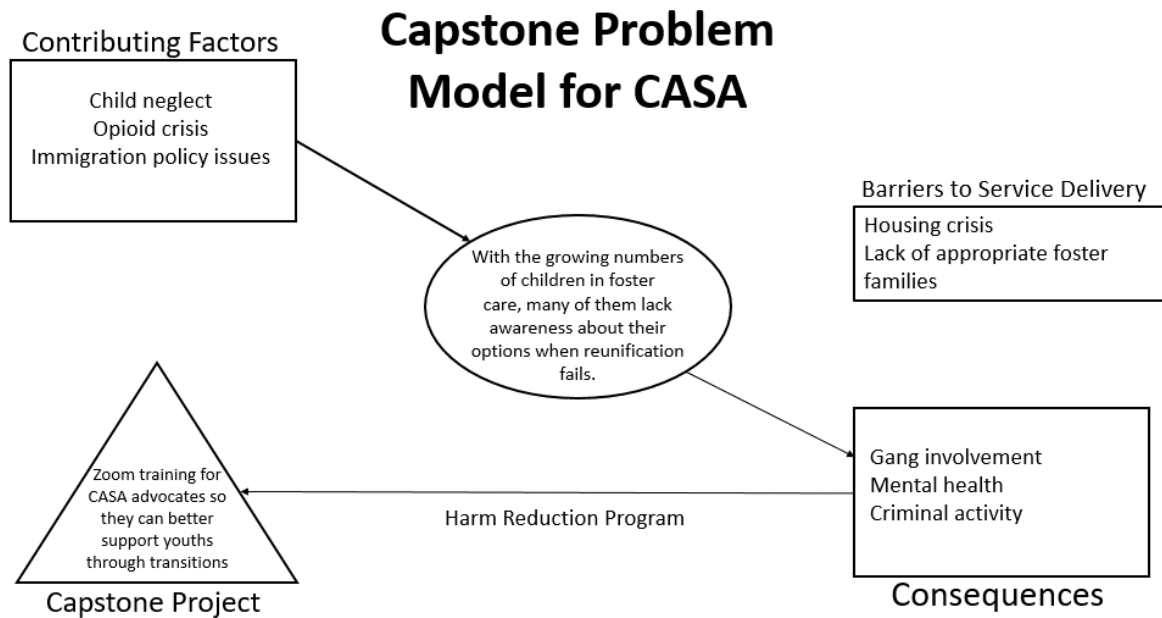
foster youth face is the question of where they will live after aging out of the system. Housing in California is not cheap and for a young foster youth, nearly impossible to find at an affordable price. When speaking with my program director at CASA, Edna Chinn, this was the main barrier to service she discussed. In Monterey county alone, there are not many affordable single-family homes. She also mentioned the section 8 voucher. This voucher allows low-income families or singles to afford safe and sanitary housing in the private market (Housing Authority, Monterey County, 2020). Unfortunately, this voucher is not accepted often in Monterey County. So the little help foster youth could qualify for is not accepted in this area. With little to no affordable housing, some foster youth become homeless after aging out of the system. Each year more than 20,000 youth age out of the system and lose access to crucial resources overnight (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). When youth turn 18, or 21 in some states, they lose access to various social, educational, and financial resources that were previously being provided to them through the child welfare system (Fowler et al., 2017). Without these supports from the system in addition to the lack of familial support, foster youth become very vulnerable to homelessness and unemployment. They no longer have anyone to guide them through adulthood as a typical young adult would. The sudden termination of services at 18 combined with the lack of family ties only increases the possibility of housing issues with young adults (Osgood et al., 2010). There was a study done in a large Midwestern metropolitan area followed up with youth who had aged out of the system two years prior. It found that one-fifth remained insufficiently housed while an additional 30% of youth endured at least one night of homelessness (Fowler et al., 2017). Finding affordable housing is a struggle for many families who want to reside in California but especially for foster youth. After aging out of the system there is a lack of support to help them transition into adulthood. They struggle to find

employment and lack the skills needed to be financially responsible. Because of this, they are at a higher risk of becoming homeless. Again, we see how having a stable adult there to support a youth aging out of the system could prove to be beneficial. They could offer guidance and support as the youth makes the transition to adulthood.

Another barrier to service is the lack of foster families for foster youth. It's clear that there are always foster children waiting to be placed with a foster family, however, there are not enough families for the number of children in the system. With the growing numbers of children entering foster care and the lack of foster parents, this leads to there not being enough homes for children to be placed in (DeGarmo, 2017). Not only is there a lack of foster families, but there is a lack of appropriate families. Unfortunately, there are some foster families that are only interested in foster care for the stipend they receive from the government for housing a foster youth. Technically, this money is supposed to be spent on resources for the foster child but there are some families who pocket the money for themselves. Because there is a lack of foster families, a lot of the time agencies are so desperate to create more homes for youth that they don't always properly vet the families who claim they are interested in fostering. A study that looked at foster youths' experiences while in care stated that at least one of their primary caregivers abused drugs or alcohol (Courtney et al., 2002). When this happens, youth could potentially be entering a dangerous living environment where some kind of abuse is likely to occur. In fact, 9 out of 10 children in foster care state their foster parents abused them (Babbel, 2016). When this happens, children often feel that speaking up will cause them more harm than good and decide to keep quiet about the abuse in fear of being displaced again. Some youth feel that it is not in their best interest to disclose violence as it could lead to a new placement where there could be a risk of more unknown abuse. Reporting their trauma can also lead to yet another

placement change which is always disruptive (Babbel, 2016). It’s obvious there is not only a lack of resource families but appropriate resource families. The ideal situation is to only place foster children with families whose only interest is providing a safe and loving home. Sadly, that is not always what happens. This is why it is important that these agencies take the time to properly screen any family interested in fostering to ensure foster youth are placed in the safest home possible.

Problem Model



Capstone Project

The capstone idea I have discussed with my mentor was creating a continuing education curriculum on a topic that other CASAs can benefit from. CASA’s are required to do 12 hours of continuing education in addition to the 35-hour training we have to complete to become an

advocate. The additional education hours are meant to broaden our volunteer's knowledge of the foster care system to help them be better advocates for their youth.

The topic we discussed was creating a lesson plan that talks about what happens when reunification with the birth parents fails. When talking about foster care the number one goal is always to reunify children with their biological families. However, this does not always happen for a multitude of reasons. Maybe the parents are unfit, or the housing situation is not ideal for the child. Whatever the case, what happens when reunification is no longer an option? This is what the training will discuss. After reunification, children can go into a few different situations. The next best option is adoption by near kin or an appropriate family. The next option is guardianship which ends once the child turns 18. A foster parent would only be responsible for the child until he or she turns 18. After that, the youth is responsible for him/herself. And the last option is permanency planning. During permanency planning, social workers are constantly looking for permanent placement for the youth. While this is happening the youth is likely to have multiple placements until one of them works out. That means the foster parent either decides to adopt the youth or go into guardianship. If the youth does not make any significant connections in their foster homes, youth can bounce around from home to home for years until the age of 18. They then can choose to either end department services or go into extended foster care which lasts until age 21.

Project Purpose

The continuing education training will be a harm reduction program to address the consequences of the problem model. The training will talk about these options in-depth and explain them to CASAs as this is a decision that their own foster youth might have to make at some point in the future. This will help the community problem in that it will ensure that youth

can make an informed decision about their own lives when reunification does not work out. It will help to broaden the knowledge of existing CASAs and help them to better advocate for their youth. By providing this information to CASAs, they will help to give their youth a sense of security in that they will have a deeper understanding of what is happening which is not always explained to them while in the foster care system. By better explaining their options as foster youth enter adulthood, we could prevent foster youth from becoming homeless which is one of the barriers to service. Oftentimes foster youth end up on the streets because they are unaware of their options. The more information a youth has, the more equipped they are able to make informed decisions about their futures. Providing them with a knowledgeable, stable adult will help them to make the best choice for their unique set of circumstances. Explaining their options after reunification fails can only better serve the youth to transition into adulthood.

Project Justification

A lot of the time when youth age out of the system, they don't realize they have the option to continue to receive department services until the age of 21. Now that is only one of the options available but youth don't always know this. In 2008, there was an initiative passed called the "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act" that allows youth to extend child welfare services until the age of 21. All youth can qualify as long as they have met at least one of the following criteria. Youth must complete high school or receive a GED. They also can qualify if they have enrolled in some kind of vocational or post-secondary education. Or if they are working 80 hours per month (Peters & Havelik, 2014). This is a viable option for foster youth but they are not always aware of it. The training will help advocates understand this and increase their knowledge of the options available to their CASA kids. They will then be able to explain these options to the youth in a way they will understand. In my time at CASA, I have

had the opportunity to attend multiple continuing education trainings, I have seen first-hand how they can benefit an advocate. Personally, I always feel as though I have learned so much after attending. For example, I attended a foster youth panel in which former foster youth discussed their stories and experiences while in care. This was so rewarding as I got to hear first-hand how CASA had an impact on the foster youth. By providing foster youth with a stable, trusted adult they felt more supported in their decisions about their future. This continuing education session will be beneficial for all CASA's as it will help them to be better advocates for their youth. By explaining why they are not reunifying with their biological families and explaining their next steps, it will help the child understand what is happening and feel supported during a difficult transition.

Project Implementation

CASA has held many continuing education seminars in the past covering different topics seen in foster care. The agenda for these seminars can vary depending on the speaker and topics but most follow a lecture-style environment. They always take place on Wednesday nights, in the CASA training room in our Salinas office. However, because of COVID-19 it is likely that all continuing education sessions will be held over Zoom for the time being. This session will not be recorded as it will be a repeated training that will take place every few months. When speaking with my mentor Dana, this is likely the format we will follow with our continuing education seminar. I will develop a PowerPoint presentation that describes the 3 options for foster youth when reunification fails. I will be encouraging participants to take their own notes at their discretion since this training will be held over Zoom. I want the PowerPoint to be informative but engaging with the audience so one of the ideas I have discussed with Dana and our program director Edna, was to include a Kahoot. Kahoot is an interactive question and answer game that

audiences can play on their smartphones. Allowing them to participate also makes it more enjoyable for them. The Kahoot will likely be at the end of the training.

The training would be run by one of the advocate supervisors as they are the ones with the know-how to present the information. Dana and I have discussed my running the Kahoot or reading a few slides to give me the opportunity to present what I have learned but the majority of the presentation and questions would be fielded by an advocate supervisor. Only one supervisor will be needed to run the training as most continuing education sessions only have 15-20 participants in total. The ideal situation would be to create a curriculum that any advocate supervisor could run. This will allow the program to continue long after I have left the agency. I will likely use Google Slides to make the presentation. The only place I could see where I might need funding is for the Kahoot quiz as that is not a free service but I do not foresee that being too expensive.

Expected Outcomes

When I first started with CASA, there was a lot of new information to take in. At times it could be overwhelming to think about how much you have to remember as an advocate. My capstone is just one area where I hadn't felt I had a true understanding of how the system works. I felt like the options after the failure of reunification had never been fully explained to me. This seminar will take care of that issue. After researching and having discussions with my mentor, I now have a better understanding of the differences between these three options and feel as though I am better able to explain them to someone. My hope is that this training will provide the same sense of understanding for my fellow advocates.

Most continuing education sessions have about 10-15 participants. When speaking with Dana, she mentioned the trainings that show higher participation numbers happen during the

early afternoon so that is likely when mine will be held. I am hoping for at least 20 participants. CASA sends out email reminders for upcoming continuing education sessions each month so my hope is that I will have a strong turnout if I give volunteers enough time to pre-register. I expect them to come out of this seminar with the knowledge that will help them to better advocate for their youth. My hope is that we see an increase in knowledge on these topics by at least 20%. The seminar will be a 1 hour session dedicated to this topic alone. It will be a place for open discussion and where advocates can ask questions on a very relevant issue for foster youth.

Assessment Plan

In order to see if the training has been effective, I will hand out a pre and post-survey for the participants. The initial survey will consist 3 questions. There will be open and close ended questions asking about their experience with guardianship, permanency planning, and adoption. This will give me a basic understanding of what they already know. I'm going to ask them to rate their understanding of these options on a scale from 1-10 to see where they are at. I will also ask them to tell me what they are hoping to learn from this training as well as if they have any specific questions they want answered during the training. This will help the advocate supervisors to be prepared.

At the end of the training, I will give them a post-survey. I will ask them specific questions to judge whether or not they feel they have a better understanding of the different options after reunification. I will again ask them to rate their understanding on the options on a scale of 1-10 to determine how effective the training was. I will also be asking if they were left with any lingering questions after the training. I will also leave a question for volunteers to submit their feedback so CASA can make improvements to the training in the future. This could

include changes to the presentation or group activities. Based on their answers, the post-survey will tell me if the training was beneficial for the advocates.

Project Results

I would say the training was successful in that the participants walked away with a better understanding of the different options for youth when reunification fails. Unfortunately, the date of the training kept getting pushed back due to scheduling conflicts with the CASA staff. Because of this I did not have as many participants as I would have liked in order to gain more accurate results. I had a total of 10 participants since the training was last minute. I obviously would have loved if more volunteers had signed up but as mentioned previously, the presentation date was changed a few times. I also had trouble getting everyone to fill out the survey after the training. But based on the results I was able to get, it looks like the participants did find it very informative. One of the open ended questions in the post-survey asked if there was anything the participants would change. Three out of the five respondents felt the training was very thorough and incredibly helpful. The other two had some helpful feedback CASA will be able to keep in mind in the future. The pre-survey asked the volunteers to rate their understanding of the topics. The number one being, "I know nothing about this topic" to ten being, "I'm an expert on this topic." I did see an increase in numbers after the training. The post-survey showed that a few participants felt their knowledge on the topics double after the training. That being said, I did not get as many responses for the post-survey as the pre-survey so the results could be slightly skewed.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Overall, I do think this is a beneficial training for all advocates to participate in. We have new training groups joining CASA year round and this will be a helpful training for them to sit in

on. I would recommend CASA put a standing date on the calendar for this training so it allows as many participants to sign up as possible. That was a problem I ran into for this first initial presentation. I feel having the training on a monthly or quarterly basis depending on when new training groups get sworn in will allow for bigger participant numbers. I would also suggest that the advocate supervisor presenting the training go through the slides and make sure the sources are still up to date and gather new data as needed. I don't imagine this will come up often but it would be helpful for the volunteers to see the most current data on Monterey county. I would also suggest CASA send out the pre and post surveys in a timely manner as to collect accurate responses from everyone. It was difficult getting responses for the post survey and I think that was because participants forgot to fill it out. An email reminder from CASA staff might help fix that problem. I would also change the wording in the question that asks participants to rate their understanding on the topics. The phrase "I'm an expert on this topic" might come across too strong. One training isn't going to make the volunteers feel like experts. A better phrase might be "I could explain this topic to someone else."

Personal Reflection

Throughout my time at Court Appointed Special Advocates, I have learned just how many children are entering the foster care system. In working in this field, I now have a better understanding of how much foster youth struggle while making their way through the welfare system. The constant instability is dangerous for their physical and emotional health. The lack of familial support has proven to be detrimental to a child's development. And with the growing numbers of children entering the system, it is more important than ever that they have stable adults in their life that they can count on for support. This is especially true when they are going through major life transitions. Because the number of child in care is so high, it is difficult for

CASA to keep up with demand. And it is hard for youth to know their options when reunification fails. This is why this training is so important. It will help our volunteers better support their youth as they go through these life transitions.

The PowerPoint was very clear and formatted well. My mentor told me she felt it did a good job of getting the information out there without overwhelming the audience with lots of text. This is something I have struggled with in the past so I am glad it wasn't an issue here. I feel as though it kept the information brief but went into detail when necessary. There is also a lot of time for participants to ask questions as they come up. The nice thing about having it on Zoom was that people could type their questions in the chat, instead of interrupting the presenter. We also had a portion of time after the presentation for volunteers to ask the advocate supervisors more detailed questions. This was nice as it allowed volunteers to ask about case experiences and gain insight from supervisors as some of them were similar situations the volunteers themselves might be dealing with. It also opened the floor for advocates to seek advice from each other with how to help youth through these life transitions, like adoption and guardianship. My program director felt the training opened a helpful dialog between volunteers and supervisors on a topic that doesn't get covered enough during training.

I obviously would have preferred to have the training in person but due to obvious circumstances, zoom was the next best option. Because the training was going to be held over zoom, I worried about losing that interactive component that in person trainings usually have. This allows for a lot of interaction between participants. The quality isn't quite the same over zoom. To help alleviate some of this, I created a kahoot for volunteers to participate in. This brought back the interaction I was hoping to gain. It also allowed for more discussion. For example, a majority of people answered a specific question wrong during the kahoot. This

allowed my supervisors to see where their understanding was at. They were also able to explain away the confusion surrounding that question which was helpful for the advocates.

There are more and more children entering the foster care system and with the lack of familial support, many youth are unaware of what their options are when reunification fails. CASA is an incredible organization that gives foster youth a strong adult that can support them through life's difficult moments. By providing the advocates with this training we are sharing knowledge that is relevant to a lot of children in the system. Advocates will now have a better understanding of what their youth is going through and how best to support them. In general, I feel there needs to be more awareness of foster youths options when reunification fails. Many youth don't know about extended foster care, which is the most relevant for kids about to age out of the system at 18. Maybe a training designed more for social workers on these topics would be helpful as they also play a big role in foster youths lives. CASA was a great agency to intern at. I had positive relationships with everyone in the office and was able to grow as a professional. The advice I would give to a future intern would be don't be afraid to ask questions but also try your best to seek out the answers yourself before asking. This shows you can take initiative in a professional setting. I would also say don't be afraid to grow your professional relationships with other staff members. This will help your networking skills and show your co-workers that you are engaged with the office community. CASA was a welcoming environment that taught me a lot about foster youth and I will always be grateful for the experience.

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