CASA of Merced County believes human connection has the power to change lives. Our work advocating for children who are in the protective care of the court draws its strength from the incredible individuals in our community who step forward – in good times and bad – to let our most vulnerable population of children know that they are not alone.

This is a challenging and stressful time for all of us. For the children we serve, it can be especially scary. Unfortunately, child abuse and neglect does not take a break in times of stress – it increases.

Right now, as we are all dealing with the stress of the coronavirus pandemic, it is more critical than ever that our children in foster care have someone who is making sure their needs are met and that our courts have trusted and trained advocates who can alert them if a child is in danger or has critical needs.

Our mission, and the advocacy and support provided by our volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates is more important now than ever before. The Judge and Social Workers need our help watching over our children.

To comply with the “stay at home” order, and for the safety of our staff, CASA of Merced County is working remotely. We remain operational, and our team is actively supporting you, our amazing volunteers.   Effective Wednesday, April 1 (no fooling) CASA of Merced County employees complied with 'shelter in place' and began working from home.  We are still here for YOU.  You can reach your Advocate Coordinator via email or phone as you have done in the past.  We will be checking calls that come into the office.  We can use Zoom to address issues that may need face to face contact.

CASA of Merced County, with your help, stands ready to serve. We are so grateful for all those who support our critical work, as donors and as volunteers. We promise to continue services during this crisis, and beyond – because we know that, the need will only increase in months to come.

How we respond in today’s circumstances will define us as a community for years to come.

We at CASA are asking that you continue to remain in contact with your CASA youth. We would like you to reach out to your CASA kiddos weekly. Remember, this is a scary time for us, but we are able to go to bed each night in our own homes with our families. Imagine how your CASA kiddos must feel separated from their loved ones in these uncertain times.

***National CASA has published these guidelines and I am asking that all of you please follow these:***

**ALTERNATIVES TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS**

* Texting: If texting with a child, no confidential information that would disclose specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed.
* Texting should be limited and during reasonable hours.
* Text conversations should not be deleted until after the case is closed.
* CASA/GAL volunteers should be aware that any messaging, texting, emailing may be discoverable by the court. Please be sure to review state laws and court rules to determine if text messaging is discoverable in court.
* Video Conferencing: Skype, FaceTime or other online video chat applications between CASA/GAL volunteers and children may be utilized for volunteer meetings with children. No confidential information that would disclose specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed.
* If online video chat applications are utilized, these additional parameters should be followed:
	+ Ensure you are in a private location with no other people around.
	+ No recording may take place (audio or visual) by either party on the call.
	+ Online video chats should not be conducted with children under the age of 13.

**More Guidance for Volunteers: Ways to Safely Stay In Touch With Children**

* All calls should be prefaced with a verbal disclosure agreement to verify the above parameters are met and agreed upon at the beginning of each call.
* Remember that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using video chat technology.
* Phone Calls: When talking to a child on the phone, the CASA/GAL volunteer must follow many of the same recommendations as with video chat technology including ensuring you are in a private location with no other people around, that there is no recording taking place, and that no confidential information that would disclose the specifics about a child’s identity or the case should be discussed

**Thank you for all you do for CASA of Merced County and your kiddos!**