



Florida Guardian ad Litem Program 2012 Status Report “A Voice Heard” Initiative & Transportation Pilot Project Review



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To Listen (*verb*) - to take heed; to pay attention.

Throughout my twenty years of advocating for children, I have learned that LISTENING is the most important skill in child advocacy. Listening, which also includes understanding, empathizing, and learning, is the foundational building block required to meet the needs of youth who are abused, abandoned or neglected - the children being served by the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program (Program) and its Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative (Initiative) provides the opportunity to listen to the voices of some of these children as they talk about the tireless work of their GAL volunteers and the important role their GAL volunteer plays in their lives.

The role of the Program and its GAL volunteers has been enhanced over the years. Originally, the Program was “under” the court system. GAL volunteers were limited to meeting the needs of the judiciary by writing a report with recommendations to the court. Their responsibilities did not include providing any direct services to the child. This limited view of the GAL’s role was reinforced by the Florida Supreme Court. On January 28, 1997, an Administrative Order was issued by the Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court entitled “In Re: Guardian Ad Litem Program Transportation Policy.” The order stated that “[T]he guardian ad litem is a court advocate only; the guardian ad litem’s responsibilities do not include providing direct services to children whose interests they have been appointed to represent.”

It became clearer, that the value of the Program were the GAL volunteers. Seeing this, the Legislature expanded the responsibilities of the GAL volunteers. The Program was moved from out of the courts to be more independent. Education laws were reformed allowing GALs to become educational surrogates for children, so they were no longer “court advocates only.”

The volunteers have always inherently understood the need for an expanded role for themselves in the lives of the children they serve. While working with the Program’s exceptional volunteers, I have come to appreciate that GALs have a tremendous passion for what they do. Children understand this, too. When an elementary school child was asked why their GAL visited them, she answered “because you love me.” A high school youth stated that his GAL “gives me inspirational speeches to try to keep me out of trouble.” These are heartfelt words from children in the most difficult time of their young lives.

I express my sincere appreciation to the Circuit Directors, staff members, volunteers, and children in Circuits 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 17 who contributed to this Initiative. Their participation is valued and appreciated. I especially want to recognize volunteer, Bonnie Marmor, Ph.D. in Strategic Planning, who led our team and put this report together. Their individual and collective efforts will help define the direction of the Guardian ad Litem Program in future years and will provide guidance as the Program moves forward to ensure that every child has a voice and someone to ensure their well-being.

Please listen to these valuable voices. Let’s all pay special attention to the children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan F. Abramowitz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Alan F. Abramowitz

February 9, 2012

THE “A VOICE HEARD INITIATIVE” EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative (Initiative) was designed to listen to the voices of children in foster care to better understand their experiences in working with a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteer and the expectations they have of the GAL volunteer with whom they have contact. The information was obtained from informal conversations between GAL volunteers in six of Florida’s Judicial Circuits and one hundred and fifty-two (152) elementary, middle and high school students, as well as youth who have left the foster care system at age 18 (aged out).

It was consistently confirmed that the bond between a GAL volunteer and the child(ren) with whom the volunteer spends time is built on the following key elements:

1. Communication: Talking, Listening and Understanding
2. Personal Interest: Caring and Concern
3. Support: Emotional and Material
4. Trust: Openness and Honesty

The children/youth participating in these conversations seemed to picture their GAL volunteer as a friend, mentor, counselor, teacher, advocate, supporter, and cheerleader. This Initiative realizes two outcomes: (1) it documents the success of the Guardian ad Litem Program and the work of its volunteers and (2) it also provides the opportunity for children in foster care to guide the direction of the Guardian ad Litem Program and to improve the organization’s ability to meet the child(ren)’s needs.



I am for the child.

“A Voice Heard”

A Guardian ad Litem Youth Initiative

Interim Report

Note: The name for the Initiative was proposed by a former foster youth, Brian Williams. Brian has recently been accepted into the Fostering Achievement Fellowship Program at Tallahassee Community College, the Program is extremely proud of Brian for his accomplishments.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative provides the opportunity to listen to the voices of foster care youth and former foster care youth as they give their opinions about the tireless work of their Guardian ad Litem volunteer and the important role their GAL volunteer plays in their life.

GAL volunteers represent so much more to a child than just being their court advocate. The GAL volunteer often becomes a role model, a mentor, an educational surrogate, a friend, a confidant, and most important, a consistent caring person on whom the child(ren) can rely. Children will tell you, in their own words, how their GAL volunteer talks with them, relates to them and cares about them.

Listening to these voices, you will hear about the ways in which GAL volunteers have been able to meet children’s needs, wishes and expectations. GAL volunteers ensure that they have a birthday party (sometimes their first one!), have a Christmas gift to open on Christmas morning, or the ability to visit their family members and friends....just like every other child does.

Listening to their voices, you will hear that Florida is fortunate to have the Guardian ad Litem Program (Program) to ensure that all children in our child dependency and foster care system have someone who respects them and regards each child as a special, unique person who deserves a bright future.

“A Voice Heard” Initiative Goal

The goal of the “A Voice Heard” Initiative is to gain a better understanding of Florida’s foster care youths’ expectations and experiences with their GAL volunteer. The Program will use the Initiative’s results to:

1. Assist GAL volunteers to develop a better understanding of the foster care youth they represent.
2. Enable GAL volunteers to effectively address the youth’s needs.
3. Allow the children in foster care to advise and guide the direction of the Program.
4. Improve the Program’s ability to meet foster care youth needs in a multitude of ways.
5. Train GAL volunteers and Program staff.
6. Share Initiative results with child welfare advocates system wide.

Framework

The framework for the “A Voice Heard” Initiative was based on the Program’s mission statement, core values and strategic plan. The Program’s mission is to ***advocate for the child’s best interest is our only interest.*** One purpose of the Initiative is to better advocate for abused and neglected children through listening to children’s needs and experiences.

The Program can better understand what really is important to the children represented and will be better equipped to represent their best interests. The Initiative will also give the Program an understanding of how youth’s experiences with their GAL volunteer can define the expectations of all GAL volunteers in the future.

In its Strategic Plan, the Program has stated its primary goal is ***to assure that every child has a voice in court.*** The Initiative pairs this goal with the Program’s core value statement that GAL has a ***commitment to children and communication built on trust.*** This core value demands the Program listen to both children currently in foster care and former foster care youth. The child’s voice must serve as the foundation for the child’s expectations of their GAL volunteer and even the Program as a whole.

The insights gained from the Initiative will become integral to the statewide training of GAL volunteers, Program staff, community stakeholders, and will be shared with child advocates in a diversity of settings and venues. In sum, GAL volunteers' effectiveness will be further strengthened through listening to children's voices and understanding their expectations. The lessons learned in the Initiative will be incorporated into the Program's Strategic Plan and future operations.

Information Gathering

The information throughout this report was obtained through conversations between GAL volunteers and foster youth in six of Florida's Judicial Circuits which were designated as participants in the Initiative. The participating circuits represent urban, suburban and rural counties. A total of one hundred and fifty-two (152) elementary, middle and high school students, as well as former foster youth, were asked a series of questions to determine their experiences with, and expectations of, their GAL volunteer.

GAL volunteers posed specific questions directly to the children with whom they are currently working or with whom they had previously worked. Having the child's own GAL volunteer question the child was an approach used for two reasons:

1. To enable GAL volunteers to learn how they could become more effective by gaining insights directly from the children they represent, and
2. To not treat children impersonally by introducing strangers into their lives.

Questions posed to the children/youth were developed in consultation with a child psychologist to ensure suitability.

The responses to each of the questions from all four survey groups were reviewed and analyzed for common themes. What follows is a question-by-question summary of children's "voices" expressing their thoughts about working with a GAL volunteer. Rather than the Initiative being a formal research project, it was developed to serve as an informal way to better understand the aspects of the relationship between a GAL volunteer and a child, and how that relationship can be strengthened.

INTERIM REPORT

Children and youth of all ages repeatedly provide examples of how important a GAL volunteer has been in their life. The work done by GAL volunteers as explained by the children themselves is an indisputable tribute to the success of GAL volunteer dedication and excellence in their advocacy. Below are the answers given by children to their GAL volunteer. The answers are divided by age group – elementary, middle and high school students and finally, former foster youth.

Elementary School Students (Grades K-5)

Question #1: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

- ❖ Help me. Fifteen children referred to several areas in which help was received.

Academics and reading: “you help me do my homework.”

Reunification with one or more parents or getting in contact with family members: “you helped me get back to my daddy’s house.”

Mental health or medical needs: “you helped me... by checking my medications...get a new therapist...get new glasses when I couldn’t see the board.”

Emotional support: “you helped me... keep my confidence...feel better and not be so sad.”



- ❖ Talk to me. Several children specifically mentioned how much they enjoyed just talking with their GAL volunteer and even mentioned what they discussed.

“You ask me how things are going.”

“You talk to me about my family.”

“You encourage me to do the right things.”

“You talk with me and my brother and sisters to make us feel comfortable where we are.”

- ❖ Visit me. Face-to-face contact with a GAL volunteer is also significant to a number of the children.

“You come to see me and play with me.”

“You check on me and make sure I am OK.”

“You come to my basketball games and cheer for me.”

“You come and get our minds off stuff and do stuff with us.”

“You taught me how to carve a pumpkin.”

Question #2: What other things would you like me to do for you?

- ❖ Help me. Some of the children’s responses indicated additional ways the GAL volunteer could assist the child. Children asked for help in their personal development, family situation, academic growth, and daily living.

Family:

“Help me...find a mommy and daddy.”

“See if my mom and I can live together.”

“Arrange for my siblings to spend the night.”

“See my sister out of state, have more sibling visits, and make sure a pre-adoptive family is a good family.”

“Help my brother and sister with doing the right thing.”

Personal Development:

“Help me...with my behavior- I am getting into trouble for my humor and bad behavior.”

“Help me to tie my shoes, show me which shoes go on which foot.”

Academic Growth:

“Help me... to learn and raise my grade.”

“Help me to do reading with practice tests.”

“Help me with my math.”

Daily Living:

“Help me...with food and lights.”

- ❖ Play with me. Several children proposed additional activities they would enjoy doing with their GAL volunteer.

Activities that could be done at the child’s home:

“Go trick-or-treating with me.”

“Do my hair...play Barbie’s...play games together... play Checkers with me.”

Attending school events:

“Come watch me play football.”

“Come to school to see my party coming up.”

“Come have lunch with me.”

Going places:

“I wish you could take me out to places so I don’t have to be here all the time with you. Like maybe a park or store or something.”

Other suggestions were being taken to the beach or to Universal Studios.

Question #3: If there was one thing you could wish for today, what would it be?

- ❖ Reunification. A few children responding to this question want to be reunited with their mom, their dad, a sibling, or their entire family.

One seven year old seemed to represent the feelings of this group when he stated, “to get back with my mommy - that is my only wish.”

Another eleven year old was happy to report, “I already got my wish...to come home.”

A variation on this wish was expressed by another eleven year old who said, “to be adopted by my aunt and uncle right now. I don’t want to have to keep waiting.”

- ❖ Material possessions. Not surprisingly, a good number of these younger children have a clear idea of what is on their wish list. Items included: an iPhone, a scooter with a wheel in front and back, a new DS charger, a Barbie doll with red, blue and purple hair, a Bratz doll, a puppy, and chocolate ice cream. One pragmatic responder just indicated “money” so he could buy a house and a car.

- ❖ Miscellaneous. Not falling into either of the above categories, a few of the expressed wishes took on a more personal note.

Two children want to expand their life experiences - “I want to go places – anywhere; I want to go to the museum – any type of museum;”

Two wanted their own bedroom; and

One wanted “to be good and get my school work done.”

The most poignant of the wishes was the ten year old who wished that “all of this

would get done soon.”

Question #4: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ You care about me and my safety. Quite a few children responding to this question believe that the GAL volunteer is interested in their safety. These children said their GAL volunteer came to see them to make sure they were safe.

“You come to check on me.”

“You come to make sure that I am OK.”

“To tell the Judge I am OK.”

“To see how I am doing.”

“To make sure everything is going well.”

“To see if I am happy.”

“To make sure I don’t get hurt.”

“To make sure I am safe.”

Obvious from many of the children’s answers was they sincerely believe the GAL volunteer cares about them *personally*. These children said that their GAL volunteers come:

“To make sure I go to school each day.”

“To make sure I get good grades.”

“Because you love and care for me and to help me with my problems.”

“Because you think I am a real neat kid - you tell me that a lot.”

“Because you care.”

“Because you love me.”



- ❖ To talk with me. As with Question #1, communication with the GAL volunteer is a key part of the volunteer-child relationship. Several children responded to this question by mentioning the value they place on being able to share feelings and information with their GAL volunteer.

As one eleven year old stated: “I like to talk to you and communicate. You explain what is going on in life. You help us be good kids.”

Similar thoughts were expressed by a ten year old who said: “you talk about good things to us. We talk about feelings and help me work that out.”

A nine year old was not too young to appreciate that “you give me information that nobody else gives me.”

- ❖ To help me. This question provided still another opportunity for the elementary school children to state their belief that their GAL volunteer comes to see them to assist them with activities related to their current circumstances.

General terms:

“To help me what (sic) I want in life.”

“So you can get more information about us so you can help us.”

Physical well-being:

“To help me count my pills.”

“To help with something we need like glasses.”

“To help us get new and/or eatable (sic) stuff.”

“To see my room.”

Family situation:

“To help us about the divorce thing with my parents.”

“To make sure me and my sister has (sic) a good family.”

Secretary Wilkins, from the Department of Children and Families stated, “The challenge of providing all of Florida’s children with the opportunity to dream of a better future is enormous. But it is truly the highest of moral callings and it requires the work of our Department, our community partners, businesses, and volunteers. I have repeatedly seen first-hand the impact of a volunteer guardian ad litem on a child’s life and the rewards are great for the child, the volunteer and our state’s future. I encourage any Floridian who wishes to help a child to volunteer with the Guardian ad Litem Program. The impact one person can have is incredible.”

Middle School Students (Grades 6 through 8)

Question #1: What do you enjoy most about my visits with you?

- ❖ You talk with me and listen to me. Much like elementary school children, middle school children also place a high value on being able to talk to their GAL volunteer. Middle school respondents, however, put emphasis on being able to have a conversation - a give and take - with their GAL volunteer. Pre-teens and young teens shifted their perspective from the GAL volunteer talking to them to their own ability to communicate with their GAL volunteer. Pre-teens also expressed the importance of being heard by their GAL volunteer. Some of the more articulate respondents expressed the trust and confidence they have in their GAL volunteer which enables them to express their feelings and discuss serious issues.



“The time we spend talking.”

“I can convey my thoughts and confide in you.”

“I can trust talking to you.”

“Having someone to talk to about stuff like what is going to happen to me and my sister.”

“Someone who listens to what I have to say.”

“I could talk to you about anything I want ...and you talk to me about what I am going through. You make me feel like a person.”

Several children view the relationship they have with their GAL volunteer as a personal one - a relationship that involves a special connection.

“You always seem so happy to see me and I can tell that you really like me.”

“You seem very interested in me and show that you care about my future.”

“I am happy to see your face.”

- ❖ You cheer me up and give me good advice. Developmentally, middle school children, pre-teens and teens are going through intense emotional turmoil. When their personal turmoil also includes involvement with the dependency system, it is not surprising that several children mentioned that their GAL volunteer is fun, lifts their spirits and keeps them centered.

“You laugh with me and give me good advice – Even when I’m mad at you, you make me happy and help me keep my head up.”

“You joke around and listen to me.”

“We laugh about a lot of silly stuff.”

“You keep telling me to find something good in everything – that’s hard but I try.”

“We have fun and enjoy ourselves. It clears my mind of all the bad things because we have fun. Also, when it’s time to be serious, you always do the important stuff, too.”



- ❖ You spend time with me. Many of the middle school children made specific mention of enjoying being with their GAL volunteer doing “stuff.” Whether talking, playing video games, meeting at the mall and “hanging out,” looking at the child’s latest photographs, polishing their nails together, playing games, or doing crafts – all of which were mentioned - there is a real sense the child looks forward to sharing time and activities with their GAL volunteer.

Question #2: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ Concern for my welfare. Many of the children responding to this question overwhelmingly voiced the same sentiments.

“Because you care about me... To make sure I am OK.”

“To see how I am doing and to see if I am in good care.”

“To make sure nobody does mean stuff to us.”

“To make sure I am OK in my foster home and to see if I want to tell the Judge anything.”

“To make sure I am eating.”

“To see if I need anything.”

“For the well-being of my safety and health and that you care about me. Also, to see if I’m progressing in my responsibilities and outlook on life.”

- ❖ To help me. Going beyond simple oversight of their safety, many children saw the GAL volunteer’s role as proactive, i.e., providing specific assistance to them. As some children were obviously becoming aware of court proceedings, there was an expectation that the GAL volunteer could be an intermediary with the court.

“To know what I want to happen in court...I can tell you what I want.”

“Give me a voice to the court and tell them how we feel.”

“Tell the judge what I want.”

Others were seeking *personal help*:

“You go to court so I will get a home where people love me.”

“To help (us) through the process (of adoption) and understand what is happening, and if we changed our mind about what we want.

“To help me solve my problems.”

Question #3: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

- ❖ Deal with my feelings. Judging from the responses to this question, the disruption of being involved in the dependency system often precipitates emotional confusion in middle school youth. Their responses reveal they are conflicted about their situation and rely upon the GAL volunteer to help them sort out their feelings. Some youth are satisfied if their GAL volunteer just lets them talk about their feelings.

“You listen to what I have to say and you get that things are important to me.”

“Spend time with us and listen to what we say about grades, friends, and father. You just listen to what we say and do not tell us stuff.”

Others want, and are able to have, a more in-depth conversation.

“(You) help me understand and answer questions I have about why my Dad and brother and Mom are the way they are.”

“You don’t mind if I cry and act upset and you understand how I feel and you explain why other people act the way they do – like my mom can’t help how she is and that she does love me.”

“When I tell my GAL I’m about to do something bad/wrong, my GAL says she is coming and she does.”

“She could help me to why (sic) I feel sad or I need to talk. We talk things through – she help (sic) me to understand and be there when needed – losing my mom was sad and D--- (GAL) was right there.”

“Try to help me get through my life and make me a better person.”

- ❖ Speak for me in court. As mentioned in the summary of responses to Question #2-B, middle school children responding to this questionnaire seem to have more of an understanding of court proceedings. Pre-teens and teens have a better understanding of the GAL volunteer’s role as an advocate in judicial procedures. For example:

“You tell the Judge my wishes and sometimes make an appointment with the Judge to talk to him privately.”

“Helps me in court, helps the Judge know how I feel, and makes sure I can talk to the Judge.”

“Make sure they bring me to court.”

“You helped me by convincing the Judge to place me with my aunt. Now I am being adopted by my aunt.”

“Helping me and my sisters be TPR’d (termination of parental rights) because going back to that wouldn’t have been good. Also, being present when we learned that the Judge had terminated my parents’ rights - that was important to me.”

Question #4: What other things would you like me to do for you?

- ❖ Nothing really. . . Maybe spend more time with me/take me places. Fifteen of the forty-four children responding to this question had no further suggestions regarding what could be done for them. Perhaps one of the largest compliments to GAL volunteers is that several of these children indicated they are already satisfied with what their GAL volunteer does for them.

“GAL does enough. There is nothing else she could do. GAL does everything.”

“You are doing great. I wouldn’t want to change anything.”

A further compliment to the role a GAL volunteer plays in a child's life is that an additional twelve students said that they wanted to spend more time with their GAL volunteer.

"I'd like to have you around more often."

"I would like for you to come visit on the weekend so we could spend more time together."

One thirteen year-old expressed a real commitment to her GAL volunteer: "I want you to be able to see me forever or at least until I get married."

Five of those who expressed a desire to spend more time with their GAL volunteer specifically mentioned that they wanted their GAL volunteer to be able to take them places "without relying on someone else." Among the proposed destinations were: an ice cream shop; a movie; my ballgame 'so you could watch me play;' (somewhere) to play video games; Legoland 'because you have done Legos with me forever;' Wild Adventure; and a skating rink.

- ❖ Help me with my family situation. No matter what difficulties the children experience in their home life, there is the hope on the part of several respondents that the GAL volunteer could help them keep in contact with family members from whom they are separated:

"I would like to see my brothers more often."

"I want to be with my Mom and big brother from Tennessee...occasionally see my Dad."

"I want to get my Dad out of jail and get my older brother to come visit me."

Other respondents were hoping for help improving their current living environment:

"To get my aunt to let me have more friends and privacy and fun and more opportunity."

"To live with my grandmother."

"To get help for my family."

"To speed up adoption."

Question #5: If you were a GAL, is there anything special you would do for the person you visit?

- ❖ Be just like you. The impact that a GAL volunteer has on a child's life cannot be overestimated. If a GAL volunteer has any doubt that their efforts are valued and appreciated by the children they advocate for, the following representative quotes should dispel that notion.

“Make sure they know I am always there for them like you do.”

“I would do what my GAL does, get to know them, spend time with them.”

“Be like you – listen- bring them things to cheer them up and put a smile on their faces – also call them like you do just to check up on their school work and see what happened to them since you came to their house.”

“I would stop by and see if there is any problem that they need to solve - I will be there. Everything you do for me – you do a lot – offer friendship and comfort.”

“Treat them nice like I have been treated.”

“I would be just like you. I want to be a GAL when I grow up so kids know someone really cares.”

- ❖ Miscellaneous. Although pre-teens and teens are often accused of being too self-involved to think of others, the characteristics specified in the responses to this question portray a very sensitive side of this group of children. It is probable that the qualities identified are significant “needs and wants” in the life of that child as well as those behaviors modeled by their own GAL volunteer – listening, caring, helping, guiding, and spending time.

“Bring snacks and make sure they had a place to sleep and food to eat.”

“Listen carefully to the child.”

“Make them feel like they were special.”

“I would help them get better. I would help them with their problems and make them be a better person.”

“Help them get out of trouble with the law.”

“I would tell them there is a lot you can do in life and don't make the wrong decisions.”

“I would do everything I could for them til I get them happy.”

“I would treat them with respect and help them as much as possible.”



“Many children in our state are alone in the big, wide world—with no one on their side, no one looking out for them, no one to protect their best interests. Some fortunate children have guardians ad litem on their side, making decisions to protect them and look out for them— to truly transform a child’s future. Please, please consider learning more about the Guardian ad Litem Program and the great things they do. Time, money and prayers— pick one or all three, but do something so that every precious child who needs a guardian ad litem will receive one.”
Senator Ronda Storms

High School Students (Grades 9 through 12)

Question #1: What do you enjoy most about my visits with you?

- ❖ You listen to me and accept me. Once again, the importance of a GAL volunteer being a communicator – listening, hearing, understanding, and talking – is ultimately one of the most important aspects of the GAL volunteer role. Virtually all of the thirty-nine high school respondents are very clear about how meaningful it is to be able to talk with their GAL volunteer. High school students place great importance on their GAL volunteer taking an interest in their activities and accepting them as they are.



“I get to talk about anything I want and just chill out and have a discussion about everything. (I feel) comfortable enough to talk about a variety of topics without worrying about getting into trouble.”

“Talking about anything and you not getting angry with me.”

“Talking about school and football. You take an interest in my classes and sports.”

“My Guardian has been very consistent when visiting in talking about school which motivates me.”

“The ability to spend time talking about different things with someone who cares what I have to say.”

- ❖ I like you and I trust you. Many responses to this question reflect the honest dialogue which takes place between the GAL volunteer and the teens they represent. High school age youth conveyed the importance of the connection and bond, built on trust and caring, with their GAL volunteer.

“I can tell you anything and I can trust you. Also I get to vent.”

“You laugh at my jokes; you are fun and listen to me. I can tell you whatever I want because I can trust you.”

“I am able to express my thoughts and concerns freely and you listen to me. You constantly help me with questions I have with (sic) Independent Living, etc.”

“My volunteer actually took time to get to know me.”

“Your nice personality and loving heart. You do things in a caring manner. I see that when you make your visits that you really care and it’s not just about your job.”

Question #2: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ To check on me. Similar to many of the middle school children, a number of high school teens believe the GAL volunteer visits them to check on their safety and well-being and because they care about them.

“Because you have concern and your goal is to keep us safe.”

“To make sure there is no trouble and to keep me safe.”

“To make sure I’m in the best place and receive those things that will help me function better.”

Some responses, however, reflect an understanding that the GAL volunteer wants information about the progress the teen is making and how they are coping and adjusting to their current situation.

“To make sure I am doing OK.”

“To see how things are going with me.”

“To make sure everything is going the way it’s supposed to.”

Some of the statements are more specific.

“To see if I’m going to counseling.”

“To see how my visits are going with my parents.”

“To make sure that I still want to stay with my Dad and Step-Mom...to find out about visits with my Mom and grandparents.”

“You are concerned about what will happen to me and my brothers and sisters.”

- ❖ To inform and prepare me. Not surprisingly, many teens viewed the presence of a GAL volunteer as being connected to their case. Some students believe that the visits from their GAL volunteer are correlated with court appearances.

“Because I have to be in court with my parents.”

“Because me (sic) and my baby have to be in court.”

More often, GAL volunteers' visits are seen as related to preparing them for the ongoing legal proceedings.

"Give me a better understanding of the legal system and what's going on."

"Keep me updated with the progress of my case."

"To give me court information and to tell the Judge how I am doing and to tell the Judge my wishes."

A small number of the high school students made particular mention that their GAL volunteer prepared them for their future.

"So we can talk about what I need to accomplish when I turn 18 and about what I want to do with my life."

"Because I will be living on my own soon and you want to make sure I'm going to be OK."

"To help me with college."

Question #3: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

- ❖ You are there for me. The responses to this question reflect the genuine appreciation the teens have for the trusting and open relationship established with their GAL volunteer. Once again there is frequent mention of the GAL volunteer being there to talk, to listen, and to help. What is communicated even more definitely is the appreciation the teens have for the unflinching emotional support provided to them by their GAL volunteer. Most often cited is that the GAL volunteer serves as a "safety net" and "moral compass."

"Make sure I stay on track and do what I'm supposed to do."

"Give me inspirational speeches to try to keep me out of trouble."

"Help me with my placements and see how I'm doing to help me do things better."

"Come and see me and when I'm mad or sad - you are always there to put a smile on my face."

The support provided by the GAL volunteer is often linked to a specific outcome.

". . . when I was in jail, putting some money in my commissary."

"You helped me to get out of a group home into a foster family and to get me in the GED program."

“Help me to be able to live on my own. You tell me that I can achieve if I believe – no matter what.”

“I had a lot of questions about what could happen in court and what it means. You explained and made me feel comfortable enough to speak up when the Judge asked me if I had anything to say.”

One seventeen year old summarized her appreciation for all the emotional and tangible support she received from her GAL volunteer.

“It’s already been done...I am aging out with a life, a job, and a new family.”

❖ Miscellaneous. Several of the teens also took the opportunity to identify other areas of assistance which are significant to them.

“Giving me advice about taking care of my baby.”

“To get a job and a place to live when I turn 18.”

“Keeping me informed.”

“Giving me advice about college.”

Question #4: What other things would you like me to do for you?

❖ Nothing now...Maybe help me with my future/keep in contact. It should first be noted that a number of the respondents to this question did not offer any suggestions for additional help. Many answered the question simply by saying: “Nothing at this point.” This question led to many children offering their feelings about their GAL volunteer.

“You are here for me. You care. If I need a book or project done, you help me.”

“You stand up for me in court.”

“I feel (my) GAL does enough but I know if I needed anything I wouldn’t hesitate to ask.”

“To continue to be informative.”

Some of the teens, however, are already looking ahead to their future....thinking about the time they will age out of the dependency system. They express the hope that their GAL volunteer will help equip them for life on their own.

“Make sure I get set up when I age out and get my own apartment.”

“Help me decorate.”

“Help me for when I turn 18 to find a place to stay.”

“Stay in contact with me when I turn 18.”

“Keep me motivated in reaching my goals and with school.”

“Help me with DJJ (Department of Juvenile Justice) court issues.”

One wistful sixteen year old just stated: “I want you to keep believing in me.”

- ❖ To Help Me Be Normal. A common theme underlying many of the responses to Question #4 was the wish for experiences or opportunities which would bring some degree of normalcy to their life. Some of these “wants” implicitly or explicitly involved being able to be transported by their GAL volunteer.

“I’d like to learn how to swim and go fishing.”

“I would like to go shopping and have a meal together.”

“I wish you could pick me up and go do things.”

“Help me to get a driver’s license to be a normal kid.”

“Help me get clothes for homecoming...help me get into Daytona Community College.”

“Help speed up the adoption.”



Question #5: If you were a GAL, is there anything special you would do for the person you visit?

- ❖ Do all the things you do for me. High school teens reference their GAL volunteer as the kind of volunteer that they, themselves, would like to be.

“I would do everything you do.”

“I would try to help them anyway I could. I would give them my time, like you do and really listen to me.”

“I would encourage them to stay strong and keep doing the right things until they can get back with their family. I would just help them out like you’ve always helped me.”

“Just spend quality time with them.”

Even if the response does not specifically reference a GAL volunteer, the behaviors that the respondents mention are those which are, in all probability, learned from their own GAL volunteer and which they value and would like to emulate.

“Be a friend.”

“To make that person feel comfortable and at ease. To listen carefully.”

“I’d make them feel like they matter.”

“Try my hardest to motivate and guide my client socially and academically.”

“Learn as much as I can about the person in order to understand them.”

“Just be there for the kid.”

- ❖ Make their life better. Making someone else’s life better is a broad concept, but several teens were clear that they view this responsibility as an important part of the GAL volunteer’s role.

“I would do whatever is necessary and in my power to make that person’s life better.”

Happiness, fun, and food all were proposed as strategies for improving someone’s circumstances.

“I think I would do what I could to make them happy.”

“I would...do fun activities.”

“Bake them cookies and make them feel special.”

“Make sure my kids are always happy in a happy home and good state of mind.”

One seventeen year old had a very special and important contribution to helping someone feel better – “ensure that the kids got to keep their pets.” In her case, when the police first arrived, this child’s pet, an indoor declawed Himalayan cat, escaped through an open door that was left open. She was not permitted to look for the pet which the child was sure would not survive on its own. According to the GAL volunteer, the child is still mourning the loss of her pet after ten months.

- ❖ Take them places. Being able to transport their “client” was also viewed by some of the respondents as something they would like to do for/with their “client.” Perhaps using this question as a means of introducing an option they miss in their current relationship with their GAL volunteer – the opportunity for normalcy – a few of the teens indicated that they would take their client places.

“Take the person places.”

“Take them to lunch or dinner in a real restaurant.”

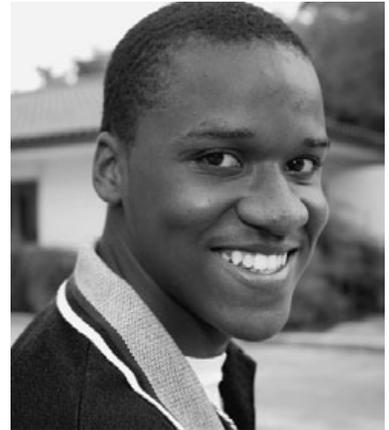
“I would take my kids to different places they have never been.”



I am for the child.

Former Foster Youth (Youth Who Have Aged Out: Ages 18-23)

Question #1: Tell me whatever you can remember about your GAL and his/her visits with you.



- ❖ My GAL volunteer was...nice, caring, helpful. The recollection former foster youth have of their GAL volunteer is a very positive one. The personality characteristics described are of a person to whom the youth:

“Could talk to about anything.”

“Who paid attention to what I had to say.”

“Who checked on my needs.”

“(Who) brought me school and household necessities that I needed.”

“Always fought for what I wanted.”

“Was very supportive and caring.”

“When I was having a bad day, always cheered me up.”

- ❖ The GAL volunteer visits were...reassuring to me. Visits by their GAL volunteer are remembered as effectively mitigating the uncertainties and challenges these youth were experiencing.

“I ran away but (my) GAL came regularly to my residential placement.”

“(My GAL) came to see me when family members weren’t able to come and visit me.”

“The visits were informational.”

“I was in school and pregnant. I was able to talk about the baby with her.”

“To spend quality time that others couldn’t spend.”

“She helped me figure out whatever I needed to do to be successful when I got out on my own.”

“(I appreciated) having someone to talk to -- know someone is thinking about me and coming to see me.”

Question #2: What did your GAL do to help you?

- ❖ Supported my choices. Former foster youth had clear memories of the advocacy role their GAL volunteer played. They appreciated their GAL volunteer supporting their living arrangement decisions.

“Helped me stay in my foster home when my caseworker wanted to move me. I went to court and saw how hard “Mr. J.” and the lawyer argued. I was just starting my senior year and I was on the Varsity football team. I didn’t want to leave my family and friends. I got to stay.”

“Told the Judge what I wanted like not living with my uncle but on my own.”

“Helped decide who we should live with---My brother and I were allowed to move in with a former teacher. Otherwise (we) would have ended up in a group home or foster home with people I didn’t know.”

“Helped me get adopted.”

“Helped me find a good place to live when I turned 18.”

- ❖ Cared about me. Many former foster youth had fond recollections of the attention that they received from their GAL volunteer.

Academics: “teach me stuff I didn’t know like math and reading.”

Legal proceedings: “my GAL was there when I had to testify in court about the allegations in front of my parents.”

Family matters: “helped me to get visits with my brothers.”

Most of the time, however, the caring that the youths remembered most was of a very personal nature.

“To see where I’m at, to guide me through, to make sure I can make it through life and encourage me.”

“Comfort me when I needed comfort, talk to me, and make sure I was being a responsible adult.”

“My GAL never gave up on me and now I have a child, married, and I’m going to college.”

“She has helped me keep my head held high when things got out of hand and never let me give up.”

Question #3: What would you have liked your GAL to do that he or she did not do?

- ❖ I can't think of anything...Maybe stay in my life. Over half of the youth interviewed indicated that they could not think of anything additional that their GAL volunteer could have done. "Thanks for helping and understanding." A few of the respondents, however, expressed their wish that their GAL volunteer could have either stayed with them longer or at least stayed in touch.

"Stayed a little longer. Stopped when I was 19. Maybe if a GAL could stay on, the youth would have an advocate."

"(I) no longer see her and I miss her."

"Stay in my life instead of just disappearing."

"Stay in touch after I aged out. I really could have used his help then, too."

- ❖ Take me places. The inability to be transported by their GAL volunteer to the mall or out to eat is something a few of these respondents still regret.

"It would have been nice if my GAL could have transported me. If so I wouldn't have missed my Aunt's memorial service. I asked my GAL to take me that Sunday, but she said she would have liked to but she couldn't because she wasn't allowed to transport. It was the weekend and the group home ran on what they called a "skeleton crew" so I missed the memorial service... I just always knew that my GAL would have done things like that for me if she had been allowed to."

Question #4: If you were a GAL, what would you make sure to do?

- ❖ Be caring and concerned. The selflessness and compassion of the older youth appears to reflect their past and present experiences as well as their desire to support other foster children and youth. Their list of ideas for what a GAL volunteer needs to do to be effective is comprehensive.

"Be available to listen."

"Take what my kid said seriously."

"Go to court hearings and visit regularly."

"Make sure they had what they need."

“Get to know them as much as possible.”

“Check on how the child is doing in school, make sure the child understands the court system and follow up on things the case worker didn’t do.”

“Bring them small gifts so that they have something to look forward to.”

As one member of the group succinctly said: “If I were a GAL, I would try to be just like my GAL. I would make sure I go in with an open mind and not judge my kids.”

Another declared that: “I would know that it’s a kid’s life – not just a job.”

❖ Be a mentor. Although the idea of mentoring is inherent in the ideas expressed above, a few members of the group were specific about what they would do to mentor a child or youth with whom they were working.

One suggested that he would: “tutor them, be a counselor, and just have a shoulder to lean on.”

Another suggested she would: “check on life situation (sic) and make sure he is staying out of trouble... provide guidance.”

One ardent and determined member of this group summarized his potential GAL volunteer role with the following words: “I would make sure that the kid know (sic) I am there for him – help as much as I can (and tell him) never give up on your dreams. I’d make sure they accomplish everything they got on their mind and make sure they can make it through life.”



CONCLUSION

When listening to the voices of the children and youth surveyed during the “A Voice Heard” Initiative, it is clear, GAL volunteers and the children they represent have a strong, durable bond.....built on the following key elements:

1. Communication: Talking, Listening and Understanding
2. Personal Interest: Caring, Concern and Emotional Support
3. Advocacy: Judicial, Educational and Situational
4. Trust: Responsiveness, Honesty and Reliability

GAL volunteers are sometimes the only constant in a child’s life.

Young elementary school age children feel they are vulnerable. Perhaps afraid, or missing their relationships with family members, or lonely, or not really understanding what is happening to them, they want to make sure someone is watching out for them. In their minds, the GAL volunteer is a protector, friend, information provider, and safety-net. It is clear that for elementary aged children, their GAL volunteer is important for the guidance, the access to court, and the shoulder to lean on they provide. From the survey information, the GAL volunteer is providing the stability and consistency that is needed in the child’s life.

Pre-teens and teens seem more focused on having a personal relationship with their GAL volunteer. They have a better understanding of what is happening to them and seek support in navigating their personal feelings, their family relationships, and court procedures. Their GAL volunteer is a caring companion and a non-judgmental sounding board. Pre-teen children look to their GAL volunteer as someone who can help them think through their problems and cheer them up when they are sad. This age group values someone in their life who is concerned about their well-being and in whom they can confide. A GAL volunteer working with middle school-aged children is helping them transition between childhood and adulthood while helping them sort through the challenges of being in the dependency system.

Because the questions posed to the middle school and high school youth are identical, there is an opportunity to examine the differences and similarities of the responses of the two groups. Both groups place considerable emphasis on the one-to-one relationship they have with their GAL volunteer. For both groups, communication and conversation are central to the existence and strength of the relationship with their GAL volunteer.

The evolving maturity of the high school group, however, appears to be a factor shaping the youth - GAL volunteer relationship into a more adult “partnership.” To the teen, the GAL volunteer represents a source of information and help for accomplishing their goals and living an independent life. Although still concerned with their own personal development, the teens also appear to be (as might be expected) increasingly concerned with “fitting in” and “being normal.” They are looking to their GAL volunteer to help them learn those skills and acquire those experiences which will help them realize this ambition.

Former foster youth have been living on their own for a relatively short period of time, so they are able to clearly recall their experiences working with their GAL volunteer. A comparison of their responses with those of other ages reveals the same recognition of the rapport they had with their GAL volunteer. The difference between this group and the others, however, is memory of how their GAL volunteer enabled them to make their own decisions and helped them move toward self-sufficiency. Their regret that this relationship was not a continuing one reveals the additional support that the respondents would have appreciated. It is notable – and laudable – that these young men and women would like to share their experiences with other dependent youth and provide the support that they, themselves, had the opportunity to receive.

Through the “A Voice Heard” Initiative children’s voices have been heard. The conversations detailed above show the respect and appreciation foster youth and former foster youth have of their GAL volunteer. Their GAL volunteer is a friend, a mentor, a counselor, a teacher, an advocate, a supporter, and a cheerleader – all rolled into one. Such an important role can be daunting, even for those caring and dedicated enough to willingly assume the responsibilities associated with becoming a GAL volunteer.

The children’s voices, however, also tell of the success of GAL volunteers in being able to establish a caring and supportive relationship with the children and youth with whom they work, despite the numerous challenges and barriers. There are lessons to be learned from these voices as well as Program objective goals to be developed.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative documents the Program’s achievements but also raises the bar for future growth. As an outcome of listening to the children’s voices, the Guardian ad Litem Program – our staff and volunteers - will continue to strengthen strategies and opportunities which make a difference for the abused, abandoned, and neglected children in Florida.

“Guardian ad Litem volunteers are a special group because they are committed to the relentless advocacy for the well-being and best interest of the children they serve,” Governor Rick Scott said. “I am thankful for each of the nearly 8,000 Florida GALs currently making a difference in the lives of children every day, and I welcome the new guardians being sworn in today.”

The volunteers have always inherently understood the need for an expanded role for themselves in the lives of the children they serve. And after listening to the children who participated in “*A Voice Heard*” Initiative, we now more than ever hear their plea for normalcy.

Foster children are no different than other children. All kids want to have the opportunity to attend school dances, play intramural sports, spend the night with friends, and visit a museum. Our volunteers knew that they could be the bridge that would allow our children those missing opportunities to experience the common, everyday activities and create those same childhood memories that most of us take for granted.

For this reason, we initiated a pilot project to allow GAL volunteers to transport their assigned children to just these sorts of activities and events. What we learned from speaking with our volunteer transporters that this small gesture in the life of these children was enormously beneficial to their growth, self-esteem, and happiness. The bond between the child and volunteer was strengthened by sharing this time in the car and with the child at social activities.



2012 Florida Guardian ad Litem Transportation Pilot Project Review

Guardian ad Litem Program Response

The Guardian ad Litem Program thanks the many GAL volunteer child advocates and staff who supported the Program's Transportation Pilot Project. The circuits and volunteers who participated in the Pilot are true trailblazers for Florida's dependent children. Started in June 2011, the Pilot empowers GAL volunteers by giving them another tool to utilize in advocating for and protecting children. The Pilot clearly exceeded every expectation the Program had for it.

The Program selected Jane Soltis to evaluate the Pilot. She has been a leader in child advocacy for the State of Florida for many years and received statewide recognition in 2011 as the Child Advocate of the Year. She currently serves as the Chair of the Independent Living Statewide Advisory Counsel. Her expertise and wealth of knowledge made her the ideal reviewer.

The Guardian ad Litem Program fully supports Ms. Soltis' recommendations through the evaluation she conducted with volunteers and youth. The next step for the Program is to adopt all of the recommendations and institutionalize volunteer transportation through the implementation of Program Standards and Operating Procedures. The recommendations and implementation plan are outlined below.

Recommendation #1: The Transportation Pilot Project should be continued and expanded to include all circuits. There is little doubt, based on the surveys of the participating GAL volunteers and the youth, that the Pilot has met the original goals intended of child safety, improved communications, a sense of normalcy, volunteer empowerment, and volunteer retention.

Implementation Plan: The GAL Program agrees with the recommendation to continue and expand volunteer transportation. The Program's Executive Director has presented the Pilot to the Senate Subcommittee on Children, Families and Elder Affairs. Based on the Committee's discussion and evaluation of the Pilot, the Program has proposed statutory language in the 2012 Legislative Session which recognizes the Program's authority to transport children in an effort to promote normalcy and establish trust between a court appointed GAL volunteer and a child alleged to be abused, abandoned or neglected under Chapter 39 proceedings.

The Program will create a Program Standard requiring all circuits to participate in permitting volunteer child advocates to transport when consistent with the child's best interest and when approved by the Program. However, no volunteer will ever be required or pressured to participate in transporting a child.

Recommendation #2: The criteria for approval for transporting should remain intact and should not be automatic. Additional criteria for determining who will transport children may be considered. There should be a timely procedure for evaluating special circumstances.

Implementation Plan: The Program will create a workgroup which will develop Program Standards and Operating Procedures consistent with this recommendation. The workgroup will be led by a Circuit Director who participated in the Pilot and will include at least one volunteer who participated in the Pilot; at least one young adult who participated in the Pilot, and at least one staff member from the Circuit who supported the Pilot. The workgroup will work with the GAL Program Office to complete implementation of the Program Standards and Operating Procedures consistent with this recommendation by June 30, 2012.

I wish to thank Jane Soltis for evaluating the Transportation Pilot Project and making recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan F. Abramowitz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Alan F. Abramowitz
Executive Director

Review of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Transportation Pilot Project

Executive Summary

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program (Program) determined that a pilot project would be created to allow interested Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers to transport children that they were representing in selected circuits throughout the state of Florida. This once common practice has been prohibited for the past 14 years.

The Transportation Pilot Project (Pilot) was launched in June 2011 and 40 of the 70 volunteers who have participated along with 20 of the youth they transported have completed surveys about their perceptions of the Pilot.

This report was completed by an independent review through telephone and email conversations with those volunteers.

Recommendations

1. The Transportation Pilot Project should be continued and expanded to include all circuits. There is little doubt, based on the surveys of the participating GAL volunteers and the youth, that the Pilot has met the original goals intended of child safety, improved communications, a sense of normalcy, volunteer empowerment, and volunteer retention.
2. The criteria for approval for transporting should remain intact and should not be automatic. Additional criteria for determining who will transport children may be considered. There should be a timely procedure for evaluating special circumstances.

Jane V. Soltis

February 9, 2012

A Review of the Guardian ad Litem Transportation Pilot Project

Introduction

A Guardian ad Litem is a volunteer appointed by the court to protect the rights and advocate for the best interests of a child involved in a dependency court proceeding. The GAL volunteer makes independent recommendations to the court by focusing on the needs of each child.

A GAL volunteer is an individual who is appointed by the court to advocate for children who come into the court system primarily as a result of alleged abuse, abandonment or neglect.

GAL volunteers visit with children that they represent on a regular basis. For the past 14 years, GAL volunteers have been unable to transport those children outside of their placement. That restriction did not provide the private and safe place for the children they are representing to share their dreams, concerns and to develop a trusting relationship with their GAL volunteer, their voice representing them in the courtroom.

In June 2011, the Program with support from the Department of Children and Families created standards and protocols for a Transportation Pilot Project (Pilot) in selected circuits. This Pilot remains in operation today on a voluntary basis and this report provides a review of the Pilot from the perspective of the GAL volunteers and the children who participated as well as recommendations for the maintenance and/or expansion of the Pilot.

The Issue

It has been 14 years since the blanket prohibition of GAL volunteers transporting children. The Executive Director of the Program, Alan Abramowitz, heard repeated questions and concerns about this policy from youth, GAL volunteers and staff, and other stakeholders in the child welfare system. GAL volunteers viewed this policy as interfering with their ability to develop a trusting relationship with the child they were representing. GAL volunteers were also interested in providing normal developmentally appropriate life experiences for the children such as eating out at a restaurant, going to sporting events and other activities that most normal children experience.

The Solution

In June 2011, Alan Abramowitz, after careful consideration of the balancing act between the negative and positive aspects of lifting the prohibition of transporting children, launched the Transportation Pilot Project.

The Pilot was based on the twin goals of fostering the relationship between the child and his or her GAL volunteer and promoting normalcy for children. The Pilot was developed as an optional Pilot with each Circuit Director deciding on whether they wished to initiate the Pilot in their circuit. Policies and parameters were created with input from a wide variety of volunteers, youth and legal representatives. It was stated very clearly that no GAL volunteer would ever be required to transport a child and that a series of protocols and approvals were instituted to determine which GAL volunteers would be selected of those interested in participating. In a March 2011 survey, an overwhelming 93% (239 of 256) of volunteer respondents were in favor of the transportation option in certain situations. Even those GAL volunteers who did not want to participate, supported their peers who indicated they would choose to transport.

The parameters of the Transportation Pilot Project were outlined and included guidance for Circuit Directors with the potential benefits of the Pilot including:

- ❖ Child safety
- ❖ Enhanced relationships
- ❖ Improved communications
- ❖ Sense of normalcy
- ❖ Volunteer retention

Frequently asked questions were distributed to all potential GAL volunteers who expressed interest in participating in the Pilot.

Circuit Directors would provide guidance to implementation should they wish to initiate the optional Pilot.

GAL Volunteer Rules of Transport

- ❖ Volunteer Transportation Request Form with documentation necessary for submission of the request.
- ❖ Standards for the restriction of this program's services.
- ❖ A letter of requirements, definition and support from the Department of Children and Families.

A total of 13 of the 20 Circuit Directors elected to implement the optional Pilot in circuits 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15 17, 19 and 20.

Since June 2011, 70 GAL volunteers have applied for and been approved to provide transportation for the children they represent.

In January 2012, all 70 volunteers taking part in the Pilot were sent a survey regarding their experience. The survey included:

- ❖ Demographic information
- ❖ Questions that were rated on a Likert Scale
- ❖ Open-ended questions

A similar survey tool was also provided to GAL volunteers to review with the child they were transporting to gauge their perspective of the Pilot. GAL volunteers had the option to complete the survey via email and return to the Program or to participate in a phone conversation with the reviewer.

A total of 14 volunteers had not yet provided transportation and did not complete the survey.

A total of 40 volunteers either emailed their responses to the survey or participated in a phone conversation.

20 volunteers submitted the youth section of the survey or provided comments.



Survey Results

What the GAL volunteers reported:

GAL volunteers who participated in the Pilot and the survey ranged in experience from six months to 22 years with a caseload ranging from 1 child to 15 children. The number of children the GAL volunteers have transported ranged from 1 to 8 children. GAL volunteers report they have transported children from once to 60 times.

GAL volunteers rated the following questions:

The child was excited when they learned I would transport them to an offsite location for our visit.

98% of the GAL volunteers strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

The child appeared more relaxed while en route to a predetermined location.

95% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

When I transport my child, my child talks in more detail as compared to when I visit only in the foster home.

93% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Being able to transport a child will lead to longer visits at the child's request.

95% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

Participating in the Pilot, which allows me to transport children, will encourage me to take on more cases.

73% were neutral about this statement, 20% agreed or strongly agreed and 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

I am concerned that transporting a child will make my child's housemates feel jealous of him or her.

38% were neutral about this statement, 25% disagreed and 17% agreed or strongly agreed. Most GAL volunteers did not experience or observe this behavior.

I am concerned that a judge may order me to transport a child because I am permitted to transport.

I am concerned the community based care provider will feel they don't have to do some of the work they have to do if I transport a child from time to time.

GAL volunteers universally felt the two above statements were not an issue and 100% disagreed or strongly disagreed. GAL volunteers reported they were able to advocate for themselves if this ever became an issue.

I feel I am able to better advocate for a child if I have times when I transport them.

70% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement and 15% disagreed stating that while they enjoyed the ability to transport, it did not take away from their ability to advocate for the child.

I feel that I will do better in ensuring the child is safe if I am able to transport the child because of the relationship I develop with them.

63% strongly agreed or agreed and 8% disagreed.

The transportation pilot gave me an enhanced relationship and improved communication with the child.

83% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement while 8% disagreed.

The ability to transport a child allowed me to give a child normal childhood experiences they may not have experienced without me transporting them.

90% strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. GAL volunteers described visits that focused on outings to malls, school events, restaurants, hair and nail salons, visits with siblings, nature walks, volunteering, music concerts and saw these outings as positive in both exposing the child to additional life experiences and the development of life skills.

OPEN-ENDED Questions

What are your major concerns with the transporting of children?

There were only minor and normal concerns with travel safety otherwise no concerns were identified by any of the participating GAL volunteers.

Based on your experience, would you recommend we continue the Pilot? Why or why not?

The most common response to this question was absolutely and definitely.

- ❖ This is the best time to talk freely with the child.
- ❖ Provides some privacy and safety for discussions especially for teens in group care.
- ❖ It gives the child another outlet.
- ❖ Excellent relationship building experience in a neutral environment.
- ❖ Bonding time.
- ❖ Warmer and more personal visits.
- ❖ They can open up when they are having fun. Gives them a sense of being normal and creates memories

A number of GAL volunteers also recommended expanding the Pilot to all interested volunteers and in every circuit.

In your experience how has transporting children been a benefit to you as a volunteer child advocate?

- ❖ Absolutely.
- ❖ I get to know the child much better, they begin to trust me and we develop a stronger bond. I then receive more information from the child so that I can better advocate for them.
- ❖ Allows us to do a more comprehensive job of supporting the kids.
- ❖ Makes us better GAL volunteers.
- ❖ Allows us more flexibility with scheduling.
- ❖ Much easier to talk and communicate.
- ❖ Develop rapport with the child.
- ❖ Able to better serve as a role model.
- ❖ Makes it more fun for me as well as the child.

What policy changes or recommendations would you make if we were to expand the Pilot?

- ❖ Consideration of younger age limit, especially when there are sibling groups.
- ❖ Individual waivers for younger kids or special circumstances.
- ❖ GALs should have at least one year of experience prior to transporting.

- ❖ Allow free access to state parks for GAL volunteers.
- ❖ Should always remain optional.
- ❖ Gas cards or some mileage reimbursement.
- ❖ Do not allow local circuits to add restrictions which make the process more cumbersome.
- ❖ Shorten time frame for approval.
- ❖ Should not be automatic approval.
- ❖ Make sure that everyone on the team knows about my permission to transport.

Please give us a memorable experience as a result of transporting a child.

- ❖ All of the rides and trips are memorable.
- ❖ Siblings laughing together.
- ❖ Picking her up at school after a stressful experience and having her open up to me.
- ❖ Showing the child what a real live orchestra was.
- ❖ Siblings able to see each other.
- ❖ Attending his GED graduation.



What the Youth reported:

Fewer youth filled out their portion of the survey. Comments included:

- ❖ “I liked it a lot!”
- ❖ “I can’t think of a reason I would not travel with my GAL.”
- ❖ “Sometimes I need to get away from my roommates but I want to be somewhere where I will be safe and with someone I can trust.”
- ❖ “My GAL can provide guidance when I am doing something I am not familiar with.”
- ❖ “I was really excited.”
- ❖ “Felt like I had a friend I could count on.”
- ❖ “We have more quality time together now.”
- ❖ “The first time I got dressed up and was looking forward to going.”

- ❖ “I liked going to Taco Bell and the library.”
- ❖ “I would not want to do it if I did not like my GAL.”
- ❖ “I like going to the hairdresser.”
- ❖ “WE talk a lot more together.”
- ❖ “I was nervous the first time.”
- ❖ “It makes me feel safer and better.”
- ❖ “I loved it when she took me to Red Lobster and I got to see a real lobster!”

Additional youth input can be found in the document “A Voice Heard” 2012 Status Report in the appendices of this report.



Recommendations

1. The Transportation Pilot Project should be continued and expanded to include all circuits. There is little doubt, based on the surveys of the participating GAL volunteers and the youth, that the Pilot has met the original goals intended of child safety, improved communications, a sense of normalcy, volunteer empowerment, and volunteer retention.
2. The criteria for approval for transporting should remain intact and should not be automatic. Additional criteria for determining who will transport children may be considered. There should be a timely procedure for evaluating special circumstances.

Appendix

- A. Guidance for Circuit Director's Implementing the Transportation Project in your Office
- B. Standard 4.4 Restriction of Program Services
- C. Letter from Executive Director of Family and Community Services, Department of Children and Families

A

GUIDANCE FOR CIRCUIT DIRECTORS IMPLEMENTING THE TRANSPORTATION PROJECT IN YOUR OFFICE

Transporting a child in foster care is an optional tool that may be used to good advantage by a select group of volunteers that are approved and choose to use it. Based on feedback from volunteers, staff, and stake holders, and with the twin goals of fostering the relationship between the child and his/her volunteer guardian ad litem, and promoting normalcy for our children, the Program is sponsoring this optional Transportation Project. It's not for everyone. In fact, no volunteer would ever be required to transport a child, and only carefully selected volunteers, who wish to transport, will be authorized to do so.

While the Transportation Project is also optional for Circuit Director's, there are a variety of reasons why you may wish to consider adopting this tool for your volunteers who wish to transport children. The reality is that there are some clear benefits to permitting carefully vetted volunteers to transport children. Among these are:

- ❖ **Child safety:** Child safety is the primary reason for instituting the Transportation Project. An email from a Volunteer Guardian ad Litem discussing the Transportation Project described the following circumstance.

“[I] have been a Guardian ad Litem/CASA with several different state jurisdictions for approximately 12 years, CASA's in California were approved to transport children; ... It really gave me the opportunity to bond with the children when they were out of the foster/group home. One girl disclosed that she was being sexually molested, (and that she was in a 'place' with me where she felt safe.”

- ❖ **Enhanced relationships:** Relationships with youth can be enhanced during the transportation of a child in foster care. The bonding and trust that develops as a result of such shared experiences are more likely to result in disclosures by the child that provide the volunteer with insight into safety issues impacting the child.

One volunteer remembers when two little boys he took to McDonalds were beside themselves with excitement because it was the first time they had ever been to a “restaurant” to eat. Amazingly, the shared experience and relaxed atmosphere of the journey can deepen the relationship between the child and the volunteer.

- ❖ **Improved communications:** Communication with youth can be tough in the best of circumstances. Meeting children on “their turf” gives them a sense of empowerment and has the ability to enhance a volunteer’s ability to communicate with kids.

One volunteer remembers how his child, after listening to some of his favorite music on the car radio, began to relax and open up to him about things going on in his group home which were impacting the child’s life. This was information the volunteer is not sure he would have heard about had it not been for that ride in the car and sharing music.

- ❖ **Sense of Normalcy:** Daily experiences help build a child’s confidence and buoys their spirit when they are able to go to a school dance or go get their driver’s license on their birthday just like their friends. Many of the everyday things that our own kids take for granted are not always something a dependent child can count on. By transporting, volunteers can help bring these same childhood experiences back into the lives of our dependent kids.

- ❖ **Volunteer Retention:** The first volunteer who was permitted to transport a child in foster care sent the Circuit Director a report after his experience. An excerpt from his report summarizing his feelings immediately after taking a child who resided in a group home to a restaurant is below. The satisfaction those volunteers who choose to request and are approved to transport could enhance the volunteer experience.

“... I know how hard you worked to get this approval, particularly in time for me to visit “Ryan”. ... When I retired I was making six figures. I am now a volunteer and unpaid, or am I? When I hear, What would we have done without you; You have no idea how much you have helped our family; Things happen when you get involved; a four year old girl nearly knocks you over jumping up to give you a hug, and a little boy puts his arms around you, his head in your chest, and says; thank you, I feel like I have gotten a raise.”

Volunteer Feedback: Many of our volunteers would welcome the opportunity to transport. In a March, 2011 survey, an overwhelming 93% (239 of 256 volunteer respondents) were in favor of implementing a transportation option to allow volunteers to transport, in certain situations, to develop deeper relationships and opened lines of communication. Even volunteers, who stated they did not want to participate in the Project, still supported those volunteers who would choose to transport.

In some cases, respondents raised valid questions and concerns, and many offered recommendations which are outlined on the following two pages. We've provided some of those answers for you, but others will be apparent to you. Even so, some respondents stated that while they supported the project, they would personally not transport because of concerns regarding liability, insurance, and false accusations. We understand. It's OK.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS CONCERNING THE TRANSPORTATION PROJECT

Q: Can either the Community Based Care Lead Agency (CBC) or the Courts require me to transport a child under any circumstances?

A: No. This Project is entirely voluntary and the volunteer is not a service provider for the child or family. Equally important, the volunteer must be authorized to transport by the Executive Director or his/her designee. No one can require you to transport a child. If in the event a court does order a GAL volunteer to transport a child, GAL will suspend the Transportation Project in that circuit until such time as the issue is resolved with the court. In the event a volunteer is ordered by the court to transport a child the volunteer must notify the Circuit Director and Supervising Attorney immediately. The Circuit Director and the Supervising Attorney will work together to determine the appropriate course of action to resolve the situation.

Q: What if I'm asked to fill in for a caseworker {take to doctor, court, etc)? Won't I get pressure from the CBCs and the Courts to transport?

A: Nothing prevents the CBC from asking you to transport and some volunteers may wish to do so. We know CBC Case Workers are busy and they may see this as an opportunity for you to help them. But as the volunteer on the case, you are not required or otherwise obligated to comply with such requests. The Program initiated the Transportation Project as a means of enhancing the relationship between the child and volunteer and providing normalcy in the child's life. It was not created with the intention of providing assistance to the CBCs or case workers. Seek the support of your Circuit Director if you feel you are being pressured.

Q: If I, as a volunteer, transport a child and I am involved in an accident, am I liable for any damages that arise from that accident?

A: Volunteers who are formally approved under the Transportation Project are protected by the State of Florida in the event of litigation stemming from any accident or incident that may occur while in the course of volunteering. Damage to other vehicles in an accident will be handled by the State's Division of Risk Management. Formal approval to participate in the Transportation Project is essential. Liability protection does not apply if you transport a child without that formal approval.

Q: What are the insurance implications if I decide to transport a child?

A: Volunteers are covered under Worker's Compensation in the event of injury to themselves during transport, as long as they have been approved for transport. Damage to the volunteer's car as a result of an accident during transport must be referred to the volunteer's auto insurance carrier. For this reason, volunteers are advised to notify their carriers that they will be transporting. You will be asked to show that you have valid automobile insurance with appropriate minimum limits as required by the State of Florida before being allowed to transport a child. If your insurance lapses or is cancelled for any reason, you must notify your Circuit Director and your authority to transport is automatically revoked.

Q: Don't I become a "caretaker" in point of fact? What if a child makes a false allegation of improper behavior against me while I am transporting a child? Will a report be made to the hotline about me arising out of my role as caregiver?

A: Any person can make an allegation at any time. However, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the GAL Program agree that the Guardian ad Litem volunteer who engages in transport of a dependent child does not fall within the definition of "caregiver" as set forth in Section 39.01, Florida Statutes. Any allegations of impropriety should be handled the same as any complaint of impropriety by any citizen against another citizen, through appropriate law enforcement channels. The report should not be accepted by the Hotline for investigation. Although we cannot determine future policy decisions by DCF, DCF has provided a letter of support for this interpretation of a "caregiver." The letter is attached.

Q: Why is the process to become authorized so rigorous?

A: This is a controlled project designed to meet the needs of volunteers who wish to transport children, as well as enhance our best interest advocacy for children. It is a new project for us and we want to make sure that we have put in place the necessary controls to protect the

Q: Why do you need my driving records?

A: The best predictor for future safety while driving a car is often found in your past driving record. Obviously, we would not authorize a volunteer for transport if there were serious problems with their past driving record. Minor offenses are likely not to have any influence on our decision to appoint, but disclosure of your driving record is the only way we can help ensure safety for the children you will be transporting.

Q: Why is there an age limit for kids who are eligible for transportation?

A: Initially, children 10 years and older have been selected as being eligible for the Transportation Project. Children ages 10 and older are more involved in their case planning than younger children and have more of a direct say in what happens to them. They are more verbal and able to speak up for themselves. As this is a pilot project, this is one of those issues that we will evaluate over time. There may be a unique circumstance, where a child younger than 10 years old would be appropriate for transportation. Circumstances such as allowing siblings to be transported together or other unique situations may be approved by the Circuit Director on a case-by-case basis. If the Circuit Director is unsure, they should call the Executive Director, or his/her designee, and discuss the circumstance surrounding the transportation request for any child under 10 years of age.

Q: Who pays for the cost of me transporting kids?

A: We recognize that there is a cost associated with transporting children. Unfortunately, there are no funds to reimburse your travel expenses. We will certainly understand if the cost of travel prevents you from considering this option.

Q: How will my Supervisor feel about me if I don't want to transport children, but others do? Will I become a second class volunteer?

A: No one should feel pressured into transporting children. This is an optional project and an individual decision for each volunteer. It is not for everyone. We value the work done by ALL of our volunteers, regardless of whether or not they transport children.

Q: Is a new approval needed each time a child is transported?

A: No. Once the Volunteer Transportation Request form has been completed and approved, no other written permission is required. The volunteer must, however, notice the Circuit Director if transport is for something other than has been identified on the Request form. For example, if the initial request includes a "sense of normalcy" as the rationale, the GAL would be able to transport a child to a local park, to the library, or to McDonalds without getting separate permission each time. The volunteer would need to notice the Circuit Director before taking the child to a medical appointment.

Q: Does the GAL need the caregiver's written permission to transport the child?

A: No, verbal permission is appropriate. However, the volunteer must communicate with and coordinate all transport through the case manager and caregiver.

Q: Can a GAL who is not approved by the Program to transport a child appeal the CO's decision?

A: No, this decision is final during the term of the Transportation Project.

Q: Does the GAL need to keep a log of the times that a child is transported?

A: Yes. Just as a GAL volunteer keeps notes on all his or her activities. This would include: date, length of time, destination, purpose, etc.

Q: Is there any situation in which a child can be transported by a volunteer who has not been approved to transport?

A: Only in an emergency situation where the child's safety is at risk. The volunteer shall notify the Circuit Director or designee as soon as practical.

A CIRCUIT DIRECTOR'S GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING THIS TRANSPORTATION PROJECT

Circuit participation is optional. By choosing to participate in the Transportation Project, the Circuit Director agrees to the following conditions and terms:

- ❖ Only those volunteers who wish to transport and have a valid Florida driver's license and auto insurance, with legally required minimum limits, are eligible.
- ❖ Staff is not permitted to transport at this time.

STEP 1: Any volunteer who wishes to request authorization to transport must seek approval from the GAL Program by completing the Volunteer Transportation Request Form (attached) and submitting it to the Circuit Director. This form requires that the volunteer also provide a copy of his/her driving record and proof of insurance.

NOTE: Remember, not every volunteer who wishes to transport will necessarily be a good candidate for this activity. In determining whether to recommend a volunteer be approved to transport, the Circuit Director's review should include, but is not necessarily limited to, the following:

- ❖ the volunteer's experience and length of service with the Program;
- ❖ the volunteer's driving record (Official DMV Driving Report) as provided by the volunteer applicant;
- ❖ any criminal history (if the applicant has NOT received a person(s) within the dependency system related to the volunteer's conduct or judgment; and
- ❖ any complaints received by the Program from the court, DCF, an attorney, CBC employee, parent, or other person(s) within the dependency system related to the volunteer's conduct or judgment; and
- ❖ the volunteer's willingness to work with the child's custodian as approval by that custodian will be required each time the volunteer transports the child.

STEP 2: Circuit Director's Request to the Executive Director: For those volunteers being recommended to transport, the Circuit Director must submit to the Executive Director or his/her designee, the volunteer's application and justification to transport indicating your recommendation for approval. It is not necessary to send supporting documentation (i.e. driving records, insurance cards, and background checks.)

After review of the Circuit's recommendation and the applicant's justification, the Executive Director or his/her designee, will approve or deny the volunteer's request to transport. Only those volunteers who have been approved by the Executive Director or his/her designee, may transport children.

STEP 3: *Important:* Once approved, but prior to actually engaging in any transport of a child, the volunteer must have initialed and signed the Program's Rules of Transport. The signed application and supporting documents, as well as the Rules of Transport should be filed in the volunteer's file. A copy of the Rules of Transport must be provided to the volunteer.

Note: While these rules are intended to provide guidance to volunteers, the Circuit may wish to provide additional guidance and instruction to volunteer transporters, which should be notated on the Rules of Transport. The Circuits may be more restrictive than this stated policy.

The record that the Volunteer is approved for transport will be entered into Tracker by the State Office.

Additional Circuit Director Considerations:

When evaluating the issue of whether or not a volunteer should transport, consider the following in addition to the factors above:

- ❖ Make your recommendations on a volunteer by volunteer basis.
- ❖ Use discretion in determining whether to allow a volunteer to transport children.
- ❖ In addition, volunteers shall not be permitted to transport any children identified by
- ❖ Make sure the volunteer understands the important responsibilities of the child's custodian, whether it be a foster parent, a group home representative, relative, or facility case manager, in caring for and coordinating the daily activities of the child and agrees to require all volunteer transporters to coordinate transport accordingly.

Remember that transporting a child is at the volunteer's discretion and neither the court nor DCF can require the volunteer transport a child. Be sure that the volunteers understand this and be sure that your staff knows to alert you to any possible pressure being exerted on volunteers in this regard by the courts, DCF, or the CBCs.

GAL VOLUNTEER RULES OF TRANSPORT

I HAVE READ, UNDERSTAND, AND AGREE TO ABIDE BY THE FOLLOWING RULES OF CHILD TRANSPORT:

| | |
|---------|--|
| Initial | |
| | I AGREE TO TRANSPORT ONLY THOSE GAL CHILDREN WHO ARE 10 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER FOR WHOM I AM THE ASSIGNED GAL VOLUNTEER, UNLESS I RECEIVE SPECIFIC PERMISSION FROM THE CIRCUIT DIRECTOR TO TRANSPORT A CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF 10 ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS. |
| | I AGREE TO ABIDE BY ALL TRAFFIC LAWS AND DRIVE IN A SAFE MANNER WHEN TRANSPORTING ANY GAL CHILD. |
| | I AGREE TO MAINTAIN MY VEHICLE SO THAT IT IS SAFE AND RELIABLE. |
| | I AGREE TO MAINTAIN AUTOMOBILE INSURANCE AT ALL TIMES. FURTHER, I AGREE THAT MY AUTOMOBILE INSURANCE WILL CONFORM TO THE MINIMUM INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS PUBLISHED BY THE STATE OF FLORIDA AT ALL TIMES. |
| | I WILL NOT TAKE ANY ACTIONS WHILE TRANSPORTING A GAL CHILD THAT WOULD JEOPARDIZE SAFETY OR IN ANY WAY PLACE THE CHILD AT RISK. |
| | I WILL NOT USE A CELL PHONE OR BLACKBERRY TO TALK OR TEXT WHILE DRIVING WITH A GAL CHILD IN MY VEHICLE. |
| | I UNDERSTAND AND AGREE TO NOTIFY THE PROGRAM IMMEDIATELY OF ANY CHANGES TO MY DRIVING HISTORY RECORD AS A RESULT OF A TRAFFIC INFRACTION, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO MOVING VIOLATIONS, DUI, ACCIDENTS, LICENSE SUSPENSION, OR REVOCATION. |
| | I AGREE TO REPORT TO THE PROGRAM IMMEDIATELY ANY UNUSUAL INCIDENTS, PROBLEMS, OR OCCURRENCES THAT MAY OCCUR DURING THE TRANSPORT OF A CHILD. |
| | I AGREE TO ABIDE BY THE GAL STANDARDS OF OPERATION GOVERNING MY CONDUCT AS A VOLUNTEER. |
| | I UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH THE CHILD'S CUSTODIAN/CARETAKER IN DETERMINING CONVENIENT AND APPROPRIATE TIMES TO TRANSPORT THE CHILD AND AGREE TO BE RESPECTFUL OF THE CARETAKER'S/CUSTODIAN'S WISHES IN THIS REGARD. |

Guardian ad Litem Volunteer

Date

Circuit Director - GAL

Date

VOLUNTEER TRANSPORTATION REQUEST FORM

Certified GAL Volunteers who wish to transport dependent child (ren) to whom they have been assigned by the court must complete the fields below.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone#: _____

Email: _____

IN ORDER FOR YOUR REQUEST TO TRANSPORT TO BE PROCESSED, YOU MUST PROVIDE YOUR DRIVER'S LICENSE AND INSURANCE CARD TO BE PHOTOCOPIED.

Vehicle Information:

Auto Make _____ Model _____ Year _____

Insurance Carrier: _____

Insurance Policy#: _____

Driving Record:

Volunteers must provide a certified copy of their driving record (7 years). You can obtain a copy of your driving record by visiting any driver license office or tax collector that offers driver license services, or court clerks who provide this service, or from a private vendor. For more information on obtaining your driving record, please visit www.flhsmv.gov.

Justification Requirement: Volunteers are approved to transport to activities and events that promote a sense of normalcy for the child. Volunteers must provide a written justification for seeking approval for participation in the Transportation Project to your Circuit Director. Attach your justification to this application which includes example of transportation needs to be met.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| For use by Circuit Director: | Recommended for Approval: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| For use by Executive Director: | Approved: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

B

Standard 4.4 Restriction of Program Services

Program representatives appointed as a guardian ad litem on a case assigned to the Program shall not:

1. permit any child or sibling of a child represented by the Program to be placed in, invited to, or temporarily housed in the residence of any Program staff member or volunteer;
2. transport any child represented by the Program unless in compliance with the Transportation Project exception set forth below;
3. accept responsibility or custody as a “caregiver” as defined by Section 39.01, Florida Statutes, of any child represented by the Program; or
4. conduct or assume responsibility for the supervision of visits of any child represented by the Program.

Transportation Project Exception: At the discretion of the Circuit Director, circuits may choose to participate in the Transportation Project. Participating circuits may recommend volunteers for approval to transport by submitting a written justification to the Executive Director or his/her designee for approval. No volunteer may transport a child without first obtaining the requisite approval.

C



State of Florida
Department of Children and Families

Rick Scott
Governor

David E. Wilkins
Secretary

June 8, 2011

Mr. Alan F. Abramowitz, Executive Director
Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program Office
Holland Building
600 S. Calhoun Street, Suite 274
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Mr. Abramowitz:

This letter is in response to the request from the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office ("GAL") to establish a GAL transportation project (the "Project"). The Department of Children and Families ("DCF") supports and has no objection to volunteer guardians providing transportation for children in out-of-home care in conjunction with the other activities the volunteer guardian is providing to these children.

DCF's understanding of the Project is that participation will be optional for each circuit, and each GAL Circuit Director will choose whether his/her circuit will participate in the Project. Additionally, not all volunteer guardians will be willing and/or suitable for transporting children. At a minimum, DCF expects volunteer guardians will successfully pass the background screening and training requirements of GAL's program prior to transporting any children. Additionally, all volunteer guardians will be recommended by his/her GAL Circuit Director, and approved by GAL's Executive Director, prior to transporting any children.

DCF will rely on GAL to ensure the volunteer guardians use good judgment in the means and destinations of the transportation. DCF expects the volunteer and the child's case manager will work together to ensure the transportation-related activities are in the child's best interest. Ultimately, as custodians of the child, DCF will be able to deny or restrict the volunteer guardian's transportation of a child, if the occasion should ever arise when that action is necessary.

Additionally, while DCF does not believe a volunteer guardian falls within the definition of "caregiver" as that term is used in Section 39.01, Florida Statutes, DCF expects GAL will ensure the volunteer guardians will have adequate insurance to cover any automobile accidents which might occur while a child is being transported. The volunteer guardian may transport a child as part of the volunteer's assignment to the child; however, the guardian volunteer will not be a substitute for the regular transportation responsibilities of the case manager.

While DCF supports this enhancement of GAL's mission through the Project, GAL will be responsible for working out the specifics of the Project with the appropriate lead agencies prior to implementing the Project within the area serviced by each particular lead agency.

Thank you for asking about DCF's position on this issue, and DCF looks forward to continuing to work with GAL in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jamie Self'.

Jamie Self, Ed.D., Executive Director
Family and Community Services

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency



Guardian ad Litem Foundation
FOR CHILDREN

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM
FOUNDATION

Florida Guardian ad Litem Program

600 South Calhoun Street, Suite 274
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

www.GuardianadLitem.org
1-866-341-1425



GUARDIAN
AD LITEM
FOUNDATION

of Tampa Bay

*Advocating for the children of the
Sixth Circuit Guardian ad Litem Program*



We would like to thank the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation, the Guardian ad Litem Foundation of Tampa Bay, and the Eckerd Family Foundation for funding the cost of producing this report.