



Building an Agenda for Success

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Anniversaries are milestones that allow a time for celebration, a time to reflect on the past, and a time to renew passion and commitment for the future. Over the past year, we have celebrated the 20th Anniversary of CASA in Georgia with several feature articles on the unique aspects of CASA advocacy, as well as the people that have helped make the growth of the CASA organization possible.

Upon reflecting over the past twenty years, a common theme emerges – the unwavering, dedication of individuals who give of themselves for a higher good. It is apparent that CASA in Georgia is no longer a fledging organization, but rather a mature, credible, and respected network. There are many indicators of CASA's success. The unanimous passage of House Bill 270 in 2007 speaks volumes of the image CASA has throughout the state as does the growth of CASA into 83% of the counties and 94% of the judicial circuits, indicating that success breeds success. Perhaps most significant of all is the impact CASA has had on the lives of thousands of abused, neglected, and abandoned children over the years. We can all certainly be proud of what has been accomplished by CASA in Georgia.

The next twenty years will be even better for CASA. Why? Because of the legacy that we, as the dedicated people that make up the CASA network, will build. Will it be easy? Not always. We have learned that things change. The system we work in is ever changing. Subsequently, we are thrust into a role that transcends the heartfelt passion of “doing good” to one that requires us to perform at a high level for courts, government agencies, community partners, lawyers, and our funders. We must demonstrate our effectiveness as a high quality advocacy organization that is a critical piece of the child welfare system and search for ways to define and measure terms like “high-impact organization” and “added value.” At the same time, we cannot lose sight of our core mission and the very reason we exist: to advocate for the safety, permanency, and well-being of abused, neglected, and abandoned children. We simply cannot be the very best advocates for children if we are not striving to be the very best we can be organizationally.

Like many organizations, we will face challenges. We need to engage in strategic discussions about how to better serve children in these ever-changing times. We need to focus on building an agenda that includes maintaining relevancy in the child welfare

system, building the capacity of CASA affiliate programs, improving the quality of courtroom advocacy, and strengthening the CASA network affiliation. Every time I see the Verizon television commercial, I am reminded of CASA. In the commercial, the man stands alone with his cell phone, attempting to get a signal, and off to the side are thousands of people representing backup for the Verizon network. Think of the CASA volunteer in the courtroom as the one advocate for the child. Now, think of all the thousands of people representing the CASA network as backup for the CASA volunteer and the child. We are all accountable to ensure that the CASA network is connected by common purposes, shared values, continual learning, high standards, and a strong support system.

I learned about a remarkable concept a few years ago that pertained to organizations with multiple entities being able to balance ‘high affiliation’ and ‘high autonomy.’ In my words, this means that each entity (affiliate CASA program) operates with a high level of independence, but also realizes the great value in being affiliated with a larger network (CASA in Georgia). Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant state it this way in their book, *Forces for Good*: **“High-impact nonprofits work with and through other organizations and individuals to create more impact than they could have ever achieved alone.”**

The Georgia CASA Board of Directors and staff are in the process of developing a new five-year strategic plan. All of our stakeholders and affiliates will be asked for input in its development. Let's seize this opportunity to come together as a network and build the right agenda for success in our future. As the environment of child welfare continues to change, we must ensure that Georgia CASA identifies and captures the strategies that will provide the maximum benefit not just to the CASA network, but more importantly to all of the abused, neglected, and abandoned children in our state. My hope is that the above-mentioned concepts of ‘high affiliation’ and ‘high autonomy’ are not just notions, but a reality for CASA in Georgia. After all, it is the least we can do for the unwavering, dedicated individuals who give of themselves for a higher good. Let us make sure that CASA's future impact on the child welfare system goes above and beyond what we have already accomplished! ❖

Article written by Duaine Hathaway, Executive Director of Georgia CASA