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GAL Volunteer Handbook

Sacramento County · Sacramento · 2026 Edition

Sacramento County Superior Court, Juvenile Division

DCFAS | Cal. Welfare & Institutions Code § 300 et seq.

PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is a practical reference for Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers serving Sacramento County families in juvenile dependency proceedings. It covers the California Welfare and Institutions Code § 300 dependency process, the Sacramento County DCFAS child welfare system, California ICWA and the state's enhanced AB 3176 tribal protections (the strongest in the nation), and local Sacramento resources for children and families.

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Part I — The California GAL/CASA Program

1.1 What Is the California GAL Program?

The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program in California trains and supervises community volunteers — operating under the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) model — to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the juvenile dependency system. California's child protection cases are governed by the **Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) § 300 et seq.**, which defines the grounds for court jurisdiction over children who have been abused, neglected, or are at substantial risk of harm.

California's child welfare system is administered at the county level. In Sacramento County, the responsible agency is the **Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services (DCFAS)**, which operates the Child Protective Services (CPS) division. When DCFAS determines that a child requires court protection, it files a WIC § 300 petition in the **Sacramento County Superior Court, Juvenile Division**.

The court then appoints a CASA/GAL volunteer to represent the child's best interests independently of DCFAS, the parents, and the child's attorney. Sacramento CASA — a program of the Sacramento County Superior Court — trains and supervises volunteers through the entire life of each case.

> **Core Mission**
> You are the only person in the dependency system who is assigned specifically to know this child as an individual. Judges, attorneys, and social workers carry large caseloads. You carry one — and your focused attention makes a difference.

1.2 Program Structure and Oversight

Sacramento CASA operates under a formal agreement with the Sacramento County Superior Court. The program recruits, trains, screens, and supervises volunteer CASAs. Each volunteer is assigned a staff supervisor who provides guidance, reviews court reports, and supports the volunteer throughout the case.

Statewide coordination is provided by the **California CASA Association (CalCASA)**, which supports 56 local CASA programs across the state and advocates for policy improvements at the state legislature.

Part II — Legal Foundation

2.1 Welfare and Institutions Code § 300

A child may be declared a dependent of the California juvenile court if they fall under one or more subdivisions of WIC § 300. The most commonly cited grounds are:

WIC § 300 Dependency Grounds

- § 300(a) — Serious physical harm inflicted nonaccidentally by a parent or guardian
- § 300(b) — Failure to protect: parent failed to adequately supervise or protect child, or child suffered serious physical harm due to parent's inability to provide care
- § 300(c) — Serious emotional damage caused by acts or omissions of the parent
- § 300(d) — Sexual abuse by a parent, guardian, or household member
- § 300(e) — Severe physical abuse of a child under age 5
- § 300(f) — Child's sibling was abused and there is a substantial risk to this child
- § 300(g) — Parent unable to care for child (incarceration, hospitalization)
- § 300(j) — Sibling was abused or neglected and this child faces similar risk

2.2 Key California Child Welfare Statutes

Beyond WIC § 300, GAL volunteers should be familiar with the following California statutory provisions:

- **WIC § 317** — Right to counsel; appointment of child's attorney (minor's counsel)
- **WIC § 326** — Appointment of CASA/GAL; powers and duties of volunteer
- **WIC § 355.1** — Presumption of abuse when prior adjudication exists
- **WIC § 356.5** — CASA access to records; privilege waiver
- **WIC § 361** — Removal of child from parental custody; findings required
- **WIC § 366.21** — Six-month and twelve-month review hearings
- **WIC § 366.22** — Eighteen-month (permanency) review hearing
- **WIC § 366.26** — Selection and implementation hearing (.26 hearing); termination of parental rights
- **WIC § 388** — Petition to modify prior court order (change of circumstances)
- **WIC § 827** — Access to juvenile court records
- **Cal. Rules of Court, Rule 5.534** — Conduct of dependency hearings
- **Cal. Rules of Court, Rule 5.660** — CASA/GAL appointment and duties

2.3 The Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)

California dependency cases involve multiple professionals. As a GAL volunteer, you will interact with each member of the team:

Sacramento County DCFAS Social Worker — The assigned CPS worker investigates the case, develops a case plan, arranges services, and reports to the court. Social workers manage large caseloads and may change over the life of a case. **Minor's Counsel** — An attorney appointed by the court to represent the child's legal interests. The CASA's role is complementary, not duplicative. **Parent's Counsel** — Each parent has separate appointed counsel. **DCFAS Attorney (County Counsel)** — Represents the agency in court. **Dependency Investigator (DI)** — Conducts early assessments in some Sacramento cases. **Court** — A Superior Court judge or commissioner assigned to juvenile dependency.

Part III — The Sacramento Dependency Court Process

3.1 From Report to Petition

California dependency cases begin with a report to the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA) hotline or to law enforcement. Sacramento County DCFAS CPS investigates the report. If the social worker determines the child is at immediate risk, law enforcement or DCFAS may take the child into protective custody. DCFAS then files a WIC § 300 petition with the Sacramento County Superior Court, Juvenile Division, located at the William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse, 3341 Power Inn Road, Sacramento.

> **Timing Note**
> DCFAS must file the § 300 petition within 48 hours of taking a child into custody (excluding weekends and holidays). The initial detention hearing must occur within that same 48-72 hour window. Cases move quickly — you may be appointed very early.

3.2 Dependency Court Hearing Timeline

1	**Protective Custody / Detention** Child is removed and placed in emergency foster care or with a relative. DCFAS files § 300 petition within 48 hours.
2	**Detention Hearing (within 72 hours)** Court determines whether to detain child out of home pending jurisdiction. Parents notified. Attorneys appointed. CASA may be appointed.
3	**Jurisdiction Hearing (within 15–30 days)** Court determines whether allegations are true by preponderance of evidence. Parents may contest or submit. Amended petition may be filed.
4	**Disposition Hearing (within 10 days of jurisdiction)** Court determines child's placement and approves case plan of services for parents. Court may remove child from parental custody under WIC § 361.
5	**Six-Month Review (WIC § 366.21(e))** Progress on case plan reviewed. Court may return child home or continue services. Substantial compliance with case plan assessed.
6	**Twelve-Month Permanency Hearing (WIC § 366.21(f))** Court assesses whether child can be returned home. If not, court may set .26 hearing to consider termination of parental rights.

7	**18-Month Review (WIC § 366.22)** If child not returned, court may set .26 hearing. Exceptions to termination assessed (legal guardianship, long-term foster care).
8	**WIC § 366.26 Hearing — Selection & Implementation** Court selects and implements permanent plan: adoption (most common), legal guardianship, or another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA).

3.3 Relative and NREFM Placement

California law gives strong preference to relative placement. DCFAS must notify all known relatives within 30 days of removal. A relative who wishes to have the child placed with them must be assessed, and the court must find compelling reasons not to place with a suitable relative. **Non-Related Extended Family Members (NREFMs)** — close family friends, neighbors, godparents — may also be considered.

> **CASA Practice Tip**
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> As a CASA, you can play a critical role in identifying relatives or NREFMs the child has mentioned. Ask the child: "Who do you feel safe with? Who do you love? Where would you want to live?" These answers can change a child's placement.

Part IV — ICWA & California Tribal Protections

4.1 Overview: Federal ICWA and California AB 3176

California has the largest Native American population of any U.S. state, with **109 federally recognized tribes** and an urban Indian population distributed across counties including Sacramento. The **Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), 25 U.S.C. § 1901 et seq.**, applies in every dependency case where a child is or may be an "Indian child" — defined as an unmarried person under 18 who is either a tribal member or eligible for membership and the biological child of a tribal member.

California went further. In 2018, the state enacted **AB 3176**, codified at WIC § 224 et seq., creating the strongest state-level ICWA protections in the nation. California's law adds requirements above and beyond federal ICWA and applies the "existing Indian family" exception only narrowly. Key state additions include enhanced inquiry, mandatory tribal notice, and tribal participation rights.

4.2 ICWA Inquiry Requirements

California law requires DCFAS to ask **every** person who has an interest in the case — including parents, grandparents, extended family — whether the child may be an Indian child. This duty of inquiry is ongoing and continuous throughout the case. Volunteers must not assume that ICWA was properly investigated just because it is marked "ICWA does not apply" in a prior report.

ICWA Inquiry — Best Practices

- DCFAS and the court must ask at every hearing whether ICWA status has changed
- Parents have a right to assert ICWA status at any time — including on appeal
- A child who is enrolled, eligible for enrollment, or biologically descended from a member of a federally recognized tribe may qualify as an Indian child
- Inquire broadly: "Do you have any Native American, Alaska Native, or Indian heritage on any side of your family?"
- Document your ICWA inquiry conversations in every contact log

4.3 Tribal Notice (ICWA § 1912; WIC § 224.2)

Once a tribe may have jurisdiction, DCFAS must send formal notice to the tribe(s) by registered mail. The tribe has 10 days to respond and may intervene as a party at any point. California requires that the court not proceed until the tribe has had adequate time to respond. Tribal intervention fundamentally changes the case: the tribe gains party status, may offer its own placement resources, and its standards govern placement preference.

■ ICWA Compliance is Mandatory

If you believe ICWA inquiry was inadequate — if no one asked the parents or grandparents about tribal heritage — notify your CASA supervisor immediately. Failure to comply with ICWA is reversible error requiring the entire proceeding to be invalidated. This is not a technicality; it is a jurisdictional requirement.

4.4 ICWA Placement Preferences

For an Indian child placed out of the home, ICWA establishes a strict placement preference hierarchy (25 U.S.C. § 1915; WIC § 361.31):

- 1st preference — Member of the Indian child's extended family
- 2nd preference — Foster home licensed, approved, or specified by the child's tribe
- 3rd preference — Indian foster home licensed or approved by authorized non-tribal entity
- 4th preference — Institution for children approved by an Indian tribe or operated by an Indian organization

Deviation from this preference hierarchy requires a finding of "good cause" supported by specific, articulable facts. The tribe may set its own order of preference, which the court must follow if it does not violate the best interests of the child.

4.5 Sacramento-Area Tribal Resources

Sacramento Native American Health Center (SNAHC)

Provides health, behavioral health, and social services to urban Native American families. Critical first contact for ICWA referrals and family support services.

- (916) 341-0577
- www.snahc.org

California Indian Legal Services — Sacramento

Provides legal assistance to Native Americans on ICWA matters, tribal enrollment, and child welfare advocacy. Can advise CASAs on tribal-specific concerns.

- (916) 978-0960
- www.calindian.org

United Auburn Indian Community (UAIC) — Auburn Rancheria

Federally recognized tribe nearest Sacramento. Tribal social services may provide placement resources and cultural connections for enrolled children.

- (530) 883-2390
- www.auburnrancheria.com

Wilton Rancheria (Miwok Nation)

Federally recognized tribe in Elk Grove (southern Sacramento County). May claim jurisdiction for children of tribal members in Sacramento County.

- (916) 687-8565
- www.wiltonrancheria-nsn.gov

Part V — Your Role as a CASA/GAL Volunteer

5.1 Appointment and Authority

Your authority as a CASA/GAL derives from your court appointment under **WIC § 326** and **Cal. Rules of Court, Rule 5.660**. The court order appointing you grants access to all records relating to the child — educational, medical, mental health, and placement records. You may attend all court hearings and are expected to submit written reports to the court. Your appointment is to the child, not the placement or the agency.

> **California Record Access**
> Unlike some states, California's WIC § 356.5 explicitly waives privilege for records reviewed by a CASA. Providers must release records upon presentation of your court appointment order. Carry a certified copy at all times.

5.2 Core Duties

- Visit the child at least twice per month (Sacramento CASA standard)
- Build a trusting, consistent relationship over the life of the case
- Review all case documents: the case plan, DCFAS reports, school records, medical and mental health records
- Observe the child in their placement environment
- Interview the child's caregiver, teachers, counselors, and service providers
- Identify and report any unmet needs: tutoring, therapy, medical care, extracurricular activities
- Attend all court hearings and IEP/school meetings when possible
- Submit a written CASA court report at every hearing
- Advocate for the child's best interests — not necessarily the child's stated wishes
- Continue contact throughout appeals, placement changes, and transitions

5.3 Boundaries and Limitations

The CASA role is powerful, but clear boundaries protect both you and the child:

- You are a volunteer, not a licensed social worker or attorney — do not give legal advice
- Do not transport the child without written authorization from your CASA supervisor
- Do not give money, gifts, or make promises to the child or family
- Do not use personal social media to contact the child or family
- Do not reveal your personal contact information to the child or family
- Do not make placement or service decisions — advocate through reports and court testimony
- Do not communicate with media about a case — all media inquiries go to your supervisor
- Report any suspected abuse or neglect in placement immediately to DCFAS and your supervisor

Part VI — Investigation and Court Reporting

6.1 Building Your Case Record

From your first day on a case, maintain a detailed, chronological log of every contact. Document the date, time, location, who was present, and what was discussed or observed. Your case record is the foundation of your court report and may be subpoenaed. Write factually and specifically — avoid opinions unless clearly labeled as such.

Obtain and review the following documents as early as possible: the DCFAS social study (jurisdiction/disposition report), the case plan, the child's last three school report cards and any IEP, medical and dental records, mental health assessments and therapy notes, prior dependency court records (if any), and the DCFAS contact log.

6.2 Visiting the Child

Your visits with the child are the heart of the CASA relationship. Frequency matters: Sacramento CASA requires at least two visits per month. Visit the child in their placement, at school, and — if possible — in other settings where you can observe their behavior naturally.

During visits, pay attention to: the child's physical condition, demeanor, and emotional state; the placement environment (safety, cleanliness, warmth); the caregiver's interaction with the child; whether the child has needed supplies, clothing, and personal items; whether the child is attending school regularly; and whether the child has access to therapeutic services ordered by the court.

> **Interviewing Children**
>
> Ask open-ended questions: "What's been the best part of your week?" "Is there anything you wish the judge knew about you?" "What do you want your life to look like in five years?" Children are more forthcoming when they feel heard, not interrogated.

6.3 Writing the CASA Court Report

Your written report is submitted to the court before every hearing. Sacramento CASA's standard format includes the following sections:

- **Case Summary** — Brief background, current placement, and hearing purpose
- **Child's Current Status** — Physical health, mental health, education, relationships
- **Placement Assessment** — Safety, stability, caregiver support
- **Parent/Family Contact** — Visitation, progress on case plan
- **Services and Service Delivery** — Whether ordered services are occurring
- **Child's Wishes** — Reported separately from your recommendation
- **CASA Recommendation** — Your independent assessment of the child's best interests

Write in plain language. Avoid jargon. Use specific, verifiable facts. If you make a recommendation, support it with evidence from your observations and interviews — not from what DCFAS or the parents told you to recommend.

Part VII — Child Development and Trauma-Informed Practice

7.1 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Research by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente — conducted in part in California — established the foundational ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study, which demonstrated a dose-response relationship between childhood trauma and lifelong health, mental health, and social outcomes. Children in the dependency system often carry high ACE scores. Understanding this helps you reframe behaviors: "What happened to this child?" rather than "What is wrong with this child?"

The 10 ACE Categories

- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Neglect (physical, emotional)
- Household dysfunction: domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, incarcerated household member, parental separation

7.2 Developmental Stages and Visit Approach

Infants and Toddlers (0–3): Focus on attachment and caregiver responsiveness. Observe whether caregivers respond consistently to the infant's needs. Note developmental milestones and whether early intervention services (Regional Center referral) are in place if developmental delays are suspected.

Preschool Age (3–5): Children at this stage are concrete thinkers. They may not be able to articulate trauma but will show it behaviorally. Note regression, tantrums, or excessive attachment/detachment. Ask the caregiver about the child's behavior at home and preschool.

School Age (6–12): School performance is a critical indicator of wellbeing. Obtain report cards and teacher input at every visit. Children this age can participate meaningfully in conversations about their preferences and feelings. Stability of school enrollment matters: California law (Ed. Code § 48853.5) requires children in foster care to remain in their school of origin unless it is not in their best interest.

Adolescents (13–17): Teens have stronger legal rights and preferences. California law requires courts to consider the express wishes of children 12 and older regarding placement. Ask about Independent Living skills, vocational interests, driving, employment, and plans for after foster care. Extended Foster Care (AB 12) allows youth to remain in care until age 21.

7.3 Secondary Traumatic Stress in Volunteers

CASA volunteers are regularly exposed to disturbing information about child abuse, family dysfunction, and system failures. Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is a real occupational hazard. Signs include intrusive thoughts about cases, emotional numbing, irritability, sleep disruption, and cynicism about the system.

Sacramento CASA provides regular supervision and peer support groups. Use these resources. If you find yourself unable to be objective about a case, talk to your supervisor. Protecting your own wellbeing makes you a better advocate.

Part VIII — Education Advocacy

8.1 Educational Rights of Foster Youth

California has enacted some of the nation's strongest educational protections for foster youth. As a CASA, you will frequently serve as an educational advocate.

- **School of Origin (Ed. Code § 48853.5)** — Child may remain in school of origin when placement changes, with transportation provided
- **Immediate Enrollment (Ed. Code § 48853)** — School must enroll foster youth immediately, even without records
- **Educational Liaison** — Each school district must designate an educational liaison for foster youth
- **Partial Credit (Ed. Code § 49069.5)** — Schools must grant partial credit for coursework completed before placement change
- **Graduation Requirements (Ed. Code § 51225.1)** — Schools must accept coursework from prior districts toward graduation
- **IEP Rights** — If the child has a disability, an IEP must be developed and followed; educational rights holder may be a surrogate parent

> **Educational Decision-Making**
> Sacramento County DCFAS must designate an educational decision-maker if no parent is available and the child lacks an IEP surrogate. If you identify an educational rights gap, notify your supervisor immediately — a CASA can sometimes serve as an educational rights holder if appointed by the court.

8.2 Extended Foster Care (AB 12)

Under California's Fostering Connections to Success Act (AB 12), youth can voluntarily remain in foster care until age 21 if they meet one of five participation conditions: working at least 80 hours/month, enrolled in school, in a vocational program, unable to do the above due to a medical condition, or participating in a program to remove barriers to employment. CASA volunteers working with teens approaching 18 should begin transition planning early.

Part IX — Sacramento County Local Resources

9.1 Child Welfare and Court

Sacramento County DCFAS — Child Protective Services

Primary child welfare agency for Sacramento County. Manages CPS investigations, case plans, placement resources, and court reporting.

- (916) 875-5433 (main); (916) 875-5437 (after-hours hotline)
- www.saccounty.gov/dcfas

Sacramento County Superior Court, Juvenile Division

William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse, 3341 Power Inn Road, Sacramento. All WIC § 300 dependency hearings held here.

- (916) 875-3400
- www.saccourt.ca.gov

Sacramento CASA

Program of the Sacramento County Superior Court. Recruits, trains, and supervises CASA/GAL volunteers for all dependency cases in Sacramento County.

- (916) 875-0100
- www.sacramentocasa.org

9.2 Child Abuse Prevention and Response

Child Abuse Prevention Center (CAPC)

Provides parent education, family support, and prevention services for Sacramento families. Operates Family Resource Centers countywide.

- (916) 244-1870
- www.capcentral.org

Sacramento Children's Home

Provides residential and community-based services for abused and neglected children including foster care, mental health, and family support services.

- (916) 564-3507
- www.kidshome.org

Shasta Family Justice Center — Sacramento

Multi-agency co-location model for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and elder abuse. Coordinates DV and child safety services.

- (916) 448-2073
- www.sacramentofamilyjusticecenter.org

9.3 Mental Health Services

Sacramento County Department of Behavioral Health Services

Provides mental health and substance use disorder services for children and families in the dependency system. Medi-Cal funded; accepts referrals.

- (916) 875-1055
- www.dbhs.saccounty.net

WellSpace Health (formerly Wellspring Women's Center)

Community health center providing behavioral health, substance use, and trauma-informed services across Sacramento County.

- (916) 737-5555
- www.wellspacehealth.org

Elk Grove / South County Mental Health — Sacramento County

Outpatient mental health services for children and adolescents in southern Sacramento County. Trauma-focused CBT and family therapy.

- (916) 875-1055 (referral line)
- www.dbhs.saccounty.net

9.4 Education and Youth Development

Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) — Foster Youth Services

Provides educational support, school of origin transportation coordination, and educational advocacy for foster youth countywide.

- (916) 228-2502
- www.scoe.net/foster

Sacramento City Unified School District — Foster Youth Liaison

District educational liaison coordinates immediate enrollment, partial credit, and school stability for foster youth in Sacramento City Unified.

- (916) 643-9125
- www.scusd.edu

California Youth Connection (CYC) — Sacramento Chapter

Youth-led organization providing advocacy, peer support, and policy input by and for current and former foster youth.

- (916) 441-4044
- www.calyouthconnection.org

9.5 Housing and Basic Needs

Families First — Sacramento

Provides foster family recruitment, placement, and intensive support services including therapeutic foster homes and respite care.

- (916) 563-1048
- www.familiesfirstinc.org

Turning Point Community Programs

Mental health and housing services for individuals and families with complex needs. Serves transition-age youth aging out of foster care.

- (916) 388-3260
- www.tpcp.org

Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services

Provides emergency food, clothing, workforce development, and family support services for vulnerable families and youth.

- (916) 456-1980
- www.sacramentofoodbank.org

Loaves & Fishes — Sacramento

Daily meals, shelter, hygiene, and supportive services for the most vulnerable Sacramento residents. Emergency support for families in crisis.

- (916) 446-0874
- www.loavesandfishes.org

Part X — California Dependency Glossary

Key Terms and Abbreviations

AB 12	California Assembly Bill 12 (2010) — Extended Foster Care to age 21
AB 3176	California's enhanced ICWA protections (2018); the nation's strongest state ICWA law
APPLA	Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement — long-term foster care for youth 16+ when adoption is not appropriate
CANRA	Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act — California's mandated reporter law
CASA	Court Appointed Special Advocate — California's term for the GAL volunteer role
DCFAS	Sacramento County Department of Child, Family and Adult Services — local CPS agency
DI	Dependency Investigator — conducts early case assessments in some counties
ICWA	Indian Child Welfare Act, 25 U.S.C. § 1901 — federal law protecting Native children in dependency proceedings
IEP	Individualized Education Program — special education plan under IDEA
MDT	Multidisciplinary Team — all professionals working on a dependency case
Minor's Counsel	Attorney appointed to represent the child's legal interests (distinct from CASA)
NREFM	Non-Related Extended Family Member — close family friend or godparent considered for placement
NMD	Non-Minor Dependent — a youth age 18-20 in Extended Foster Care under AB 12
PPLA	Planned Permanent Living Arrangement — an older term for APPLA
RFA	Resource Family Approval — California's unified approval process for foster/adoptive families (replaced foster care licensing in 2017)
SSB	Safe Surrender Baby — infant relinquished under California's Safely Surrendered Baby law
TDM	Team Decision Making Meeting — structured meeting convened by DCFAS before major placement decisions
WIC § 300	California Welfare and Institutions Code § 300 — grounds for juvenile dependency jurisdiction
WIC § 366.26	The ".26 hearing" — selection and implementation of the permanent plan, including possible termination of parental rights
.26 Hearing	See WIC § 366.26 above

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