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## For Advocates

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For Advocates

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### **Abstract**

The mission of the Court Appointed Special Advocates of Santa Cruz (CASA) program is to provide children in the foster care system a volunteer advocate who spends time with the child to ensure they are receiving the services they need (CASA of Santa Cruz County, 2019). The problem addressed is the high volume of foster children in Santa Cruz county and the three causes of the problem are substance abuse, poverty, and abuse and neglect. The consequences are how abuse affects a foster child's mental health, what it means to be a dual-status youth (a child involved in the welfare and juvenile system), and discussion on the cycle of abuse (an abused child becomes an abusive parent). The barrier of delivery in services is the cultural differences between advocates and foster child therefore the "For Advocates" page will be updated so that it is organized, easily accessible, informational resourceful. Compared to the pre-test where 70.8% of advocates stated that it was fairly easy to find the content they are looking for with the old design and 29.2% who found this "sometimes easy", in the post-test, 100% of respondents found the new design and content "fairly easy" to navigate. It is recommended that CASA of Santa Cruz hire a person who will be in charge of keeping the website and all the content up to date in order to make it easily accessible for advocates.

*Keywords:* accessibility, advocate, capstone, child abuse, foster children, mentoring, webpage

### **Agency & Communities Served**

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Santa Cruz is a non-profit agency that works with the court systems and agencies (such as Independent Living Program and juvenile hall) throughout Santa Cruz county to serve current foster youth between the ages of 0 to 21. CASA's mission is as follows:

“CASA of Santa Cruz County 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 of Santa Cruz County, 2019).”

This agency holds a 34-hour training every three months to train new volunteers to become advocates for current foster youth. As a CASA advocate, volunteers are encouraged to have weekly visitations with their foster child/youth and report their observations and recommendations to the court every six months. Once an advocate has completed their training and has been sworn-in by a judge, they come to the CASA house/office and read cases until they find a foster child they want to work with. The staff supports their served populations and its volunteers by having supervisors available to support and help the advocates, as well as to connect them with services the family may need.

CASA works in tandem with the community to collect various types of donations such as personal care products that the foster youth have access to, as well as books, pajamas, and school supplies, to name a few. The unique factor CASA of Santa Cruz has compared to other CASA agencies all over America is that the advocates can bring their foster children/youth to the office which doubles as a house. The house is a safe place where the advocate and youth can come over

to play, cook, read, and do activities comfortably such as arts and crafts or homework. The agency also has a birthday closet so that every foster youth that they serve gets a birthday present. Overall, the CASA of Santa Cruz works very closely with its community to provide as many services and support to not only the foster children and youth, but their families as well.

### **Problem Description**

Children are one of the most vulnerable and dependent groups in humankind, which is why it comes to no surprise that approximately 437,283 children were reported to be “in-care” or in foster care nationally in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2018). It is reported that there is a rate of 2.18 per 1,000 children in foster care in the entire state of California (Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2020). In comparison, between 2007 to 2014, the ratio of children in foster care was between four and five children per 1,000 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). Although the Santa Cruz county rate has not increased, the consistency of the rate is alarming and a standing issue. Child abuse is a social issue that has become normalized due to how often it occurs, which is incredibly problematic.

### **Contributing Factors**

#### **Substance Abuse**

The misuse of drugs, opioids, and alcohol plays a large role in the removal of children from their families and into the foster care system. The rate of children entering the foster care system due to their parents abusing drugs has risen by 53 percent since 2007 and the rate is 131 per 100,000 children on a national level (Sepulveda & Williams, 2019). When under the

influence of substances, people are less likely to have self-control and their thinking is impaired, therefore are more likely to physically abuse their children. Substances like drugs, alcohol, and opioids are addictive and can cause people to abuse and neglect their loved ones. It was reported that 36 percent of cases that resulted in a child being removed from the care of their parents was due to the parent abusing drugs (System, 2018). Although substance misuse is not always at play when a child is being abused, it can be a contributing factor as to why they ultimately are removed from their parent's care. Substance abuse is a growing issue and is important to address due to the high rates of parents abusing their children under the influence of substances.

### **Poverty**

Poverty is a serious social issue in itself, but it can also contribute to a child being placed in the foster care system. In 2018, 40 percent of foster youth came from African American and Latino families, and it has been reported that over 30 percent of African American and Latino children were living in poverty at the time of their removal from their parents/guardians (Ethnic and Racial Minorities & Socioeconomic Status, 2014); (Services, 2018). Poverty is considered a contributing factor due to the stressors it brings into a family. Single parent households are most likely to struggle with poverty and there can be instances where the parent has to have multiple jobs in order to provide basic needs for their children. It has also been found that single-parent households are more likely to leave their children home alone while at work since childcare services tend to be expensive. Research has shown that single-parent families are at, "greater risk of living in poverty," and that between 79-90 percent of single parents were employed while between 12-27 percent were living in poverty (Dimensions of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993, pp. 42-45).

## **Abuse and Neglect**

When assessing the level of risk a child is in if they remain in their home, four things are taken into consideration: imminent danger of physical harm to the child, a dangerous home situation, risk of abandonment (or neglect) of a child, and the causes of the issues that were reported (Raines, 2018). Along with parental substance abuse, physical abuse and neglect of children are among the top three reasons children are removed from the care of their parents. According to the 2018 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System report (AFCARS), it was reported that 62 percent of children were removed due to neglect and 13 percent for abuse (System, 2018). Some signs of a child being physically abused may present itself as several bruises that are in different stages of healing or, a child may have new injuries with explanations that do not match the nature of the injury. Signs of neglect in a child can be evident if the child is malnourished, if they have poor hygiene, or if they wear clothes that are ripped or do not properly fit, to name a few. The severity of child abuse is described as “enormous and tragic” and should be perceived as “an epidemic...that require critical national emergency response” Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC), 2014).

## **Consequences**

### **Mental Health**

It is well known that the first couple years of life is when major brain developments occur and can be drastically changed by events surrounding any forms of abuse. It has been found that foster youth and foster care alumni, also known as former foster youth, tend to have more mental health concerns as children and as adults as opposed to children from the general population which can interfere with foster youth’s daily activities and functions (Gypen et. al, 2017, p. 70-

79). The most common disorders that were found in former foster youth were depression (over 28 percent reported this), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse (Gypen et. al, 2017, p. 70-79). It is also explained that 12-25 percent of former foster youth are reporting emotional problems that connect with their past experiences. Foster children are often moved from home to home and may be moved suddenly various times which can affect their ability to develop healthy and significant attachments and relationships.

### **Dual Status Youth**

Dual status youth are foster youth who are also involved in the juvenile justice system. The Guidebook for Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare System Coordination and Integration explains that there are three types of dual status youth. Dually-identified, (currently involved with the juvenile justice system and have a history in the child welfare system but no current involvement), dually-involved (youth who have concurrent involvement [diversionary, formal, or a combination of the two] with both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems), and dually-adjudicated youth (youth who are concurrently adjudicated in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems [i.e. both dependent and delinquent]) (Wiig, Tuell, & Hedman, 2013). This is important due to foster youth pipelining straight into the juvenile and adult court system. Dual-status youth are more likely to act out in aggression as a result of being abused and neglected and not knowing better forms of coping mechanisms. A non-foster child would likely have their parents and/or other family members to lean on for advice, but unfortunately, not all foster youth have the same opportunity to have a positive role model in their lives.



## **Cycle of abuse**

When a child is raised in an environment where abuse is normalized, it is difficult to break away from what they have been conditioned to feel is normal. For this reason, it is common to find that those who have been abused are more likely to abuse their offspring and/or spouse later in life. It is explained that someone who has been physically abused is more likely to have psychological problems such as trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Narang & Contreras, 2005). Assuming that not every foster youth that is placed in the foster care system will be referred to a therapist or receive proper treatment, chances are that many of these issues are going to remain unaddressed. Children who have been abused see abuse as a reasonable way of responding to difficult situations since that is how they were raised. The cycle of abuse can become intergenerational if abuse continues to remain normalized. Former foster youth are at a greater risk of becoming either the abused or abuser in intimate relationships, often due to low self-esteem or witnessing it as children. As Ridings, Beasley, and Silovsky (2016) explain, parents who have been abused themselves are about 3.6 times more likely to physically abuse their offspring as well.

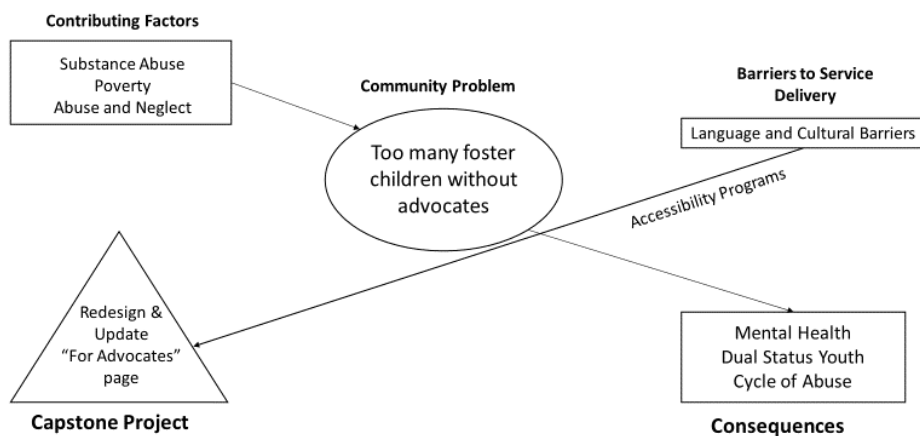
## **Barriers to Service Delivery**

Due to an overwhelming number of children in the foster care system, it is easy to miss an opportunity to help a foster child find the resources they need. This can be resources that are academic, like helping the youth find a tutor, or socially, like finding support groups. For this reason, making the CASA website accessible and full of useful resources is crucial, as the website currently lacks these features. CASA advocates are asked to be the voice of foster children not only with their team of social workers, therapists, and educational liaisons, but

within the court system as well. Providing advocates with an effective webpage where they can easily access resources and learning material is beneficial because we are helping advocates support their children and youth as much as possible.

Within the CASA agency, there are several barriers to service delivery since most of the volunteer advocates are older white men and women. This is troublesome because the majority of the foster children served are Hispanic and speak Spanish. In addition, there is an overrepresentation of low-income Hispanic and African American children in the foster care system. It was found that although African American children represent 15 percent of the United States population, over 32 percent of African American children end up in the foster system (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010, pp. 213-225). In 2010, Hispanic/Latino children represented 23.1 percent of children in the United States, but it was found that 21 percent were represented in the child welfare system (Garcia, Aisenberg, & Harachi, 2012, pp. 1060-1071). This data is problematic and can prove to create language and cultural barriers in service to delivery since the advocates are predominately white. The CASA agency also has a technological barrier with the way the website is currently designed that is inaccessible and consists of broken links and disorganized information.

### Capstone Problem Model



## **Capstone Project Description and Justification**

### **Capstone Project**

For my capstone, I will be recreating the “For Advocates” page on the CASA website. It is essential that this section of the website be functional and easily accessible to advocates because it is meant to hold important information that will help them be better advocates and serve their foster children effectively.

### **Project Purpose**

The purpose of my capstone project is to have accessible and relevant resources readily available for CASA advocates. Currently, the “For Advocates” page on the CASA website has fundamental issues: most links do not work, the material is outdated or no longer relevant, and the material is unorganized and cluttered. This is a massive barrier to service due to the fact that most advocates use this webpage when they are either looking to educate themselves on the dilemma their assigned foster child is currently facing, if they want to find resources for their child or young adults, or if they are looking for fun activities they can do with their foster child. This can directly affect the population being served because if an advocate does not have the proper tools to help the foster child, the advocate will struggle with helping the child - especially if they are new to being advocates. Although each advocate does have a supervisor they can look to for guidance, it would be beneficial to have the resources offered on the website so advocates can later go back and find it or they can explore and find further information on the matter they are trying to address.

By creating an effective “For Advocates” page on the website, it will address several of the contributing factors. It will include resources for families (both biological and resources

parents) that will either help the families directly and indirectly. An example would be including local food banks to address that the family can go to. It would also provide activities that would help a foster youth forget about their abuse and trauma, even if it is temporary, such as places an advocate may take them like the zoo or park.

### **Project Justification**

By creating an efficient webpage, my project will be working to address barriers of service such as cultural differences between advocates and foster youth as well as addressing technological barriers. By providing services and activities for advocates to do with their foster children that are more focused on Hispanic communities, advocates will be able to help foster youth be in touch with their culture and its traditions. In fixing and organizing the “For Advocates” webpage, technological barriers will be removed so that the website is easily accessible and has reliable resources that serve foster children and meet their needs.

### **Project Implementation**

Earlier this semester I sat down with all the supervisors who work directly with advocates and asked them what they thought were areas within the agency and by the end, everyone had agreed that the CASA website was what they felt needed most help. After taking a few hours to go through the website, I found that a good majority of the links were broken and that it was really hard to navigate. I found that two advocate supervisors had started brainstorming on how to improve the full website. After a few meetings with these supervisors, we came to a mutual agreement that out of the whole website, the webpage’s most important area of improvement was the “For Advocates” page. I had asked to take the lead in redesigning and reorganizing the page as well as helping the supervisors collect the resources we all found to be most important.

The first step of this project was to work with Roxy Greenspan, who is the CASA birth to five specialist and an advocate supervisor, to figure out the outline of the page to determine what content, headings, and material is most important on the page. I plan on creating a questionnaire that will determine the accessibility of the page and send it to all active CASA advocates. My next steps are to watch Firespring tutorials on how to make a web page and start testing things on a separate and unpublished page. Once the layout is completed and it is well organized, I will work with the supervisors to compile resources and continued education materials for the advocates. Once completed, the method of delivery is to publish the webpage and email all active advocates to encourage them to take a look and fill out a satisfaction survey to see if the new page is more accessible than the previous version.

The staff I am working most directly with is Roxy Greenspan, Megan Grewohl, the transitional aged youth specialist, and Alma Rocha, the educational liaison. Roxy is my primary point of contact on this project although I am still going to be reaching out to Megan and Alma to get their input on the sections that are relevant to their specialties. I will be working on a test page with the software the agency already works with, Firespring. I will need to research and collect good resources for advocates and the families and children we serve. I will also need to look at local places in Santa Cruz county that offer discounts or are inexpensive for advocates to take their foster children during visits.

### **Assessment Plan**

In order to assess the current functionality and accessibility of the “For Advocates” webpage, I created a survey using google forms and sent it out to all current advocates at CASA of Santa Cruz and received 24 responses. The first question asked in the survey was “How often do you visit the “For Advocates” page” and I received the following answers: never,

occasionally (1-2 times a month), sometimes (3-4 times a month), and often (5 or more times a month). The second question asked was how easy it was for advocates to navigate the “For Advocates” page to find what they were looking for with the options of fairly easy, sometimes easy, or difficult. The third question asked was how long it typically took for advocates to find the information they came looking for. The last two questions were fill in responses to the questions “What resources or materials would be helpful to you to post on the "For Advocates" web page?” and “Please include any additional comments or suggestions on how to improve your experience navigating the "For Advocates" page”. The post-assessment will consist of the similar questions as the pre-assessment once the new pages are published.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcome is that there will be an increase in user satisfaction and that the website will be visited more frequently. The hope is that the updated web page will be easy to navigate and that all the material/resources will be relevant and up to date.

### **Project Results**

In the pre-assessment I received 24 responses from current advocates. When asked how frequently they visited the “For Advocates” pages, 66.7% answered “sometimes” while 8.3% claimed to never visit the pages. Although 70.8% of advocates stated that it was fairly easy to find the content they are looking for with the old design, I chose to focus on the 29.2% of people who only found this “sometimes easy”. In addition, 45.8% of advocates stated that it took them on average a minute or more to find the content they were looking for. The last two questions asked for participants to share with me what resources and materials they wanted to see with the new design which were kept in mind as I worked on these pages. The last question asks

participants to provide any suggestions for how we can improve the pages. Please refer to Appendix A for the full pre-assessment results.

Although I did not receive the same number of responses for the post assessment, I still feel confident in stating that I achieved my expected outcomes. The assessment sent to current advocates with a tutorial video of how to navigate the new pages. In order to truly assess the success of the new pages, advocates were asked the same or similar questions as in the pre-assessment. Out of the seven advocates that answered the post-assessment, 71.4% projected using the new pages 3-4 times a month. When asked how easy it was for them to navigate the new pages, 100% of participants answered with “fairly easy” which was what I hoped for my expected outcomes. When asked how long it took advocates to find the information they were looking for, 57.1% said that it took them less than a minute. I believe that the 42.9% that answered “over a minute or more” may be because the advocates are not used to finding content in the new pages. I was asked to also include a question asking advocates what parts of the new pages they intended on visiting more, 57.1% said for “continuing education” materials, 28.6% answered with “CASA activity resources” and 14.3% answered with “training and references materials”. Please refer to Appendix B for the full results of the post-assessment. Overall, I feel confident in stating that my project met my expected outcomes since advocates have had nothing but positive reviews.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

In the process of completing the redesign and organization of this project, I learned a lot of new skills that pertain to website design. The main thing I learned was that this was a trial-and-error project and that there really was not a way to do things orderly. Due to the positive responses seen in the post-assessment, I can see it was implemented well. I would also

recommend that my agency hire on a staff member whose job is to update the rest of the website as well as keep the sources up to date in order to keep it running smoothly.

### **Personal Reflection**

In doing this project I learned how difficult it can be to maintain a website because of how extensive the work can be to complete this task. I learned how impactful images used on the website can be and how important it is to have a diverse population presented in such pictures in order to promote inclusivity. One of the issues I was trying to address was cultural differences between advocates and the foster children they work with. By diversifying the photos used throughout the “For Advocate” pages I was able to address this issue.

The biggest strengths in working on this project are how well everything turned out and how much more effective the webpages are running. By finding more up-to-date resources, I was able to include cultural-inclusive resources and learning materials.

I faced a lot of limitations early on in the project because I had never worked in web design and new this project was going to take some time to complete. I was not really able to kick off the work on this until Roxy Greenspan, an advocate supervisor, starting helping me with this. Although she was not able to work with me every time, it did make it a more fun learning experience as we learned together how to change the things we wanted to change. Throughout this project, I felt like time was a challenge I had to continuously fight against as this project was very time consuming. With Roxy’s help and working on this project during the summer, I was able to finish the project on time.



My advice to future interns at CASA of Santa Cruz is to get to know all the staff and look for opportunities to work with everyone. The best thing about this staff is their flexibility and willingness to teach interns new tasks. I also recommend that if you feel like you are not being challenged or that you are not learning, talk to your mentor and ask for more responsibilities. This organization and its staff have set up a great learning environment and is full of opportunities to try new things and learn from new people. If an intern decides to become an advocate, please remember to talk to your advocate supervisor frequently, they have so much advice and helpful tips to offer. Finally, if an intern decides to continue improving and updating the website and the "For Advocate" webpages, please consider the following: "if you were a foster child, what would you need from the adults helping you? What should they be knowledgeable about?". And of course, always keep in mind that whatever you are doing, it can find its way and end up making a difference in a foster child's life.

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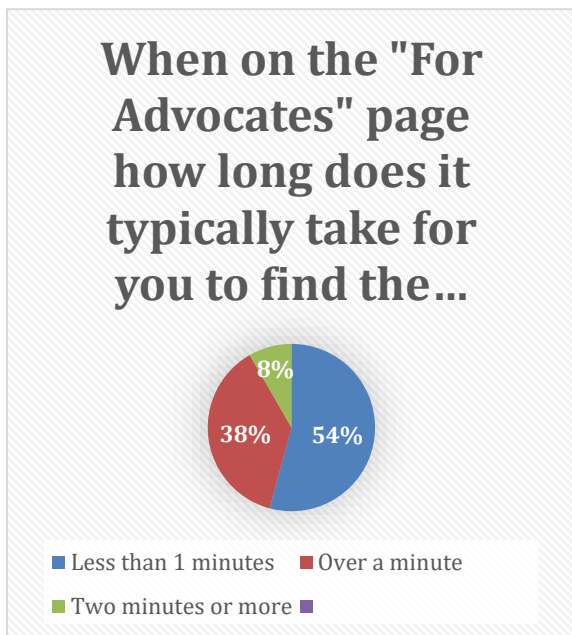
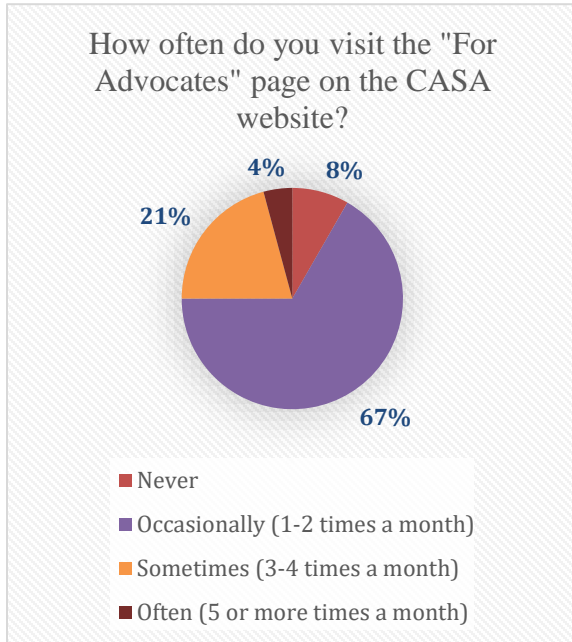
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Appendix A

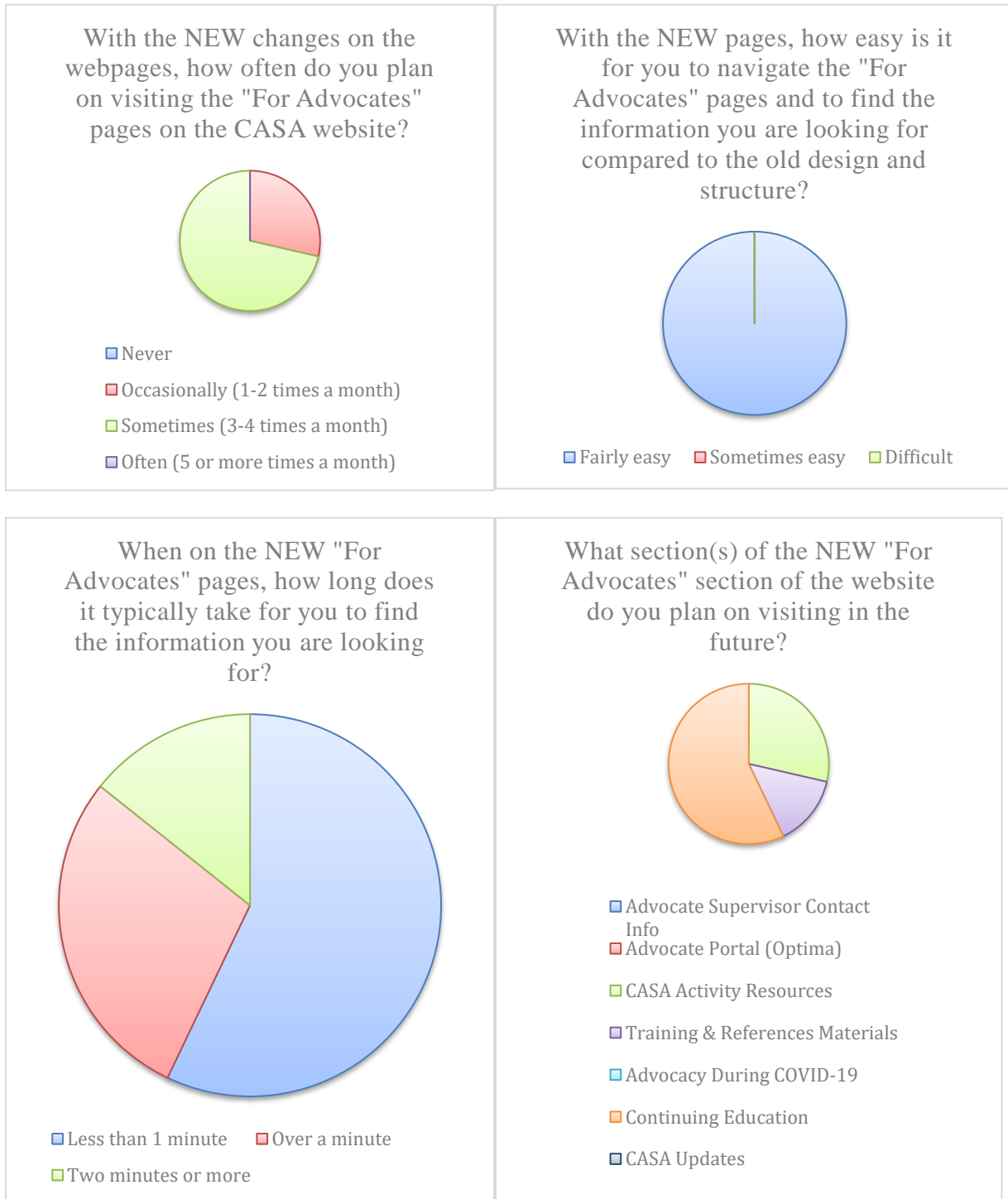
Pre-Assessment Results



## Appendix A Continued

What resources or materials would be helpful to you to post on the "For Advocates" web page?	Please include any additional comments or suggestions on how to improve your experience navigating the "For Advocates" page?
<p>“Resources for training outside the regular classes.”</p> <p>“Continue to add to current resources”</p>	<p>“Make the Advocates page easier to find from the main page.”</p> <p>“maybe add some testimonials/stories or lessons learned from various advocates”</p>
<p>“I would like to see more frequently asked questions”</p>	<p>“I would like more information on ideas/activities for working with the early childhood age group”</p>
<p>“As an avid reader and current Netflix watcher, I would always enjoy more suggested titles to read and films to watch.”</p> <p>“Ah accounting of how many hours of training I have done/need to do for the year.”</p>	<p>“I also think that a little extra attention to building community among advocates would be sweet as a retention tool. Perhaps a no-host monthly zoom. Perhaps a letter of thanks from the judge. Perhaps setting up an email discussion group for one of CASAs most recommended books/themes.”</p>
<p>“Court report and memo templates, local events and activities, entertainment, trails, hikes, beaches, age group books to buy for kids, 10 best taquerias in Watsonville”</p> <p>“Things to do with child”</p>	<p>“Organization of CE opportunities could be improved including updating the spreadsheets for books/movies and their associated CE credits”</p>

Appendix B



## Appendix B Continued

<b>What resources or materials would be helpful to you to include in the NEW "For Advocates" pages?</b>	<b>Please include any additional comments or suggestions on how we can improve your experience navigating the "For Advocates" pages?</b>
<p>“I’ve just begun working with a youth, but this looks amazing, so many resources! I can’t wait to take advantage of it.”</p>	<p>“This is a really nice step-up for the website -- easy to use -- and very informative. Thank you!!! Good job”</p>
<p>“!I really like the new pages -- the site is very useful!”</p>	<p>“Thank you for your work!”</p>
<p>“Zoom activities”</p>	<p>“None. Nicely done. Thanks.”</p>
<p>“I think it’s covered well and is now easily accessible. Great job!”</p>	<p>“The question about what sections I want to access --- shouldn't that be a multiple choice?”</p>