

■ Texas

GAL Volunteer Handbook

2026 Edition

Guardian Ad Litem Support Network

GAL National Database — galnationaldatabase.org

TFC § 107.011 | Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

CASA of Texas | Harris County District Court

Comprehensive reference for Texas GAL volunteers:

Program structure · Legal foundation · Court process

ICWA (incl. Texas tribal nations) · Education rights · Local & statewide resources

1. Program Overview

Texas operates one of the nation's largest child welfare systems. The primary state agency is the **Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS)**, which manages Child Protective Services (CPS), foster care placements, and statewide adoption services. **CASA of Texas** coordinates 70+ local CASA affiliate programs placing trained volunteer advocates in dependency proceedings statewide.

Texas uses a distinctive model: the **Texas Family Code Chapter 107** creates the 'Amicus Attorney' — an attorney appointed to advocate for the child's best interests independently of the child's expressed wishes. CASA volunteers work as the investigative arm of the Amicus Attorney, providing factual support and community connections.

State Child Welfare Agency	Texas DFPS (CPS)
GAL Umbrella Organization	CASA of Texas
Primary Governing Code	Texas Family Code (TFC)
Court of Jurisdiction	District Court (Domestic/Family)
GAL Appointment Statute	TFC § 107.011 (Amicus) / § 107.001
CASA Affiliates in TX	70+ local programs statewide

2. Legal Foundation

Texas child welfare proceedings are governed by the Texas Family Code, particularly Chapters 107, 161–166, 261–265, and 263–264. Key statutes for Texas GAL volunteers:

TFC § 107.011

Amicus Attorney — Appointment & Duties

Authorizes the court to appoint an Amicus Attorney in any SAPCR to provide legal services necessary to assist the court in protecting the child's best interests. The Amicus Attorney is not bound by the child's expressed wishes and independently advocates for best interests. CASA volunteers serve as the investigative arm of the Amicus Attorney in most Texas courts.

TFC § 107.001–107.010

Attorney Ad Litem for Child

Establishes the role of Attorney Ad Litem, who represents the child's expressed objectives. Client-directed — must advocate for what the child directs even if different from best interests. Courts may appoint both an Amicus Attorney and Attorney Ad Litem in the same proceeding.

TFC § 262.001–262.403

Emergency Removal & Protective Orders

Authorizes DFPS to take possession of a child without a court order when there is immediate danger and no time to obtain an order. DFPS must file a petition and obtain an emergency order within 24 hours of removal. All emergency orders must have supporting affidavits with specific facts.

TFC § 161.001

Termination of Parental Rights — Grounds

Enumerates grounds for TPR including abandonment, endangerment, failure to comply with the service plan, and conviction of certain crimes. Termination must also be found in the child's best interests — a separate finding from the statutory ground. The Amicus Attorney leads the best-interest analysis.

TFC § 263.401–263.405

Dismissal Deadline — 'One Year Rule'

Texas requires courts to dismiss a DFPS-filed SAPCR no later than the first Monday after the first anniversary of DFPS becoming temporary managing conservator (unless an extension up to 180 days is granted). This deadline creates urgency throughout the case and defines every GAL's timeline.

3. Your Role as CASA Volunteer / GAL

In Texas, CASA volunteers serve as the investigative arm of the court-appointed Amicus Attorney. CASA volunteers conduct the in-person investigation — visiting placements, interviewing the child and caregivers, reviewing records, and connecting the child to resources — while the Amicus Attorney handles legal advocacy in hearings. Understanding this division is essential.

■ Investigate	■ Advocate	■ Connect	■ Report
Monthly placement visits. Review DFPS plans, school, medical, and court records. Interview child, caregivers, CPS workers, teachers, and therapists.	Prepare investigation reports for Amicus Attorney. Identify service gaps and placement concerns. Recommend specific services and court orders.	Identify and connect the child to therapy, tutoring, extracurriculars, and peer support. Texas's urban centers offer extensive resources; rural areas require creativity.	Prepare thorough investigation reports for the Amicus Attorney before each hearing. Attend all hearings and testify if called. Document every contact in detail.

Texas-Specific: Amicus Attorney vs. CASA Volunteer

The Amicus Attorney is the legal party in the proceeding — they file pleadings, cross-examine witnesses, and argue legal positions. The CASA volunteer provides the factual investigation. Clarify your court's specific practice expectations with your CASA supervisor before your first hearing, as practices vary significantly across Texas's 254 counties.

4. The Dependency Court Process

Texas child welfare proceedings operate under strict statutory deadlines, including the 'one-year rule' requiring case resolution within 12 months of DFPS taking temporary managing conservatorship. Every CASA volunteer must understand the timeline urgency that governs Texas CPS cases.

1. Emergency Removal & Protective Custody

DFPS or law enforcement removes the child based on immediate danger. DFPS must file a petition and obtain an emergency order within 24 hours (or next business day). Court has 14 days to hold an adversary hearing.

2. 14-Day Adversary Hearing

First contested hearing — court determines whether DFPS should retain temporary managing conservatorship (TMC) pending final disposition. Counsel and Amicus Attorney are typically appointed at or before this hearing.

3. CASA Appointment & First Contact

CASA program assigns you to the case. Obtain petition, emergency order, and existing DFPS records. Make initial contact with the child at their placement within days of appointment. Coordinate with the Amicus Attorney immediately.

4. Status/Review Hearings

Texas courts hold status hearings approximately every 60 days. DFPS files status reports on service plan, placement, parental progress, and reasonable efforts. CASA volunteers provide updated investigation reports to the Amicus Attorney before each hearing.

5. Permanency Hearing (Within 12 Months)

Texas requires a permanency hearing within 12 months of DFPS assuming TMC. The dismissal deadline is the first Monday after the first anniversary — creating hard timeline pressure. CASA volunteers provide comprehensive best-interest reports for this critical hearing.

6. Extension Period (If Granted)

If the court grants an extension (up to 180 additional days), a second permanency hearing must be held before the extended dismissal date. Extensions are granted sparingly. CASA volunteers continue monthly contact and investigation throughout.

7. Final Hearing — TPR or Conservatorship

Case concludes with TPR followed by adoption, appointment of a permanent managing conservator, or reunification. The Amicus Attorney presents the best-interest case based on the CASA investigation record.

8. Post-TPR Monitoring & Adoption

Post-TPR reviews are held every 6 months. CASA involvement typically continues through adoption finalization. Advocate for timely finalization and monitor the child's well-being in the adoptive placement.

5. ICWA & Tribal Inquiry

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA, 25 U.S.C. §§ 1901–1963) applies in any custody proceeding involving a child who is a member of, or eligible for membership in, a federally recognized tribe where the biological parent is also a member. Texas has three federally recognized tribes within its borders, making ICWA inquiry particularly important.

Three Federally Recognized Tribes in Texas

Texas is home to the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (Polk County), the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas (Eagle Pass), and the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo (Tigua, El Paso). Additionally, hundreds of thousands of members of Oklahoma-based nations (Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Comanche) reside throughout Texas. ICWA inquiry is mandatory in every dependency case.

Mandatory ICWA Inquiry Steps

- ✓ Ask both biological parents, grandparents, and extended family about any Native American or Alaska Native ancestry
- ✓ Document the inquiry — it must appear on the record at the adversary hearing
- ✓ If any tribal affiliation is indicated, notify DFPS and the Amicus Attorney immediately for formal tribal notification
- ✓ The tribe — not the family, DFPS, or the Amicus Attorney — determines ICWA eligibility
- ✓ If ICWA applies, placement preferences shift: Indian family, extended family, tribal member homes, tribal foster homes (25 U.S.C. § 1915)
- ✓ 'Active efforts' must be made to prevent the breakup of the Indian family — a higher standard than 'reasonable efforts'

6. Education Rights of Foster Youth

Texas has one of the largest foster care populations in the country, and foster children face significant educational disruption. Texas has implemented policies aligned with federal ESSA requirements to protect foster children's educational rights.

TEC § 25.001(b) / ESSA Foster Care Provisions

School Stability for Children in Foster Care

Texas Education Code and ESSA Title I require school districts and DFPS to collaborate to keep foster children in their school of origin when in the child's best interests. Cross-district transportation must be provided. DFPS must complete school enrollment within two business days of a placement change.

- ✓ Obtain school records and most recent report card at every case contact
- ✓ Ask whether the child has an active IEP or 504 Plan — IDEA rights follow the child regardless of placement
- ✓ Every Texas school district must designate a Foster Care Liaison — contact them directly for enrollment disputes
- ✓ DFPS must complete school enrollment within two business days of a placement change — flag any delay
- ✓ Report chronic absenteeism (10+ days) in your investigation report — Texas tracks this as a child welfare performance indicator
- ✓ Advocate for PAL (Preparation for Adult Living) enrollment at age 14 and EFC planning well before age 18

Extended Foster Care: Texas operates EFC for youth ages 18–21 under TFC § 264.121. Youth may remain if enrolled in school, GED, post-secondary education, employed 80+ hours/month, or participating in a program removing barriers to employment. The **Preparation for Adult Living (PAL)** program provides life skills training starting at age 14.

7. Local Resources — Houston Metro (Harris County)

CASA of Harris County

Houston, TX

One of the nation's largest CASA programs; serves Harris County District Courts with trained volunteer advocates. (713) 535-7980 | casahouston.org

Texas DFPS — Houston Region

Harris County

DFPS CPS regional office for Houston. Harris County CPS handles one of the country's largest child welfare caseloads. (713) 767-2500 | dfps.texas.gov

Texas Children's Hospital

Houston, TX

Nation's largest children's hospital; abuse assessments, trauma-informed pediatric care, mental health for foster youth. (832) 822-3578 | texaschildrens.org

The Alliance — Youth & Family Services

Houston, TX

Youth shelter, transitional housing, crisis intervention for Houston-area youth including those aging out of foster care. (713) 942-7600

Harris County Family District Courts

Houston, TX

Multiple family district courts (247th–315th) handling SAPCR/CPS cases. Court clerks: (713) 274-5700. Confirm local filing requirements with your specific court.

Houston Area Women's Center

Houston, TX

Crisis services, counseling, and advocacy for DV survivors — relevant for cases with DV as a child welfare risk factor. 24-hr hotline: (713) 528-2121

8. Mental Health Resources

Medicaid / STAR Health — Texas

Statewide

All children in DFPS conservatorship are enrolled in STAR Health, Texas's Medicaid managed care program for foster youth. Covers comprehensive behavioral health services. hhs.texas.gov/star-health

Harris Center for Mental Health

Houston, TX

Houston's largest community mental health center; outpatient therapy, crisis services, psychiatric evaluation, youth behavioral health. (713) 970-7000 | harriscenter.org

Texas 988 Crisis Line

Statewide

Dial or text 988 for immediate mental health crisis support, 24/7. Spanish-language support available. Provide this number to caregivers and older youth.

Depelchin Children's Center

Houston, TX

Trauma-informed mental health services, foster care case management, and adoption services for Houston-area youth. (713) 730-2335 | depelchin.org

Youth Villages

Statewide

Intensive mental health, foster care, and therapeutic services for children. Residential, foster care, and in-home programs statewide. (901) 251-5000 | youthvillages.org

NCTSN

National Resource

Free trauma-informed practice resources. Toolkits for working with commercially sexually exploited youth — a priority issue in Texas. nctsn.org

9. Housing & Basic Needs

Houston Housing Authority

Houston, TX

Section 8 / Housing Choice Vouchers for Harris County. Youth aging out of foster care may be prioritized. (713) 260-0500 | housingforhouston.com

Star of Hope Mission

Houston, TX

Emergency shelter and transitional housing for families and youth. Serves families and kinship caregivers facing housing instability. (713) 227-8900 | sohmission.org

DFPS Independent Living Program

Statewide

DFPS Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program: housing navigation, life skills, financial literacy for foster youth ages 14–21. dfps.texas.gov

Houston Food Bank

Houston, TX

Largest U.S. food bank by distribution volume. Serves 18 Southeast Texas counties through 1,500+ partner agencies. (832) 369-9390 | houstonfoodbank.org

Texas SNAP (Food Assistance)

Statewide

SNAP benefits for eligible kinship caregivers and families. Apply through Texas HHS: (877) 541-7905 | hhs.texas.gov

Salvation Army — Houston

Houston, TX

Emergency utility assistance, food, and clothing. Multiple Houston-area locations. (713) 752-0677 | salvationarmyusa.org/houston

10. Texas Statewide Resources

CASA of Texas

Austin, TX

State umbrella for 70+ CASA affiliate programs. Training, advocacy, and technical support. (512) 473-2627 | casatexas.org

Texas DFPS

Austin, TX

State child welfare agency. CPS, foster care, adoption, adult protective services. (512) 929-6500 | dfps.texas.gov

Texans Care for Children

Austin, TX

Child policy advocacy organization. Publishes data on Texas foster care outcomes, education, and health. (512) 473-2000 | texanscare.org

Texas Legal Services Center

Austin, TX

Legal assistance for low-income Texans including families in child welfare proceedings. (512) 477-6000 | tlsc.org

Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services

Austin, TX

Association of child-placing agencies and residential care providers. Agency directory for child welfare professionals. (512) 334-2100

Texas Foster Care Youth Council

Statewide

Youth-led advisory body providing input to DFPS on foster care policy. Familiarize yourself with their advocacy priorities. dfps.texas.gov

11. Federal Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway

U.S. Children's Bureau

Comprehensive federal resource library including Texas-specific guidance. [childwelfare.gov](https://www.childwelfare.gov)

National CASA/GAL Association

Washington, D.C.

National umbrella for all state CASA programs including CASA of Texas. casaforchildren.org | (800) 628-3233

Administration for Children & Families (ACF)

U.S. HHS

Federal agency overseeing child welfare funding and policy. Texas is one of the largest IV-E states. [acf.hhs.gov](https://www.acf.hhs.gov)

NCTSN

National Resource

Texas has active NCTSN member centers in Houston, Dallas, and Austin. [nctsn.org](https://www.nctsn.org)

SAMHSA National Helpline

SAMHSA

Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral (available in Spanish): (800) 662-4357. [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov)

BIA Southwest Regional Office (ICWA)

Albuquerque, NM

Federal ICWA guidance and tribal notification assistance for Texas courts. (505) 563-3100 | [bia.gov](https://www.bia.gov)

12. Investigation Report / Court Report Guide

In Texas, CASA volunteers typically prepare investigation reports for the Amicus Attorney — not filed independently (though this varies by court). Your report is the factual backbone of the Amicus Attorney's legal advocacy. Include all 8 sections in every report:

1. Case Identification & Investigation Summary

Child's name and age, case number, hearing date, how long in DFPS conservatorship, number of contacts since last hearing, and date of most recent placement visit.

2. Sources Reviewed

All records reviewed (DFPS service plan, school, medical, therapy notes, court orders) and all individuals interviewed. Thoroughness builds credibility for your recommendations with the Amicus Attorney.

3. Current Placement & Well-Being

Describe current placement, child's adjustment, and changes since the last hearing. Include specific observations from your placement visit — not secondhand reports. Texas courts expect CASA volunteers to have direct, current knowledge.

4. Services Status

Each ordered service and whether it has been accessed, is in progress, or completed. Note barriers. Flag any court-ordered services not yet provided — the Amicus Attorney needs documented examples to hold DFPS accountable.

5. Parental Progress

Objective, factual description of parent compliance with the service plan. Note visitation frequency, quality of visits, and child's response. Facts, not opinions — Texas courts need specific documentation to evaluate parental fitness.

6. Child's Views

Report what the child told you about placement, school, relationships, and permanency wishes — in the child's own words. Distinguish statements from your interpretation. Coordinate with the Attorney Ad Litem to avoid confusion about who speaks for what.

7. Best-Interest Recommendation

State your recommendation clearly and specifically: 'Continue current placement, order enrollment in TF-CBT within 30 days, and require DFPS to provide transportation to school of origin.' The Amicus Attorney will build their legal case on your factual recommendation.

8. Requested Court Orders

List specific orders you recommend. Discuss proposed language with the Amicus Attorney before the hearing. In Texas, the Amicus Attorney formally presents these orders — providing clear proposed language maximizes the likelihood your recommendations are adopted.

This handbook is a reference resource only and does not constitute legal advice. Laws, program structures, agency contacts, and resource availability change frequently. Always verify current information with your CASA supervisor or the relevant agency before relying on it in any legal proceeding. GAL volunteers are officers of the court and must follow their program's official guidance at all times. | GAL National Database 2026 | galnationaldatabase.org