

## **VICTIM SERVICES**

### **Mental Health Services**

Referral to mental health services for all family members is crucial in minimizing the trauma of suspected child abuse and the aftermath. DCFS shall make referrals for mental health services. Law enforcement is encouraged to make referrals to local mental health services where appropriate. Some suggested resources are

- Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health [DMH]
- local rape treatment centers
- other mental health treatment centers

### **Victim Witness Assistance Program**

The Victim Witness Assistance Program [VWAP] provides comprehensive services to victims and witnesses of crime pursuant to PC §13835 et seq. Both the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office and the Los Angeles City Attorney's Office have such programs. Agencies are encouraged to use advocates for support services throughout all phases of a child abuse evaluation, investigation, prosecution, and dependency court proceeding to ensure the statutory rights of child victims and their families. According to PC §679.02, law enforcement officers shall make available copies of VWAP materials to victims and witnesses.

The VWAP maintains a comprehensive list of written agreements with agencies providing services to victims of family violence and child abuse. The program also refers victims and family members to the agency most able to meet the individual needs. Services include

- advocacy to provide support for the child victim/witness or victim's family member during interviews
- crisis intervention, victim and family needs assessment, resources and referral counseling, emergency financial assistance, restitution assistance, and assistance with filing for Victim of Crime Compensation
- courtroom orientation and accompaniment
- consultation and assistance to DCFS, dependency court, medical, and mental health treatment agencies
- follow-up and post-advocacy services after court proceedings have concluded

- training and technical assistance to all child abuse protocol members

### **Court Appointed Special Advocates [CASA]**

CASA volunteers act as a liaison between dependent children and the dependency court to facilitate provision of services, monitor compliance with the orders of the court, and advocate in the court and in the community for the best interests of the child.

CASA volunteers are recruited, screened, selected, trained, and supervised by the Los Angeles Child Advocates Office. Volunteers are appointed by the juvenile dependency court as sworn officers of the court to assist the court in defining the best interests of a particular child. The Child Advocates Office may be involved only when the dependency court has jurisdiction over the child.

The hearing officer on a case or any party to the case may request appointment of a CASA at, or subsequent to, the detention hearing in dependency court. The appointment is made via a referral form supplied in every courtroom. The form is signed by the hearing officer and forwarded to the Child Advocates Office along with the legal case file. The legal file is reviewed by staff and a determination is made whether the office will accept the case. Once a case is accepted by the program, a CASA is selected and an Order Appointing CASA is sent to the court for the hearing officer's signature. If a case is not accepted, a report will be sent to court informing the court and all parties of the reason the case was not accepted.

The Child Advocates Office accepts children from birth to age 18 for advocacy tasks related to a variety of issues such as permanence, education, medical or psychological treatment, and emancipation. The main criterion is whether there is a need for advocacy for the child. Preference is given to very young children and to children of any age initially received into the court system. Cases in which the primary need is for a mentor or a Big Brother or Sister are not appropriate. When a case has concurrent proceedings in criminal court and the child is a victim or a witness, the CASA volunteer may gather and report information regarding the criminal case to the dependency court.<sup>9</sup> The CASA volunteer may also support and accompany the child to the criminal proceeding.

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<sup>9</sup> WIC §326.5 requires the Judicial Council to adopt a Rule of Court appointing a guardian ad litem, either an attorney or a CASA, for a child who is the subject of a petition filed in dependency court or is an alleged victim of abuse or neglect in a prosecution in criminal court.