

Baby Court (0 to 3)

The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Office requests **\$996,920** in recurring general revenue funds to establish 18 FTEs Child Advocate Manager I positions (class code (8401) and 1 FTE Program Director (class code 8505) to provide targeted advocacy for the best interests of infants and toddlers aged 0 to 3 within Early Childhood Courts in Florida's judicial circuits. These courts, known as "Baby Courts," work with teams to focus case-specific resources and intensive oversight on very young children; they engage stakeholders and parents with frequent monitoring and assessment to prevent further maltreatment, reduce the time needed to permanency, and improve the child's well-being.¹ The GAL Program, as the child's representative, has a crucial role to play on these teams, which require a greater time commitment than other cases to establish an early path to permanency.

The 18 FTE Child Advocate Manager I positions will be assigned to work with each of the 18 Baby Courts across Florida, carrying a reduced caseload in order to increase the frequency and intensity of child and family contact. One (1) FTE Program Director is requested to provide leadership, consistency and direction to the GAL's work in the 18 Baby Courts. In addition to the funding for salaries and benefits for the GAL Baby Court staff, \$30,000 is included in this request for training and travel to ensure that these staff obtain the specialized knowledge and skills needed.

The number of children in Florida's child welfare system is increasing, especially infants and toddlers. The number of children in out-of-home care has increased 11 percent since April 2015, and babies younger than age 1 are the single-largest group of children in state custody. Both Florida and federal law require that children reach permanency within 12 months, but there are unique aspects to cases involving children under 3. According to the Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, the younger children are when they come into the system, the longer they stay and the less likely they are to be reunified. Further, long periods in out-of-home care are harmful to children, who often must endure multiple placements, increasing the chance they will be further traumatized and subject to attachment disorders. These long lengths of stay in foster care are also costly to Florida taxpayers, who bear the expense of these placements as well as the resulting societal costs of poor outcomes: homelessness, joblessness, teen parenthood, substance abuse, crime and mental health problems.

In contrast, national results show that children served by evidence-based Baby Courts are reaching permanency three times faster than infants and toddlers in the general foster care population. *ZERO TO THREE*, a global non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of infants and toddlers, developed the Safe Baby Court Teams initiative so that child welfare systems, which sometimes work at odds with a baby's development, can use the science of early childhood development to achieve better outcomes for children (see <https://www.zerotothree.org/our-work/safe-babies-court-teams>). The program connects babies and their families with the support and services they need to promote healthy child

¹ Florida State University, Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, "A Proposal to Support and Enhance Early Childhood Courts & Transform Florida's Dependency Courts to Protect Young Children," March 2017.

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development, while at the same time ensuring speedier exits from the system. As the *ZERO TO THREE* website explains:

The first three years of life encompass the most critical phase of brain development. It is during the first 36 months that the foundation is being laid for how a child perceives the world around him or her: is it a safe encouraging setting where the child is surrounded by loving adults and has every opportunity to become a happy child and a curious learner? Or is it a dangerous and hostile territory where adults cannot be relied on to respond appropriately to the child's needs? The stakes are high but developmental neuroscience demonstrates that this is the time –when the foundation of the brain's architecture is being laid—to intervene on behalf of victims of maltreatment.

Baby Courts have demonstrated positive outcomes. In 2014, this approach was added to the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, where it was given a scientific rating of a 3, showing promising research evidence and high relevance to the child welfare system.² **Almost two-thirds of children served by the Safe Babies Court Teams found permanent homes with members of their families, while only one-third of infants and toddlers in the general population exit foster care to family members.**

The Safe Babies Court Team approach is being implemented in 18 Florida sites to change the trajectory for infants and toddlers in out-of-home care with an active court team focused on:

- provision of timely services specifically targeted for the 0 to 3 population
- community-wide collaboration led by judges
- focused attention recognizing a family's individual strengths and challenges
- interventions that meet the specific needs of each child and parent
- frequent hearings to monitor progress, often once or twice a month.³

It is critical for the best interests of children that the GAL Program be a meaningful participant in Baby Courts. Florida Statutes require that a guardian ad litem be appointed by the court at the earliest possible time to represent the child in any child abuse, abandonment, or neglect judicial proceeding, whether civil or criminal. § 39.822, Fla. Stat. While the Program is serving more than 25,000 children with more than 10,000 volunteers, there are still many children who need a GAL, in part because of a dramatic increase of children in out-of-home care over the past several years.

The traditional GAL model of representation encompasses a team comprised of one volunteer, one GAL Child Advocate Manager and one GAL attorney. During FY 17-18 and FY 18-19, the GAL Program will be piloting a variety of innovative solutions to meet the needs of abused children and move them more quickly to permanency. The Program believes it can identify

² <http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/safe-babies-court-teams-project/>

³ <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1655-the-core-components-of-the-safe-babies-court-team-approach> (last visited July 25, 2017).

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ways to become more efficient while providing proactive representation of the unique needs of every child to represent all children without seeking a significant increase in funding. Baby Court is one such initiative.

As decisions are made for children on an expedited basis in the Baby Courts, it is imperative that each child's voice be heard, and that recommendations for their best interests be timely and comprehensive. To ensure that the Program has sufficient staff to support and enhance Baby Court efforts, the Program seeks 19 FTE positions for the following functions:

- providing a dedicated GAL point of contact within each Baby Court to facilitate effective communication among the many parties and stakeholders;
- enabling the Program to provide advocacy targeted to the 0 to 3 population using GALs with specialized knowledge of 0 to 3 issues;
- gathering information and making recommendations on the child's best interests within the expedited Baby Court timeframes; and
- establishing sufficient GAL staff to attend the increased number of hearings required in Baby Court cases