



A Voice Heard

2016

VISUALIZING A
HOPEFUL FUTURE



GAL

Guardian ad Litem

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR
FLORIDA'S CHILDREN

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM

“I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully.” Ernest Hemingway



As the Executive Director of the Guardian ad Litem Program, I am privileged to meet the most dedicated, hardworking, and determined volunteer child advocates from across the state of Florida. I listen to their stories of advocacy for the children we represent and I am inspired. Our Program’s staff and volunteers exemplify our mission, “I am for the Child,” every time they listen to the children and act to ensure that the children are safe and have their needs met.

One of the most important qualities of a GAL volunteer is his or her ability to listen. Sometimes, a GAL volunteer listens just to hear the child’s story – so the child feels understood. Listening lets the child know that he or she is valued and understood. Listening to the child also develops trust. Listening, whether it is to the child, the child’s teachers, foster parents, case workers or attorney, is how a GAL volunteer understands a child’s needs and what is in the child’s best interests.

The *A Voice Heard* reports started in 2012 as a way of putting together information and acting upon what we have learned from listening to children statewide. From transporting children to ensuring GAL volunteers are trained in educational advocacy, I hear about the impact of GAL Programs and policies directly from the voices of children in foster care and children who were formally in foster care. Just as GAL volunteers listen in order to learn, I have learned the most from listening.

Throughout *2016 A Voice Heard – Visualizing a Hopeful Future*, you will be able to read quotes from children involved in the dependency system. Some of the quotes are very powerful and will speak to your heart. Whether it is the child who wishes only for a dog or for her mom to love her – hearing a child’s words is impactful. As I read through the children’s words, one quote in particular struck me. When a high school student was asked what the most important thing her GAL volunteer did for her, the child responded that her GAL volunteer helped her to “visualize a hopeful future.” If the GAL Program, through GAL volunteers and staff, can help a child visualize a hopeful future – I believe we have been a success.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan F. Abramowitz', written in a cursive style.

Alan F. Abramowitz
Executive Director
Florida Guardian ad Litem Program

A VOICE HEARD – VISUALIZING A HOPEFUL FUTURE

In February 2012, the GAL Program published the first in a series of *A Voice Heard* reports. The *A Voice Heard* reports are an opportunity for the GAL Program to record and reflect upon the voices of youth in foster care and youth formerly in foster care as they give their opinions about the tireless work of their GAL volunteer and the important role their GAL volunteer plays in their life. The reports are a way to better understand the aspects of the relationship between a GAL volunteer and a child, and how that relationship can be strengthened. Ultimately, the goal of *A Voice Heard* is to improve the GAL Program's best interest representation and advocacy.

In the first *A Voice Heard* report (2012), GAL volunteers asked foster youth in six of Florida's Judicial Circuits a series of questions to determine their experiences with, and expectations of, their GAL volunteer. More than 150 elementary, middle and high school-age students in foster care, as well as former foster youth, were asked a series of specific questions by GAL volunteers with whom they were 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.



"I wish my mom would love me and I could go back home."

Elementary School Student
Fifth Judicial Circuit



“I wish I could be Captain America.”

Elementary School Student
Fifth Judicial Circuit

Questions posed to the children and youth were developed in consultation with a child psychologist to ensure the questions were suitable for each age group questioned.

The results were compiled and analyzed for common themes to assist the GAL Program in improving its advocacy both within the courtroom and in the community. The themes that emerged taught us that young people want four things:

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

2016 A VOICE HEARD – VISUALIZING A HOPEFUL FUTURE. This year the GAL Program issues its 2016 *A Voice Heard* report. Over 100 current and former foster children from circuits across the state were questioned. The GAL Program wanted to better understand how initiatives that removed barriers for foster children participating in age-appropriate activities; GAL volunteers ability to transport children; and other GAL projects changed or added to the quality of the GAL volunteer – child relationship and best interest advocacy.

When reviewing the youth’s responses, it is clear that children still value four basic things: **personal interest, advocacy, communication, and trust.** In addition, it is evident that GAL initiatives and programs have changed GAL advocacy for the better.

Children and youth count on their GAL volunteers to help them:

BE SAFE: “You help me find places to live where people are nice to me”, “I can trust you . . . I know you won’t betray me”, “you make my nervousness go away”.

BE ADVOCATED FOR: “You’ve gotten me the things I need - bus passes, clothes, shoes, a computer, tutoring, and a bike”, “talk to the judge for me”, “ you help me understand what is going on in court and figure things out”, “you make sure I can talk to the judge”.

BE LISTENED TO: “You listen to me”, “you get me books when I am upset to help calm me down”, “you talk to me about mom”, “you stay and talk”.

HAVE A HOPEFUL FUTURE: “You give good advice”, “help better my life”, “you check on me – if my grades are good and I am going to school”, “you helped me get out of a group home and into a better place”.

BE A KID: “You bring us donut holes”, “you play games with us” “you have fun with us”, “you take me shopping”, “you taught me to cook”, “piggyback rides in the park”, “going bowling”, “you make me laugh”.

Throughout the *2016 A Voice Heard -Visualizing a Hopeful Future* report, you will read quotes from children explaining in their own words how their GAL volunteer has impacted their life.



When asked what he would wish for a child answered, “I would make sure no one ever gets hurt.”

Elementary School Student
Second Judicial Circuit

GAL PROGRAM

ADVOCATING FOR A CHILD'S HOPEFUL FUTURE

Florida's GAL Program advocates for the best interests of children alleged to be abused, neglected, or abandoned who are involved in court proceedings. This means preserving the child's physical safety and emotional well-being; finding a permanent placement in a stable and nurturing home environment that fosters the child's healthy growth and development; and protecting the child from further harm during the child's involvement in the court system. The GAL Program uses a team approach to represent children: GAL volunteers, Child Advocacy Managers (CAMs) and Child Best Interest (CBIs) Attorneys. GAL volunteers bring a community-based, common sense approach to children's cases. They are supervised and supported by CAMs who help them navigate the complex dependency system. The CAMs and GAL volunteers receive essential legal counsel and support from CBI attorneys and pro bono attorneys. CBI attorneys attend hearings and depositions, negotiate at mediations and take on appeals. The unique perspective and expertise of each team member complements the others and all are critical in advocating for the best interests of children.

Florida Statutes require that a GAL be appointed at the earliest possible time in an abuse or neglect (dependency) proceeding. § 39.822(1), Florida Statutes. After appointment, the GAL Program accepts the case and assigns a GAL volunteer. When the GAL Program accepts a child's case, a GAL volunteer begins to collect comprehensive information about the child and family, attends staffings and hearings, and takes steps to further the child's best interests.

Throughout the proceeding, the GAL volunteer visits the child at least monthly in his or her home environment. By visiting the child, the GAL volunteer gains an understanding of the child's needs and wishes. Frequent contact offers an opportunity to explain the dependency process to the child in an age-appropriate manner. Under Florida Statutes the GAL volunteer is required to make recommendations to the court as to the child's best interests and inform the court of the child's wishes. §§ 39.822(3), 39.807(2)(b), Florida Statutes. The GAL volunteer provides reports and recommendations to the court in order to assist judges in making pivotal decisions for the child, including placement, visitation, termination of parental rights and adoption.

The GAL Program advocates for things the law says the child is entitled to, such as a permanent home, appropriate developmental and educational evaluations, and services available for those children aging out of foster care. Some examples of issues a GAL volunteer might work on include ensuring a child removed from her home stays in the same school, advocating for



"I know that you have my back. That's all I need."

High School Student
Eleventh Judicial Circuit

increased visitation between children and their parents or siblings, and identifying age-specific services for children. The GAL volunteer monitors the child and all participants in the case to get children into permanent homes and prevent them from languishing in the foster care system.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM ADVOCACY

During a child's involvement in the dependency system, the GAL Program advocates for the best interest of the child including such things as:

- Safe, Permanent Home in as Timely a Manner as Possible
 - Appropriate Services and Programs
 - Visits with Siblings & Mentors
 - Stability in Foster Home Placement and School
 - Normalcy - remove barriers that prevent children from participating in age-appropriate extracurricular, enrichment and social activities.
 - Getting a Driver's License
-

The GAL also monitors the child's safety and well-being, as well as significant changes in the parents' lives which could impact the child's safety.

The Department of Children and Families (the Department) is the government agency responsible for protecting abused and neglected children. Unlike the GAL Program, the Department has obligations to serve a number of individuals in addition to the child, for example, the child's parents, relatives or foster parents. There are times when the Department's obligations to these other individuals conflict with the best interests of children. The GAL Program may work collaboratively with the Department to reach a goal for a child, but can also present the other side of a story or the child's opinion. The GAL Program works to move a case toward permanency more quickly and make sure the child does not fall through the cracks. For all of these reasons and more, it is critical that every child has a GAL volunteer.

VISUALIZING EVERY CHILD WITH A VOICE

OVER 10,000 VOLUNTEERS ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN

Before the GAL Program existed, abused and neglected children went to court alone. Now there are more than 10,000 volunteers, 175 CBI attorneys, 350 CAMs, 20 Circuit Directors and GAL staff representing the needs of thousands of dependent children. In the last 35 years, the GAL Program has had over 30,000 volunteers who have represented more than 250,000 children. GAL volunteers ensure that during what is certainly the most difficult time in a child's life, the child has a consistent advocate who listens to the child, makes sure the court hears the child's voice and advocates for the child's needs.

The volunteer's perspective is unique because the volunteer advocates for one child or a sibling group, and typically has only one or two children, rather than managing a caseload. The child is not a case or a number. While case workers and placements may change, a GAL volunteer is a constant in the child's life. The GAL volunteer advocates from the perspective that every child should be treated as if he or she were the only child in the foster care system.

On average, a GAL volunteer stays with the GAL Program for 32 months. Over this 32 month period, the State receives \$4,076 in value of goods and services from each GAL volunteer. That averages more than \$13 million per year in contributions by the more than 10,000 GAL volunteers and local foundations that support the GAL Program.



If I were a GAL volunteer, "I would make sure I was really interested in the child and their life - like family and friends. I really would want them to know that I understand and I would show compassion and really understand what they are going through. I would want to find out if they had any issues or problems with previous GALs, the Department etc. so I could understand more about them and to try and go about rectifying past issues or concerns. I would want them to feel comfortable around me so they could trust me. I would want them to know I actually care, and I am not just checking up on them. I would not just ask how they are doing or are they doing what they are supposed to be doing but more about the child and their family and their life."

Youth Formerly in Foster Care
Judicial Circuit

THE PROGRAM CONTINUES TO AGGRESSIVELY RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS.

The GAL Program has an all-time high of more than 10,000 volunteers representing Florida's most vulnerable children. Continuous growth of our volunteer base is a critical element of the GAL Program's objective to represent every dependent child. The twenty circuit program's progress is reported monthly in an Advocacy Snapshot, Representation Report and Dashboard posted monthly at www.GuardianadLitem.org.

ADVOCACY SNAPSHOT

The Advocacy Snapshot gives our circuit leadership teams monthly information so that they may better strive for individual and local circuit program excellence based on meeting or exceeding prescribed statewide performance benchmarks. Information captured in the Advocacy Snapshot includes:

- The Number of Children Appointed to the GAL Program
- The Number of Active Certified Volunteers
- Children/Certified Volunteers –Productivity Ratio
- 12 Month Rolling Certified Volunteer -Retention Rate
- Certified Volunteer Recruitment Progress
- Educational Advocate Volunteers – Percentage of Volunteers Trained
- Transportation Eligible Volunteers – Percentage of Volunteers Approved

REPRESENTATION REPORT

The Representation Report is an in-depth look into the numbers of children and volunteers in each county including:

- Total Dependent Children
- Children Appointed to the GAL Program
- Children in Out of Home Care
- Total Volunteers
- Certified Case Volunteers
- Volunteers that have been Inactive 6 or More Months
- Discharged Volunteers
- Children Assigned to a Volunteer
- Percentage of Children with a GAL Volunteer

DASHBOARD

The Dashboard is an interactive tool to understand representation by circuit, region, multiple regions, or statewide during a specific selected time frame.

ENGAGING POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS

Through social media and the GAL website, the GAL Program is reaching out to potential volunteers with information, inspirational stories and immediate attention when a potential volunteer expresses interest in becoming a GAL volunteer. Through a new volunteer contact system, once a potential volunteer lets the GAL Program know of his or her interest in becoming a GAL volunteer via our website, a volunteer recruiter from the county where the potential volunteer lives responds within two business days to tell him or her about the GAL Program.

Over 40 percent of potential GAL volunteers reach the GAL Program through social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The GAL Program continues to reach out to the public to inform, celebrate and recruit potential GAL volunteers for the GAL Program. With almost 3,000 followers of the Florida GAL Program Facebook page, the GAL Program can instantly share the latest news, motivational stories and legislative happenings with the public.

The GAL Program provides free online training, practice aids and support through our skilled CBI attorneys and committed Program Office.

PRO BONO ATTORNEYS

Attorneys who want to use their legal expertise to give a voice to Florida's most vulnerable children, find a meaningful pro bono experience with the GAL Program. Since 2008, between 225 and 300 attorneys have volunteered their time with the GAL Program each year.



Pro Bono attorneys give a child a voice by:

- representing children with certain special needs (children prescribed psychotropic medications, children placed in or being considered for placement in nursing homes or residential treatment centers, children diagnosed with certain disabilities or children who are victims of human trafficking);
- becoming a GAL Volunteer Child Advocate;
- representing a child as an Attorney ad Litem in a traditional attorney-client relationship.

Pro Bono attorneys also use their legal expertise to help children regarding issues such as immigration, special education, guardianship, and probate.

STATEWIDE PRO BONO RECRUITER

This year the GAL Program hired its first Statewide Pro Bono Recruiter. Having a dedicated statewide pro bono recruiter enables the GAL Program to use targeted recruitment efforts to recruit attorneys to work pro bono as part of the GAL Program team.



"I had 5 foster homes and I was always scared. Miss Donna always came and made things better."

Youth Formerly in Foster Care
Eighth Judicial Circuit

"You come to see us to make sure we are OK, because you care about us."

Elementary School Student
First Judicial Circuit

THE GAL PROGRAM ADVOCATES FOR THE FUTURE

VOLUNTEERS ABLE TO TRANSPORT CHILDREN

The N.I.C.E Transportation Program (Normalcy, Improved Communication, Child Safety, and Enhanced Relationships) which allowed volunteers to transport children began as a pilot project in 2011 and was such a success that it was unanimously approved by the Florida Legislature in 2012.

The GAL Program Transportation Program enhances normalcy for dependent youth, and betters relationships and communication between a GAL volunteer and the child they represent thereby enhancing the volunteer experience.

The GAL Program's goal is to have 25 percent of its certified volunteers eligible to transport children. This year the GAL Program has far exceeded its goal as almost 34 percent of our GAL volunteers are eligible to transport children.

A Voice Heard



"You took me to see the play Cinderella."
Elementary School Student Twentieth Judicial Circuit

"Take me shopping"
Elementary School Student Sixth Judicial Circuit

"Take us to different places like church, picnic, ballgames, birthday party, and swimming."
Elementary School Student, Fifth Judicial Circuit

"I enjoy coming to your house and allowing me to stay and to cook and tryout doing different things."
Middle School Student, Twentieth Judicial Circuit

"I enjoyed going places . . . receiving gifts, and my first visit to 4 Rivers Smokehouse with you. I liked Chuck E Cheese visit."
Middle School Student Fourteenth Judicial Circuit

"I like to spend time with you. Doing fun things. I like to go shopping and out for dinner. I like when we cook together."
High School Student, Eighteenth Judicial Circuit

VOLUNTEERS ARE EDUCATIONAL ADVOCATES

Numerous studies have confirmed that children in foster care perform significantly worse in school than children in the general population. The educational deficits of children in foster care are reflected in higher rates of grade retention; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates. The poor academic performance of these children affects their lives after foster care and contributes to higher than average rates of homelessness, criminality, drug abuse, and unemployment.

Children and youth who are or have been in out-of-home care:

- Face extra challenges: more than 60 percent drop out of school before graduation, a rate that is twice as high as the dropout rate for all students.
- Two or three times more likely than other students to have disabilities that affect their ability to learn.

Becoming an educational advocate is crucial to ensuring children have the evaluations, services, and support they need, and the educational stability they require. All GAL volunteers have some educational advocacy training. However, additional training not only provides increased and improved educational advocacy for GAL children needing critical assistance with educational issues, it enhances overall skills, competencies and advocacy performance of GAL volunteers.

A Voice Heard



"To make sure I am ok and doing well in school"
Elementary School Student, Eighteenth Judicial Circuit

"You cared about me. You went to my school for meetings and you talked to my teachers. You got me a tutor to help me."
Middle School Student, Ninth Judicial Circuit

"You make sure that school stuff is on track."
High School Student, Eleventh Judicial Circuit

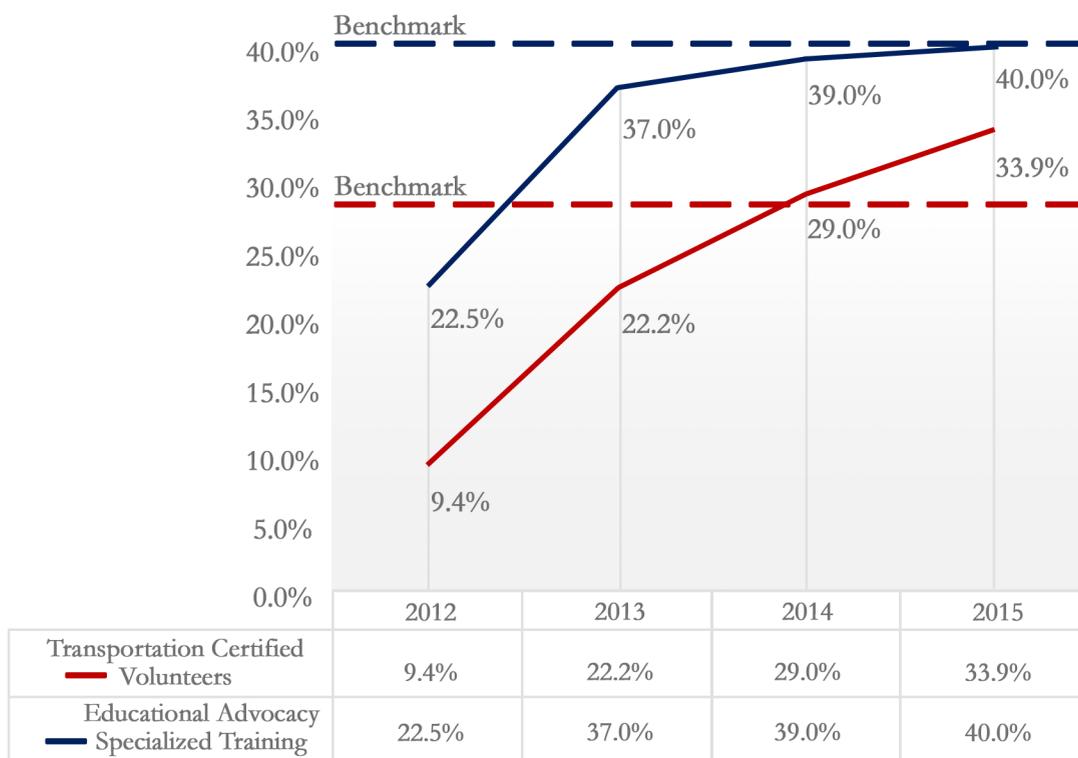
"I need you to help me figure out how to pay for college and to fill out the applications and scholarships."
High School Student, Eighteenth Judicial Circuit

"My GAL volunteer always shows up and has stayed with me. She pushed me in school and found any information I needed for college."
Youth Formerly in Foster Care, Tenth Judicial Circuit

The GAL Program’s goal is to have 40 percent of its certified volunteers trained specifically in educational advocacy. The GAL Program has met its goal as 40 percent of GAL volunteers are currently specially trained in educational advocacy.

The GAL Program has showed continued growth in the number of certified volunteers who are transportation eligible and who have had additional specialized educational advocacy training. Our GAL volunteers have met and exceeded benchmarks the GAL Program has set for itself.

Specialized Educational Advocacy Training & Transportation Eligible Certified Volunteers



VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Effective, efficient training of GAL volunteers is critical for the children the GAL Program represents and for GAL volunteers. This year, the GAL Program developed a new volunteer training program. It has been successfully implemented in all of the GAL Program’s 20 Judicial Circuits. The GAL Program expects new volunteer training to have a positive impact on volunteer retention. As part of the new volunteer training, a Pre-Service Training Handbook and other materials were created. These materials are accessible through the GAL Program network.



Based on feedback from staff and volunteers, the GAL Program developed a new web-based Volunteer Independent Study module which allows for volunteers to use one central site to complete their training – either through the GAL Program network or on the GAL Program website.

The GAL Program is concerned with the issue of children in foster care who are prescribed psychotropic medication. To ensure GAL volunteers

have the latest information and training the GAL Program created a training package - video training and materials including practice aids and reference materials. “Psychotropic Medications and our Foster Youth” is available on the GAL website. The GAL Program also developed volunteer training to focus on reaching permanency for foster youth called “Performing Our Advocate Role to Reach PERMANENCY”.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM LEARNING ACADEMY FOR IN-SERVICE TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

This year, the GAL Program developed the Guardian ad Litem Learning Academy for In-Service Training and Certification. When possible, trainings are videotaped for easy access for the volunteers and developed to enhance the overall volunteer experience.

Once fully implemented, the GAL Learning Academy will consist of:

- Core Training of 12 Essential In-Service Trainings. Each course is a minimum of 1.5 hours and are to be completed prior to seeking specialty certification
- Specialty Certification / Advanced Topics – Each course is a minimum of 3.0 hours and will be offered both regionally and at the circuit level
- Electives – the GAL Program continues to create and offer in-service trainings in addition to Core and Specialty Certification training

LEGAL ADVOCACY

While the GAL Program has historically been known for the work of its thousands of volunteers, the GAL Program has worked diligently to improve its legal practice. The Director of Legal Services enacted several new initiatives designed to improve the quality of the Legal Department's advocacy.

These initiatives include:

- Creating key support positions, including Director of Attorney Professional Development,

Diligent Search Affidavit Coordinator, and Statewide Litigation and Advocacy Consultant

- Conducting “Complex Case” Staffings
- Monthly CBI Attorney training calls - recorded and available on the website for CLE credits.
- Topical calls for CBI Attorneys

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The GAL Program’s Legal Department has had a busy year, with accomplishments including:

- The addition of paralegals as support staff
- Planning and implementing trainings covering psychotropic medications, trial skills, guardianships and ethics
- Updating the Dependency Practice Manual
- CBI attorneys presented at major conferences throughout the year including the Department of Children and Families Child Protection Summit and the GAL Disabilities Training Conference
- Filing an amicus brief in the ineffective assistance of counsel case JB v. Department of Children and Families
- GAL CBI attorneys are serving on the Select Committee on Ineffective Assistance of Counsel
- GAL Program appellate team secured a significant victory for children’s permanency in the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program v. A.A. case.
- GAL CBI attorneys are participating in the Certification Training Committee

LOOKING FORWARD

The GAL Program has developed a plan for training which includes:

- Opportunities for CBI attorneys to participate as attendees and presenters at live trainings
- Updating and organizing written materials, practice aids, presentations and reference materials – all available on the GAL website
- Increased GAL Program support of peer-to-peer learning opportunities and local training initiatives
- Utilizing newly launched GAL website to share training videos, materials and practice aids across the state

CHILD’S BEST INTEREST ATTORNEY CONFERENCE CALL TRAINING

The GAL Program’s monthly conference calls are a cost-effective method to ensure staff is aware of changes in the law, best practices, and current issues facing youth. Continuing Legal Education credits are available for attorneys which enable them to maintain good standing with The Florida Bar at no cost to the attorney. All trainings are recorded and the audio files are placed on the GAL Program’s website, which can be accessed by the public.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM DISABILITIES TRAINING CONFERENCE

This year's Florida Guardian ad Litem Disabilities Training Conference: Imagining the Future was two days of networking, sharing best practices, and learning - challenging old ideas and creating new pathways to better advocacy for dependent children with disabilities. The conference was a huge success and included key note speaker Jonathan Martinis who discussed Supported Decision-Making and a panel discussion by Florida's Youth SHINE. The conference further included 31 workshops, two keynote speakers and was attended by 436 child welfare professionals representing agencies from across the state, private attorneys, registry attorneys and other dedicated to Florida's dependent children with disabilities.

The GAL Program is grateful to Governor Rick Scott and the Florida Legislature - specifically Senator Bill Galvano and Representative Eric Fresen – for giving the GAL Program this wonderful opportunity to bring together dedicated legal professionals from child serving agencies and partner-private attorneys throughout this diverse state.

Every workshop and keynote speaker was recorded and is available along with workshop materials at www.GuardianadLitem.org. These recordings are also available for CLE credit for Florida attorneys – at no cost.



“I rely on you and trust you. You are a professional friend I can talk to, mostly I can be casual with you.”

High School Student
Twentieth Judicial Circuit

SHARING BEST PRACTICES THROUGH TECHNOLOGY AND OUTREACH

WEBSITE

The statewide website (www.GuardianadLitem.org) has been redesigned and relaunched this year and continues to develop as a useful resource for CBI attorneys, GAL volunteers, and pro bono attorneys. Through the website, the GAL Program shares best practices, provides training and information, and recruits and supports volunteers. The site also contains up-to-date case summaries, legislative updates, and links to statutory and administrative materials. The website includes many hours of video and conference call training – many available for CLE credit.

Visitors to the website can view summaries of the latest dependency opinions by date or based on terms they are interested in, for example: adoption, First District Court of Appeal, or termination of parental rights.

NEWSLETTER

The GAL Program’s Legal Briefs Newsletter provides case summaries and articles reinforcing general areas of practice as well as instruction on complex legal issues. The newsletter is available to volunteers, judges, attorneys, and others who have an interest in Florida dependency law and can be accessed through the website or can be delivered via email.



Every month the
GAL website
receives over
10,000 visitors.

“You listen to me. You let me know how my brother and sisters were doing and that they missed me.”

Middle School Student
Twentieth Judicial Circuit



LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Every year the GAL Program advocates for legislation to ensure the law supports what is best for children in foster care. Since 2005, the Statewide GAL Program has worked with the Legislature and with other child welfare organizations resulting in positive changes for dependent children.

- The Regis Little Act which ensures children who lack capacity will have a guardianship or guardian advocate in place before they become an adult;
- The Quality Parenting for Children in Foster Care Act which creates a more child and foster family friendly approach to normalcy for foster youth;
- KIDS (Keeping I.D. Safe) Act to assist in the protection of children in foster care's financial records;
- The Keys to Independence Act which gives a pathway for foster teens to drive;
- Guardian ad Litem volunteers being allowed to transport children;
- Expansion of foster care until 21; and
- Attorneys ad Litem for children with special needs.

This year the GAL Program is supporting A Child's Best Hope Act. This legislation seeks to change the current law that permits even a parent who has murdered a spouse, committed egregious acts against their children, or who wishes to punish a foster parent that has provided a caring home for their child for a lengthy time to choose with whom their child will be placed. The court is currently not required to consider what is in that child's best interests, as it would for any other child in the dependency system.

"What I enjoy the most about your visits is just a chance to discuss the case but also talk about me and my needs."

High School Student
Thirteenth Judicial Circuit

"I remember that she always came to see me. No one else ever kept promises for me! She was the only person I could count on."

Youth Formerly in Foster Care
Thirteenth Judicial Circuit

Of course, the GAL Program does not act alone. The GAL Program has legislators, GAL volunteers and so many more who make legislative changes a reality for Florida's children. This is especially true of Representative Ben Albritton, Representative Janet Adkins, and Senator Nancy Detert. The GAL Program also thanks the GAL volunteers, foster parents, advocates agencies and Youth SHINE who come to Tallahassee to speak to legislators to support laws that protect and support children in foster care.

PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

The government alone cannot meet the needs of Florida's abused, abandoned, and neglected children. Throughout the state there are not-for-profit organizations that support the GAL Program and help address other needs of children. Some of these organizations provide necessary items directly to children, such as football uniforms and opportunities to attend summer camp, while others provide staff for the GAL Program who advocate for children. In many circuits these organizations also assist with recruitment and retention of GAL volunteers. There are numerous organizations that have proven they are for the child. Two of these organizations are Akerman, LLC and The Women's Council of Realtors – Florida State Chapter.

"You help us out in our life.
You're helpers."

Elementary School Student
Nineteenth Judicial Circuit

"Helps me with the things
that are out of my hands."

High School Student
Eighteenth Judicial Circuit

AKERMAN, LLC IS FOR THE CHILD



Over the past year the GAL Program and the Florida Statewide GAL Foundation has partnered with Akerman LLP – a top 100 U.S law firm serving clients across the United States. This partnership was made possible through the National CASA Association. Over the past year, Akerman has given more than \$30,000 to the GAL Program's local circuits and has provided more than 11,800 pro-bono hours of legal advocacy. More than 99 attorneys and staff from the firm have become certified GAL volunteers and every day additional lawyers and professionals from Akerman are signing up to become GAL volunteers. In addition, Akerman announced a \$1 million, six-year pledge to the National CASA Association and its affiliate programs across the country. The GAL Program and the Florida Statewide GAL Foundation are looking forward to this continued partnership.

THE WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF REALTORS FLORIDA STATE CHAPTER

The Women's Council of Realtors is a network of successful realtors, advancing women as professionals and leaders in the business, the industry and the community that they serve. The Women's Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter has thirty-four Chapters statewide. This year, they teamed-up with the GAL Program's local circuits for a new suitcase drive. They collected 851 new suitcases to benefit the children in foster care that are represented by a GAL volunteer. Typically, when children are removed from their homes or change placement, all of their worldly belongings are placed in a black trash bag. Having an actual suitcase is a way to show children they are cared for by their community. Additionally, the Women's Council of Realtors has provided 6 certified GAL volunteers and counting.



The Florida Statewide GAL Foundation relies on public-private partnerships, like the ones with Akerman LLP and the Women's Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter, to ensure that every child represented by the Florida GAL Program has a voice in court and that their essential needs are met.

When a high school student was asked what the most important thing her GAL volunteer did for her, she responded her GAL volunteer helps her...

"Visualize a hopeful future. Taking me to meet with a college counselor... and constantly reinforcing that I am in control of my decisions and destiny. I know the things I want for myself are all within my reach, and that I can break a multi-generational pattern of family dysfunction, and my GAL will help me to achieve my goals, but that ultimately it's up to me."

THE GAL PROGRAM IS VISUALIZING A HOPEFUL FUTURE FOR ALL OF FLORIDA'S DEPENDENT CHILDREN

The GAL Program is dedicated to ensuring that all of Florida's abused, neglected and abandoned children are listened to and advocated for in dependency court. Even though the GAL Program is reaching more children than ever, there are still children waiting for a GAL volunteer. The GAL Program will continue to recruit volunteers and pro bono attorneys. The GAL Program will train volunteers, CBI attorneys, CAMs and pro bono attorneys and advocate for legislative changes that help Florida's children.

The GAL Program visualizes a future where every child has a voice.



Alan F. Abramowitz

Executive Director

Florida Guardian ad Litem Program



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**A POWERFUL VOICE FOR
FLORIDA'S CHILDREN**

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