

Principles of Good Court Reports

Each CASA shall investigate the case to which he or she is assigned to provide independent factual information to the court.

Information is provided to the court by testimony in the courtroom and by court reports. The volunteer should always provide a written court report and be prepared to testify.

The court report should contain facts about the child's needs, available resources, court order compliance, and recommendations. It is very important that the court report be factual, verifiable, and avoid hearsay. The volunteer should review the records (including school, medical, DHS, and juvenile court), should interview key parties and witnesses, and visit with the child. The report must be factual and avoid opinions.

Example of opinion:

The house is not a fit place for a child to live.

Example of statement of fact:

The house was dirty. Dishes were piled high in the sink with mold and there was no running water. Numerous roaches were in the kitchen on the dishes and in every room observed. There was no heat, but there was electricity. There were no beds in the house and the only furniture was a chair and a TV.

Example of opinion:

Johnny is not doing well in school.

Example of statement of fact:

Johnny has missed the last 15 days of school. His school records indicate that he is reading below his age by 3 grade levels.

Example of hearsay:

Mrs. Smith said that she saw the mother use drugs at a party last week.

Avoiding hearsay:

Allegations have been made about the mother's continuing drug use. (In this case, the attorney should know that Mrs. Smith made allegations. The attorney may want to subpoena Mrs. Smith to testify as what she saw.)

The court report should be concise. Information about the child's placements should be on the first page, and the volunteer should include a photo of the child, especially if the child is not going to be at the hearing.

CASA staff should always review court reports prior to distribution. The court report should be distributed to all parties prior to the hearing.

Court Report Checklist
(inspired by Judge Wiley Branton)

- Does the report conform to statutes?
- Is the information factual & without hearsay?
- Is the placement appropriate for this child? (are they better off than where they were before being taken into care?)
- Has the child been able to maintain their educational continuity? How is the child performing and/or adjusting to their school environment?
- Are there any valid concerns on how the DCFS caseworker is handling the case? (use tact/diplomacy & attempt to reconcile through CASA director and/or ad litem prior to voicing concerns)
- Overall adjustment of the child (the Judge gives considerable weight to CASA's opinion on this matter).
- Are there other services that should/could be provided?
- If relevant, are the parents adequately prepared for the return of the children? (can give observations of interaction between children/parents).
- Are visitations being held regularly? - particularly with siblings if relevant.
- Have the children expressed any concerns or desires that need to be addressed (be their voice!)