JULY 2019
GUARDIAN
AD LITEM
FOR CHILDREN

FEATURED
Legislative Session Update & Program Regional Updates

STAY INFORMED
Read this month’s newsletter and get updated with what’s happening Statewide!

WHAT’S IN THE ISSUE
• A MESSAGE FROM ALAN
• NORTHERN REGION UPDATE
• CENTRAL REGION UPDATE
• SOUTHERN REGION UPDATE

Read this month’s newsletter and get updated with what’s happening Statewide!
What an incredible legislative session for the Guardian ad Litem Program! The Legislature passed the substantive measures we backed, along with many of our top budget priorities. In terms of policy, three important bills were signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis:

**Charting a Positive Path for the Future (SB 124)**, sponsored by Sen. Aaron Bean and Rep. Tyler Sirois, was signed into law on April 2, 2019. It streamlines communication related to abused and neglected children with multiple court cases, sometimes known as “crossover kids,” by allowing a guardianship petition for children in dependency court to be filed where the child resides or in the county with jurisdiction over the dependency case. It also allows delinquency judges to consider information provided by the Guardian ad Litem Program and the child’s attorney ad litem if the child is under the jurisdiction of the dependency court.

**A Year is A Long Time in the Life of A Child (SB 262)**, sponsored by Sen. Ben Albritton and Rep. Spencer Roach, was signed on June 25, 2019. It will help keep children from languishing in foster care by requiring their parents to be referred for services within seven days; parents must keep their contact information current and notify the court of any barriers to completing their case plans. The Department of Children and Families must anticipate barriers and give parents strategies to overcome them, making sure parents get updated contact information if the caseworker changes.

We also championed a public records measure, **Senate Bill 318**, sponsored by Sen. Bill Montford and Rep. Rick Roth, to ensure that reporter information is better protected. There have been times when information released in discovery led an alleged abuser to deduce who reported the alleged abuse. This has happened to our volunteers and staff, as well as to teachers and nurses who report.

“**The Legislature passed the substantive measures we (the Guardian ad Litem Program) backed, along with many of our top budget priorities. In terms of policy, three important bills were signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis.**”

Continued on next page.
As to the budget, we are delighted to see so many of our priorities included:

- $657,470 for Professional Certification and Training for Child Advocate Managers
- $331,362 for Extraordinary Volunteer Travel
- $225,000 for training on advocacy for children with disabilities
- $158,896 for IT Server End of Life
- $2,115,500 in the Attorney ad Litem Registry for Children with Special Needs
- 18.5 attorney positions converted from OPS to FTE

For our attorneys, also included is a pay adjustment of $1,200, effective July 1, 2019. This includes program attorneys, senior attorneys, supervising attorneys and regional attorneys. Although we requested funds to address benefit disparities, the Legislature offered a salary adjustment instead, which we were excited to get. We know the benefits issue is important, and we plan to pursue it again in 2020.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to Governor DeSantis, First Lady Casey DeSantis and our lawmakers for their strong support of the children we serve. And I am honored to work with each of you. Your heartfelt advocacy has given our Program a reputation that inspires policymakers to help us.
NORTH REGION UPDATE

OUR BEST RECRUITING IS WHEN VOLUNTEERS OR STAFF DO ONE-ON-ONE OUTREACH.

We continue to be very successful each month educating the public about the Guardian ad Litem Program and reaching many potential Volunteer Child Advocates through various means like Social Media and our local radio, TV and print media sources. These efforts are extremely important in helping the community understand the value we bring to the Child Welfare system and how they can help meet the needs of abused and neglected children in their areas. It is important that these initiatives are continued and enhanced, as well as the other events and presentations conducted by our outstanding team of recruiters.

“We know that our best recruiting is when our current volunteers and staff do one-on-one outreach. No one knows better the qualities, dedication and character that’s needed to become a highly successful Volunteer Child Advocate than our own people.”

We know that our best recruiting is when our current volunteers and staff do one-on-one outreach. No one knows better the qualities, dedication and character that’s needed to become a highly successful Volunteer Child Advocate than our own people. I have met many volunteers who became associated with the Guardian ad Litem Program through their relationship as a friend, neighbor, co-worker, or church/social group member with a current volunteer. By sharing our own stories of how rewarding and personally satisfying it is to make a positive lifelong impact in the life of a child, we can attract like-minded people to join us.

Many volunteers enjoy having others they know volunteer with them so they can talk about their experiences, share ideas, celebrate accomplishments, and work out any challenges they might encounter. Some accompany each other on child visits to feel more comfortable and secure. Some volunteers like the social experience and enjoy attending training events and social gatherings. There are many benefits and rewards that we can all enjoy by engaging with and supporting each other. We can also help recruit high quality Volunteer Child Advocates so that all children have someone advocating on their behalf.

How long has it been since you asked someone to become a Guardian ad Litem Volunteer? Has it been too long? Please take this opportunity to think of someone that you know who would make a good addition to our team as a Volunteer Child Advocate, then take the initiative to ask them to join us. Also, please remind everyone (including our current volunteers) to reach out to their associates who would make great volunteers. We must all make it an ongoing personal goal to reach out to others to assist in recruiting additional volunteers. If so, we could reach our Program goal of 100% representation for all children in the Child Protection System in a very short time. Let’s do it now!
Over the last several years, the number of children in Hillsborough County’s dependency system has consistently grown. Commissioner Sandra Murman has recognized this significant issue and decided to assemble a Blue Ribbon Panel Committee to focus on what Hillsborough County can do to further support the local system of care.

This Committee included leadership from all stakeholders, including the Community-Based Care, Sheriff’s Office, Educational System, Department of Juvenile Justice, Judiciary, Early Head Start, Healthy Families, Guardian ad Litem Program, and more. The group met on a monthly basis and eventually established a plan that would help strengthen diversion services, provide an assessment center for children in need of high end placements, increase data sharing capabilities, and provide paid professional foster parents with the goal of decreasing the number of children in the dependency system. This 3 million dollar plan was unanimously approved at a recent county commissioner meeting and is being endorsed as an innovative pilot project for the Department of Children and Families.

In addition to the approval of a plan to decrease the number of children entering the system, Commissioner Murman has long supported the Guardian ad Litem Program in Hillsborough County. She has acted as a Volunteer Child Advocate, has participated in a PSA, encouraged others to volunteer through her newsletter, website, and interviews, and has been the Program’s biggest supporter in increasing the Guardian ad Litem Program’s county budget. Although there were no requests to increase budgets last year, Commissioner Murman surprisingly provided an additional $25k in the Guardian ad Litem Program budget to be used for whatever was needed. This year, Commissioner Murman has supported a request for an additional two Child Advocate Manager positions in order to assure that children have an advocate in a complicated system.

In May, another Commissioner decided to offer a joint proclamation to all stakeholders in Hillsborough County to recognize their hard work for the foster care system. Commissioner Overman expressed her appreciation for the work that all of the programs do for the children in our community. Commissioner Murman delivered an extremely effective speech that not only urged citizens to volunteer as a Guardian ad Litem, but also that the Guardian ad Litem Program is the only program that speaks up for children in the system. What a great message to share and so very true!
We often say relationships are a critical aspect of our jobs. The relationship we have with our volunteers, the relationship of the Guardian ad Litem Program team members and most importantly, the relationship we have with the children we represent. While these are all important relationships to build and maintain in order to be effective advocates, what about the relationships with those “outside” our Program?

The phrase “everyone is a recruiter” is one you have heard many times. Talking about the amazing work we do on behalf of children comes naturally to most, if not all, as this is our passion. Educating the community about the role of the Guardian ad Litem Program needs to be an integral part of our everyday advocacy. When we think of advocacy we usually think of individual cases and children but I challenge you all to think bigger. Advocacy takes place on all levels- county, state and national. Ensuring the laws we enact are in the best interests of the child, ensuring the Program has the funding and support to represent the increasing number of children, and supporting the child welfare system as a whole are all things that fall under the larger umbrella of advocacy.

When taking on “bigger picture” advocacy objectives, we rely on the relationships built along the way to help guide and support the direction we are going. For example, when seeking to get legislation passed we form legislative workgroups, gather feedback from community partners and educate those making decisions as to why these changes are so important. Another example is that of the current issues before the Florida Bar Board of Governors regarding our model of representing children. Your relationships and engagement with community leaders, civic and professional organizations, law firms and individual attorneys, and your legislative delegation is important to the everyday advocacy for our children.

Decisions regarding our Program, the child welfare system and ultimately the children we represent are being made often times by those not in the trenches of dependency. It is our job to educate, inform and guide those decisions so that they are done in the best interests of the child. Strong relationships are key to making sure advocacy on all levels is strong and consistent. We pride ourselves on being the one constant in the child’s life, the one who knows them the best. We need to be that one constant, the ones that others rely on when it comes to child advocacy and representation.

Relationships take work and they take time. We must all make it a priority to educate our communities not just on the opportunity to be a child advocate but also on the impact and importance of the Guardian ad Litem Program. We need to engage those who have the ability and desire to advocate, inform them of the issues affecting the children in their community and guide them on ways to support our mission. We must be the ones to reach out and start the conversation.

“Educating the community about the role of the Guardian ad Litem Program needs to be an integral part of our everyday advocacy.”