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The Rise of Spanish Speaking Advocates for CASA of Santa Cruz County

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### **Abstract**

CASA of Santa Cruz County is a nonprofit organization that serves youth in the foster care system, by pairing them with a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). CASA's are volunteers who devote their time by supporting youth through dependency court. The Hispanic/Latino foster youth that requires a Spanish-speaking advocate wait twice as long for a CASA, compared to a youth who is non-Spanish speaking. This research project gathered information regarding the importance of Hispanic/Latino youth in foster care being paired with a Spanish-speaking advocate. Interviews were conducted with former youth who were matched with a CASA. The interviews showed when a Hispanic/Latino youth is paired with a bilingual CASA, language barriers within the youth and family are broken and advocacy is prioritized. This information will help with the implementation of outreach for Spanish-speaking volunteers and will lead to Hispanic/Latino youth waiting less time for a CASA.

*Keywords:* CASA, Foster Care, Advocate, Hispanic/Latino, Youth

### **Agency & Communities Served**

My internship was at CASA of Santa Cruz. CASA stands for a court-appointed special advocate. They work throughout Santa Cruz county and branch out to neighbors if they need to. CASA of Santa Cruz's headquarters is in Watsonville California; they are a nonprofit organization that works with youth in foster care. CASA of Santa Cruz provides resources and support to help make the environment of the youth a safe one, they are funded through grants and donations. Their mission is to advocate for children and youth by providing CASA volunteers to support through the dependency court system. When interviewing my mentor Ana Guzman, she said "my vision is to see that all children who are dependents of the court have a CASA. That each one is supported, their voice is heard, and every need or every concern is addressed.

CASA advocates are the main resources this nonprofit uses. These advocates work directly with foster youth they are paired with and support them in any way they need, like going to court and advocating for them. Or getting ice cream and distracting them from real life, and advocate their role is to support their youth and be a safe space. Other programs CASA has been summer camps for the children, free passes to museums, free birthday cakes, and extended medical assistance.

CASA of Santa Cruz works with many agency partners; the main one they work with is their local superior court. Within the court system of Santa Cruz County, it includes judges, parents, and social workers. One community partner CASA of Santa Cruz is greatly involved with is the County Office of Education. Within this group, they work with FosterED.

CASA works with youth from the ages 0 to 21. In 2019 the U.S Census Bureau showed that 81 percent of the Watsonville population were Hispanic, and 34 percent of the population in

Santa Cruz County was Hispanic, most of those Hispanics reside in Watsonville. From the year 2018 to 2019 CASA reported they served 52 percent Hispanics and 38 percent, White.

Youth in CASA have a greater chance at finishing high school from 2014 to 2018 it was reported that 59% of the population in Watsonville graduated from high school or higher and in Santa Cruz 93%. According to Vici the waitlist manager there was a total of 16 youth that graduated in the 2019-2020 fiscal year. 8 of those youth were Hispanic and only 1 Hispanic Latino was not able to graduate (full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix B).

Along with CASA working with youth that come from a low-income family, all of their youth are either dependents of the court or in the juvenile system. When dealing with youth in foster care these youth have a history of abuse and neglect. The Lucile Packard Foundation found that 44 per every 1,000 children in Santa Cruz had reports of abuse and neglect, and in the United States, 53 per 1,000 children had records of abuse and neglect (KidsData, 2018).

In the fiscal year of 2019 to 2020 CASA of Santa Cruz served 234 children, this includes youth from foster care, a youth of the court, and juvenile youth (Annual Report, 2019). Some of the consequences of children being moved from home to home are becoming homeless, more likely to be sex trafficked, and at risk of not graduating high school.

In the fiscal year of 2019 to 2020 at CASA of Santa Cruz, 20 of their youth assigned to an advocate that year spoke Spanish. 8 of those 20 were paired with a Spanish Speaking advocate, and 6 of the 20 were paired with a Hispanic advocate (Herkomer interview, transcript for interview found in Appendix B). Out of the 190 advocates they currently have 33 identified as Hispanic. There were 98 advocates assigned to a case, 22 of the 98 speak Spanish, and 14 of the 98 identify as Hispanic. This demographic information is important because it shows the

numbers of how much Hispanic youth CASA served in that year, and the total number of Spanish Speaking advocates there are.

### **Problem Description**

Hispanic/Latino youth in the foster care system wait longer than youth who are non-Spanish speaking that is waiting for a CASA due to the lack of Spanish-speaking advocates available. In the fiscal year of 2019 to 2020, 30% of the youth CASA was referred, required an advocate with some Spanish fluency. This is important because it shows how many youths came to CASA needing someone who spoke Spanish to advocate for them and provide beneficial mentorship. CASA's goal when being referred to youth is to pair them with an advocate within 30 days. When interviewing Vici Herkomer the waitlist manager at CASA she provided me with the data on wait time for the youth that needed a Spanish-speaking advocate, and those that do not need a Spanish-speaking CASA. The median time children with no Spanish-speaking need wait 23 days, on average they wait 51 days to be assigned an advocate. Children who need an advocate that speaks Spanish wait a median of 58 days, and on average 75 days to be assigned an advocate (full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix B).

The micro-level problem they are facing is the wait time for Latino/Hispanic youth is too long. There are not enough Spanish-speaking advocates that can be matched with a youth that need and depend on their advocate to speak the language they were born into or their families speak the lack of Spanish-speaking advocates has led to Latino/Hispanic youth in foster care losing the opportunity to receive a CASA and stay on the waitlist longer than a youth who can receive an advocate faster due to there not being a language barrier.

### **Contributing Factors**

One of the 3 contributing factors to the problem of having Hispanic/Latino youth not receiving an advocate waiting longer than the average matching time is the high number of Hispanic/Latino youth in dependency court, this is due to the Hispanic/Latino youth in Santa Cruz county that is in the foster care system. Foster's youth go through dependency court because there was some type of negligence from the parent or guardian that led to Child Protective Services (CPS) or authorities being called, and many times parents lose their child and have to fight back from them at the court which is "dependency court". This can happen because a parent is physically, mentally, or verbally abusing the youth. Santa Cruz county serves many youths in dependency court, but as of 2016 there was a Community Assessment Report done for the Sana Cruz county, and they had a total of 311 reports made of child abuse. From those 311 reports, 5.6% of Hispanic youth in Santa Cruz county were reported of child abuse, and 5.8% of white youth were reported of child abuse (The Community Assessment Project & Applied Survey Research, 2017, p.155).

Another contributing factor is the lack of Spanish-speaking advocates at CASA of Santa Cruz. CASA works for the best interest of the youth and their family. When seeking advocates, they emphasize that there is no need for experience and that they just ask for their time and dedication to the youth. The Journal of Extension: Diversifying the Volunteer Base: Latinos and Volunteerism, did a research study around volunteerism in the Hispanic community, they found that volunteering in the Latino culture looks very different from what American culture has paved the way for in volunteerism. "Latino volunteerism occurs first in the context of family and secondarily in the neighborhood and church as opposed to mainstream community-based organizations" (Journal of Extension & Hobbs, 2001, para. 9).

The last contributing factor is the lack of outreach being done for Spanish-speaking volunteers. They have seen a great number of volunteers wanting to get involved during the pandemic but there seems to be a lack of outreach for the Hispanic community. CASA of Santa Cruz annual report for the year 2018-2019, reported that 52% of the youth CASA of Santa Cruz serves are Hispanic and this means that most of the families of these youth are Spanish speaking and require a translator in court (CASA of Santa Cruz, 2019). This year when they did their annual report, they did not include the ethnicity of their youth. Prioritizing the outreach for Hispanic/Latino youth is a big factor as to why there is Hispanic/Latino youth on a waitlist for an advocate.

### **Consequences**

One of the consequences to there being a large number of Hispanic/Latino youth on the waitlist for an advocate is the resource CASA of Santa Cruz provides to their youth is not being used at its full potential. CASA of Santa Cruz has many services that they provide to their youth, for example, tutoring services, mental health services, and having a person to trust in a time where it seems everyone is against them. CASA's from all over the U.S report having a bilingual volunteer (English/Spanish) is an important way to help the community with the youth and their family when it is needed, even though there are available interpreters, having a volunteer who understands the Hispanic/Latino community, as well as knowing the culture, helps be a better advocate with the cases in the dependency system (CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County, 2015).

The consequence of there not being enough Spanish-speaking volunteers at CASA is the low graduation rates of Hispanic/Latino youth. CASA of Santa Cruz volunteers works to help their youth succeed in life and one of those successes is graduating high school. When a youth



does not have a CASA advocate their chances of graduating high school while in foster care decreases due to the emotional and physical trauma they are experiencing in their life. According to the California Department of Education, 64% of foster youth in the state of California graduated in the year 2018-2019.

The last consequence that is seen within outreach for Spanish-speaking advocates at CASA of Santa Cruz is not prioritized. This leads to not having enough Spanish-speaking volunteers to advocate for Hispanic/Latino youth who have gone through trauma and negligence that is not being addressed. Trauma and neglect leave serious mental and physical effects on youth, when they do not have someone who can help get them resources and be an open space, it can leave these issues being untreated. According to an article published by the American Psychological Association, they said: “Unmet mental health needs for foster children can mean ongoing problems as a youth in foster care enter adulthood” (American Psychological Association, 2012, para 8).

**Problem Model**

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Factor 1 The high number of Latino youths who are in Dependency court	Hispanic/Latino youth in dependency court who are on a waitlist for a court-appointed special advocate (CASA)	Consequence 1 The resources at CASA are not being used at their full potential
Factor 2 Lack of Spanish Speaking volunteers		Consequence 2 Risk of low graduation rates
Factor 3 Outreach for Spanish Speaking volunteer, not a priority		Consequence 3 Trauma and mental health issues not being addressed or supported

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

This research project focuses on the time Hispanic/Latino youth wait when needing to be paired with a Spanish-speaking advocate at CASA of Santa Cruz. I will be responsible for gathering data on former CASA youth and their experience as a minority youth with a bilingual or nonbilingual CASA. The purpose of this project is to bring awareness to the importance of there being enough Spanish-speaking advocates for the Hispanic/Latino youth that need a bilingual CASA and prioritizing outreach for Spanish-speaking volunteers.

### **Project Justification**

The Rise of Spanish-speaking Advocates at CASA of Santa Cruz is important because the Hispanic Latino youth CASA serves to have to wait longer to use the resources provided to them due to the language barrier between volunteers and CASA of Santa Cruz not having enough Spanish-speaking advocates. Research on the need for Spanish-speaking advocates, says most CASA's in the United States are in demand for Spanish-speaking volunteers, and male advocates, but have always had difficulty reaching these two demographics. Fellow CASA board member Sesario Escoto wrote "children who need a bilingual advocate wait two times as long to be paired with a caring volunteer" (Sesario Escoto, 2018, para 2).

The goal for this project is to reduce the wait time between matching a Hispanic Latino youth that needs a Spanish-speaking CASA, as well as helping prioritize an outreach plan that focuses on seeking Spanish-speaking advocates.

### **Project Implementation**

This project addresses the wait time Hispanic/Latino foster youth go through when being matched with an advocate as well as the contributing factors and consequences, they face due to this problem. I created introductory emails, interview guides and collected data on the

experiences Hispanic/Latino youth faced when having a CASA that is non-Spanish speaking or Spanish speaking. I met with different CASA staff members and collected information regarding the average wait time and obstacles they experience when matching youth that needs a Spanish-speaking advocate.

My role was to interview, gather data, and transcribe all the information that was collected, to find out the importance of a bilingual CASA being paired with a Hispanic/Latino youth that has a bilingual need. The responsibilities I had were to meet with different CASA staff members and gather the supporting evidence on how long these youth waits. As well as how CASA matches their youth with volunteers based on language, culture, health and other important factors they need to build a beneficial advocacy relationship. I met with Ana Guzman my mentor and program coordinator to help me get into contact with the resources and people I needed for my research. Vici Herkomer the waitlist manager, and Jimmy Cook the program director connected me with former youth that used to be served by CASA in Santa Cruz county. I then got in contact with these youth to set up interview times, dates, and forms of contact. My criteria when searching for these youth was, they needed to be over 18, have been served by CASA, and Hispanic/Latino.

I got into contact with 3 different youth but only interviewed 2 of the youth that reached out. When reaching out to them I had sent them the interview guide so they could prepare beforehand on the questions I was going to ask. I then transcribed both of my interviews and requested consent for the use of their information and pictures.

Some resources that were needed to help with my research project were zoom, phone, email, and google docs. I had my email, and google calendar updated with my availability so that my participants could schedule interviews with me. I used my laptop for zoom and to record both

of my interviews, with consent from both participants. I used annual reports for the number of Hispanic/Latino youth there are at CASA and data that was given to me from Vici on the average time youth wait when being matched (full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix B).

This project will help contribute to the problem CASA of Santa Cruz has by providing evidence that the search for Spanish-speaking volunteers needs to be prioritized. The need for this project is to provide evidence that Hispanic/Latino youth do better with a mentor who is Spanish speaking.

### **Assessment Plan**

To measure this outcome, I conducted interviews with Hispanic/Latino youth that have been served by a CASA and asked them questions in regard to their experience with a CASA. I focused on gathering information on if there were any language barriers, and how this affected their experience with their CASA. The method I used to gather this evidence and measure my outcomes was collecting all the data from the interviews and recording the phone or zoom interview through my laptop. I then transcribed the interviews and reviewed the information the youths provided based on their perspective of having a CASA. I used this information for the recommendations I have to offer to CASA of Santa Cruz.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The expected outcome that I wanted to achieve as a result of this project is to collect information on the effects there are when a Hispanic/Latino youth is paired with an advocate who is bilingual in Spanish. I will use it to help push to create a new outreach plan in seeking Spanish-speaking advocates that will help bring in more bilingual volunteers. This would lead to matching Hispanic/Latino youth with Spanish-speaking advocates. What I hoped to receive from these interviews is to gather data on the effects there is when having an advocate that speaks the

same language as their youth. As well as finding out if it makes a difference when a Hispanic/Latino youth has an advocate who does or does not Spanish.

### **Project Results**

The data gathered from the interviews were conducted with former CASA youths, and current CASA staff to show the importance of seeking Spanish-speaking advocates and how beneficial it is for Hispanic/ Latino youth on the waitlist to be paired with bilingual advocates. I met with interviewee A through a phone call meeting, our phone call lasted 45 minutes. Interviewee A was served by a CASA from the ages 16 through 19. She's currently 32 and identifies as a Mexican female. She always had a rough life and struggled financially within her family when she was younger. She did not trust many people because they would come and go.

Having the same culture as her CASA was not a priority to her and she just wanted someone to support her. Interviewee A said it is important for CASA to continue seeking Spanish-speaking advocates especially if they are trying to reunify with family. When I asked her in what ways could CASA work on when trying to bring in more Hispanic/Latino volunteers she mentioned educating the community on the foster care system is a great way to bring in more volunteers (full interview transcripts are presented in Appendix).

When reaching out to interviewee B she felt more comfortable meeting through zoom. Our meeting lasted 50 minutes, she gave me consent to record the meeting, use her photo, and share her story. Interviewee B is 21 years old and identified as a Latina. She had been in the system since she was 5 and has had five different CASA's. Just like interviewee A, she shared the same experience in building trust with her CASA. During our interview, she was very open and ready to share her experiences. Interviewee B said that having a CASA with the same culture

was very important to her, especially because the majority of her family only speaks Spanish. Her current CASA is Spanish speaking which made their bond stronger.

She shared an experience when she had a CASA that did not speak Spanish, and this resulted in the youth needing to translate which defeated the purpose of having a CASA. Her CASA was not able to communicate with her family and explain her role as a CASA.

Interviewee B shared that CASA should focus on educating the Hispanic/Latino community on the importance of volunteering for foster youth, as well as breaking the stigma of needing to be overeducated to support this community because at the end of the day it is just about being there for the youth.

This project was successful because the agency gained more knowledge on the disparity there is for the Hispanic/Latino that wait for a Spanish-speaking advocate and the importance of needing Spanish-speaking CASA's. The results from my interviews supported my claim that Hispanic/Latino youth benefit from having a CASA that is Spanish speaking whether it is needed or not. When the language barrier is removed, and the culture is understood it allows for advocacy to be beneficial.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

The results from my interview provided CASA of Santa Cruz with a look into the experiences the Hispanic/Latino foster youth go through when being matched with a CASA that is Spanish speaking or non-Spanish speaking. CASA should use these interviews as a motive to prioritize an outreach plan for Spanish-speaking advocates so it can help reduce the wait time of matching youth with a bilingual volunteer. The Rise of Spanish-speaking volunteers provided CASA with evidence on the benefits there are when taking language, and culture into consideration during the matching period.

CASA of Santa Cruz has worked on outreach for Spanish-speaking volunteers but was never a priority. With the information I am providing CASA of Santa Cruz should continue outreach for this demographic. They currently have a new outreach manager who is Spanish-speaking and has been working on new outreach methods to get these volunteers in. My recommendation is for the outreach manager to continue doing the work she is doing by talking on Spanish radio shows and doing interviews with Spanish news so that education around foster youth and the benefit of volunteering is spread throughout the Hispanic/Latino community.

### **Personal Reflection**

Working on this year-long research project was tedious, challenging, fulfilling, and exciting. In the process of setting up meetings with CASA staff, I felt nervous because I did not have the confidence in myself to believe I could do a project like this on my own. Meeting with youth and setting up interviews was a new experience, I had to take charge and be in control of all the interviews and questions. Some challenges I had were getting motivated on my own and there were times I lost sight of my goal.

Some insights I gained from my project was how little Hispanic/Latino representation there are for youth in the human service field and the foster system. I also learned new outreach methods that targeted specifically the Hispanic/ Latino population in Santa Cruz county. I learned how to communicate more efficiently as well as set boundaries within what I can and can't handle.

Setting boundaries and communication deadlines with my mentor was an experience that contributed the most to my learning goal. Speaking up is key and leading with confidence can get you ahead. This is the part that pushed me out my comfort zone I had to be persistent with

my mentor in getting connected with the youth, and even if I felt like I was a bother I had to push. What I will remember about this project 10 years from now is the stories of the youth, as well as the impact CASA’s made to foster youth.

Some advice I have for future CHHS student interns is to set yourself up to succeed with attainable goals. Sometimes when you have your goals set too high and you aren't able to reach every single one of them this can become overwhelming and lead you to give up.

**Appendix A**

**Scope of Work**

Phases		Activities/Tasks		Deliverables	Timeline/ deadlines
1	Select capstone project	1.1	Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor and agency staff	Generate a list of capstone project ideas.	Sept 2020
		1.2	Discuss ideas with agency staff	Submit a list of potential ideas to mentor for review/approval	Oct 2020
2	Plan project	2.1	Discuss implementation and the scope of the work	Created a list of ideas and backup plans to help with implementation in the next semester	Nov 2020
		2.2	Discuss and get an understanding of the problem my project addresses	Have identified the contributing factors and the results the risk factors do within the problem	Dec 2020
3	Implement project	3.1	Gather annual reports from CASA, talk to the waitlist manager, and meet with Ana on receiving	Have gathered enough data to move forward and interview those	Jan 2021, Feb 2021



			these resources and information	necessary for the project	
		3.2	Create interview questions after reviewing all the data found and provided.	Have interview questions created and interview dates set up	Feb 2021,
		3.3	Interview youth remotely through zoom, phone call, or any other video chat source	Have gathered all of the interviews from all parties	March 2021, April 2021
4	Assess project	4.1	Compare and analyze all the data and interviews gathered	Write and break down what I found in the information	April 2021
		4.2	Gather any more information needed and contact staff or youth if more data is needed	Final agency and capstone reports	April 2021 May 2021
5	Report on project findings	5.1	Complete reporting requirements	Final agency and capstone reports	April 2021 May 2021
		5.2	Prepare capstone presentation in the selected format	Present at Dress Rehearsal for grading	May 2021
		5.3	Final preparation for Capstone Festival	Final Capstone Festival presentation!	May 2021

**Appendix B**

[Interviewee A Question Guide](#)

[Interviewee B Question Guide](#)

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