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Teaching Note—CASA Volunteerism: Preparing MSW Students for Public Child Welfare Practice

Jill Duerr Berrick and Wendy Durst

In an effort to reform public child welfare systems across the nation, Title IV-E child welfare training programs were established over 2 decades ago. Participating students typically engage in a customized educational experience as part of their MSW program that prepares them to work in the field of child welfare upon graduation. This article describes an initiative taking place in one MSW program where students are encouraged to serve as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), paired with an individual child or youth in foster care. The purpose is to offer students a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of children in care. Information relating to program design and student perspectives on the experience are presented.

In an effort to reform and improve public child welfare systems across the nation, Title IV-E child welfare training programs were established over 2 decades ago (Clark, 2000). In most of these programs, participating students engage in a customized educational experience as part of their MSW program that prepares them to work in the field of child welfare upon graduation. While in the program, students are offered a stipend to support their educational pursuits, and upon graduating students commit to work in a child welfare agency for 2 years as a repayment for their awarded stipend (Grossman, Laughlin, & Specht, 1992; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009).

In most schools of social work with Title IV-E programs, faculty strive to prepare students for the challenging work of child welfare and offer an educational experience that will allow them to thrive once employed. Public child welfare agencies are challenging environments, often with very high caseloads and emotionally demanding tasks, and they require working with clients with very complicated family circumstances that require collaborative system responses from multiple public and private agency partners (Kim, 2011; Spath et al., 2008). Faculty and field agency partners often collaborate to develop student skills that will allow them to work within the organizational context of public child welfare. In addition, students are prepared to take leadership positions within child welfare, aspiring to shape the new organizations that are required if child welfare reform is to be realized.

The field placement experience of many Title IV-E MSW students revolves around internships in public and private agencies where students gain knowledge and skills in social work practice

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with a particular emphasis on child welfare. As agents of their organizations, students may engage in contact with the courts, with birth parents and children, with foster parents, and with collaborative service providers. Because federal law articulates the role of child welfare staff in offering reasonable efforts to help prevent child removal and to support family reunification, much of child welfare casework is directed at birth parents. Children's safety is of paramount concern, but child welfare workers' efforts largely focus on birth parents as the actors whose behaviors and home circumstances require change. As such, students of public child welfare may gain a one-dimensional perspective of social work. They learn their trade from other social workers and allied professionals who have important perspective on students' future careers. What students may miss, however, is the perspective of the child. Although public child welfare is designed to strengthen and support children and families, students' access to children's experience of care is often limited at best.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Volunteerism initiative was designed in one MSW program to offer students a parallel and supplemental experience to their field agency internship to deepen their knowledge and experience of child welfare-focused social work. The CASA initiative uses the service-learning frame to shape students' experiences. Service-learning is a model that combines experiential community activities with academic material (Donaldson & Dougherty, 2011) and is used increasingly in social work education to help deepen students' understanding of diversity content (Maccio, 2011), school social work (McKay, Sanders, & Wroblewski, 2011), macro-practice (Nandan & Scott, 2011), health (Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011), and HBSE (Twill, Elpers, & Lay, 2011). In the context of child welfare, the CASA initiative pairs MSW students with a single child in foster care while they simultaneously attend graduate school for their degree. The initiative is designed to offer insight into the child's significant vulnerability, the child's complex needs, and the urgency of attending to those needs skillfully. As a result, students are expected to become more sensitive, thoughtful, empathic, and skilled professionals who—in their future careers—are less likely to lose sight of the human dimensions of their work. Because the CASA experience can be emotionally powerful as well as intellectually stimulating, the expectation is that students participating in the initiative ultimately will become transformative agents of change within the bureaucracies in which they work and will help reshape child welfare to most benefit the families involved.

WHAT IS CASA?

The CASA program was born in the late 1970s to offer dependent children an adult court representative who would report on and support children's best interests in judicial proceedings independent of the perspectives of other actors including attorneys, social workers, or family members (Caliber Associates, 2004). CASA draws on community members to serve as volunteers matched with an individual child in out-of-home care for at least 12 months or, often, for the life of the case. According to the National CASA Association (2011), CASA includes 75,000 volunteers in 49 states, serving an estimated 240,000 children nationwide. These numbers vary significantly by state, however. In the state sponsoring this initiative, only about one in 10 foster children is paired with a CASA volunteer (L. Collier, personal communication, December 2010).

The CASA program is well regarded in many circles, most prominently by judicial officers (Administrative Office of the Courts, 2003), whose views suggest that CASA has a positive effect

on children's outcomes and that the program is helpful in securing additional services for children (Collins-Camargo, Jones, & Krusich, 2009). Findings from a handful of small-scale, methodologically limited studies are equivocal on the effect of CASA on child welfare outcomes (Lawson & Berrick, 2013). Among the presumed benefits of CASA, however, is the stability of relationship afforded the child. It is widely acknowledged that turnover among social workers in public child welfare settings is very high (Clark, Smith, & Mathias, 2009; Hopkins, Cohen-Callow, Kim, & Hwang, 2010; United States General Accounting Office, 2003; Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011); children in foster care are also often subject to a dizzying array of other rotating professionals as their stay in care lengthens. In a recent study of children paired with a CASA volunteer, however, 68% experienced a stable relationship with their CASA volunteer, and only 10% of children enjoyed similar stability with their social worker (Brennan, Wilson, George, & McLaughlin, 2010).

CASA volunteers undergo a 32-hour training on a range of topics including the juvenile court process, child welfare services and goals, advocacy skills acquisition, and child and family development. Once appointed by a juvenile court judge, CASA volunteers get to know their foster youth and then spend at least 12 hours per month working with and on behalf of this youth, advocating for them in school settings, foster homes, with birth families, or in any other contexts that are relevant to that youth's individual needs.

INITIATIVE DESIGN

In 2009 the CASA Volunteerism initiative was launched in one school of social welfare in a Western state. Collaborative relationships were first secured with a local CASA agency. Staff from the agency were initially ambivalent about the partnership owing to their fears that graduate students might not maintain their minimum one-year commitment to their paired foster youth/child. Given students' demanding school, exam, and internship schedules, CASA staff expressed concerns that students' enthusiasm might be initially high but would ebb with time. Several agreements were made to relieve these anxieties, including an orientation to CASA for interested students prior to the commencement of training; detailed written introductory information; a lengthy discussion about the importance of commitment during several of the training sessions; a signed agreement of commitment; and regular messages from the faculty member championing the initiative at the school.

CASA staff agreed to the initiative and in so doing made modest adjustments to their standard practices in order to accommodate graduate students. First, agency staff agreed to conduct the training at the university to minimize student transportation time. They also agreed to revise the training schedule to parallel the beginning of the academic year when students' course and field loads were less taxing. Because MSW students live in several counties surrounding the university, reciprocity arrangements were made with CASA agencies in some surrounding counties to determine if they would honor CASA trainings provided by a single agency. Other accommodations were made by the CASA agency including a waiver of some additional continuing education credits required for CASA volunteers. Students instead shared their syllabi from child and family service-related courses, and the CASA agency granted these MSW-level courses as signals of ongoing training. And CASA also allowed for delayed entry for students making such a request. That is, CASA volunteers are typically matched with their foster child/youth directly following

the final training session. Some students, however, requested a delay of a few months to better settle in to graduate studies.

With funding obtained from a local private philanthropic foundation, students were offered up to \$250 as reimbursement for expenses they might incur with their CASA youth. No IV-E funds were used for this initiative. All students took advantage of this generous offering. As graduate student expenses in recent years have grown substantially, these funds provided an important resource to students living on a highly constrained budget.

Finally, along with their CASA volunteer experience, students enrolled in a 1-unit course. Readings for the course focused on materials that offer first-person accounts of the child welfare system from the perspective of the child (e.g., *Hope's Boy*), the foster parent (e.g., *Another Place at the Table*), and the child welfare worker (e.g., *Turning Stones*). In addition to focusing students' attention on the first-person accounts of actors in the child welfare system, the course material encouraged students to be reflective about the children and families with whom they work in their field placement, and to consider these experiences from the dimension of the client. This client-centered understanding was revelatory for a number of students who were typically more familiar with the perspectives of social workers or other agency actors. The course also offered a bridge between students' volunteer experience and the historical or policy backgrounds that reflected on their experience. And finally, the course offered an opportunity for students to explore their unique role as a CASA volunteer distinctive from their role as an agent of the state in child welfare. For example, students articulated the difference in serving a single child as a CASA volunteer compared to the likely competing demands for time and attention that a full child welfare caseload would require. In short, the course created a setting for reflection and critical thinking about students' future roles within the child welfare system.

IV-E students serving as CASA volunteers and also serving as interns in the county child welfare agency were placed in units unattached to their CASA youth. For example, if a student was assigned a CASA youth in long-term foster care, they were placed within an agency unit outside of long-term foster care (e.g., intake, assessment, emergency services, adoption).

At the end of the third year of the initiative, 25 graduate students have participated in the CASA program. In the first year, approximately 40 students participated in the orientation held during the first week of the semester. Of these, six students ultimately joined the CASA program. In the second and third years, respectively, approximately 30 students participated in the orientation and 10 and nine students became CASA volunteers. When asked why the majority of students who participated in the orientation declined participation, the large majority suggested that the time commitment was too great and that their school commitments made them question whether or not they would be able to maintain their commitment to their CASA youth.

SUMMARY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Students participating in CASA were asked to complete an end-of-semester evaluation of the CASA course and the CASA experience. Students were also asked to submit a brief reflection assignment designed to capture student views about the CASA experience as an adjunct to their graduate school education. Finally, students from the first 2 years' cohorts were asked to participate in a single focus group to review the strengths and weaknesses of the program to support future modifications.

Among the students who participated as CASA volunteers, their reports of the experience were uniformly positive. Students described the experience as being “invaluable,” “one of the best decisions I’ve made,” and as providing “an incredible learning opportunity.” The various components of the CASA program, including the training, class, and the opportunity to partner with a youth navigating the child welfare system were experienced by the participants as making an important contribution to their development as social workers.

Students reported the training was “delivered in a way that kept me engaged throughout the entire time.” Beyond preparing them for their role as a CASA volunteer, one student explained further, “I am not sure how I would have made it through my first semester in our program without the crash course in child welfare and the foster care system.” Although the training covers several topics, students reported that the trainers communicate the material in meaningful and effective ways. One student wrote that the trainer “guided us through the dense material with ease and made the information come to life with heartfelt anecdotes and challenging stories.” Another student shared her perspective:

To be honest, my CASA training was one of the most valuable components of my first year experience in Social Welfare. We finished with our training almost immediately before starting internship, so it literally served as the backdrop for my field experience. The two other first year students placed at my internship also participated in CASA with me, so we had a shared language and knowledge base that we were able to build upon in our field work.

Student perspectives on the accompanying course suggested that the experience brought added value to the CASA initiative. Students enjoyed the support and further learning opportunities that the class provided. “The CASA class last semester was very informative and beneficial. I enjoyed hearing CASA stories, attending the (guest) lecture by Andrew Bridge, and listening to the stories of foster parents.” Another student wrote, “I was glad to have the moral and social support from my friends in this class and our professor. I also enjoyed talking about their challenges since that helps us brainstorm on possibilities but also learn more about the policies for foster youth in the system.” Students indicated that meetings with their case supervisor at CASA helped to think through the immediate needs of their foster youth, but that the class offered additional benefits, largely setting a broader policy- and systems-context for understanding the circumstances of their CASA youth.

Many students cited a desire to better understand the needs of foster youth and the child welfare system as a primary reason for becoming a CASA volunteer. Universally, students reported a high degree of satisfaction in meeting this learning objective. Many students described the experience as being transformative for their understanding of the lives of foster youth. As one student put it, “(t)his experience has opened my eyes to the world of the foster child.” Another student reported of her experience in the CASA program, “I have learned far more about the ins and outs, frustrations and successes of the child welfare system than from my class work.” One student reflected on the CASA experience as being equally, if not more, educational than her field placement.

Still other students came to the CASA program for the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with foster youth. The majority of students described having formed powerful relationships with the youth they were working with. One student described the relationship as one of walking side by side with the foster child holding their hand as they face complex challenges. Students told stories of engaging in relationship-building activities such as exchanging music,

going to the zoo, and playing videogames. They referenced these times as unique opportunities outside of the traditional role of social worker that enabled them to explore a new window into the life and thinking of the youth they were working with. As one student put it, “CASAs really make a difference in providing that safe space and comfort for youth to speak their minds and express feelings and concerns that they would not otherwise express.” Another student CASA volunteer described the effect that the CASA relationship has had on the youth she works with. “Knowing that someone who genuinely cared for her, who was not paid to be present and who would fight for her interests, was in her life meant so much to (her).” Reflecting on the overall value of her role in a foster youth’s life, another student wrote “things in (her) life aren’t great right now, and even though I can’t fix everything and there are a lot of times I have no idea what to do, I know (she) will call when she doesn’t know what to do and at least I can help hold that feeling so she doesn’t feel alone.” Such a role may be unique for these student volunteers who, as future social workers, will largely be called on to act and engage others to act on behalf of foster youth and who may not have the luxury of time to simply sit with and support all of the youth on their caseload.

Students described making concrete contributions to the treatment planning for the youth they partner with. Student CASA volunteers described incidents when they successfully advocated for youth to participate in extracurricular activities and receive family therapy; when they set up and participated in “Team Meetings” to coordinate the various service providers’ efforts; and when they provided accurate representations of the youth’s opinions in court both in person and in their written reports.

And CASA appears to have deepened students’ sensitivity to the issues children and youth face in foster care. As one CASA volunteer expressed:

Working with my CASA youth has heightened my awareness of her emotional vulnerabilities as a child in the dependency system. My CASA youth has little emotional support from the adults in her life. She is faced with difficult decisions about the direction of her life and often has to make important choices on her own. I feel that I have had to fill in the gaps in her knowledge about the system and what benefits and resources she is entitled to as a youth in the dependency system.

Another student put it this way:

My work as a CASA volunteer has given me an individual youth for whom I feel deeply responsible to and for, and the training and experience has both forced and enabled me to become familiar with my CASA youth’s needs, wishes, and rights.

In sum, it appears that the CASA initiative provides a unique and effective learning opportunity for students. It also empowers students to have a meaningful effect on the lives of local foster youth. One CASA volunteer’s experience shows how students can integrate their CASA experience with classroom learning while having a substantial effect on others’ lives:

The first day I met my CASA youth she told me she had just discovered that she was pregnant. . . . In the few months leading up to her due date, we had many conversations about healthy parenting and I was able to teach her about topics I had just learned in my “Infant and Child Development” class. I took her to Target to buy baby supplies, I took her on a tour of the maternity ward at her hospital and helped her write a “birth plan.” . . . She recently had her baby and I visited the day she got home from the hospital. I was delighted to see her and the baby looking healthy and doing well together.

SUMMARY OF CASA STAFF EXPERIENCES

CASA staff entered into this new initiative with guarded optimism. Although they were eager to develop a new cadre of CASA volunteers, they were hesitant about using students. One of the markers of the initiative's ultimate success was whether or not these new CASA volunteers would meet their regular monthly responsibilities to their CASA youth, and whether they would stay connected to their youth for a minimum of 12 months.

At the close of the third year, CASA staff indicate that the initiative has been more beneficial than anticipated. None of the concerns initially expressed by CASA staff have been realized, and all of the students engaged in this work have been steadfast in their time and commitment to their CASA youth. The MSW graduate students who volunteer are bright, committed, and enthusiastic. They bring a strong knowledge of child welfare and related systems, and think critically about problem solving on their youth's behalf. Their court reports are well written, and their drive and initiative allow case supervisors to allow relatively more autonomy in their work with children and youth. CASA staff suggest that MSW graduate students' work with CASA children and youth feels influential and thus it fits squarely within the mission of the CASA agency.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Training public child welfare workers is an essential component to the development of an effective workforce. This training should be multifaceted; the inclusion of a service-learning initiative such as the CASA opportunity described here can be seen as a supplemental tool to help support Schools of Social Work in their efforts to enhance and develop the future child welfare workforce. Given the limited information we have gathered from student participants, we believe that CASA volunteerism has the potential to deepen students' sensitivity to children's needs and rights, to strengthen their knowledge of the complex child welfare system, and to make important impacts on children's daily lives.

Efforts to professionalize the public child welfare workforce should continue apace. Public child welfare systems arguably serve some of the most vulnerable children and families in the United States and offers of assistance using underskilled staff deepens the injustices many of these families have faced. Public child welfare staff should be highly skilled, politically savvy, astute at managing interorganizational collaboration, knowledgeable about policies and programs across a range of topics (e.g., child welfare, education, health, substance use), and able to navigate sometimes chaotic and confusing work environments. And at the end of the day, child welfare workers must show deep respect, empathy, and understanding for the individuals on whose behalf they do this work. CASA holds promise for initiating students into the lived experiences of the children served by social work; as such, it has the potential for helping social workers understand the key role they can play as vulnerable children's champions.

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