1. Describe the organization’s history and programs.

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)/Prince George’s County, Inc. partners with the juvenile court to improve the lives of abused and neglected children living in foster care. With a strong commitment to diversity, CASA trains and supervises volunteers from the community who advocate for the best interest of children, recognizing and respecting each child’s individual needs. By providing a voice to children in the foster care system, it is our goal to promote the timely placement of the children we serve in safe, permanent homes. The program was started in 1992 through a collaborative effort of stakeholders, including board members from the Juvenile Court, the Department of Social Services and Legal Aid to address the unmet needs of children in foster care. In 2000, CASA was reorganized by an independent Board of Directors comprised of community, civic and business leaders. Since 2001, CASA has worked to continue to expand to meet the needs of the community.

CASA’s primary work is to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in a variety of areas including education, health, safety and placement. CASA recruits, screens, trains, and supports volunteer advocates who receive intensive training and are supervised by professional staff who oversee the work of no more than 30 volunteers to ensure a high level of support and professional services to the children served by CASA volunteers. CASA volunteers are matched one-on-one with a child or youth in foster care. CASA volunteers meet regularly with the child to whom they are assigned, enjoying time together while building the trust that is critical for understanding what that child or youth needs. CASA volunteers also gather information from everyone who is involved in the life of the child or youth. Each CASA volunteer writes a report to the court that provides information on progress and promotes greater understanding of the child or youth’s needs. The recommendations made by the CASA volunteer are considered by the court and more than 80% are ordered by the court to be implemented, resulting in more services for the youth we serve.

Children not matched with CASA volunteers often enter and exit the foster care system without ever having someone who can thoroughly assess their needs or advocate for their best interest. CASA strives to ensure that children with volunteer advocates receive critical services more often and sooner than those children not matched with a CASA, shortening the time they spend in the foster care system before achieving permanency. No other organization provides this service in Prince George’s County.

In addition to our core advocacy services, CASA has a Transitioning Youth Program to improve outcomes for youth preparing to emancipate at age 21 by developing and implementing plans around issues such as education and meeting their basic safety net needs including establishing safe, stable housing. Through this program, we are advocating for effective transition planning and ensuring that youth are stably housed and ready to live independently when their cases close. In addition to a lack of future planning, youth are struggling with developmental disabilities, mental health issues and educational issues. CASA is working to address these issues so that our youth are able to succeed in school. The program also ensures that all safety net services are available at the time the case closes.

2. What are the short and long term goals of the organization?

CASA’s primary goal is always to help children in foster care find a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible. In the short term, CASA seeks to build its Transitioning Youth division to bolster staff, volunteer and stakeholder expertise to advance Ready by 21 efforts and improve outcomes for transitioning youth. CASA will increase efforts to recruit a diverse volunteer pool prepared to work with transitioning youth. CASA will offer transitioning youth-focused pre-service training so that all volunteers understand the unique needs of this population. CASA is continually working to ensure that transitioning youth have written Transition Plans. CASA
will ensure that at least 70% of transitioning youth who emancipate during the award cycle will be stably housed at the end of their case and that appropriate safety net services will be in place for a smooth transition. At least 70% will obtain their high school diploma or equivalent

Long-term outcomes include increasing the number of youth who graduate from high school; increasing the number of youth who enroll in and graduate from secondary education; increasing the percentage of youth who are employed at the time their case closes, eliminating homelessness among exiting foster youth who are served by CASA and continuing to grow until all children and youth in need are served by a CASA volunteer.

3. Describe the organization’s most important accomplishments of the past year to three years.

In the past three years, our accomplishments include: named “One of the Best” nonprofits in the DC Metro region by the Catalogue for Philanthropy; decreased average length of stay in foster care for youth we serve by 17 months over FY10; increased the number of cases closed to permanency by 39% over FY10; 83% of cases closed to permanency resulting in more children having a safe, permanent home and fewer children languishing in foster care; 84% of recommendations CASA made to the Juvenile Court were ordered by the Court, resulting in CASA children receiving more services; created an Emancipation Manual and Emancipation Checklist that were adopted by the Juvenile Court to help improve outcomes for youth preparing to emancipate; established stable housing for 70% of transitioning youth (prior to Transitioning Youth Program, most youth were homeless at case closure); Executive Director named 2013 Kappa Alpha Theta CASA Program Director of the Year; CASA volunteers served for an average of 24 months, twice the 12 month required commitment which is evident of volunteer satisfaction; no cases served by CASA reopened due to additional abuse or neglect whereas nationally about 16% of cases without a CASA reopen; named Gold Participant on Guide Star Exchange.

4. Describe the organization’s most significant challenges.

Our constant struggle is to meet the needs of Prince George’s County foster care youth. Best practices require that each full-time Case Supervisor supervise no more than 30 cases and many cases remain open for several years due to the complexities and extenuating factors. We must continue to grow requiring additional staff to expand our capacity to meet the community need. This growth requires us to continue to diversify our funding sources to recruit, train and support additional volunteers.

While the Department of Social Services (DSS) is legally charged with the care of foster youth and creating Transition Plans for them, it is not possible for DSS to fully prepare youth for adulthood; a multi-partner collaborative approach is required. As the 2011 Chapin Hall study on foster care alumni outcomes shows, youth are unprepared and are experiencing a wide range of negative life outcomes. CASA initiated the Transitioning Youth program to address the underlying lack of preparation and focus but more must be done to pave the path towards success including focus on critical determining factors for success such as education and job readiness. CASA is working to identify emerging needs in the population and bridge the gaps where DSS is unable to provide what these youth need to succeed.

5. Describe the working relationship between the executive director and board. What are their respective roles in terms of decision-making, strategic planning, fundraising, and financial oversight?

The Board is charged with programmatic and fiscal oversight of the organization and is responsible for assisting with fundraising activities. The board has an active role in decision making by reviewing and approving the annual programmatic goals and activities as set forth by the Executive Director. The Executive Director prepares a budget each year which the Board reviews, approves and monitors over the course of the fiscal year,
approving changes as necessary. The Executive Director is responsible for day-to-day operations of the organization, programming and staff supervision. The board approves all new staff positions proposed by the Executive Director and reviews new and amended job descriptions that support the annual goals. The Executive Director and Board together review progress toward goals quarterly and make adjustments as necessary. The board leads strategic planning every three to five years, creating committees to collect stakeholder and staff input. The strategic plan is managed by the Executive Director and has strong board input. The board has ultimate approval authority. The board approves and leads fundraising events and charges the Executive Director with raising funds necessary to meet the budget. The board has a personal gift obligation to the organization and is expected to introduce the Executive Director to potential corporate and individual donors. The board takes part in the annual thank-a-thon and has led individual gift campaigns with challenge funds. The Executive Director is responsible for day-to-day financial management of the organization and is authorized to complete financial transactions on behalf of the organization. The board directs that an audit be completed every year, reviews financial statements prepared by the Executive Director at least quarterly and requires the Executive Director to stay within budget in all areas. The Board reviews financial and accounting policies and makes changes and amendments as needed.

6. Describe the working structure of your board. How often does it meet? Do subcommittees exist? Are there any advisory boards, how are board members recruited?

The Board meets every other month and is led by an executive committee and all members participate on subcommittees (audit, PR, fundraising and Board development). In spring 2012, the Board worked with Taproot to identify areas of strength and weakness and develop a plan for recruiting new members. As a result, the Board is actively recruiting new members through a variety of sources including personal and business contacts and online volunteer and board member matching sites. Seven new members were added in 2013 and several more are currently under consideration for membership.

Section B:

1. How will this funding request improve the organization’s ability to achieve its programmatic or organizational goals?

The long term goal of this program is to ensure that all foster care youth have the appropriate education that leads to sustainable income and stable housing when they emancipate. The gateway to this goal is advanced training and education. This funding request would allow CASA to continue current best practices and processes around training volunteers and providing support to volunteers working with transitioning youth. Additionally, it would allow CASA to initiate a secondary education fair for both volunteers as well as for the youths themselves to attend in order to present the full range of options available to Prince George’s County youth.

The youth we serve come from families and homes where domestic violence, substance abuse, poverty and untreated mental illness are the norm and high school graduation, college attendance and sustainable employment are seen as unattainable. CASA is working with these youth to teach them that there are better ways, other choices, other options and that they can take care of themselves and can be successful. Over years of working with a particular youth, we are able to witness them making better choices- realizing that they should not accept abusive behavior from a partner; recognizing that, while they might be able to continue a relationship with their birth family, they cannot live with them because they are not healthy; or realizing the importance of maintaining their health and seeing a counselor. Breaking a cycle takes a generation whereas CASA only works with the youth for their childhood and/or adolescence. However, the fact that we witness...
youth making better choices and moving in the right direction shows us that they have the potential to break those cycles. We envision a time when we will work with youth to find internships, apply to colleges, and chase their dreams. Right now the immediate needs are more basic, more pressing. However, CASA is proud to say that we are witnessing transformation in these youths’ lives. CASA believes that future planning will give us the opportunity to witness the successes that their peers and their families experience and take for granted.

2. Describe how the project/activities fit within the goals of the grant opportunity.

This program will prepare youth to transition successfully to adulthood by obtaining their high school diploma or equivalent and by linking them to appropriate safety net services. According to the Child Welfare League of America, 3 out of 10 homeless adults report a history of foster care which demonstrates the failings of current transition planning efforts. Youth who emancipate without effective Transition Planning are more likely to end up homeless, jailed, using substances, unemployed and reliant on adult services. According to the 2002 Chapin Hall study, youth who were employed before exiting foster care had much higher employment levels after emancipating than those who were not employed while in care. CASA will match youth one-on-one with a CASA volunteer who, unlike their social worker who may be assigned to up to 30 cases, will be able to address their individual needs, working with youth to develop a plan that makes the most sense for their needs and developmental level. CASA volunteers attend IEP and other school meetings, advocate for the youth, and help the youth learn to advocate for themselves. CASA volunteers help to actualize goals of the youth’s transition plans. For example, if the plan is for the youth to get a GED, the volunteer will take the youth to sign up for a GED program and will monitor progress and attendance. As the youth nears emancipation, the CASA volunteer will work to connect the youth to all available community resources and will teach the youth how to access safety net services while at the same time working towards sustainable housing. At the time the youth emancipates, he or she will receive a personalized Emancipation Manual which will include listings of available community resources and steps for addressing emerging issues.

Joseph has worked side-by-side with Robert for several years to keep him stable in school, even personally tutoring him. Attending prom is important to Robert so Joseph has made sure that he has a suit and is able to attend. Robert wanted to drop out of school but Joseph talked him out of it and kept him moving forward. Because of Joseph, Robert is going to graduate next month. Joseph continues to help Robert plan for his future and plans to walk side by side with him as he works toward his goals.

By improving outcomes for youth transitioning out of care, CASA hopes to increase self-sufficiency and reduce the level of homelessness of this population thereby reducing the likelihood of subsequent costs to the County and State through re-entry into the system.

3. What specific community need or issues does your organization/program address?

Court Appointed Special Advocates works with children in Prince George’s County who have been deemed Children in Need of Assistance (CINA) due to the severity of abuse or neglect they have experienced and, as a result, are living in foster care. Though it is the wealthiest African-American majority county in the country, there are high incidents of poverty, a troubled school system that ranks 24th of 24 school districts in the state and the 2nd highest number of children in care in the state. 86% of the youth served by CASA volunteers are 14-21 year old transitioning youth who are preparing for adulthood when their case closes. As the Child Welfare League of America explains, youth transitioning out of foster care are “at a higher risk for unemployment, poor educational outcomes, health issues, early parenthood, long-term dependency on public assistance, increased rates of incarceration, and homelessness.” According to the 2010 Chapin Hall study, only about 50% of foster
youth graduate from high school while the national drop-out rate is only 4.1% (National Center for Education Statistics) and even fewer enroll in college. Only 10% of foster youth actually enroll compared to 41% of the general population. Most unsettling is the fact that only 2% of foster youth graduate from college. In Prince George’s County, only 65% of exiting foster youth have a GED or high school diploma; 41% are attending educational or vocational training and a mere 35% are employed.

National trending and our experience indicate that the vast majority of youth CASA will serve in coming years will be at-risk transitioning youth. Though the increase in transitioning youth is a national trend, this CASA program finds that youth here have additional barriers to successful transitions such as performance greatly below grade level, multiple mental/medical health issues and a lack of resources to provide even court-ordered services. As our youth reach emancipation, they are unprepared to live completely on their own. Many are forced to live with family members that were considered unfit to care for them when they were minors, live from friend to friend or live on the streets engaging in illegal activity in order to survive. The Department of Social Services is ordered by the court to assist older youth in developing a Transition Plan to prepare for the transition out of foster care yet the court is given little information regarding planning and very few youth in Prince George’s County have a Transition Plan when they emancipate. Not only are they unprepared for adulthood or self-sufficiency but most are homeless on the day their case closes. This year, 19 of the youth we serve will age out of the system. Without CASA’s intervention, they will likely be homeless. CASA seeks to address the unmet needs of older foster youth and ensure that transitioning youth have necessary life skills; a plan for independence that includes education, job preparation and/or attainment, and healthy relationships; and stable housing when their case closes, ultimately contributing to successful transitions to adulthood. In the absence of a safe, permanent placement with a caring adult, the ideal for older youth is to be well prepared for adulthood and this CASA program is initiating innovative efforts to ensure a successful transition.

4. Describe the strategies to tackle these issues. Does the organization use best practices shown to be effective in other settings or based on national standards? How are identified strategies implemented?

Unfortunately, DSS is currently creating Transition Plans only for 20.5 year olds just prior to emancipation which leaves little time for preparation. CASA will continue to improve our relationship with DSS case workers to facilitate this process but will also work directly with the youth we serve to plan for the future. For youth who have a Transition Plan, CASA volunteers work proactively with the youth and DSS to execute the youth’s Transition Plan focused on education, employment, money management, housing, supportive relationships and community connections, health and documentation. CASA will work towards the goals of their Transition Plan (e.g. if obtaining a GED is a goal, the volunteer will take the youth to sign up for GED preparation and follow progress and attendance); will attend DSS-facilitated planning meetings to review progress towards the goals of the Transition Plan, and will report on progress to the court at hearings. For all youth, CASA will keep the focus in court hearings and in their work with the youth on future planning. CASA seeks to help youth build a path towards success and stability; therefore educational goals are a major component of future planning therefore CASA is working with youth to develop and actualize educational goals to ensure they graduate from high school or obtain their GED and have the opportunity to enroll in secondary education if that is part of their plan.

CASA offers pre-service training 3-4 times per year to new volunteers which includes a special emphasis on transitioning youth. This specialized pre-service training as well as in-service training for volunteers currently working with transitioning youth utilizes National CASA Association’s “Fostering Futures” curriculum, a national best practice based on the Theory of Possible Selves. In addition to CASA volunteers, the in-service training is offered to all Independent Living Case Workers, the Legal Aid Bureau and other attorneys representing the
youth we serve. CASA will also offer a Secondary Education Fair that presents the full range of options available to our youth including apprenticeships, workforce development, community colleges, state universities and other appropriate options. Various workshops or tables will be available to youth such as a booth where financial aid personnel will be available to assist youth in completing FAFSAs on the spot. Information on special scholarship and internship options for foster care youth will be made available.

CASA employs all available local, state and national best practices. Best practices influenced by the National CASA Association include use of their training module, the number of pre-service (37) and in-service (12 per year) training hours and the inclusion of LGBTQ training. Not only do we adhere to National CASA best practices regarding volunteer screening but we have developed additional methods to ensure we are utilizing only the most qualified and appropriate individuals who can handle this rigorous work. CASA volunteers advocate for Family Group Decision Making, a family-centered facilitation method, and Fostering Connections, a national best practice for finding family members. With CASA’s assistance and training, DSS has been experiencing unprecedented success in locating relatives all over the world, providing new hope for children awaiting a permanent home.

5. How is the population you serve involved in your work and how do they benefit from this work?

Youth meet regularly with their CASA to discuss their progress. CASA volunteers get to know the youth and significant individuals in their life (i.e. teachers, foster/biological parents, social workers) to make recommendations to the court regarding what is in their best interest. In addition to responding to questions about their status and services, youth participate in social activities with their CASA volunteer that are appropriate to their age and interests. Many youth look to their CASA as the trusted adult in their life and view them as a mentor. CASA volunteers advocate for Family Decision Making, a family-centered facilitation method that promotes the involvement of the youth and family in the process.

CASA volunteers work proactively with the youth and DSS to write and execute the youth’s Transition Plan which focuses on education, employment, money management, housing, supportive relationships and community connections, health and documentation. CASA volunteers attend Transition Team meetings with the youth to discuss progress towards the goals and makes adjustments as necessary. Youth meet regularly with their CASA volunteers who actively seek to assist the youth in implementing goals of the Transition Plan. CASA has created several opportunities such as focus groups for youth to provide input into the services we provide to integrate youth fully into the process and engage them as adults and partners in decision making regarding their Transition Plan. Youth will benefit because they will have a voice in the process. Rather than simply receiving a copy of a Transition Plan a Case Worker has written for them, CASA will ensure that youth have a voice and play an integral role in creating their Transition Plans so that they are realistic and achievable based on the youth’s values, interests and personal goals. Ultimately, youth will benefit from this program because they will have the life skills required to transition successfully to adulthood when their cases close.

6. How does this organization connect to the work of other organizations in the same field/area? Who will your partners be? What are their roles and responsibilities? How will you manage your relationship?

CASA staff network with community resource providers such as the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center and the Training Source and leverage our partnerships with organizations such as the Human Services Coalition of Prince George’s County, the Prince George’s Community College’s Workforce Development Institute and the Coalition for the Homeless to connect youth to all available resources. CASA continues to identify opportunities to collaborate with other local community resource providers.
CASAs has been working closely with the Prince George's County Department of Social Services (DSS) senior leadership to establish the most effective ways in which CASA can support their efforts to improve outcomes for transition aged youth and have determined that CASA will be a vital member of the Transition Planning Team. While the Case Workers will facilitate the team, CASA will do much of the work in partnering with the youth to implement goals. The court recognizes that teens need individualized support in implementing their transition plans and looks to CASA to provide that individualization since DSS workers are stretched thin. Since CASA volunteers are assigned only one case at a time, they can focus on ensuring the implementation of the goals while collaborating with DSS and reporting on progress to the court. While Case Supervisors and volunteers will routinely work directly with DSS Case Workers, the Executive Director and DSS’ Independent Living Director will continue to communicate regularly to ensure an effective collaboration.

7. Who will be involved in carrying out the plans outlined in this request?

All CASA staff will have a role in this program. The Executive Director, Ann Marie Binsner will oversee the project and related evaluation. Ann Marie Binsner has been the Executive Director since CASA began operations in 2001. She has responsibility for reaching the targets set forth in the grant. Ms. Binsner has an extensive background in program development and fiscal management as well as experience and training in working with children who are struggling with a multitude of challenges. In addition to her administrative duties, Ms. Binsner is responsible for the supervision and oversight of all program development and implementation.

The Executive Director, Program Director and Transitioning Youth Coordinator will work to build and develop relationships with key stakeholders and community partners. The Program Director, Rodi Moore, has wide-ranging experience in all aspects of social work and case management and is able to explain social workers’ perspective to her teammates. Cheryl Richards is the Transitioning Youth Coordinator and has been working to build the program since 2011 with a lot of early success. The Program Director, Transitioning Youth Coordinator and Case Supervisors will directly supervise the volunteers and will provide support and linkages to community resources. Jeanmarie Albert and Sarah Bosken serve as CASA’s Case Supervisors. Each team member has experience in child welfare, family law and volunteer management. Ms. Albert has extensive experience with transitioning youth and is charged with collaborating with Ms. Richards to build the transitioning youth division. This dynamic team, led by Ms. Moore's supervision ensures that each CASA volunteer receives the support and guidance needed to ensure high quality advocacy services for children in foster care. Volunteers are the backbone of the organization and work directly with the youth to create and implement the Transition Plans. Volunteers come from a range of backgrounds and bring their unique perspectives to the work which is guided by common principles and practices which are taught in pre-service training.

8. Describe goals/outcomes for the grant period and how this request will enable you to accomplish them.

**Goal 1:** 100% of transition-aged youth will have basic needs addressed

**Outcomes:** 102 youth receive specialized services and support from trained CASA volunteers. Case Supervisors meet with volunteers at least monthly and provide advice and resources as needed. CASA volunteers will work directly with youth to ensure that either Transition Plans are written or future planning is conducted; will build life skills and prepare for their future by accomplishing goals of the Transition Plan. CASA will connect youth to available community resources. 100% of youth will receive information on accessing safety net services. Volunteers report to the court regarding progress at hearings every 6 months. 100% of youth will have health insurance when they emancipate. At least 70% of youth will be stably housed when they emancipate.
**Goal 2:** Volunteers and youth will receive the appropriate training to conduct future planning and develop Transition Plans and effect positive results in accomplishing goals of the Transition Plan.

**Outcomes:** Volunteers will be recruited through a variety of sources and 3-4 volunteer pre-service trainings will be held. Priority needs for each youth will be identified. Volunteers will work with youth on development of future planning and creation of transition plans.

**Goal 3:** 70% of eligible transitioning youth served by CASA will obtain their HS diploma or equivalent.

**Outcomes:** CASA will assist youth in creating educational and vocational goals, revisit those goals at least biannually and provide support to youth in achieving short and long term goals as set by the youth. A Secondary Education Fair will be hosted by CASA which will present foster youth with all available educational options including apprenticeships, workforce development, community colleges and state universities and will provide information and assistance on topics such as completing a FAFSA. The fair will allow youth of all skill/ability levels to identify realistic and accessible goals and community partners that offer what they are seeking. At least 70% of youth will achieve their educational/vocational goals by the time they reach the age of 21.

9. **What measurable outcomes have been achieved over the past year?**

CASA has created an Emancipation Manual which was adopted by the Juvenile Court and is distributed to all emancipating youth in hard and digital copy (youth served by CASA receive a manual customized to suit their individual plan) and an Emancipation Checklist that was adopted by the Court and is utilized by CASA volunteers and other parties to the case to track progress. CASA has created a new Court Report template that is utilized by volunteers and staff to guide Court hearings by focusing on progress in the key areas of the Transition Plan. CASA hosted our first independent living skills training in coordination with “Operation Hope” which provided a 4-hour economic empowerment training. The Executive Director has forged relationships with DSS senior leadership and has advocated for the use of Transition Plans which are mandated by the Maryland Department of Human Resources, but have not been fully implemented in Prince George’s County. Approximately 70% of the youth we serve are stably housed when their case closes whereas prior to this program, the majority of exiting youth were unstably housed, living with inappropriate parties or were homeless.

10. **What data/performance measures will you use to evaluate the success of the program?**

CASA will use COMET (CASA Outcomes Management Evaluation Tool) to track progress and outcomes on each case including: # of youth served, recommendations made by CASA; permanency plan accepted by the court; number of placements; length of time in care; number of cases closed and whether CASA’s recommended permanency plan was achieved. CASA will leverage its involvement in Model Courts and its positive relationships with the local Masters to continually monitor the benefits to the court and make adjustments as necessary. CASA volunteers will meet with the youth at least twice per month and will report to their Case Supervisor at least once per month regarding compliance with court orders and the progress towards the goals of the Transition Plan. Case Supervisors will evaluate progress and provide immediate feedback to volunteers to ensure constant monitoring between court hearings. The Emancipation Checklist and Transition Plan will be the primary focus of each court report submitted prior to hearings and COMET will allow tracking of the success of our recommendations in those court reports. In addition to formal evaluations, CASA volunteers and staff will monitor youth through qualitative means to ensure that they are obtaining the life skills required for a healthy and successful transition to independence. Participant surveys will be used to track results of training.