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From: Jennifer Richard, CFRE <JenniferR@speakupnow.org>
Sent: Wednesday, May 20, 2020 11:12 AM
To: Nicol, Colleen <CNicol@riversideca.gov>
Cc: Jessica Muñoz, Esq., MFS <JessicaM@speakupnow.org>
Subject: [External] Voices for Children - Public comment for City of Riverside public hearing on June 2, 2020

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Good morning,

Attached please find Voices for Children's public comment submission regarding CDBG allocations for the upcoming public hearing on June 2. Thank you for the opportunity to be heard in this virtual format.

Please contact me with any questions.

Best,
Jennifer Richard

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cc Mayor
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VOICES FOR CHILDREN
Riverside City Council Virtual Public Hearing – June 2, 2020
Public Comment Submission

Voices for Children would like to thank the Council for providing CDBG funding to support our Court Appointed Special Advocate or CASA Program.

Voices for Children (VFC) is the only Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program authorized by the court to provide CASA volunteers in Riverside County. CASAs play an important role in transforming the lives of children in foster care who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected. CASAs typically serve one child or sibling group at a time unlike other child welfare professionals who often serve large caseloads of families. In many cases, the CASA is the one consistent adult presence in the life of their case child.

In light of COVID-19, the role of the CASA has never been more critical. Children in foster care have experienced trauma and uncertainty in their lives. And now, the uncertainty in our local communities is compounding the instability already prevalent in their lives. We know that during this time, children will reach out to their CASA for support, especially because they are experiencing abrupt losses of the people and places upon which they may have sought comfort. They are not attending school with familiar teachers and friends. Their visits with siblings and family members have been limited. They may not have easy access to mental health services. We also know that tumultuous times like these often create unhealthy family dynamics that may result in even more children at risk and an increase in the number of children entering foster care. CASAs are providing a lifeline for children and their caregivers as well as another set of “ears” for social workers and the court.

There is nationwide concern that children in foster care are more at risk now during the COVID-19 crisis. Many caregivers are experiencing stress due to the economic consequences of social distancing. Before the pandemic, children’s attendance at school and daycare provided a modest safety net to help identify children who might be experiencing abuse or neglect. In those interactions, someone outside the home might spot a bruise and ask how things were going. During physical distancing, that oversight is gone. CASA volunteers may be the only adult in frequent contact with their case child during this time. As mandated reporters, their observations and reports to the court are critical in protecting these children.

In the coming months as restrictions are lifted, child welfare professionals anticipate a spike in child abuse reports and an increase in the number of children entering foster care. Sadly, this means children may remain in abusive situations longer and may experience ongoing abuse. Because CASAs focus on one child or one sibling group at a time, they are well-position to advocate formally through their written court reports and informally through communication with social workers to ensure that children receive services specific to their needs. We are preparing to meet the needs of these children and provide them with the unparalleled support of a CASA.

Voices for Children is grateful for the grant funds that have been allocated to our CASA program in the prior year. These funds have been, and will continue to be, used exclusively to serve children from the city of Riverside. We respectfully request that the Council follow the recommendations to provide a CDBG grant again this year.