

Sample Communication with Caseworkers (for Activity 4H)

Relationships with caseworkers and other professionals on a case are important but not always easy. Unlike CASA/GAL volunteers, who are working on one case at a time, caseworkers are juggling several cases. It is your job to learn how to communicate effectively with them in order to protect the child's best interests. Following are three examples of direct, clear and successful communication between a CASA/GAL volunteer and a caseworker.

Example 1: Setting the Tone on a New Case

Office visit by CASA/GAL volunteer Sara to the office of caseworker Karen

Sara: Hi Karen, my name is Sara Lopez. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me today. I know how busy you are so I'll get right to the reason for my visit. I've been appointed by the court as the CASA/GAL volunteer for Jamie and Leah Mason. I've been on their case for about six months now. You're their new caseworker, right?

Karen: That's right. I've been in social work for a while, but I just started at this agency and took over for Natalie Wilson. Thanks for letting me know that you're the CASA/GAL volunteer.

Sara: Have you ever had a CASA/GAL volunteer on one of your cases before?

Karen: No, but there was a segment about CASA/GAL volunteers in my orientation and I've heard comments around the office...

Sara: Well, I don't know what you've heard, but I hope we can work together to help Jamie and Leah. My role is to be their advocate, their voice in the system to help make sure that they are safe, well cared for and are placed in a permanent home as soon as reasonably possible.

Karen: Wait a minute—I thought that was my job! So you're here to tell me how to do the job that I went to graduate school for?

Sample Communication with Caseworkers, Cont'd.

Sara: Not at all. My role is different from but complementary to yours. Because I'm a volunteer assigned to only one case, I can spend a lot of time with the children, getting to know them in a way your schedule won't allow. I also have time to delve into their current situation: contact all the people they interact with, read all the records, and research resources that might be helpful. My job is to pull all that together and prepare a report for the court that includes making recommendations in the best interest of each child. Does that make sense?

Karen: Sort of . . .

Sara: I won't just be reporting to the court, of course. I'll be sharing information with you and the other legal parties to the case throughout the time the children remain under the authority of the court. I know you have a whole stack of Natalie's cases to get up to speed on so I'd be happy to share a bit about Jamie and Leah right now if you have time.

Karen: Okay.

Sara: Jamie is 9 and Leah is 4. They are in two different foster homes—both okay. They were separated because of Jamie's behavioral issues but need to be back together ASAP. Jamie's pretty bright but not mainstreamed in school and not performing up to his ability due to behavior issues. The foster mother and I think he needs further evaluation, but the school seems to be dragging its feet. Leah, his little sister, is on track developmentally. She is sweet and shy, an easy child to foster. Her face lights up on the rare occasions when she gets to see her big brother. Neither parent has made much consistent headway with drug treatment for meth. A court review was scheduled for next week, but it has been continued for a month.

Karen: That was helpful. It looks like I've got a lot to do with a court hearing coming up that fast.

Sara: Amen—me too. I hope that you'll be equally open about the case with me. As you know, the court order grants me access to all information about the children. Please send me a copy of the new case plan once court is over. Also, please be sure to copy me on notices of any meetings regarding these

Sample Communication with Caseworkers, Cont'd.

children, especially Family Team Meetings. Here's my contact information.
[Hands her a card.] Do you have more questions?

Karen: Not right now, but I'm sure I will later. *Sara:* I work full time, so it's not always easy to get me by phone during the day but a text will always reach me. Thanks so much, Karen. I look forward to working with you.

Example 2: Concern about Caseworker's Inattention to a Case

Email from CASA/GAL volunteer to the CASA/GAL volunteer supervisor

I just sent the following email to the caseworker. The caseworker [Jim] just had a 7-year-old boy on his caseload end up dead, so he is probably busy as well as distraught, but that is no reason to let this case slide any longer.

From: CASA/GAL volunteer Peg

To: Jim Small (caseworker)

Copy: CASA/GAL volunteer supervisor

Sent: Thursday, February 16, 9:38 a.m.

Subject: Re: Mullen Case

Jim: I know the past couple of months have been very demanding on you with your caseload, the birth of your daughter and surgery. I also understand the difficulty we have had in connecting due to our conflicting schedules. I know that you have not been able to spend much time with the Kelly family but please trust me when I tell you that there are serious problems with Joe that cannot be dismissed.

At the February 2 meeting, both foster parents (Carl and Jane) expressed a fear of Joe because his behaviors were becoming more aggressive and destructive. At my visit last night with them, Carl again stated he worries he will come home someday and find Jane seriously hurt or even dead. When I called Monday to schedule a visit, Joe was screaming in the background and Carl said he was throwing one of his fits. He has been refusing to do his schoolwork and he is staying up until 4 a.m., refusing to sleep. MGM was also present at the apartment last night, and she instructed Jane to call 911 when

Sample Communication with Caseworkers, Cont'd.

his behavior becomes dangerous, to which I agreed. Carl said he has seen Joe's behavior turn more aggressive lately, and Joe has hit and nearly stabbed Jane in his fits of anger. He has had only one session with his therapist since November 28. There are transportation issues that need to be addressed as well.

Last night both Carl and Jane were in tears as to what they should do. They are exhausted, frustrated and scared. I hope you are planning to attend the meeting on Friday—it is everybody's day off and that is why we scheduled it for 1 p.m. at Harbor. We all agree to the seriousness of this case and a need to help the foster parents. Joe's lawyer, Linda Lewis, will also be present. I hope we can bring you up-to-date on this case, as there are many other things that have happened that you may not have been made aware of. I know you will be seeing them tonight on your way home and thought you should be aware of some of these things. They have expressed their disappointment in you not being at the February 2 meeting. They said in December you dropped off gifts but didn't come in, and at January's visit spoke with Joe, but didn't have time to listen to their concerns.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call me at home after 5, any night but Thursday at 555-0001. My cell is 555-0008.

Thanks, Deb Baranoski

Example 3: Fighting Case Inertia for Best Results

Phone call from CASA/GAL volunteer Sharon to caseworker Melissa

January 19, 8:42 a.m.

Sharon: Good morning, Melissa. I'm really glad we finally connected. How are you doing?

Melissa: I'm insanely busy as always. I was just getting ready to sign out to do home visits so I don't have much time to talk.

Sharon: Got it. This won't take long. I'm calling about Tommy Sizemore's case. You remember that Fred and Melissa Wilson, Tommy's paternal uncle and his wife, want to adopt Tommy, right?

Sample Communication with Caseworkers, Cont'd.

Melissa: Yes, I remember. There is one of a pile of home studies on my desk to be done.

Sharon: Wow, I'm sure it must be difficult to balance a caseload like yours. I know your situation is very different from mine where I can just focus on what's best for Tommy. Well, I visited the Wilson's last night and they are very excited at the prospect of adoption. Since the foster mom and the Wilsons are friendly, the transition and bonding should be fairly smooth and both families can remain involved. I'm calling with two concerns. The Wilsons told me they have been trying to get in touch with you to finish Fred's background check and get their home study done. They're worried that something might be wrong because you haven't returned their calls. I told them that returning calls sometimes takes a while since you're in the field several days a week but not to worry. Their second concern is that visitation hasn't been set up yet. The Wilsons want Tommy to start visiting in their home and, more importantly, Tommy needs permanency sooner rather than later. I told them I would check with you on both issues and get back to them.

Melissa: You said it about our situations being different! As much as I would like to move Tommy's case forward, it's not the only one on my plate. Tommy's current foster home is one of our best so Tommy is getting good care. Right now, I have several older kids in placements that are about to blow so I have to deal with those first.

Sharon: I completely understand. That said, I'd like to do whatever I can to speed up permanency for Tommy. If it works for you, I'd be happy to touch base with the Wilsons, let them know that you've received their messages and that you're planning to set up an appointment with them within the next 7-10 days. Will that work for you?

Melissa: Absolutely – it will save me a call and calls with prospective adoptive parents are rarely brief. Thanks. Please tell them that I sent in the background check forms but they haven't all come back yet which is why I haven't scheduled their appointment.

Sharon: I sure will. What about visitation?

Sample Communication with Caseworkers, Cont'd.

Melissa: It's against agency policy to allow in-home visitation until the background checks have cleared and the home study is approved. The Wilsons just need to understand that adoption is a lengthy, one-step at a time process.

Sharon: Is there any problem with them visiting Tommy at the foster home?

Melissa: Well... adoption by these relatives is Tommy's permanency plan. They and the foster mom have already developed a friendly relationship. So, I guess it's OK as long as they're reasonable about it and don't make a nuisance of themselves to the foster mother but they cannot leave with Tommy or visit him unless the foster mom is home. Make sure they get that!

Sharon: I'm sure the Wilsons will comply as much as they would like to move faster. Thank you for taking the time to work out some concrete next steps for Tommy and the family. Please let me know of anything I can do to accelerate the home study process. Thanks again. Good-bye.

Melissa: Gotta run. Bye.