

C.A.S.A. - COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES' RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Cesar Navarrete was the Executive Director of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (C.A.S.A.) of San Bernardino County, an organization that recruited, screened and trained volunteers to serve as court appointed special advocates for youth living in foster care. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2019, Cesar had to decide whether to move the organization fully online, develop a hybrid model, or establish that employees were essential workers who needed to work onsite during the crisis. In addition, regardless of the mode of work and service delivery, the organization needed to consider adopting flexible work arrangements.

The decisions (about employee work, service model delivery and potential flexible work arrangements) would involve individual, group, and organizational level analyses to gain buy-in from employees and approval by the Board of Directors.

Court Appointed Special Advocates

Court Appointed Special Advocates (C.A.S.A.), a national volunteer movement, began in 1976. Its founder, Seattle Superior Court Judge David Soukup, decided he could no longer endure sleepless nights worrying about the lifelong impact his decisions had on abused and neglected children. At that time, children in foster care did not receive the same representation in court as parents did. According to Judge Soukup, in an *LA Times* interview, "*I was consumed by the fact that I didn't have enough information about each child, and I just didn't know if I had done the very best job I could*" (Mehren, 1995: 39).

Judge Soukup set out to right the wrong. He thought well-trained volunteers could ensure children's voices mattered and provide judges with insight to make the best possible decisions. In 1977, Judge Soukup formed the first C.A.S.A. program to recruit, train, and supervise volunteers who built meaningful relationships with, and advocated for, abused and neglected children in juvenile dependency court. Those first fifty volunteers became Court Appointed Special Advocates and started a movement.

In 2022, close to 1,000 C.A.S.A. programs served children in forty-nine states. In California, county C.A.S.A. directors recognized the need for a state office to strengthen the network. Together, they formed the California C.A.S.A. Association in 1987. At the time of its founding, only 17% of California Superior Courts had access to C.A.S.A. volunteers. Through persistence, partnership, and passion, the network of C.A.S.A. programs grew to serve children and courts in fifty-one of the fifty-eight counties in California, covering where 99% of foster youth lived (California C.A.S.A 2022).

C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino

C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino County was designated as a “*Legal Services/Advocacy/Civil Rights*” nonprofit by the Southern California Nonprofit Organization Committee (Nonprofit Compensation Associates 2021). Pre-pandemic, C.A.S.A. supported 163 volunteers who served 221 youth in foster care, with over 11,000 contact hours. C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino boasted of a 100% high school graduation rate for the foster youth in its program. In 2020, it had an annual expense budget of \$958,238 with a revenue target of \$1,013,003. Two-thirds of the budget came from government contracts, and one-third came from a combination of foundation grants and individual as well as corporate sponsors. The service goals for 2020 were to add one hundred more volunteer advocates to serve a minimum of two hundred foster youth (Dashboard 2021).

C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino’s Organization

To meet its goals, C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino had a staff of 12 (including the Executive Director and two managers). Turnover was low, normally transitioning 1-2 staff members per year (*i.e.*, 10-20% turnover rate) and the average employee tenure was 7 years. Pre-pandemic, the main factors contributing to turnover were retirements or taking a job that provided a promotion or greater pay.

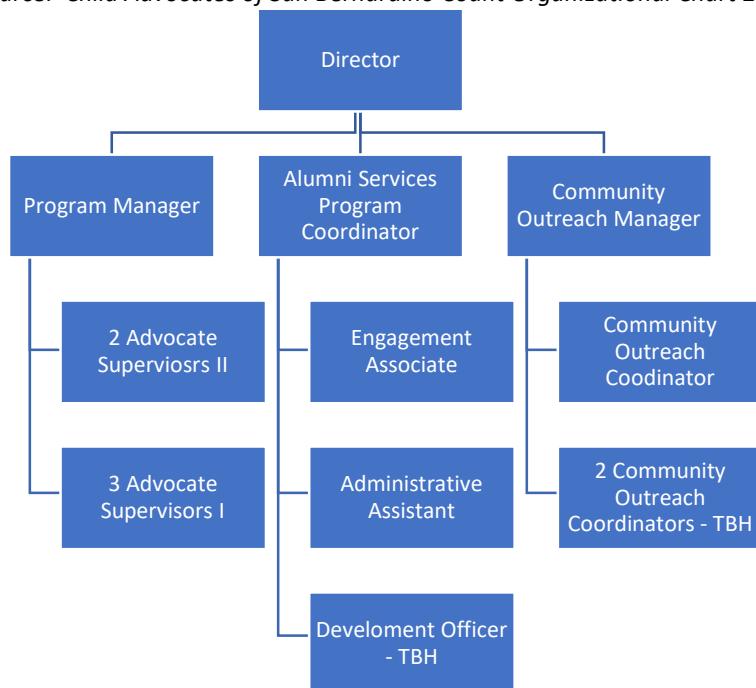
The Executive Director had three direct reports: the Program Manager, the Community Outreach Manager, and the Engagement Associate. All but one employee (the Administrative Assistant) were full-time, working 40 hours per week in salaried positions. C.A.S.A. had a 60-day mini-evaluation for new employees, although it took newly hired employees 3 to 6 months to get up to speed in terms of acceptable work performance. After the probation period, C.A.S.A. used an annual performance management system, however, the system was more informal than formal. In terms of benefits, C.A.S.A. provided paid time-off (PTO), medical insurance, and (recently) retirement benefits for employees (Handbook 2018; Navarrete 2021).

The organization was made up of three distinct units: (1) Community Outreach – which focused on recruiting, screening, and training community volunteers to serve as Court Appointed Special Advocates; (2) Advocate Supervisors – who matched, supervised and supported the trained volunteers who in turn provided mentorship and advocacy for the youth they were assigned to; volunteers acted as intermediaries between the social workers, attorneys, and courts; and (3) Administrative – which included alumni relations, development, and administrative support for C.A.S.A.

The Community Outreach Coordinator position, which reported to the Community Outreach Manager, was vacant. There were five Advocate Supervisors who reported to the Program Manager, two level-IIs and three level-Is, who provided support to the volunteers. There were also an Engagement Associate, an Alumni Services Program Coordinator, and an Administrative Assistant. The two managers (Program and Community Outreach) and the Engagement Associate reported to the Executive Director. Exhibit 1 provides C.A.S.A.'s organization chart:

Exhibit 1. C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino – Organization Chart

Source: Child Advocates of San Bernardino Count Organizational Chart 2020



Prior to the pandemic, C.A.S.A. had planned to add two Community Outreach Coordinators and a Development Officer. Therefore, the plan to move to online, hybrid or maintain face-to-face operations needed to consider the impact on talent acquisition. Navarrete's assumption was that Covid-19 would have a significant impact on service delivery. However, C.A.S.A.'s finances were expected to remain stable, so Navarrete did not anticipate having to reduce pay, or use furloughs or layoffs (Navarrete 2021). Given the positive budget outlook, what would be the impact of adding (or not adding) staff during the pandemic, in terms of employee attitudes, motivation, culture and organizational objectives?

Another factor to consider was the service area. San Bernardino County was a 20,105 square-mile region. It was the largest county in area in the United States. With a population of over 2 million people (as of the 2010 U.S. Census), it was the 5th most populous county in California and the 14th most populous in the United States (U.S. Census 2021). In 2019, there were 2,622 children entering foster care (San Bernardino County 2021). To serve the region, C.A.S.A. had a main administrative office in Colton, CA, and two satellite offices, one in Apple Valley and the other in Upland. C.A.S.A. was locked into leases at each facility, with Apple Valley expiring 2022, Upland expiring 2024, and Colton expiring 2025. How could C.A.S.A. leverage its offices, as well as flextime and flex location options, to serve the region?

In terms of technology, each employee had an i-Pad, a \$50 per month telework/technology stipend (which offset remote office costs, such as internet and cellular service), MS Office and Microsoft Teams for inter-office communication, and Zoom for virtual meetings. Employees used their personal cell phones for work, although a third-party program allowed them to connect to their office phone and voice mail. Finally, there were proprietary case management, training, and record systems. However, even with the technology, C.A.S.A. was not paperless, as employees still needed to print, obtain wet signatures, and store documents for reports and orders to the courts (Navarrete 2021).

The Executive Director and C.A.S.A. employees were supportive of flextime and flex location, but they had concerns about balancing work and life (Employees 2021). Some did not have adequate office space at home (using the kitchen table or bedroom to work), two had school-age children who would be studying at home, two others had child-care and parent-care responsibilities, and one staff member had intermittent internet service. Therefore, issues of work-life balance, home offices, dependent care, and internet service needed to be considered in the decision.

Executive Director

The Executive Director was responsible for overall organizational performance, including increasing community awareness of C.A.S.A., developing a volunteer base, improving geographic coverage, and increasing and diversifying funding streams (Performance Review 2020). The Executive Director reported to the Board of Directors - the Governing Body of the Agency; the Board would be reviewing the recommendations. In addition, as Child Advocate of San Bernardino County, the Presiding Juvenile Court Judge was the ultimate overseer of the Agency (C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino 2021). As such, the Presiding Judge would also need to approve any changes in services to youth.

Cesar, the Executive Director, was a Hispanic male, age 39, with a master's degree in public administration, who had been in the position for the past 7 years. His journey, in his own words, was:

"My personal experience as a victim of child abuse and trauma feeds my passion for my life's work, to be a voice for those that cannot speak for themselves. My unfortunate circumstances served as a springboard for a life filled with continuous learning and service to others. I am happily married with six amazing children of my own. I have over 16 years of experience in the nonprofit sector working in program development, implementation, quality improvement, management, resource development, sustainability, community organizing, and advocacy. My passion has driven me to work with at-risk populations throughout my human services career, especially youth-at-risk" (Navarrete 2021).

Cesar continued:

"I received my BA in Criminal Justice from California State University of San Bernardino in 2004 and began my career as a public servant working at a local nonprofit as a youth program coordinator. I devoted seven years at Family Service Association in a variety of capacities, and worked my way up from a program coordinator to a manager, to a director. Once on the Executive Team, I decided to go back to school to earn my MPA. In 2014, I decided that it was time for me to grow professionally and accepted the position as Executive Director of C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino County."

"I believed my previous experiences had prepared me to lead a nonprofit - but I was very much mistaken. C.A.S.A. was operating in a deficit and staff were ready to jump ship; I needed help. Help came through The City Scholars Foundation Fellowship Program, the Academy for Grassroots Organization's Fundraising Academy, Annenberg Alchemy, and other amazing nonprofit and public sector mentors" (Navarrete 2021).

Finally, Cesar described his approach to leadership and management:

"For the past seven years, my enduring vision as a Servant Leader has been to [...] improve the life outcomes of our foster youth through authentic connections, advocacy, and individualized support. My approach is simple but effective. From top to bottom, I have created a culture of service. My staff do not work for me - I work for my staff so that they have the tools and resources necessary to be effective fulfilling their responsibilities. Our volunteers do not work for my staff or for me – in turn we work for our volunteers to ensure that they have the tools, resources, and professional support needed to serve our youth as mentors and Court Appointed Special Advocates. Together with our community partners, we positively impact the lives of our foster youth through meaningful relationships, authentic connections, and impact-driven programming" (Navarrete 2021).

C.A.S.A. Advocate Supervisors

The core staff position at C.A.S.A. was the Advocate Supervisor, who was responsible for managing C.A.S.A. volunteers and their assigned cases. As a part of his/her case management duties, the C.A.S.A. Advocate Supervisor provided professional support to C.A.S.A. volunteers. The Advocate Supervisor was responsible for: (1) the ongoing support, education, and training of advocates; (2) timely submission of all reports and documents; and (3) compliance with stated indicators and standards. This role was also responsible for volunteer supervision,

including case documentation review and coordination of cases (California C.A.S.A. 2020). The essential duties of the Advocate Supervisor were:

- Supervise Court Appointed Special Advocates appointed through San Bernardino Dependency Court.
- Facilitate C.A.S.A. Core training classes on a quarterly basis.
- Review; submit C.A.S.A. Reports and recommendations to Juvenile Dependency court.
- Maintain confidential youth case files containing Children and Family Services Status Review Reports, court minutes, Health and Education Passports and contact information.
- Update youth and C.A.S.A. TRACKER system profiles.
- Capture C.A.S.A. impact through implementation of a Volunteer Impact Survey. Evaluate C.A.S.A. performance and provided direct feedback on areas of improvement taking corrective action when needed resulting in improved C.A.S.A. quality of service.
- Assist with C.A.S.A. monthly billing practices by providing performance measures to the San Bernardino County Dependency Court (Pulido 2010).

C.A.S.A. Volunteers

A C.A.S.A. volunteer provided a judge with recommendations that helped the court make a sound decision about that child's future. Each case was as unique as the child involved.

C.A.S.A. volunteers came from all walks of life, with a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Aside from their C.A.S.A. volunteer work, 85% were employed in regular full-time jobs. Two-thirds of the volunteers nationwide were women. A C.A.S.A. volunteer usually spent about 10-15 hours per month with her or his assigned foster youth.

Social workers were employed by state or county governments. Social workers sometimes worked on 40 to 50 cases at a time and were frequently unable to conduct a comprehensive investigation of each case. The C.A.S.A. worker was a volunteer with free time and a small

caseload (on the average 1-2). The volunteer did not replace the social worker on a case; he/she was a separate, independent appointee of the court. Although there were other child service organizations, C.A.S.A. was the only program where volunteers were officially appointed by the court to have the specific responsibility of looking after the child's best interest. In addition, C.A.S.A. was the only agency that required extensive pre-service training, continuing education, and an 18-month program commitment from volunteers (C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino 2021).

To become an advocate, volunteers needed to complete 30 hours of training, which included a mix of synchronous and asynchronous online instruction through *C.A.S.A. University*, available evenings and weekends. They also had to pass a comprehensive background check. Once completed, volunteers were sworn-in by the court and matched with 1-2 foster youth. In addition, volunteers submitted monthly time logs to their staff Advocate Supervisor and completed 10 hours of continuing education each year. The focus of the relationship with the youth was on advocacy, mentorship, and guidance for school, life, and work. Volunteers also collaborated closely with their Advocate Supervisor, especially when a court cases or significant issues was pending (for example, placement instability, mental health, or substance abuse).

One C.A.S.A. volunteer explained:

"In 2014, after discussions with a CEO who was a C.A.S.A. volunteer, I reached out to C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino County to inquire about the role and expectations. I attended an informative meeting held by the C.A.S.A. staff. My largest interest was – how could I affect the life of a foster child? After meeting a C.A.S.A. Advocate Supervisor, I made the decision to attend the volunteer training. The weekend meetings gave me a chance to meet other candidates as well as hear from current volunteers. Their words of impact and development inspired me to move forward."

"After training and the official swearing-in by the court, I met with my Advocate Supervisor. He presented potential files for consideration in terms of selecting a youth. It was a difficult decision, as there are so many youths looking for an advocate. My initial criteria were simple: select a youth with the hope of influencing him in the right direction. I chose a 10-year-old. He had never met

his father and his mother had substance abuse issues. He had been in several homes prior to my meeting him as an advocate. The Advocate Supervisor set up the initial meeting. My youth was a bit hesitant at first, but he opened-up before the first meeting ended” (Volunteer 2022).

The volunteer then talked about the impact of mentoring the child:

“Our goal was to spend 10 hours a month with the youth. Activities on my end were to take him to lunch, the movies, sporting events and other activities – many sponsored by C.A.S.A. – to develop a mentoring relationship. The challenge at this point was when my youth changed home assignments, moving further away, causing time limitations for interaction. However, phone calls and emails were still ways to remain in contact.”

“My youth graduated from middle school and transitioned to high school. As a typical teenager, he met challenges with social interaction. I tried to assist him in his communications as well as maintaining an interest in his class grades. He had high aspirations for a career, so the interest in class achievement was paramount. He showed substantial progress from his middle school days.”

“In 2019, I moved out of the local area and had to make the difficult decision to relinquish my role as an advocate for this young man. On a positive note, he was in a more stable situation with his family and friends to continue on his own” (Volunteer 2022).

Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements (or FWAs), also called family friendly work practices (FFWPs), included various employee-focused work arrangements, such as telecommuting and flextime, encompassing “*adjustments to the timing, location or tasks of work*” (Townsend *et al.* 2016: 2086). Telecommuting was defined as working out of the office, in this case at home, using technology (such as the internet, email, phone, and web conferencing). Flextime was an employee’s authority to set her or his 40-hour per week work schedule (such as a 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. or 12 p.m. to 8 p.m., or perhaps 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and then again 7 p.m. to 8 p.m.). Flextime was “*intended to facilitate positive behaviors and attitudes toward work by improving work-life balance and employee well-being*” (Ko *et al.* 2013: 546). FWAs were positively related to employee job attitudes (Boell *et al.* 2016; Chen & Fulmer 2018; Julien *et al.* 2011; Ko *et al.* 2013;

Townsend *et al.* 2016;). However, it was unknown what would be the impact of these arrangements in the crisis. In addition, not all C.A.S.A. employees had adequate office space, reliable internet connectivity, or supportive dependent care services to manage a telecommuting arrangement. Nor was it clear how an online service model would affect volunteers and foster youth. Prior to the pandemic, volunteers and youth had engaged in-person at libraries, restaurants, coffee shops, sporting events, and other community and cultural events.

Factors Affecting the Decision

Macro-organizational Factors

Macro-organizational factors (concerned with organization-wide issues) were the impact of the pandemic on the foster youth, the volunteers, and the court system, as well as C.A.S.A.'s organizational structure and organizational culture.

In response to concerns about community transmission of Covid-19, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued a "Stay-at-Home" order on March 19, 2020. "*We need to bend the curve in the state of California,*" Newsom said as he announced a statewide order for Californians to stay home (Tan & Bhattacharjee 2020: para 2). As a result of the order, Californians in eight critical sectors could continue to work, as "*essential critical infrastructure workers,*" including employees in community-based functions (California State Government 2021). The pandemic brought unprecedented changes in how people worked, went to school, and interacted with each other. It contributed to a loss of income, social isolation, stress, and a reported 16% unemployment rate in California (California State Government 2021).

In terms of working with foster youth, there was concern for adequate and equitable technology access (including reliable devices, internet service, and space to connect), and "*Zoom fatigue*" from online school and other social services. C.A.S.A. was also concerned about foster youth's motivation to connect with an advocate volunteer online. For the volunteers,

there were concerns about both moving online and remaining face-to-face. On the one hand, volunteers might have little interest in engaging in an online mentorship relationship. On the other hand, volunteers might be little inclined to connect face-to-face during the pandemic.

The pandemic had increased the number of environmental elements to consider in any decision about how to deploy staff. Above all else, keeping everyone safe was of paramount concern to the staff, volunteers, and youth; in addition, C.A.S.A. needed to consider the human cost of the pandemic, such as the impact of isolation, and mental and physical wellness.

In terms of organizational culture and structure, traditionally C.A.S.A. had been characterized as people-friendly, focused on employees, and flexible. The organization relied on the ability of employees to self-organize. It empowered them to make organizational decisions, and had adopted a flexible, participatory, and generalized task structure. It remained to be seen if that culture and structure were well aligned with the new external environment.

Micro-organizational Factors

Micro-organization factors (concerned with the behavior of individuals and groups) that needed to be considered in the decision included technology, employee attitudes, and managerial style.

For technology, as mentioned previously, employees had access to i-Pads and a mouse, as well as the \$50 per month telework/technology stipend to work remotely. Nonetheless, there were systems and reports that required on-site access. At least four employees had limited workspace at home, four had dependent care responsibilities, and at least one had limited internet access at home. In terms of attitudes, employees had high job involvement, accepted the organization's goals, and were willing to exert considerable effort for the organization. Employees wanted to maintain their membership in the organization. However, as with many small nonprofit organizations, there were limited opportunities for advancement, pay was less than that provided in many for-profit jobs, and benefits were less than those offered in government positions.

The current leadership style was considered to be “*sound*,” balancing good employee relations with the efficient use of resources to further organizational goals. The Executive Director adopted a servant-leadership approach and was open to increased staff flexibility in terms of time and space requirements. The leadership style had worked well thus far to ensure the success of C.A.S.A., but there was the question of whether or not that style was best for the crisis. Job satisfaction was high, especially job involvement and intrinsic motivation, with good feelings associated with the work itself, co-worker relationships, and the supervisor. Employees shared their thoughts regarding job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and managerial support:

- *“Get along with co-workers really well. Part of the reason I stay”* (Employee B).
- *“Love what we do...see the fruits of the labor”* (Employee E).
- *“Satisfied, because everyone is friendly, but will let me know if doing something wrong, providing good positive feedback”* (Employee F).
- *“Like that I’m able to work with them (volunteers) one-on-one, kind of have my own program, and a say in how I choose to help them”* (Employee G) (Employees 2021).

Nonetheless, satisfaction with pay and promotional opportunities was lower than satisfaction with other facets of the organization, likely due to the limited pay and promotion opportunities at the nonprofit. But employees understood the limitations and felt that their job involvement, flexible benefits, and development opportunities outweighed the pay and promotion restrictions. Employees remarked:

- *“Always receiving continuous training opportunities, conference and workshops”* (Employee D).
- *“Working for a nonprofit, so pay is not what it can be, but knew that when I selected career wise”* (Employee E).
- *“Not about the paycheck, all about the passion of loving what I do”* (Employee H).
- *“None, but that is ok, as can grow programs, and support of management”* (Employee I) (Employees 2021).

In addition, organizational commitment was high. The main reason employees joined and stayed with the organization was the strong alignment between the employees' goals and values and those of the organization.

- *"Love the work and mission"* (Employee A).
- *"Having started as a volunteer I realized how important our work is, and my strong commitment, so invested in this job, it is the real deal, real life"* (Employee C) (Employees 2021).

Trust between employee and management was strong, as well as perceived managerial support for employees:

- [The Executive Director] *"is very flexible, and does not micro-manage, does provide us the technology and does communicate challenges or obstacles"* (Employee A).
- *"Bends over backwards for us, so we do the same"* (Employee E).
- *"If I express something I don't agree with, or ask why, they are understanding in helping out, explaining, or talking it out if necessary"* (Employee F).
- *"Very satisfied...does an excellent job connecting and keeping us informed..."* [The Executive Director] *"trusts me, and I don't want to let him down"* (Employee I) (Employees 2021).

Overall, the support and trust between management and employees seemed to contribute to positive job attitudes and the overall success of the organization.

The Decision

As the Executive Director of C.A.S.A. of San Bernardino County, Cesar Navarrete had to decide whether to go fully online, consider a hybrid approach, or try to maintain face-to-face operations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The decision should consider micro and macro-organizational behavior concepts to justify the decision and gain buy-in from employees and the Board. Recommendation should include a plan of action that addresses flexible work arrangements, whether to hire staff, consideration of the service area coverage, the need for limited on-site work, and how best to support employees, volunteers and foster youth who had limited resources.

Specific questions that needed to be addressed included: (a) How would the decision affect employee job attitudes (job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment) and employee motivation? (b) What type of managerial support, leadership style, and communication process would be the most effective? (c) What culture and organizational structure were best aligned with environmental demands? (d) How could the organization help employees achieve work/life balance? (e) What ethical issues and potential ethical dilemmas needed to be addressed? (f) Finally, if significant changes were to be introduced, how could Cesar Navarrete implement them?



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Di Fan has her MBA in Management and is currently enrolled in the EdD program in Human Resource Development and Diversity & Equity at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Di also serves as a member of the EPOL committee (Education Policy, Organization and Leadership) at UIUC. Di is an entrepreneur, who has started her own business (Minghai S&D), and is a former Product Development Manager at Guess? Headquarters. Di has experience working in higher education as TA, GA and RA, striving to create a fairer and more diverse environment for students and faculties. Her research interests include leadership, human resource development/management, diversity, equity & inclusion, organizational behavior/change, and cultural competency/communication.



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