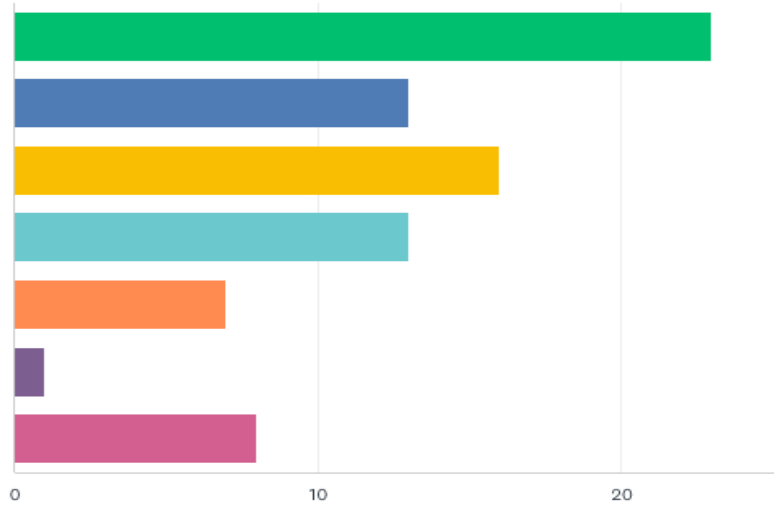


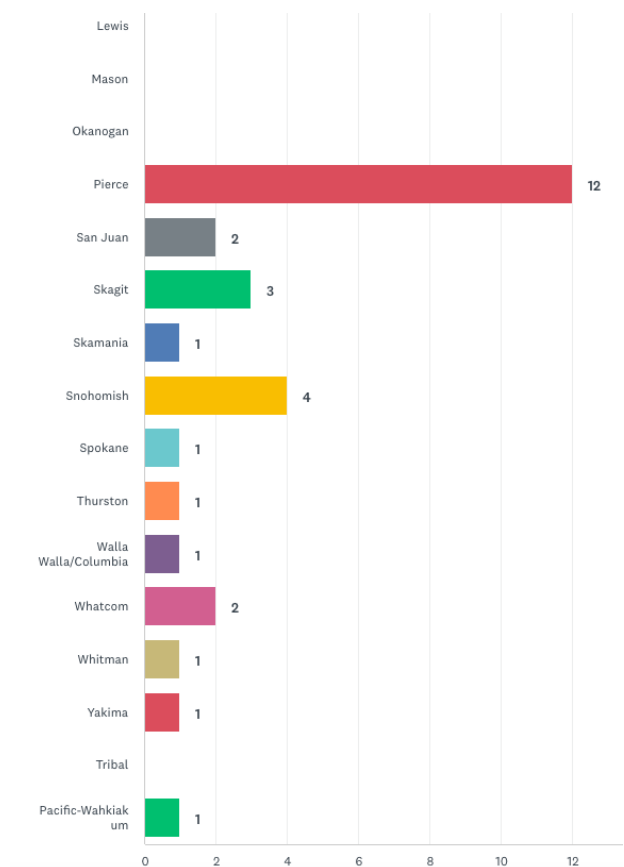
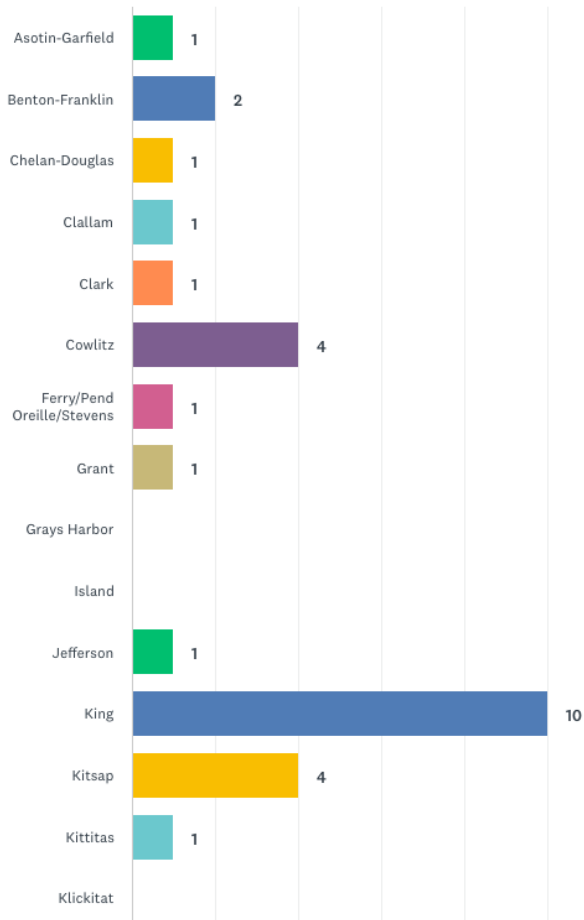
59 judicial offers responded across the state.
 Survey was conducted June 2022.

Your role:

- Currently presiding on a dependency docket
- Trials only
- Dependency docket in recent past
- Overflow hearings and trials, sporadically
- Dependency specialty court (O-3, FTC, etc)
- Recently retired
- Other



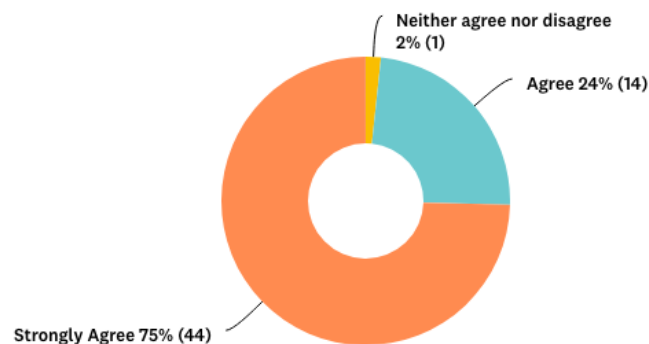
Responses By County:



Questions ranked by average response score (Strongly agree – 5, agree-4, neutral-3, disagree=2, strongly disagree=1)

1. **4.78** Best interests advocacy for children is a **critical component of dependency court** and judicial decision making.
2. **4.67** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **sibling contact** and placement are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
3. **4.64** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **overall child wellbeing** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
4. **4.63** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **services for the child** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
5. **4.62** Overall, the **proposed recommendations** provided in written reports from the Child Advocates/GALs are useful in making best interests decisions for the child and family.
6. **4.58** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding the **child's safety** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
7. **4.57** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **placement** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
8. **4.49** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **parent-child visitation** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
9. **4.20** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **services for the parents** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
10. **4.17** Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **case resolution strategies** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.
11. **4.07** Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the **child's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression**.
12. **4.02** Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the child and family's **race and cultural identity**?
13. **4.00** Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the child and family's **economic barriers** that may be hindering reunification?

1. **Overall**, the information provided in written reports from the Child Advocates/GALs is useful in making best interests determinations for the child and family.



Comments:

Because they are written reports, I can review in advance and ask appropriate questions. When a child is represented by an attorney, I have absolutely NO information to review in advance, thus not prepared for the hearings.

Don't know what we would do without them.

It's between agree and strongly agree. GALs have a unique position and can give much more information that I get from the attorneys. They actually see these families and give a different perspective. However, it depends on the GAL or CASA.

In reviewing each dependency case, the Child Advocates/GAL's report is the first item I read. They often raise issues not lifted up by others and regularly provide more detail and information about the well being of the children.

The information is invaluable. We cannot make informed decisions without it because the Department's social workers are all overwhelmed by their caseloads and the tsunami of human suffering they see--and are either inexperienced or burned out.

In my county they have received excellent training and do a good job.

Often times the best objective participant reporting to the court.

Most of the time the CASA reports and briefing is the most comprehensive and understandable report the Court receives.

Not only useful, but often more timely than the report from the Department.

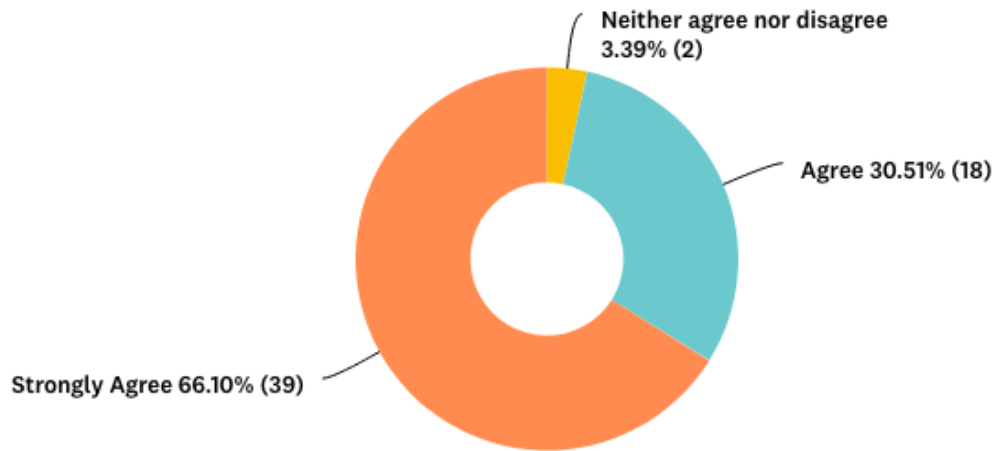
They are the ONLY team members tasked with looking at best interests, which are not the same as legal or stated interests.

The depth and quality of reports vary, but in general the info is very helpful.

Often vastly superior to ISSP's.

Often times only the CASA brought items to my attention regarding unnecessary and detrimental delays in the Department ensuring the child received recommended medical treatment, therapy, and even glasses. I relied on the CASA to ensure I was tuned in to the more "day to day" issues the children experienced.

2. Overall, the **proposed recommendations** provided in written reports from the Child Advocates/GALs are useful in making best interests decisions for the child and family.



Comments:

The supporting information for each recommendation is usually lacking, so it's hard to tell if the CASA thinks independently about recommendations or defaults to the DCYF recommendations.

May not follow recommendations but what and why helpful in focusing issues.

Again, these folks tend to have more time interacting with the family without an "agenda."

Depends somewhat on the philosophy adopted by the agency board.

See response to #5. They often can identify specialty services needed that the social workers do not know about and/or cannot take the time to research.

I don't always agree, but I always find their recommendations useful.

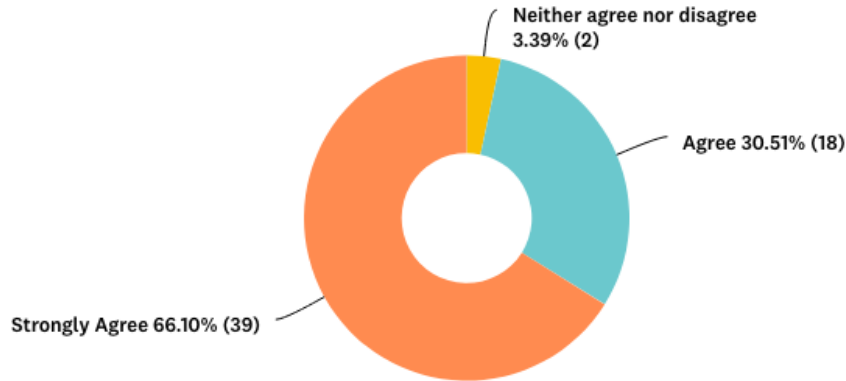
I am concerned about the suggestion that child advocates could/should be eliminated--I think this would be a huge mistake.

Information is more concise and easier to read than information within ISSP's, even as ISSP's have been amended over the years to make them more readable.

Depending on the experience of the CASA. Some do not understand the law around termination of parental rights. Some think tribes or the Dept. can override the court's decision on permanency.

They were useful, but like any GAL recommendations in any type of case, they were not dispositive and I did not always follow them.

3. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **services for the child** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

There typically aren't specific recommended services for the child.

Again, I get the information in advance of the hearing, so much more helpful.

Often suggest needed services SW don't know or forget to suggest.

They often identify specialty services that social workers cannot take the time to research.

Often they have excellent ideas.

Again, they are the ONLY team members tasked at looking at best interests, and have the benefit of in-person and/or video visits. I sincerely doubt an attorney would do home visits to prepare for court hearings.

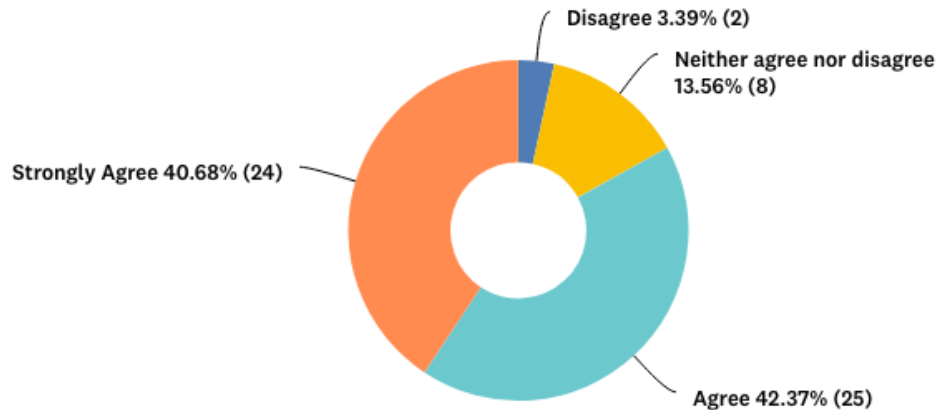
Often there is little/no dispute regarding services for the child.

Unfortunately, this issue is often raised in a court report and not a motion requiring additional hearings so the other parties can respond. If children do have counsel, then the CASA should. It is NOT helpful to have a unrepresented party in these cases and can be harmful.

When such recommendations are made, they are very helpful, but this is quite rare in my experience.

In my experience, the CASA was often the only person at the table truly tuned-in to the status of children's therapy, medical and dental care, and whether the children needed things like glasses or physical assistive devices (orthopedic shoes; crutches, canes, or walkers; etc.)

4. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **services for the parents** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

They typically mirror services that are already ordered or agreed, and don't indicate what the basis is for the recommendations outside of the order or agreement.

Again, written reports hugely valuable.

Once again, much more helpful than SW only.

It really depends on the parent. Some don't want services because they want to be left alone, or they don't believe they have any issues.

Child Advocates/GALs have the benefit of seeing the interaction of parents with children through the child's perspective. This sheds an important light and offers incredibly important insight into opportunities for growth for the parents.

They sometimes identify specialty services that social workers are unaware of or cannot take the time to research.

I always appreciate their thoughtfulness.

I rely on the DCYF social worker reports more for services for the parents than the GAL but since the GAL knows the child better I do value the GAL input on what the parent could work on relative to each specific child

Advocates view services from the point of view of the child, and often present a different perspective than the parents or AGs. I think this is a necessary perspective because it ultimately helps the court make a better decision.

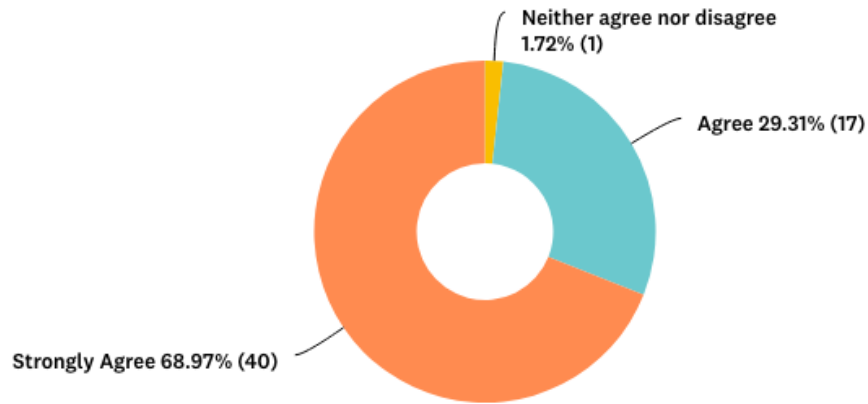
This is not their role.

I think that this might be helpful, but I have not seen them make recommendations as to services for the parents.

It often worked out better if the CASA was slightly "hands off" regarding recommendations about parents.

Focusing on the child permitted the parent to see CASA as an ally, whereas CASA focusing on the parent set up an adversarial relationship.

5. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **sibling contact and placement** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

See the above comments.

Often only place we get this information accurately.

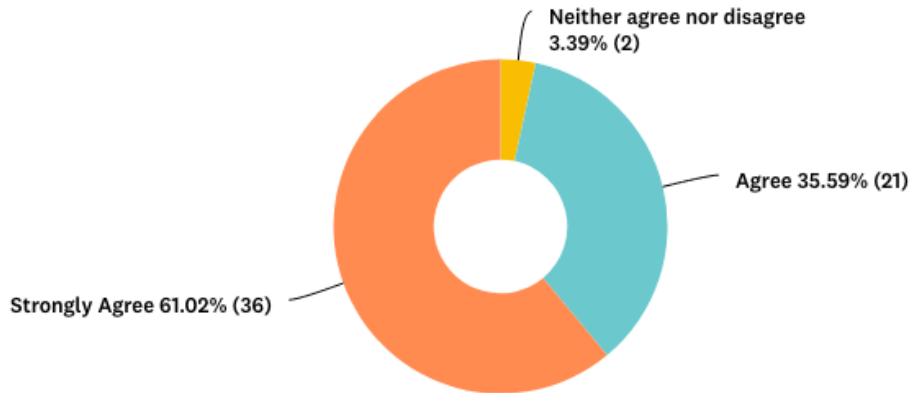
Child Advocates/GALs are close to the children and know them well, which fosters and promotes sibling contact and placement.

They are sometimes the only ones who remember that sibling contact is a priority, even when the Department cannot locate a placement who will take all siblings together.

Other parties often do not consider sibling relationships and how those impact a child. It is good to have an advocate's perspective on placement because the advocate has the benefit of in-person and/or video visits.

Recommendations about this issue were very helpful; often only the CASA could address logistical challenges, so we could take care of them in court instead of having it languish and visits be delayed.

6. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding the **child's safety** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

Properly educated GAL's perspective of safety (are) very helpful.

Having someone whose job it is to solely focus on the child is paramount. Our GALs focus relentlessly on child safety; the Department's social workers often focus only on what is easy, rather than what is necessary to protect safety.

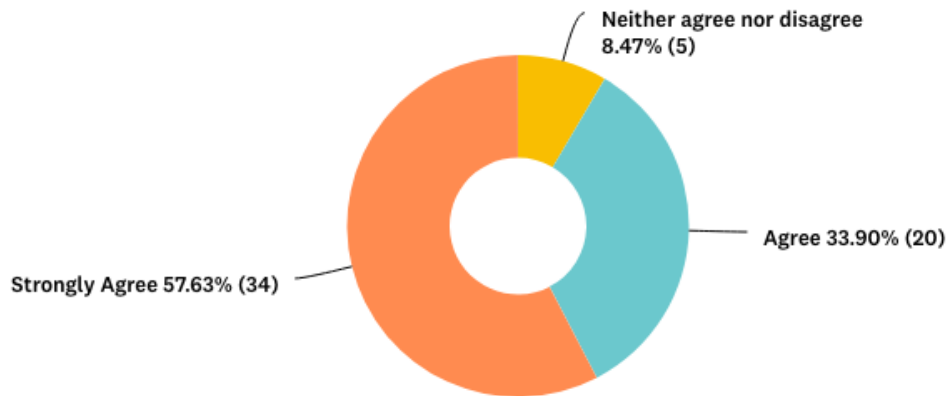
These are often more up-to-date than the analyses of the social workers.

This really depends on the quality of the training the CASA received.

I think this is helpful, but advocates vary in how much they focus on safety considerations.

Analysis, yes. I always received the most updated and correct information regarding issues impacting safety from the CASA. The social workers were often a month or so behind in info, whereas the CASA seemed updated to the minute more often than not.

7. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **parent-child visitation** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



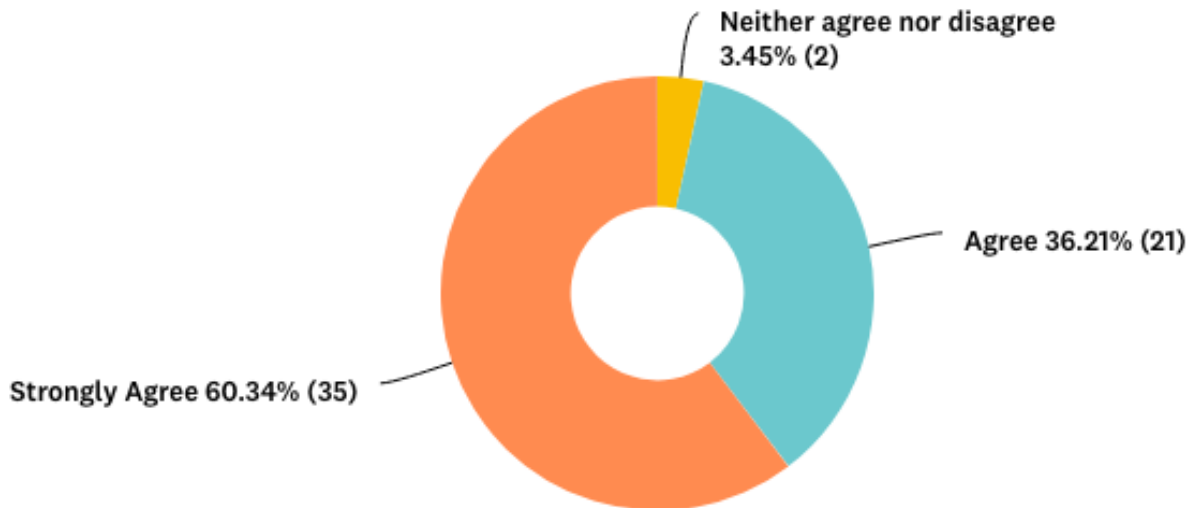
Comments:

Their recommendations often come from actual conversations and visits with the child.

I think that more information is better, but advocates definitely want to err on the side of having monitored or supervised, which is less helpful.

Useful, yes. But I think the court must remain mindful that "BIOC" isn't necessarily the test for when/how/how often visits happen in the context of a dependency.

8. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **placement** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

This is a huge issue, the GAL is not limited by DCYF's policy, so I can read/hear about truly what is in the best interest of the child re: placement.

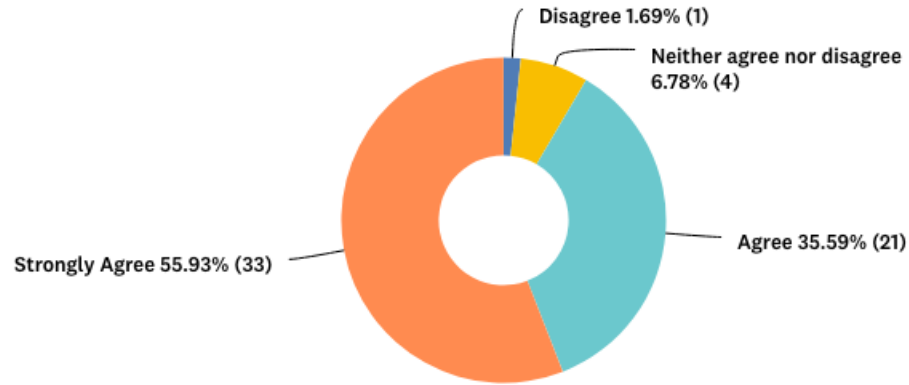
GALs often see the subtleties in relative placement. The Department's social workers tend to go with the quickest, most obvious route even if it will not be best for the child long-term.

Advocates can get a better sense of how the child is doing in a placement because of the in-person and/or video visits that they conduct. I doubt attorneys would be willing to do in-home visits to prepare for court.

I find their analysis is usually helpful when there is a contested placement issue.

I agree in that the CASA would typically offer information about this child and siblings, school, other issues that the social workers rarely offered.

9. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **reunification progress** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

It seems like once reunification is underway, we don't get as much information about how things are going.

GAL has most current accurate information and child's perspective!

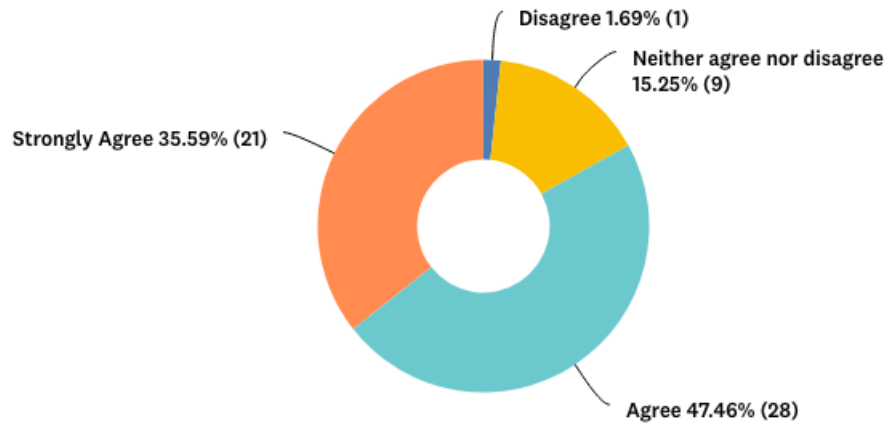
Invaluable!

Having someone whose sole role is to advocate for the child's best interest is of paramount importance. The Department's social workers must demonstrate reasonable efforts at offering parents services and every opportunity for reunification. GALs can identify subtleties (and sometimes the obvious) about whether progress is or is not occurring on any reasonable timeline and where responsibility for any lack of progress lies.

Advocates are the ONLY team members who are tasked with telling the court how the child is bonding to the parents and adjusting to being back in the home.

Again, I'm not sure "BIOC" is the test for how the reunification process takes place, so I'm a little uncertain how to answer the question. But in my experience the CASA often offered information that other parties didn't, which was useful in the court's analysis and ultimate decision.

10. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **case resolution strategies** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

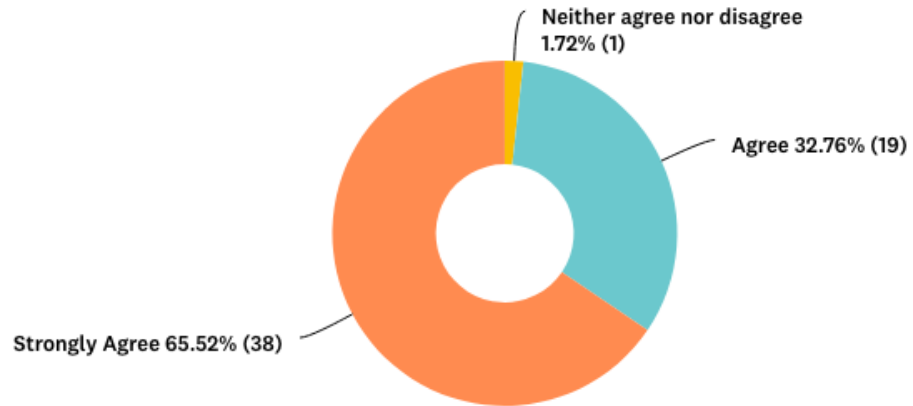
I don't think I've ever read any case resolution strategies.

I don't know enough about this.

Many do not understand the permanency requirements.

Depends on the advocate, but I have seen advocates raising the issue of guardianship earlier recently, and I think that's helpful.

11. Child Advocate/GAL recommendations and analysis regarding **overall child wellbeing** are generally useful in making best interest determinations.



Comments:

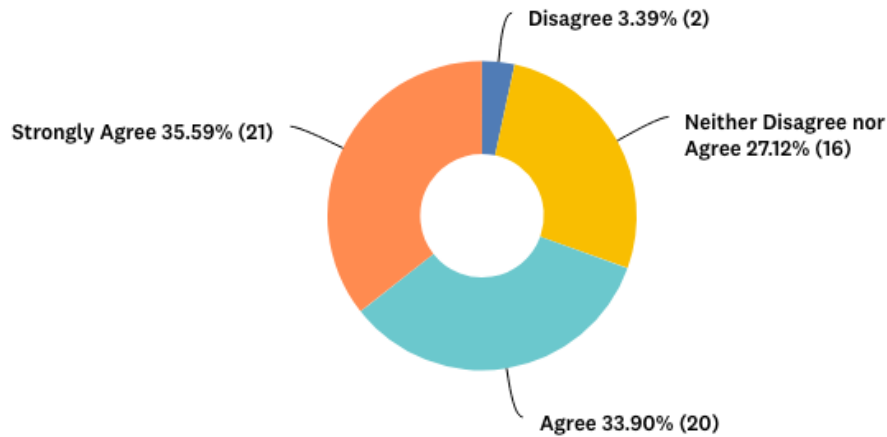
Most frequent and direct child contact!

Caregivers are permitted to file reports which address this, but in my experience rarely do. Sometimes the only person I hear about how the child is doing overall is the GAL.

They know the child, and the child's needs, they know the family and they know the caregivers. Often the GAL is the only one recommending services for the child.

Again, CASA offering up information about the child that no other party did or could, even about the child's likes/dislikes, how school was going, what was upsetting or difficult for the child recently, was always incredibly helpful.

12. Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the child and family's **race and cultural identity**?



Comments:

CASA reports rarely address race and culture in a meaningful way.

Often not identified.

It depends on the GAL. I don't know how many GALs have training such as this, or even if there is such training.

This does not happen often enough from anyone in our system.

Our GALs usually do not address this issue

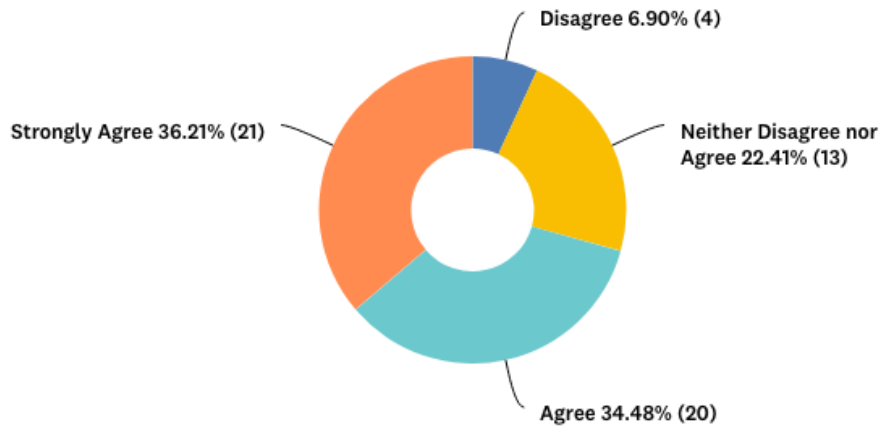
Honestly, most GALs/CASAs are unpaid white women. More diversity and money to pay them for their work should be a goal.

CASAs/GALs often seem to shy away from such recommendations, or from offering detailed analysis..

Because of the court docket being all Native American children, this issue does not get ignored. It depends, but where this is relevant, I think this can be very helpful.

I think historically these issues have been more tough for CASA volunteers, most of whom are white people who live upper- and upper-middle class lives. The best CASA's understand the limitations of their own worldview and lived experience, and seek input from relevant cultural sources.

13. Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the child and family's **economic barriers that may be hindering reunification?**



Comments:

CASA reports rarely address recommendations to overcome economic barriers.

Usually not a focus.

Often not considered by SW

Sadly, unless we get more money and housing, there is not too much that they can do.

I don't recall this being addressed often

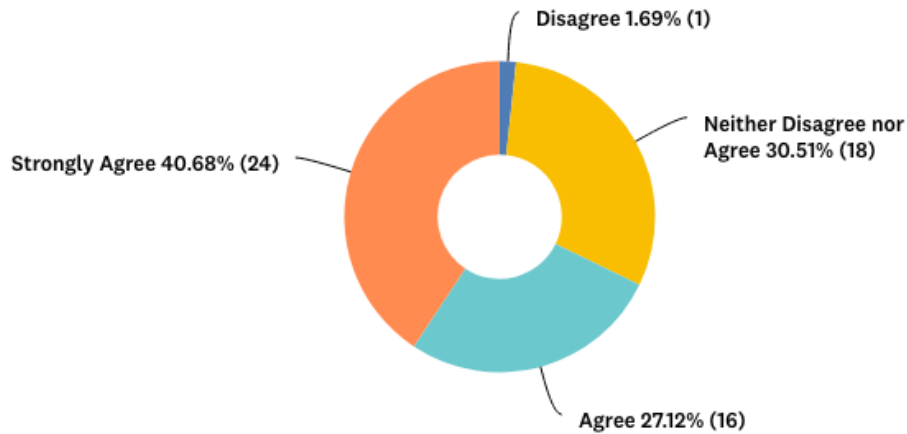
This does not happen often enough from anyone in our system.

Usually the social worker and/or parent's attorneys addresses this issue

I have seen advocates push for financial assistance or resources where DCYF does not appear to be offering such, at least not as quickly as needed

In my experience, CASAs didn't necessarily think of issues in economic terms, or that economic issues could be overcome. I think this requires a shift in thinking.

14. Child Advocate/GAL reports and recommendations are useful in assisting the court to make better decisions around the **child's sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.**



Comments:

This situation has not arisen in any of the cases I've presided over thus far.

Often, NOTHING is in the SW's report and without the GAL's written report, I would be dealing with a very uncomfortable hearing (not knowing the issues!)

Child disclosures to GAL more/most likely

Child Advocates/GALs have shown tremendous sensitivity and understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression issues that children experience. I find their approach to be nuanced and affirming.

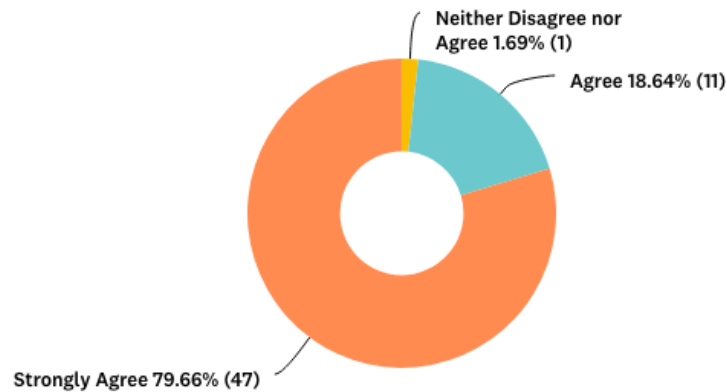
Our GALs are sometimes the only ones who remember to address this.

I have only ever had a child's attorney mention this, has not come up in a GAL report for me yet

I assume that this would be helpful, but I have not had this come up.

In my experience, the CASA was often vital in bringing forth this info in a sensitive way which respected the child's wishes and where the child was at in their own process. This may be because I'm in an urban county, and our program has LGBTQ staff members who are out and who advocate on such issues with knowledge and respect.

15. **Best interests advocacy for children is a critical component of dependency court and judicial decision making.**



Comments:

CASAs fairly reliable prepare reports to court that provide useful information. I will frequently start with their report to get a concise explanation of what's going on in a case.

Concept of Best Interests is trumped only by Safety issues

The question is simply too non-specific to answer.

Critical, and the most important component.

They will speak up for the child and the child's needs more effectively than if they were asked only to express the legal or stated interests of the child.

It is also consistent with statutes governing domestic relations cases.

I agree when it is done well, and when the CASA is fully comfortable with the point of the process - reunification, if safe.

16. What's the **biggest difference** you notice between cases that have a best interests Child Advocate/GAL versus those that don't (kids on a waitlist or some other form of representation?)

Comments:

We are very fortunate in the jurisdictions where I work as there are no cases in which children do not have a Child Advocate/GAL appointed. From the outset of every dependency matter best efforts are made to get a Child Advocate/GAL on board and working the case.

Child Advocate/GAL provide the court a broader perspective.

All cases I hear have a GAL.

There's a lack of information regarding kids on waitlists or in stated interest representation. The stated interest representation program doesn't seem to have an expectation that reports will be filed or that youth will be made available for their hearings. Stated interest attorneys who do file reports regularly don't always address all of the issues facing children in the dependency system (placement, parental visits, sibling visits, extended family/culture and race, systemic barriers, reunification strategies), so you're left with a report regarding what hobbies the children have without a lot of assistance as to the actual issues facing the court. CASA reports manage to report on the personalities and interests of the children while also reporting on the other issues, perhaps because they have a prescribed form.

There is not as much detail about what is happening for the child or what the child is like - who they are. This information is critical to making good decisions for the child. the GALs have generally had contact with lots of folks who know the child: caregivers, daycare, school, etc plus contact with the child (and if the child is of age the expressed statements of the child regarding all of the issues). With best interest GAL we get both child's desires as well as what is best for child. This does not happen, it cannot when attorneys are representing client's desired position.

Poorer quantity and quality of information unique to the family and the child(ren) in cases where there is no CASA/GAL. In my experience while doing dependency hearings daily, the CASAs knew more about the child(ren) and their circumstances than anyone else, including the assigned social worker.

I haven't been in juvenile court for a while, but as far as I know, we were quite good at getting GALs assigned fairly quickly. I don't recall having a case where there should have been a GAL but there wasn't.

A path forward for the child is less clear and possibly even absent.

I've not had any cases where the advocate was not involved.

I hear the voice of the child and that makes all the difference! We obviously focus much energy in supporting and helping parents to rectify deficiencies, but child advocates/GALs see how the parental behavior directly impacts the children and report that to the court.

Our program is assigned at shelter care. Generally there is an individual GAL/advocate assigned by fact finding. When that does not occur quickly it makes it more difficult to make informed decisions regarding placement change requests that happen during the shelter care phase.

All of our children are lucky enough to have experienced GALs from our Juvenile Department.

N/A. to my knowledge, all of our cases have a GAL/CASA and/or child's attorney

N/A.

Lack of detailed objective information.

NA

Not applicable, all our dependent children have GALs

All cases had GALs

All of our cases involve a GAL.

CASAs provide much needed insight and critical thinking application to what is typically really going on, such that they are vital to many cases in determining best interests.
some greater acceptance of the system

N/A. All of our kids have some form of GAL (staff or volunteer) or attorney at the hearings.

GALs tend to spend more time with the child, observing the child in different settings, and at visitations. These observations offer the judge a more comprehensive picture of the child's wellbeing and needs. This leads to better decisions and the ordering of services for child and parents.

All our kids have a GAL or an attorney depending on their age and I value the input from the GALs to make sure the kids are not getting forgotten in all the focus on the parents at review hearings

All of our children are appointed advocates/GALs so I cannot say what the differences are.

I have always had an advocate in dependency matters.

Children with child advocates/GAL are usually reunited with parents sooner or have permanent homes sooner.

Kids that have a GAL have a "child's voice" in court--the GAL can give recommendations from the child's perspective, based on conversations and visits with the child. An attorney does not necessarily care about the child's best interests, which is a broader concern than the child's legal or stated interests. The child's best interests include interests outside of litigation or interests that the child cannot necessarily verbalize.

GAL/CASA are not subject to Department pressures like Social Workers.

All children in our court have a CASA.

Where a CASA has not yet been appointed, it is often more difficult to ascertain best interest based upon the more partisan presentations of DCYF and parents' counsel.

Longer resolutions and reunifications with parents.

We use a GAL / advocate in all cases so I don't know any other way.

GALs advocate for the best interests of a child based on historical knowledge of the case -- what's worked, what hasn't worked, etc. Attorneys for kids often advocate for what the child wants at a specific period of time (most often, the here and now).

When the parents are not participating, kids without representation are not placed timely with relatives, visiting siblings or getting timely permanency. There are no "fires" to put out so the case sits.

I tend to get more information about a child's situation that helps guide the court's decisions about how the case needs to move forward to establish permanency.

Incomplete information results in incomplete or less than optimum decisions.

The court generally has more background information regarding the family. The CASA/GAL has no vested interest in the outcome of the parents, and many times is the only consistent ongoing source for information (given that there is such a high turnover in social workers during the course of a dependency case).

I don't end up knowing much about the child when there is no advocate for the child at all. When there is only an attorney, the information I get focuses on the legal issues - understandably - but that isn't a fully fleshed-out understanding of the child's day to day needs, wishes, and challenges. CASA provides a different role than an attorney, and I think it is a necessary one.

17. Are there areas that you wish Child Advocates/GAL were **better trained in?**

Comments:

There are no areas that I can identify that require additional training that is needed at this time. Due to the impact that COVID had on the court system there are some of our newer Child Advocates/GALs that do not have the same familiarity with the court processes. This is through no fault of their own, there simply have not been opportunities for them to observe and participate in court proceedings.

Available services in the community for children.

No

I think the CASA program does a great job with their training, but I would love to see a more diverse panel of CASAs.

Economic circumstances, poverty, and lack of housing; importance of culture and race and how these issues can be brought to the court's attention.

My experience is that they are very well trained and very compassionate advocates.

As volunteers, there is a learning curve, but most quickly mature into fully helpful child advocates.

Cultural awareness, mental health, community resources for families and children. cultural issues would be helpful. I think we are getting better with this, but we aren't great.

Medical needs of children.

n/a

Civil procedure. Our program does not have the benefit of counsel and when they are in disputes over discovery or want to bring a motion regarding visitation or the like, it is very challenging for them.

Cultural factors for the families they most typically serve (Mexican and Central American and Cambodian and Laotian immigrants); impact of poverty on ability to parent and on children generally.

No. Our advocates appear to be well-trained.

No

Some GALs are more skillful and therefore more helpful. However, I do not know if this is something training alone can remedy.

Cultural needs of indigenous children

We used to have an attorney that ran the CASA program. I miss her. She retired.

Training is always good, so more in-depth knowledge of drug addiction, domestic violence and sexual abuse matters and how such impacts the child/ren's makeup and the impact on parenting. ethnicity, socioeconomics; orientation and gender expression

No.

Cultural and gender issues of families and kids

Hard to say. They are all very highly trained but everyone can always use more training for such an important area of the law.

Sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

Diversity, poverty training. Recognizing that everyone's home is not the same.

Cultural competency/diversity

Domestic Violence

The dependency laws.

Nothing leaps to mind.

Tribal connections. Trauma-focused interventions for children, parents and families. Access to resources, especially housing resources and respite care for children.

Our advocates have trainings with the bench constantly so this is not an issue.

No- I wish they had lawyers. And yes - a better understanding of the research around supporting the healing of the parent is the best way to support the best interests of the child.

I think continued/heightened awareness on safety threat framework would be helpful. Services available for families and race and equity.

All of the ones I have encountered are conscientious, dedicated and extremely hard-working. They all provide detailed reports.

Child development, mental health, substance abuse, cultural issues, but we all need ongoing training in these areas

I think ensuring they understand that a dependency case is fundamentally different than a family law case is key. We aren't just comparing the parents to the placement, to figure out which would be in the child's best interests. That is NOT our task in dependency court. In fact, we really shouldn't be engaging in those comparisons at all. CASAs and GALs must be fully tuned in to the purpose of dependency cases, which of course is reunification. With that mindset in place, the work they do is then more helpful.

18. What are the overall strengths of best interests advocacy?

Comments:

This approach allows for a holistic and child centric approach to addressing issues that led to the removal of a child from the family home. Very often Child Advocates/GALs combine relevant information from multiple sources regarding the needs of parents and children to better educate the court on these cases.

Children's voices should be represented in every case.

They are independent.

When a CASA is able and willing to give a lot of time to a case and do an excellent job with best interests advocacy, the court can make better orders and do a better job meeting the needs of the family and the child.

The focus is only on the child. It brings the case and hearings back to why we are there - the abuse or neglect of a child and what the system needs to do to hopefully ensure that doesn't happen again AND how can we help support the youth in services to recover and move forward after the abuse and neglect.

We all want best for children, without "best interests" advocacy, we might be harming children. Attorneys for children have rarely, if ever, provided any value added/helpful information.

The children feel they have their own advocate who personally cares about them and communicates with them regularly. The court gets better and more complete information on which to base decision making.

Getting important information to the judicial authority and the family.

Focus is on what should be done for Child rather than being limited by what can be done. The Department is constrained by budgetary considerations and the CASA/GAL is not. The Court is, after all, supposed to be focused on the Life and Future of the Child, not a line item in a budget scheme.

The question is simply too non-specific to answer.

The best interests of the child can often be overlooked with a strong focus on reducing parental deficiencies.

It is child specific and lends balance to the discussion. Not all social workers are created equal, so having another voice for the child is very important. Occasionally, their advocacy make the court aware of shortcomings in DCYF court reports.

It is vital to have someone whose sole role is to advocate for the child's best interests without being forced to balance parents' constitutional right to parent their children. Everyone else has to do that, and often the children are de-emphasized in that process.

I'm unclear as to what this is asking.

Personal knowledge and experience

Having an advocate concentrate on the child and not the family generates valuable information for the court. Also their independence from DCYF is extremely helpful .

Focus on the needs of the children above the needs or wishes of parents

The lawyers have their clients' agenda which may not look at the best interests of the child at all. The Department is a behemoth that is mired in rules, some of which don't actually make sense. Too much bureaucracy sometimes ties their hands.

Support and vital interactive knowledge with the children they oversee through the process. offers a longer-term, more overall and comprehensive view

They are focused on child's needs (down to IEP recs, etc) rather than bare minimum service needs to remedy the parental deficiencies.

Provides a voice to the smallest voices in court

I believe it's an essential component for fully informed decision-making in dependency matters.

Their advocacy for children.

The power to investigate and report on the child's best interests. This is a broader concern than legal interests or stated interests.

Often times CASA advocates provide information the court would never have. Their independent investigation is often very useful.

A well prepared CASA who has had recent, substantive interactions with the child(ren) is an invaluable asset to the judicial officer, who is making decisions based upon info that is imperfect or intentionally mischaracterized by other parties.

Usually gets right to the issue when presented.

Having an independent voice for the child vs the DCYF bureaucratic viewpoint.

Even though GALs represent the best interests of the child, I feel like they are the "neutral person" in the courtroom. They advocate from a place of seeing the whole case. They aren't representing a client or CYAing and complying with policy -- they are simply advocating for a child's health and safety based on everything that's happened in the case.

No concern about liability for an agency; no concern about "how long this is taking"; allows for individualized analysis of a child's well-being.

More information is provided, and it generally appears to be more objective than what is received through attorneys appointed for children. However, having advocates rather than child attorneys does not necessarily make it less acrimonious. Local attorneys appear to perceive VGALs as being adverse to the parents, which is unfortunate.

Provides more information to the court when the social worker and youth's attorney after often resource-limited and only provided limited information.

CASAs are the eyes and ears of the court, they are able to see parents and their children interact, they investigate other sources of support for the parents and children (family, friends, neighbors), they have no vested interest in the outcome.

CASAs try to get to know the children as people, and help the court get to know them in a way we can't just seeing them at hearings. That aspect is invaluable. We just don't get it from social workers or the parents, and we also don't get that view from children's attorneys very often (except from a select few who work for child-focused agencies). Getting that point of view is, I realize, actually different than the actual advocacy for the child's best interests...but it was really vital for me when I served on the dependency bench.

19. What are some opportunities for improvement for best interests advocacy?

Comments:

Every child should have a Child Advocate/GAL.

Additional training in sensitive issues.

We need more diverse CASAs.

More advocates. Advocates should have access to legal advice . . . (which we have in our county).

Continued training at yearly conferences and other local court continuing education.

It would be ideal if each child in the dependency system, particularly those in foster care, had his/her own CASA/GAL.

Training and getting more people to sign up for this thankless volunteer work (or maybe it's thankful).

Ensure that CASA/GAL submits written report in advance and attends the hearing. They too get to make an oral presentation at the hearing, and they are a party to the action with the right to receive notice, reports and other information in advance of hearings and decisions.

The question is simply too non-specific to answer.

I am unaware if there is a statewide GAL list serve, but I think that would be highly beneficial. As a court commissioner I use our list serve frequently. As an attorney I did the same. I have found that whatever issue I am grappling with has occurred to some other similarly situated professional.

Make sure that every child advocate/GAL has the opportunity to regularly see their assigned children in an environment without their parent(s) present, and also in an environment with their parent(s) present when appropriate. The contrast in behaviors and comfort levels speak volumes. yearly trainings, which we do.

None

Training is all important.

I believe the improvements are more in needed funding of CASAs. Meaning their caseload is limiting because there simply are not enough CASAs for the heavy caseloads we are facing. That equates to not enough time to prepare thorough reports that are vital to the court.

More training.

Reducing caseloads so advocates can do more home visits.

More training on the laws and procedurally how a dependency/termination case flows. I am always willing to help with that.

During Covid, many CASAs were understandably unwilling or unable to meet with children and their families in person. That has greatly improved recently, but I still receive some CASA reports based solely or mainly upon virtual interactions. Such reports are usually far less helpful.

Child development training and cultural and racial implications.

Not sure.

Legal advocacy to get the best interests request in front of the court. Better and better training (and this is happening) on trauma responsiveness and supporting the healing of parents. Requirements for timely and written reports so hearings are not continued and/or the information is not ignored or used without ability to respond.

See above re safety threat framework. Also more cultural awareness training and raising of those issues. I remind and encourage VGALS to request more frequent hearings if they believe that is in the child's best interests - they seem best situated to make that request.

Youth attorneys need to engage and provide better representation of youth. The GAL's/CASA's can work to ensure the youth (when older) are present for hearings.

Ongoing training into the above issues I mentioned in my answer to question 21

I am not sure, given so many who do this work are volunteers and so to ask MORE of them is really difficult.

20. Anything else you'd like us to know?

N/A

Funding is limited. The most important deficit is ability to have supervised visitation IMMEDIATELY after removal. There should be immediate increased funding to provide parents with visitation services ASAP.

Also, funds should be provided to get parents into services ASAP, the bureaucratic issues they need to navigate leads to huge delays in actual services and reunification.

The biggest frustration I had on the dependency docket was the length of time everything took, including availability of mental health/psych evaluations and treatment, addiction services, parenting classes, etc. for parents, and the lack of adequate resources for traumatized kids. Also the lack of good foster parents.

Maybe you could start playing Lotto for money for GALs? More seriously, as long as the GAL/Child advocate is caring and compassionate and focused on the child, it is helpful. It's helpful to hear their perspective, though I don't always agree with them.

A CASA/GAL is categorically different in both form and function from an Attorney for the Child.

Candidly, the purpose of an attorney for a 6 month old child is hard to discern absent some medical challenge which may require litigation. The role of a CASA/GAL is more challenging than that of the Attorney because they must consider factors and issues well beyond the immediate asserted interests of the Child. The CASA/GAL may indeed even take a position which differs from that immediately sought by the Child, and thus the role of the Attorney for the Child becomes more defined. But fundamentally, the role and purpose of the CASA/GAL and of the Attorney for the Child are not the same and will never be identical. They will most often agree on the issue before the Court, which is most helpful. But when they disagree, that disagreement is of great help to the Court in identifying not only the issue in conflict but also the best resolution of that conflict.

I would be happy to be involved in a training on civil procedure, discovery conferences, motions, requests for interim reviews, declaration drafting, and the like. Also, with the new changes regarding guardianship as a permanent plan, statewide training on minor guardianships would be very helpful. In 2021 I did a minor guardianship training for DCYF, attorneys, and GALs. I could assist with another if that would be helpful.

Pacific and Wahkiakum Counties exist and have a court. Please don't omit us from your menus :)

I'd love to see the CASA program work with the stated interest program to develop some consistency across the programs and a smoother transition process from a CASA to a stated interest attorney.

It would be a terrible loss if we were to be without the GAL program.

I do not understand those that are opposing the need for CASAs. We have always had an excellent group of people that are committed to doing what is in the best interest of the children and families - what more would someone want. I am wondering if this is more about specific agencies rather than CASAs as a whole. To me it would be tragic to not provide for CASAs.

1. more volunteers needed from a cross-section of the community 2. tenure has included rotations at juvenile court, UFC and general trial rotation, i.e. family law trials with children.

I would always prefer to have a child advocate involved in a case. It provides the most independent voice for the child/children.

We are very fortunate to have an excellent program in Chelan county. I can't imagine doing a dependency case without a CASA.

I didn't realize how good our advocates / gals were until I went to other courts. I wish all courts could have such strong advocates.

GALs are an integral part of our child welfare system. I literally could not (and would not want to) do my job without them. I rely on them heavily when making my decisions.

The training is the critical component for CASA/GALs. It should start with knowing your bias - if there is any resistance, then this is not the right fit for this person. Then, the CASA/GAL must have high skills in having uncomfortable, difficult conversations with people with trauma history. All volunteers should have well-trained and available mentors/supervisors.

I have had many cases where the GAL has improved the outcome of a case. They have found relatives the Department was not able to find, they consistently advocated for services the children need, and they provide more information that the court would not otherwise get. While I may not agree with conclusions or recommendations from the information, the information in and of itself is valuable.

I think CASAs and GALs should have to read Tara Urs' law review article as part of their training, and have trainers encourage them to do the hard work of internal analysis, to ensure they are in the right mental place to do the work. I recall hearing certain CASA folks being "offended" by the article, and I remember thinking, well, isn't that just illustrative of the problem, then?