



Columbia Gorge CASA Policies and Procedures For CASA Volunteers

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COLUMBIA GORGE CASA

VOLUNTEER POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

A. THE CASA MISSION

Mission: Our mission coincides with that of the National CASA Association, namely, *advocate for the best interests of children in foster care in Wasco, Hood River, and Sherman counties*. More specifically, we work to *promote and support quality volunteer advocacy to help assure that each child receives all needed services while in care and that they are expeditiously placed in a safe, permanent, nurturing home*. CASA volunteers work with attorneys, social workers, parents, teachers, and foster parents to learn the child's circumstances and make reports and recommendations to the judge as to what is best for a particular child. This can include reunification with parents, adoption, or another permanent plan to ensure no child "falls through the cracks" of the system.

History: Conceived by Judge David Soukup, the first CASA program began in Seattle in 1977. CASA came to Oregon in 1985 when the legislature authorized a pilot CASA project. In 1987, the legislature mandated that all Oregon children who were abused or neglected should be appointed a CASA. Columbia Gorge CASA (then known as Mid Columbia CASA) began in 1987.

PROGRAM AUTHORITY:

Laws Governing CASA Programs: Oregon Revised Statute 419B.112, governs the appointment, duties and authorities of the Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Approval & Sanction: Columbia Gorge CASA ultimately operates under the approval and sanction of the Presiding Circuit Judge for Hood River, Wasco, and Sherman counties. Columbia Gorge CASA has working agreements with the courts and the Department of Human Services. The agreements outline our intent and legal obligation to:

- a) Investigate all relevant information about a given case;
- b) Facilitate and negotiate to ensure that the Court, the Department of Human Services, and the child's attorney fulfill their obligations to the child in a timely fashion;
- c) Monitor all Court orders to ensure compliance;
- d) Bring to the Court's attention any change in circumstances that may require a modification of the Courts order;
- e) Hold confidential and not disclose to others, except the Court professionals, and parties to the case, information received about the child, child's history, and prognosis; and
- f) At all times work to ensure that the child's best interests are maintained at the forefront of the case.

Corporate Authority: Columbia Gorge CASA is a private, not-for-profit organization incorporated under the laws of Oregon and operating with non-profit status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. A Board of Directors governs Columbia Gorge CASA.

B. THE CASA VOLUNTEER'S ROLE

Volunteer Advocates: Columbia Gorge CASA is committed to providing volunteer, lay advocacy for children. Although not child welfare professionals, CASA volunteers have an imperative to function with the highest standards of professionalism.

Role of Child Advocates in the Child Welfare System: Columbia Gorge CASA believes in the tremendous value of lay advocacy within a system primarily staffed with professionals; the lay advocates are equal participants who deserve respect in their role. Likewise, Columbia Gorge CASA believes in the importance of the professionals within the system and that CASA volunteers in no way replace those professionals.

Responsibility to Children: The organization's first responsibility is to advocate for the best interests of the children served by the program. All resources are allocated and policies & procedures are enacted in accordance with this responsibility. Examples include screening and case management procedures, training programs, staff qualifications, ratios of volunteers to staff, ratios of children to volunteers and a commitment to the highest standards of confidentiality.

Child Advocacy: Advocacy for the best interests of children requires commitment to three tenets: protecting children from abuse, promoting safety and permanency for children, and actively valuing the child's attachment to his or her family.

Safety and Permanency: Safety and permanency for children is a major focus of all CASA programs. Children require and deserve to live without the threat of physical or psychological harm to either themselves or to others in their home. Likewise, children require and deserve stability and permanence in order to develop bonds and attachments that lead to healthy, nurturing and meaningful relationships.

Attitudes Towards Families: Children love and value their families, even families who have abused or neglected them. Columbia Gorge CASA therefore recognizes that advocacy for the child is often closely tied to advocacy for the family. We promote respectful treatment of all parents and family members.

Culturally Appropriate Advocacy: Advocacy for the best interests of the child requires tremendous sensitivity to both the child's and family's culture, ethnic identity, religion, and the many other factors that contribute to a child's identity. Columbia Gorge CASA and all those within it must make a diligent and deliberate effort to ensure that advocacy is culturally sensitive and appropriate. Furthermore, Columbia Gorge CASA strives to do better than the norm, to grow beyond our current understanding and competency level. Columbia Gorge CASA recognizes that the best services will be provided to children when members of all the communities to which these children belong are well represented at every level of the organization, i.e., policy setting (Board of Directors), support and supervision (CASA staff), and direct service (CASA volunteers).

Purpose of Providing Support and On-Going Training to CASA Volunteers: CASA volunteers require and deserve competent and professional support and training in order to provide effective and appropriate advocacy for children. Columbia Gorge CASA strives to offer support and training, which will maximize the volunteer's strengths and minimize their limitations.

The CASAs Autonomy and Limits on Autonomy: The CASA, after appointment by the juvenile court, is the child's advocate and is given wide latitude by the CASA program to determine and advocate for a child's best interest. In fact, CASAs are encouraged to be vigorous in their advocacy efforts. Columbia Gorge CASA staff will normally support CASAs in this role. However, if the CASA program is in conflict with the opinions and recommendations of a CASA volunteer, the program may:

1. Submit a separate report to the court detailing its concerns, opinions and recommendations or,
2. If the program feels that either the welfare of the child or of another individual is jeopardized by the actions and/or recommendations of a CASA volunteer, the program may remove the CASA from his/her appointed case.

Communication: Positive and respectful communication is essential to the success of the Columbia Gorge CASA program. It is imperative that all individuals associated with Columbia Gorge CASA make all efforts to assure that venues of communication remain open and productive. This includes communication between staff and volunteers as well as with all other individuals and agencies engaged in the child welfare system. Communication between the program manager and volunteer is vitally important. Reports and recommendations submitted to the CASA program, from the volunteer, will not be altered without the knowledge and agreement of the CASA volunteer.

Relationship to the Child Welfare System: Columbia Gorge CASA values strong, professional and productive relationships and open communication with all the individuals associated to CASA cases and with the agencies working within the child welfare system. Although CASA volunteers often take positions in specific cases that are at odds with others on the case, the CASA program does not cast itself in an adversarial role with any party. Columbia Gorge CASA recognizes that reasonable people disagree and that the best outcomes for children result from a full and complete discussion of all issues and points of view.

Relationship and Responsibility to the Court: As the Hood River, Wasco, and Sherman County Juvenile Courts' designated Court Appointed Special Advocate program, Columbia Gorge CASA has a responsibility to operate with the highest standards of ethics and accountability, doing nothing to discredit the Court or the position of trust the program has been given. As appointed officers of the Court, Court Appointed Special Advocates must consistently demonstrate these high standards in all of their conduct, both inside and outside of the courtroom. They must abide by the laws of Oregon and the federal government and follow the rules of the Court, doing nothing to bring dishonor to either the Court, the role in which they serve or to the CASA program. These expectations additionally and equally apply to the Columbia Gorge CASA staff.

Job Duties and Requirements: CASA Volunteers, when sworn in and appointed to a case, are required to:

1. Visit with the children on their case(s) at least once every 30 days.
2. Review all records pertaining to the child as available.
3. Report to their assigned CASA Supervisor and discuss the status of the children on their case regularly.
4. Prepare written court reports for the Juvenile Court for all hearings associated with the child(ren) on their case. These reports must be submitted to the CASA Supervisor for review 72 business hours prior to the scheduled hearing. (CASA staff is prohibited from altering reports or recommendations without the knowledge and agreement of the CASA volunteer.)
5. Report immediately to their CASA Supervisor any major case related events or concerns (child is moved, abuse reoccurs, concerns about foster family, etc.).
6. Report to their CASA Supervisor any case related meetings, e.g., CRB hearings, DHS staffings, Family Decision Meetings, etc.
7. Share all written information with their CASA Supervisor before sharing it with any other party.
8. Attend court hearings & CRB reviews, Family Decision Meetings, and other meetings about the child.
9. Report hours and mileage spent on their case to their CASA Supervisor on a monthly basis.
10. Maintain their continuing education hours.
11. Return case files and other case related information to CASA office within one month of the case closing.
12. Immediate notify their CASA Supervisor of any criminal charges.

C. GROUND RULES FOR CASA VOLUNTEERS

Confidentiality: Columbia Gorge CASA is committed to the highest standards of confidentiality regarding clients, volunteers, staff and donors. The Executive Director, or their designated representative, has been delegated to address inquiries from the media or the public for information regarding confidential matters. Decisions to release information about confidential matters are made on a case-by-case basis by Columbia Gorge CASA's Executive Director. However, general information about the program and the work the program performs on behalf of abused and neglected children may be released by anyone associated with the organization.

A CASA volunteer must maintain absolute confidentiality regarding the children they represent and their families. This policy is the cornerstone of the CASA program, reflecting the CASA's legal (419B.112), moral, and ethical obligation to protect the child's and family's right to privacy.

CASA volunteers must hold in confidence all information regarding children and families. The case may not be discussed with the CASA volunteer's own family or friends, regardless of geographic distance. Confidentiality also applies to online and social media communication. In addition, all volunteers are required to sign and abide by the "Online Communication & Social Media Guidelines" policy.

CASA's must use extreme caution in transporting and storing written material about their case. Files at home must be kept in a secure file or storage unit.

No information of any type may be released, except as follows:

- A legal party to the case, as it assists in good case planning and service. Parties to the case may include among others: the judge (in court), attorneys and caseworkers assigned to the case. A prohibition on ex-parte communication specifies that documents given to one case party member MUST be given to ALL case party members.
- Other CASA volunteers.
- Columbia Gorge CASA staff.
- Professional counselors providing mandated services to the CASA children in a case.

Any decision to release confidential information should be discussed with your CASA supervisor.

Mandatory Reporting: Upon the completion of training a CASA volunteer becomes a Mandatory Reporter and as such must report any incident or perceived incident of child abuse or neglect to the CASA supervisor and the appropriate authorities.

Ethical Behavior: Columbia Gorge CASA is committed to the highest standards of ethics and integrity in all of the work we perform. Unethical behavior is never justified or acceptable, no matter the intention or outcome.

Respect: Columbia Gorge CASA, both staff and volunteers, will treat all people with respect and fairness, no matter who they are or what their relationship may be to the CASA program and the work the program does. Rude, disrespectful or demeaning behavior is considered unacceptable at any level of the organization.

Safety and Child Visitation: For the safety of the children, CASA volunteers are to remain within earshot or visual view of another adult when visiting with their child(ren.) This policy is intended to protect CASA volunteers from any false allegations as well as insure the safety of the child(ren).

Child Safety & Volunteer Background Checks: All Columbia Gorge CASA volunteers complete a comprehensive background check as prescribed in the National CASA Program Standards as a part of their application process. All current, active CASA volunteers are required to repeat this background check every four years on the month of their original swear-in date.

Transportation: In accordance with the recommendations of National CASA, Columbia Gorge CASA volunteers are not permitted to transport their CASA children in personal or public vehicles during the course of performing their duties and responsibilities. It is STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. Should this policy be breached the volunteer will be terminated from the program. Protecting the child, volunteer, and program requires adherence to this policy.

Placement, Legal Advice and Counseling: A CASA volunteer is prohibited from taking a CASA child home, providing legal advice or counseling. A CASA volunteer's role is not to make placement arrangements for their CASA child.

Giving Money or Gifts: CASA volunteers are not permitted to give money or expensive gifts directly to the child, the child's family or caregiver.

Grievances: If a CASA volunteer feels unfairly treated in any way, the volunteer is encouraged to speak directly with the Executive Director of Columbia Gorge CASA. If the CASA volunteer is still unsatisfied, she/he may request, in writing, a meeting with the Board of Directors.

Volunteer Caseload: It is desirable that CASA volunteers carry no more than two cases. In unique situations, a volunteer may be asked to add an extra case when a CASA's involvement is critical to the "best interests of a child"

and no other volunteer is available. In any case, a volunteer with more than two cases should be an exception to the rule and will be formally documented by CASA staff.

Conflicts of Interest: The primary obligation of both CASA staff and CASA volunteers is to represent the best interests of abused and neglected children as objectively as is possible. Outside employment or personal business activities should not conflict with the volunteer's primary responsibility as a child advocate. Responsibility for recognizing and preventing such conflicts rests solely on the volunteer. It is strongly recommended that any suspected conflicts of this nature be brought to the immediate attention of Columbia Gorge CASA program staff.

Volunteers may not, in any way, use their position to obtain financial gain for themselves, any member of their household, their friends, or any business with which the volunteer, a member of their family's household or a friend is associated.

Volunteers may not enter into a professional or personal relationship with any client of Columbia Gorge CASA during their tenure as a Columbia Gorge CASA volunteer advocate. Volunteers must disclose the existence and nature of any pre-existing personal or professional relationship with any Columbia Gorge CASA client in order to prevent actual or potential conflicts of interest.

Records and Materials: Volunteers may not keep any confidential materials related to their assigned Columbia Gorge CASA case(s) upon case closure and/or separation from service. Such confidential materials include paper and electronic documents. All paper documents pertaining to assigned CASA cases must be returned to Columbia Gorge CASA for confidential shredding within 2 weeks of case closure or termination from service. Electronic files pertaining to assigned CASA cases must be permanently deleted from all personal computers within 2 weeks of case termination or termination from service.

Agreement to Policies and Procedures: CASA volunteers must agree to abide by the policies and procedures of the Columbia Gorge CASA program. These policies and procedures exist for the protection and benefit of the children, the volunteers, and the CASA program. CASA volunteers are obligated to familiarize themselves with these policies and procedures, follow them carefully, and bring any questions of interpretation to the attention of their CASA supervisor.

Deliberate violation of any of these policies or procedures by a CASA will result in disciplinary action. This may include placement on probation, requirement of specific remedial action, and/or immediate removal from the duties of a CASA volunteer and from volunteering for Columbia Gorge CASA.

Any CASA volunteer who subsequently realizes she/he may have acted contrary to the CASA Policy and Procedures is expected to immediately contact the CASA Supervisor or the Executive Director. Columbia Gorge CASA staff will work to sort out and correct any resulting problems, and will take into account the CASA volunteer's early notification as a demonstration of good faith. **It is infinitely better for Columbia Gorge CASA staff to hear about a problem early from the CASA volunteer rather than hear about it later from an outside source.**

CASA volunteers interact with a wide spectrum of individuals and agencies, not all of whom are happy to see a Court Appointed Special Advocate at his or her home or office. **Problems can and do occur.** Familiarity with Columbia Gorge CASA policies and procedures and close communication with the CASA supervisor can help forestall problems.

D. BECOMING A CASA VOLUNTEER

Recruitment and Screening: Recruitment of volunteers will be conducted in such a manner as to seek a diverse group of qualified advocates, to be as culturally, ethnically, racially, socio-economically and linguistically reflective of the children and families served as possible. An individual may become a Court Appointed Special Advocate if they:

- Are 21 years old or older;
- Successfully complete the application and screening process;
- Demonstrate the capability to adequately advocate for a child or children;
- Have no criminal record or history with a child protective service (CPS) agency; and
- Successfully complete 30 hours of initial training.

Screening procedures include:

- Review and evaluation of the written application;
- Three written reference checks from non-relatives;
- Criminal history check;
- Community screening process; and
- Interview with program manager, or other staff member appointed by the program manager.

The Columbia Gorge CASA program must ensure a high quality of service to children and therefore reserves the sole right, at any time during the screening and training process, to determine who may or may not be appropriate to serve as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Reasons for Rejecting an Application: Reasons for rejection of an application to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate may include, but are not limited to:

- The application is incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise unsatisfactory;
- References are not returned or are unsatisfactory;
- The applicant refuses to sign the release of information or provide necessary information to conduct background check;
- Criminal records and/or CPS check is unsatisfactory;
- The applicant has unresolved abuse issues, the applicant- or a member of the applicant's family- is currently involved or potentially involved with the Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Welfare, has pending litigation as a victim or survivor of abuse, is currently in treatment for substance abuse, has physically, sexually or emotionally abused or exploited a child, holds values in conflict with Columbia Gorge CASA's core values, or is otherwise deemed unsuitable;
- The applicant has falsified or misrepresented written or other information;
- The applicant has been sanctioned or faces disciplinary action by a professional licensing or other governing body;
- The applicant is employed or provides volunteer service in a capacity where conflicts of interest are perceived to be unavoidable; and/or
- In the estimation of CASA staff, it becomes apparent through the training process that the applicant will be incapable of fulfilling the role of a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Applicants who are denied will receive written notification that their application has been rejected. Columbia Gorge CASA reserves the right to offer or withhold information related to the reasons for rejecting the application.

Accepting Applicant Trainees: Acceptance into the Columbia Gorge CASA volunteer training program does not guarantee that the trainee will become a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Record keeping: Columbia Gorge CASA will maintain records for all applicants to the program. Records associated with active and inactive volunteers, including volunteer personal data, application materials, training records, record of appointment and case related information, will be maintained and kept by the program. Access to applications submitted to the program and to records of active and inactive volunteers is limited to Columbia Gorge CASA staff.

Training:

Purpose: The National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association (NCASSAA), the Oregon Court Appointed Special Advocate Association (OCASAA) and the Columbia Gorge CASA (CGCASA) program all share guidelines that call for appropriate and adequate initial on-going training, education, and professional development of CASA volunteers.

General Training Requirements: Columbia Gorge CASA requires thirty (30) hours of initial training and twelve (12) hours of annual, on-going training for CASA volunteers. The initial training for prospective new CASA volunteers is normally scheduled over a two month period.

On-Going Training: On-going training is required for all active and inactive volunteers. Columbia Gorge CASA will alert CASAs to trainings available in exploration on many issues. Volunteers may submit attendance at workshops, seminars and other trainings attended as part of their employment, reading books and other material checked out from the program's Library, and other volunteer positions to be considered as credit towards this annual 12 hour requirement.

CASA Oath and Swearing In: All CASA volunteers who successfully complete the 30 hour training and wish to become Court Appointed Special Advocates must take an oath and be sworn-in by a Circuit Court Judge.

Volunteer Status Definitions:

Active: Active volunteers are those currently appointed to at least one case by the Columbia Gorge CASA Program or by a judge associated with a Courtesy CASA case from another jurisdiction.

Inactive: Volunteers will be considered inactive if they:

- Have not been assigned to an open case for a 12 month period.

Retired: Volunteers will be considered retired if they:

- Resign from the program
- Have been inactive for 13 or more months
- Fail to actively engage in their assigned case after 2 or more months.
- Are terminated from the program by Columbia Gorge CASA

Returning to Active Status from Retired Status: Volunteers with a "Retired" status may return to active status under the following terms:

- Provide proof of 12 hours of continuing education for each year they have been in a retired status.
- Complete a criminal background check if it has been 4 or more years since last check.
- Attend a one hour "Program Update Review." During this session the Volunteer Manager will review any new changes to the dependency process or program policies and procedures.
- Sign the Volunteer Policy and Procedures Acknowledgment & Agreement statement.
- Acceptance of a case assignment.

Volunteers who have been retired 5 or more years must complete the application and training process like a new applicant.

Volunteer transfer from another CASA Program: Volunteers who were active in another CASA program within the past 12 months are required to complete the following before becoming an active Columbia Gorge CASA volunteer:

- The other CASA program shall complete a Volunteer Referral Form which documents the volunteer's length of service; initial and continuing education training methods & hours, number of case assignments, number of cases completed, and redacted copies of three CASA Court Reports

- Completion of a Columbia Gorge CASA application packet; including a criminal background check.
- Complete a two hour “Local Program Orientation” which includes review of the program’s service area and Volunteer Policies and Procedures.
- Complete three hours of court watch.

Grounds for Termination: Volunteers may be terminated from CASA service if the agency determines one or a combination of the following:

- Violation of program policies and procedures, court rules, or law
- Gross misconduct or insubordination
- Being under the influence of alcohol or drugs while performing volunteer duties
- Theft of property or misuse of program equipment or materials
- Mistreatment or inappropriate conduct toward clients, families, co-workers or cooperating agency personnel
- Taking action without program or court approval that endangers the child, or is outside the role or powers of the program
- Failure to complete required initial or ongoing training
- Breach of confidentiality
- Failure to satisfactorily perform assigned duties
- Conflict of interest which can not be resolved
- Falsification of application materials or misrepresentation of facts during the screening process
- Falsification of any materials included in a report to the court
- Failure to report significant case information to the court
- Criminal activities
- Existence of child abuse or neglect allegations
- Initiation of ex-parte communication with the court
- Transporting a CASA child(ren)

The CASA volunteer shall be provided with a confidential memo identifying the reason(s) for the dismissal. At the time of a volunteer dismissal, all case materials and notes must be turned into the CASA office immediately. Individuals who have been terminated from Columbia Gorge CASA’s volunteer ranks will not be considered for a return to “active” status.

Volunteer Reviews:

All active volunteers will participate in annual review with Columbia Gorge CASA’s Volunteer Manager. The purpose of this review is to provide the volunteer and Columbia Gorge CASA an opportunity to check in about how the advocate’s volunteer experience is going; to identify ways that Columbia Gorge CASA can provide more effective volunteer support; and to review case status and identify future strategies and goals.

E. STARTING AND ENDING A CASE

Criteria for Case Appointments: A case in which a child has a pending juvenile court matter involving abuse or neglect may receive Columbia Gorge CASA services. The Circuit Court judges appoint the Columbia Gorge CASA program to the child’s case. In turn, the volunteer manager appoints the CASA volunteer to the case. The program cannot accept appointments to cases involving solely delinquency or custody issues.

Volunteer Selection for Appointment: When assigning a volunteer to a particular child/case, Columbia Gorge CASA staff will take into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of each available volunteer and make a determination as to which individual volunteers would best serve the needs of the child(ren) on the case. All cases are unique and volunteers have varying levels of knowledge, skills and experiences. It is with this in mind that the program will seek to match the right CASA volunteer to the right case.

Wait List: The Columbia Gorge CASA “Wait List” consists of those cases that have been referred to the program but, due to a lack of volunteers or appropriate volunteers, are not assigned a CASA.

Case Closure: Cases achieve closure when the Circuit Court removes itself and the state from custodial jurisdiction of the child(ren). This may be achieved by the child(ren)’s adoption or legal guardianship, a return to the biological family, the child(ren) reaching the age of majority (18), or by any court order mandating the end of such jurisdiction.

CASA Volunteer Removal: Removal of a CASA from a case may be voluntary at the request of the CASA, involuntary at the request of Columbia Gorge CASA or the Court, or a result of case closure. Unless it is a result of case closure, Columbia Gorge CASA will send an email notice notifying the parties that the CASA is no longer assigned to the case.

Courtesy CASAs: Columbia Gorge CASA, on occasion, will be asked to perform “Courtesy CASA” services. These requests usually come from other CASA programs, parents, foster parents or others associated to a case that relocates to Hood River, Wasco, and Sherman County. A “Courtesy CASA” is often requested in these instances to provide follow-up to a case. Though normally a short-term assignment, Courtesy CASAs still require a court appointment. As Columbia Gorge CASA wishes to provide safety for all children, the agency will seek to provide Courtesy CASA’s whenever possible.

Assigning an Additional Volunteer to a Case: Under certain circumstances, cases may benefit from having an additional volunteer appointed. This may occur, for instance, if the case would benefit from a certain expertise, e.g., bilingual skills. In such a situation, Columbia Gorge CASA staff would make a determination to appoint a co-CASA.

Transfer of Jurisdiction: If a case is transferred out of the jurisdiction of Hood River, Wasco, or Sherman County Juvenile Court, the appointment and the involvement of the Columbia Gorge CASA volunteer ends. Should the volunteer and the CASA program wish the new jurisdiction to appoint a CASA volunteer; the program will assist the volunteer to communicate with both the court and the CASA program in the new jurisdiction.

Saying Goodbye

CASA Volunteers have a time-limited relationship with the children on their cases. In the process of ending a case, it may be appropriate for a volunteer to make a “goodbye visit” to the child(ren) and family. **Always discuss this first with your CASA supervisor.**

Remember, every case is unique and every relationship is different. Discuss your ideas for future contacts, including the questions of cards and gifts, with your CASA supervisor.



Columbia Gorge CASA Volunteer Policies and Guidelines

Acknowledgement and Agreement

I have received and read the Columbia Gorge CASA Volunteer Policies and Guidelines. I understand that by signing this agreement and becoming a Columbia Gorge CASA Volunteer, I am agreeing to abide by these policies and guidelines in good faith and to the best of my ability.

Print your name

Signature

Date