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Our Words Matter & 2019 Statewide Award Recipients

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We all know good leaders must be decisive. And since the decisions we make in child welfare can have dire and lasting consequences, they must be the best decisions possible. That means, as leaders, doing several things at once.

It means gathering the best information while setting a timetable and knowing when the moment to decide cannot be delayed. It means getting buy-in from colleagues and stakeholders while knowing when to cut off discussion and move ahead.

It means relying on experience as a guide while challenging our own assumptions and biases.

And it means having systems and habits in place that encourage good decision-making throughout our Program on a routine basis. This applies not only to case-related decisions, but to administrative decisions – and personal ones.

Certainly it applies to legislative choices. When our Program plans its legislative agenda, we start by asking, “What are the biggest obstacles to representing the best interests of children?” One answer is that the children we serve are often moved out of the county or circuit where we’ve been representing them.

So how can their Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates – many of whom live on fixed incomes – keep traveling to visit the children with whom they’ve forged a bond? The need to keep those relationships intact drove our decision last year to propose the “Go the Extra Mile” - a extraordinary volunteer expenses reimbursement program, and we are grateful the Legislature appropriated funds for this.

Good decision-making breeds more good decisions. And I have every confidence in our Program’s leaders to model how it’s done.
Our role as child advocates requires us to make best interest recommendations based on facts and not emotion or conjecture. To do so we must carefully memorialize in Optima the information we gather. It’s critical for many reasons, but foremost it allows others in our advocacy team to provide constructive feedback as needed to avoid delays in services and permanency.

But why is it important that we memorialize all of our work in Optima?

First, becoming better historians will lead to better outcomes for children. Many times when staffing cases or reviewing them during the Advocacy, Collaboration and Teamwork process we find that the record is not always complete or clear.

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However, when the advocacy team reports in person they tend to be well versed in their thoughts and reasoning. When these insights are not clear in the written record it can lead to more time spent on understanding the case and less time providing suggestions that will promote permanency.

Next, maintaining good records can result in permanency to be accomplished more quickly. When our advocacy is well defined we can use it to make better arguments in court that result in better services for the children in our community. Our Best Interest Attorneys are a critical part of our advocacy teams and providing good information to them is crucial so that our advocacy in the courtroom is based on solid reasoning. This can result in less time children spend in the dependency system.

Last and very important, we must protect the integrity of the Guardian ad Litem Program by maintaining professionalism. If our recommendations are based on emotion and not facts, or if the other members of our advocacy team do not understand our reasoning, we can fall short. In court, if our team is divided we can lose credibility. Our ability to advocate for all children is important so it’s crucial that we require professionalism and clarity from our advocacy teams.

Unfortunately, the time a child spends in the dependency system is not always time well-spent. As child advocates we have an obligation to use our words to promote permanency at all stages of the case. Our words do matter, so we must strive to provide the best record possible.
PRESENTING SUCCESSFUL MOTIONS: A TEAM APPROACH

The role of the Best Interest Attorney is to protect the best interest of the child either in the circuit dependency courts or in the appellate court. See Guardian ad Litem Program Attorney Expectations (2015). One method a Best Interest Attorney can use to demonstrate the team is “For the Child,” is by pursuing a motion.

A motion is a formal request by a party made to a judge for an order or judgment.* There are many requests a Best Interest Attorney can make on behalf of the child. They range from motions for supplemental adjudication, motions to modify visitation and placement, motions to amend the case plan and motions for reunification, if that is deemed to be in the child’s best interest.

In order for the judge to grant the requested relief, it is necessary to prepare a motion that addresses the relevant facts and law that support the motion. The components of a well prepared motion are (1) an opening which identifies which movant is bringing the motion, (2) citation to the law, (3) facts relevant to the motion, (4) reference to the statute or rule that supports the motion, (5) analysis of the facts and the law, and (6) conclusion. The motion should be detailed and “tell a convincing story” that results (hopefully) in a favorable order.

While the Best Interest Attorney is responsible for arguing the motion in court, the entire advocacy team has a role in bringing forth a strong motion on behalf of the child. One way the team can identify issues that can be resolved by way of a motion, are case staffings. The staffings should be meaningful and designed in a manner that will elicit the current status, well-being, and needs of the child. At times, a Volunteer Child Advocate and/or Child Advocate Manager may seek an outcome that is not supported by existing facts. This is an opportunity for the attorney to counsel his or her team members on the information needed to support the relief to be requested in a motion and how to independently gather the same. Then, the team should formulate an action plan that outlines the next steps to be taken by each member.

Preparing a successful motion is a team effort. For our Program, that team consists of the Best Interest Attorney, Program Staff, our Volunteer Child Advocate and/or Child Advocate Manager, and the children we represent. When the team communicates and supports each other, amazing results can be achieved on behalf of the child.

Look around our beautiful state and seemingly overnight you see new growth -- blooms everywhere, flowers growing, trees swaying with new leaves, and lawns needing to be cut. But... as we learned during school, these changes were occurring when most were not looking. In the winter months, during the coldest time of the year, the ground and trees and flowers were being prepared for change.

In like fashion, we have seen new growth in leadership and operations. While individual circuits have always had to strive and provide needed training to their own Volunteer Child Advocates and staff, now as a Program, we have a centralized training platform that provides consistent content that is applicable statewide.

Three years ago the seed was planted for “I am for the Child” Academy – it received the leadership support needed for it to grow and with careful cultivation, it has bloomed!

Like never before, quality trainings across a myriad of subjects are available that impact more than one circuit during a specific training session – they reach the entire state at any time, every day. Critical knowledge is being provided that can truly impact our positive outcomes on the children we advocate for on a very real, direct level.

Please help us grow this online training opportunity by encouraging active engagement by everyone involved with the Guardian ad Litem Program to create and use an account on “I am for the Child” Academy by going to: florida-guardian-ad-litem-program.thinkific.com/users/sign_up.

We know that as long as it is being nurtured, the Academy roots will grow. Training will continue to become stronger and better than we ever imagined and will provide growth in knowledge and most importantly, quality advocacy for those we serve.
This year, our three Statewide Staff Award winners all display key Leadership qualities. They have earned the respect of their peers and community partners alike. They are fierce advocates for our children and our Program is very fortunate to have them on our side. Leadership is about influence and these three women have influenced many throughout their careers with the Guardian ad Litem Program.

**Jenna Wickenhauser / Daniel P. Dawson Award**

Jenna Wickenhauser, Program Attorney for the 7th Circuit (Flagler, Putnam, St. Johns and Volusia Counties) certainly embodies the phrase of “Leadership by Example”. She strongly displays each of the values outlined in our “Program’s Five C’s”: Commitment to Children, Communication built on trust, Collective Empowerment, Collaboration and Courtesy. One of the qualities that really stands out in Jenna is her commitment to children. In one such case, which is now approaching four years, is with a child who has been in a foster home placement since an infant.

Jenna showed this commitment through her assertive legal advocacy overcoming several obstacles. She was successful in arguing against a last minute Adoption Intervention that was not in the child’s best interest as well as an Interstate (Compact for Placement of Children) ICPC that would have continued to delay permanency for the child. Jenna was even committed to staying with the case after the Judge recused herself at the second (Termination of Parental Rights) TPR trial. She requested to remain on this case upon transfer to another court. Jenna again successfully argued against the intervention and the third attempt of the TPR trial was successful. The little girl is now awaiting final adoption by her foster placement, the only parents she has ever known.

Jenna empowers her Child Advocate Managers and Volunteer Child Advocates to move the cases forward by pointing them in the right legal direction so that in the courtroom there is no doubt that Guardian ad Litem is prepared and able to effectively advocate for the best interest.

Jenna has built a wonderful working relationship with Children’s Legal Services, community partners, parents’ attorneys and judges. She is seen as a true advocate in the courtroom and is often looked upon as an example in the courtroom. Jenna treats everyone with courtesy and respect and understands that this job can be exhausting, tiresome and sometimes frustrating, but she always has a smile on her face. Jenna sets the bar high, displaying a great example for us to follow.
Alice Williams / Angela Orkin Award

Alice (Hackett) Williams is the recipient of the 2019 Statewide award for administrative professionals, the Angela Orkin Dedication Award. Congratulations to Alice and to her 12th Circuit (Desoto, Manatee, and Sarasota Counties) team!

Alice comes in on time every day with a pleasant smile and positive attitude. She is conscientious about making sure that her work is done well and timely. She addresses issues brought to her attention immediately. Alice is the front-line for processing cases and paperwork, and she ensures the accuracy of information that is input into the system. She adheres to all time-lines. Alice always keeps the other support staff who are in the same role as her informed of her scheduled time out of the office to ensure adequate coverage. The Child Advocate Managers and Attorneys look to and trust Alice’s decisions regarding her functions and roles.

Alice is a big proponent of Optima and works hard to have the information in the system in a timely manner so the Volunteer Child Advocates and staff have access to the information in real time. Alice is the front line when handling incoming calls and visitors to the office. She is always pleasant, informative, and helpful. Whenever Alice does not have information, she does not just pass it off to someone else, she finds out the information and deals with it. She is a big help to leadership, the Child Advocate Managers, Volunteer Child Advocates, Attorneys, and others in the circuit.

When two key administrative roles were recently vacated in the 12th circuit, Alice stepped in without hesitancy to take on various responsibilities of the HR and Volunteer Liaisons which allowed for consistency in keeping processes flowing smoothly in the office and for the Volunteer Child Advocates.
Sandi Webb/ Barbra Sessa Award

When you talk about Child Welfare in the Florida Keys - Monroe County (Circuit 16), you cannot do so without Sandi’s name coming up in the conversation. Sandi has been a long time Child Advocate Manager in the Keys and everyone knows her but most importantly they respect her. When she talks about “her kids” you listen. She has formed relationships with everyone involved and maintains open and honest lines of communication with everyone on the team.

Everyone adores Sandi and they feel comfortable bringing things to her attention as they know she will address the issues head on. Sandi values the relationships she makes on the individual cases and ensures everyone is informed about what is going on. She communicates with the parents, caregivers, teachers, case managers and providers frequently so that the whole team is working towards the child’s best interest.

Most importantly, Sandi has a remarkable ability to effectively communicate with our children. She is always open and honest with them given their age and maturity level and is thus able to create and maintain a great rapport with them. They trust her; she always listens and ensures their voice is being heard throughout the process. She communicates the children’s wishes, desires and concerns to her team so they can be incorporated into the decision making process.

In addition to being a great advocate, Sandi is a great leader for her Volunteer Child Advocates and peers. She makes it a point to make sure everyone is heard and knows they are a valued member of the team. She thoroughly discusses everything with the team and ensures everyone is comfortable moving forward. She ensures her Volunteer Child Advocates have open communication with the Best Interest attorney assigned to the case and that they have the support needed to advocate for the children they are assigned to represent.

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In the past two years, the 16th Circuit has endured a lot. Hurricane Irma greatly affected the Florida Keys with many people not able to return home. The Circuit has had a hard time maintaining a stable force of Volunteer Child Advocates and staff but that did not stop Sandi. She took on additional cases when we were down staff and traveled a lot to ensure children were seen when Volunteer Child Advocates were unable to return home as quickly as they would like.

The Circuit would not be sure what they would have done without Sandi over these last two years and I know the community as a whole has relied on her knowledge and attention to detail as well. Sandi truly embodies the “Program’s Five C’s” and is a leader in every way.