



NOVEMBER 2018 ISSUE



**GUARDIAN  
AD LITEM**  
FOR CHILDREN

**NEWSLETTER**

### FEATURED

*Celebrating our Team!  
Statewide 2018  
Awards*

### 30-MINUTE READ

*Read the first statewide  
newsletter - a monthly  
review of the statewide  
operations of our  
Program.*

## WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

- A MESSAGE FROM ALAN
- STATEWIDE AWARDS
- OPERATIONS
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- 2018 AWARD RECIPIENTS

*“Reading the bios of the nominationees reinforces the dedication and drive you have for the children and the Guardian ad Litem Program.”*



## STATEWIDE AWARDS

Each year the Guardian ad Litem Program recognizes Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates, Guardian ad Litem staff, and community supporters for their tireless work and dedication to the Program. It is always extremely difficult for the judging panel to review the nominations.

We have so many great Volunteer Child Advocates, employees, and supporters - reading the bios of the nominationees reinforces the dedication and drive you have for the children and the Guardian ad Litem Program. Each and every day you advocate, listen, support, and fight for what is in the best interest of children.

Check out the rest of the newsletter to find out who these outstanding individuals are. Congratulations to all who were nominated and to our award recipients!



*“Every county has goals that match ours: the best interests of abused and neglected children. And they know the Guardian ad Litem Program improves outcomes for maltreated children who are at higher risk to become homeless or enter the criminal justice system.”*

## A MESSAGE FROM ALAN

### Guardian ad Litem Circuits Can Better Collaborate with the Counties They Serve

“The law says we provide housing and infrastructure [to Guardian ad Litem],” said Leon County Commissioner Bryan Desloge, past president of the National Association of Counties. “Beyond that, it’s at the counties’ discretion.”

It's already the constitutional responsibility of Florida's 67 counties to support their local Guardian ad Litem Programs. They do so much – providing help in the form of communications, office space and furniture – that we at Guardian ad Litem are extremely grateful.

And as local Guardian ad Litem circuits already know, many counties – especially rural ones – are strapped for cash and challenged to serve children and families who need mental health services and substance abuse treatment.

Yet every county has goals that match ours: the best interests of abused and neglected children. And they know the Guardian ad Litem Program improves outcomes for maltreated children who are at higher risk to become homeless or enter the criminal justice system.

So I'm urging circuits to build closer relationships with the counties they serve. "Counties have a natural pipeline of Volunteer Child Advocates," said Audie Canney, a consultant and long-time friend of Guardian ad Litem; she points to counties' strong relations with civic and neighborhood associations, local colleges, school districts and government employees. "Most elected officials want to help, they just need to be asked."

Canney says colleges can partner with Guardian ad Litem circuits to create public service announcements (PSAs) for the Program. The PSAs can then be aired on local governmental channels. It's a win-win - a partnership of college students filming and producing with children served by Guardian ad Litem.

Local governments can also promote Volunteer Child Advocate opportunities among their employees and write letters of support for grant applications by the non-profits that help pay for services to children represented by Volunteer Child Advocates for Guardian ad Litem.

Moreover, it's not unusual to find commissioners who are Volunteer Child Advocates for Guardian ad Litem, like Hillsborough County Commission Chair Sandra Murman. Led by Murman, the commission has stepped up to the huge need in Hillsborough, which leads all Florida counties with an estimated 2,502 children in foster care through August 2018.

Hillsborough County has gone above and beyond to help Guardian ad Litem, and so have many other counties, said Tabitha Lambert, director of the local Guardian ad Litem Hillsborough office.

*"There are many good ideas for collaborating with counties – and all of them depend on good relations with your elected officials and staffers."*

For instance, Pasco County's Sheriff Chris Nocco and School Superintendent Kurt Browning recorded PSAs for Guardian ad Litem local offices in the Pasco area, and Pasco Tax Collector Mike Fasano, set up Guardian ad Litem information tables at his two busiest offices.

In short, there are many good ideas for collaborating with counties – and all of them depend on good relations with your elected officials and staffers. So please keep them posted on the status of children in your service area. Attend your local legislative delegation meetings, and tell elected officials you're a Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocate. "Make a bit of a business case," Leon's Desloge advises.

So in preparing this article, we reached out to long-term allies now serving on their county commissions. Sarasota County Commission Chair Nancy Detert, an honorary Guardian ad Litem and a children's champion while in the Legislature, suggested that someone from the local Guardian ad Litem to record a PSA for the county's education channel. She also agreed to speak at a Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocate appreciation event.

Broward County Commissioner Nan Rich said she'd consulted Dr. Philip Harris, administrator of Broward's Children's Services Administration Section. As a result, they will convene a meeting with Guardian ad Litem Broward County Circuit Director Kasandra Philips, the Children's Services Board and the Children's Services Council to better coordinate their efforts.

"It's going to increase awareness about Guardian ad Litem," Rich said. "There's not that much connectivity now, but there will be by the time we get finished with this."



*Guardian ad Litem's  
5 Cs... Our Program's  
core values - "Our  
advocacy for children  
requires it."*

## **OPERATIONS**

### Core Values, Why Are They Important?

As an organization, Core Values will help support our vision and clarify our principles and philosophy. Why is that important? Our advocacy for children requires it. In order to effectively advocate for Florida's children, we must maintain integrity and garner respect from the Judiciary, other agencies, and the families and children we work with. The bottom line – we need others to hear us and act on our recommendations so the children move towards permanency in the shortest time possible.

Here are our 5 Cs and why they are important:

**Commitment to Children** - the children for whom we advocate are our most important priority – this is common ground shared by all of us in child-welfare and a good starting point for our work.

**Communication Built on Trust** - the Program has a culture of open communication, active listening, team work and regard for the views of others – most importantly we need to be honest and open in what we say and how we say it.

**Collective Empowerment** - each Circuit has the authority and responsibility to make and implement the best decisions to meet the children's needs. This empowerment must be passed on to Volunteer Child Advocates, staff and attorneys – this empowers you to break down walls to do what is best for our children.

**Collaboration** - the Program fosters relationships that promote the well-being of the whole child and it is important that we work together within our Program, with the families we serve, and with our community partners.

**Courtesy** - the Program values all who engage in this challenging work and assures they are treated with respect and dignity – this is critical especially when we disagree with others – our differences when properly embraced can only make us better.

Remember, building relationships is the most effective way to advocate for the children we serve. If you incorporate these Core Values into your everyday efforts, you will see an improvement in our advocacy, a change in how others view our Program, and a renewed respect for the important work we do.

*“Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child’s lifetime and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience.”*



## LEGAL

### Improving Sibling Separation Outcomes

Amber (10), Simon (8) and Joseph (5) were placed in two separate placements. She lives an hour away from her siblings. It’s the first JR and visits have not occurred since being ordered at shelter. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act requires that siblings be placed together unless contrary to their safety or well-being –and that if separated, frequent visitation or other ongoing interaction be provided.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 40% of sibling groups are in separate placements.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining the sibling connection is crucial. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child’s lifetime and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience.<sup>3</sup>

For separated children, being with their siblings can enhance their sense of safety and well-being and provide natural, mutual support. *Id at 5.*

The following are three tips to improve this outcome.

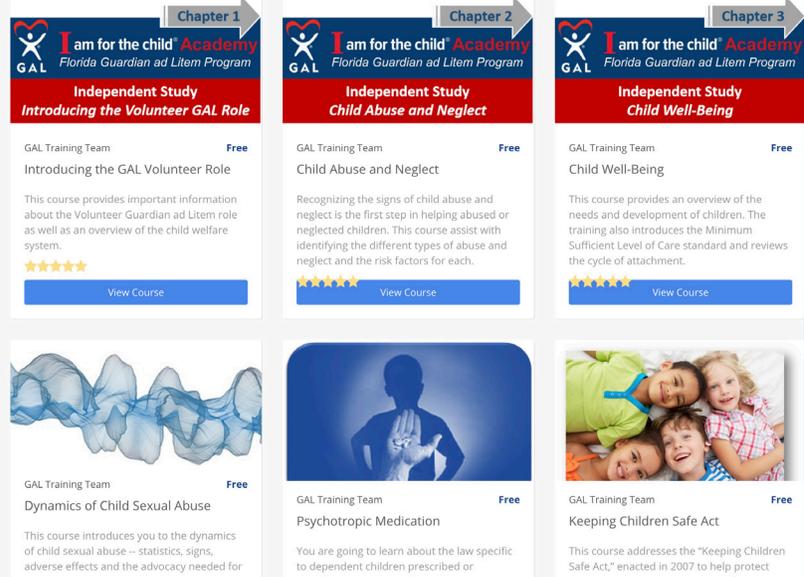
1. Ask separated children the last time they saw their siblings.
2. Inform the assigned attorney if sibling visits are not occurring.
3. Conduct Family Finders: there may be a relative willing to care for all siblings.

Placing siblings together is challenging. However, we can help maintain the sibling connection by ensuring they visit often. We will explore the importance of maintaining the sibling connection in future newsletters and examine, for example, the impact of sibling separation.

<sup>1</sup>See Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, P.L. 110-351 § 206.

<sup>2</sup> See Child Welfare Key Indicators Monthly Report, February 2018, retrieved from [http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qa/cwkeyindicator/KI\\_Monthly\\_Report\\_Aug\\_2018.pdf](http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qa/cwkeyindicator/KI_Monthly_Report_Aug_2018.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>See Center Welfare Information Gateway, Sibling Issues in Foster Care Adoption, January 2013, retrieved from [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/siblingissues.pdf#page=4&view=Importance of Sibling.](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/siblingissues.pdf#page=4&view=Importance%20of%20Sibling)



*“With over 3,000 current users, the ‘I AM FOR THE CHILD’ Academy continues to grow.”*

# TRAINING

## “I am for the child” Academy

On May 15, 2018, the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program experienced the launching of a new way to train our Volunteer Child Advocates, staff and the community. The “I am for the child” Academy became a reality that now hosts our Independent Study portion of pre-service training, as well as many excellent in-service training opportunities.

With over 3,000 current users, the Academy continues to grow. Next up will be the ability to access our classroom section of pre-service training in an online format. This will provide our circuits with another way to train Volunteer Child Advocates, as well as a means by which to address missed live classroom training hours.

The Training Team has numerous courses in production that will give our staff and Volunteer Child Advocates the opportunity to easily earn their in-service hours. Many of these same courses will be offered to new Volunteer Child Advocates as their “electives,” necessary to complete certification.

Thank you all for your support! If you haven’t yet taken the time to register and take a tour of the website, what are you waiting for? Go visit the “I am for the child” Academy and create an account. Please encourage your Volunteer Child Advocates to join the Academy, too. It exists for all of us!



*“I am amazed and inspired by so many people that have come to the aid of others helping with urgent and basic needs.”*

# NORTHERN REGION UPDATE

## Northern Region Update: Hurricane Michaels Devastation and Inspiration

I'm sure that you have seen reports and photos of the devastation in the panhandle caused by Hurricane Michael, the third- most intense Atlantic hurricane to make landfall in the United States. The storm ripped across the panhandle from the Bay County coast continuing upward through the Alabama / Georgia lines leaving a massive amount of destruction at the Guardian ad Litem Bay County office and other local Program offices in the Panhandle area.

At the time of this writing, I'm thankful to report that all of our staff are safe, though many have experienced some level of loss or damage. The assessment of their needs for support and assistance is still ongoing and we will let you know how you can help. I am amazed and inspired by so many people that have come to the aid of others helping with urgent and basic needs.

During the initial impact of the storm, when a lot of our Citrix based communication was out, contact could be made and information shared statewide through our social media platform, Workplace. There is very limited space in this newsletter, so I will be periodically sharing stories of inspiration, photos and let you know how you can help over our Workplace in the days ahead!



*"The collaboration among the circuits is a great example of our core values, but also the commitment that Voices for Children has for our Program..."*

# CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

In 2017, Voices for Children developed a relationship with the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay. The Community Foundation works with 5 counties in the Tampa Bay area to include Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Hernando, and Citrus counties.

Voices for Children wanted to launch a campaign to promote the Guardian ad Litem Program's need for Volunteer Child Advocates in the Tampa Bay area. Through collaboration with the local Guardian ad Litem offices from the Ocala and Clearwater areas, a campaign was developed focusing on the Guardian ad Litem's fight for kids in the system and to help recruit male Volunteer Child Advocates.

Videos and photos were created to utilize on social media, shirts with the Guardian ad Litem logo were made, pinwheels and signs were posted throughout the Tampa Bay area, and a specialized website to monitor the number of inquiries was secured. The Community Foundation funded the project in its entirety and wants to fund another initiative in 2019 with the local Guardian ad Litem offices from the Ocala, Tampa and Clearwater areas.

*“Videos and photos were created to utilize on social media, shirts with the Guardian ad Litem logo were made, pinwheels and signs were posted throughout the Tampa Bay area, and a specialized website to monitor the number of inquiries was secured.”*

The collaboration among the circuits is a great example of our core values, but also the commitment that Voices for Children has for our Program, the need to assist the circuits in recruiting Volunteer Child Advocates, and ultimately the impact that the relationship has on helping our children.

*“Everyone came together for an emergency staffing and immediately started putting together our action plan with everyone taking an active role in the process.”*



## *SOUTHERN REGION UPDATE*

Unfortunately, the children we represent are not always placed in their home Circuit. They are often times placed hours away from their family and friends. It is our job to ensure that no matter where they are placed, they have a dedicated advocacy team fighting for them. When our teams collaboratively work together, while physically in different parts of the state, great things happen for our kids.

In August, a 7 year old little girl from Pensacola was placed 62 counties away in Miami. She was placed in a group home and within the first three weeks was Baker Acted not once but twice. She did not have services in place nor was she enrolled in school.

This child was in an inappropriate placement and the Guardian ad Litem team in Miami started sounding the alarms. Everyone came together for an emergency staffing and immediately started putting together our action plan with everyone taking an active role in the process. An emergency status report was filed for a court hearing the next day and we were able to inform everyone about the situation the child was in.

The Court was very concerned and ordered that the child be removed from that placement. We would not have been successful if it were not for the quick and effective action by the child's Best Interest Attorney Shayna Marsteller and Child Advocate Manager Lydia Gordon who ensured the home Circuit's community partners and Court were informed of the team's concerns.

Thank you Mary Walton and Brandy Wells (OOC team in Miami) for always ensuring our children have a strong voice no matter where their case comes from and for making sure this little girl knew she had someone who cared about her even when she was so far from home!

*“No matter what position you hold in this Program, each of you matters and you are leaving a legacy.”*



## **STAFF RECOGNITION**

### **2018 GUARDIAN AD LITEM STATEWIDE AWARDS - RECIPIENTS**

Non-Profit of the Year:

**North West Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation** – Pensacola – First Judicial Circuit

Community Advocate of the Year:

**Riana and Olga and the University of Miami School of Law** – Miami – Eleventh Judicial Circuit

Circuit Team Award:

**Mary and Ken Ward**, Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates; **Laura Faber**, Child Advocate Manager; **Roberta Katz**, Child Best Interest Attorney – Port St. Lucie – 19th Judicial Circuit

Barbra Sessa Award:

**Zachary Lang** – Jacksonville – 4th Judicial Circuit

Judge Daniel P. Dawson Award:

**Andi Bemenderfer** – Port St. Lucie – 19th Judicial Circuit

Angela Orkin Dedication Award:

**Tammy Harris** – Tallahassee – 2nd Judicial Circuit

Leadership Award:

**Christine Meyer** – Jacksonville – 4th Judicial Circuit

Executive Director:

**Jorge Tormes** – Miami – 11th Judicial Circuit

Audrey L. Schiebler Volunteer Child Advocate of the Year:

**Patti Reges** – Brevard – 18th Judicial Circuit

To see the full list with Award Recipient descriptions and the nominees list, please visit the Guardian ad Litem website at: [GuardianadLitem.org](http://GuardianadLitem.org).

No matter what position you hold in this Program, each of you matters and you are leaving a legacy. Congratulations again to everyone!