



AUGUST 2019



**GUARDIAN  
AD LITEM**  
**FOR CHILDREN**

# NEWSLETTER

## FEATURED

- Program's Major Accomplishments for the Year
- Support Staff Collaboration
- Exciting Pro Bono Initiatives

## STAY INFORMED

Read this month's newsletter and get updated with what's happening Statewide!

## WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

- A MESSAGE FROM ALAN
- REGIONAL UPDATES
- TRAINING ARTICLE
- LEGAL UPDATE
- OPERATIONS UPDATE

# A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ **THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM'S MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE YEAR** *ENDING JUNE 30, 2019*

- 38,997 total children represented
- 10,000+ citizens who volunteered as Guardian ad Litem
- 508 pro bono attorneys donated legal services
- Guardian ad Litem's "Defending Best Interests Project" collected over 4600 hours of donated legal services to defend the best interests of children for a value of \$1.3 million, and won the 2018 Prudential Productivity Award.
- "FAWL in Love with GAL," a partnership with the Florida Association of Women Lawyers (FAWL), connects teenage girls with approximately 145 lawyers who work toward the best possible permanency outcomes, mentor them, and provide positive role models.



**38,997 Total Children  
Represented**

**10,000+ Citizens who  
Volunteered as Guardian ad  
Litem**

**508 Pro Bono Attorneys  
Donated Legal Services**

- Our new "Total Engagement" program establishes a one-stop shop for law firms and attorneys to find pro bono projects to support the children and families we represent. Firms can work with Program support to reach pro bono goals. The Program has public-private partnerships statewide donating critical resources to the children we represent.
- In addition to consistent assistance from county governments, the Program is supported by 20 not-for-profits, one in each judicial circuit. They provide resources from meeting the needs of individual children (e.g., school clothes, MRIs, camps), to funding positions, organizing Guardian ad Litem volunteer recognition events and helping recruit foster parents. The Program also has a direct-support organization called the Guardian ad Litem Foundation and statewide partnerships including the National CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) Association, Sunshine Health and the Akerman Law Firm.

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# A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ

## THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM'S MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE YEAR *ENDING JUNE 30, 2019*

(CONTINUED)

Guardian ad Litem advocates for abused and neglected children in communities and statewide. In the Legislature, we championed:

- Chapter 2019-128, "A Year is a Long Time in the Life of a Child Act" to improve accountability and facilitate permanency.
- Chapter 2019- 10 to improve outcomes for children involved in multiple court proceedings. We are currently working with state partner agencies to implement these important changes.

Guardian ad Litem works to improve the quality of representation for children, including:

- Creating a certification program for our Child Advocate Managers in collaboration with the Florida Certification Board to enhance representation with professional credentialing.
- Facilitating Board Certification with The Florida Bar for our attorneys, who represent over 10% of all Florida attorneys who are Board Certified in Juvenile Law.
- Recognizing the impact that culture and poverty has on children and the adverse effects on their mental and physical health, educational and development outcomes, our Director of Program Advocacy and Inclusion is responsible for training, research, communications and developing best practices to achieve diversity, equity, inclusion and poverty education in all our circuits. Also, the Program has partnered with the Florida A&M University School of Journalism and Graphic Communications to help recruit from communities of color, males, young adults and people of faith.
- We strive to improve the practice of other stakeholders to improve outcomes for children. Our training curriculum, the "I am for the Child Academy," is web-based and publicized to everyone in the dependency community at no cost. July 2019 statistics show the Academy has over 6,700 registered users, offering not only basic dependency training, but webinars on more complex child welfare issues and free CLE (Continuing Legal Education) trainings for lawyers. In May, we trained over 475 attendees including Guardian ad Litem staff and volunteers, DCF (Department of Children and Families) and CBC (Community Based Care) employees, parents' attorneys and attorneys ad litem at our Specialized Advocacy Symposium.

Going forward:

- The Program will continue training staff and revising operations to accommodate implementation of the Families First Preservation and Safety Act and the end of the state's Title IV-E waiver.
- The Program is finalizing its Trauma Informed Advocacy initiative to collect information on the specific impact of trauma on the children we represent, examine Guardian ad Litem practices and policy, and make recommendations to align our representation with what experts in child development have determined best serves children.
- Since volunteers are a critical part of our advocacy, and we always look for ways to improve volunteer recruitment and retention, we are pursuing a partnership with Volunteer Florida in hopes of reaching more Floridians who want to help abused and neglected children.
- In August, the Guardian ad Litem Foundation will begin work on a grant from the Children's Justice Act to identify and overcome systemic and community barriers for children and improve advocacy by employing a recently retired dependency judge to consult and develop best practices.

## OPERATIONS

# NECESSITIES: TO FUNCTION AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS

As Floridians, in order to survive the sometimes brutal Florida weather we need some things: water, sunscreen, generators, and air conditioning! As Guardian ad Litem Program staff in Florida we also have necessities in order to function at the highest levels: Volunteers who are dedicated, passionate about children's issues, and selfless.

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program was founded in 1985 with the concept of using volunteers from the community as child advocates as well as dedicated staff to recruit, train, manage, and support them. In essence, Florida favors the volunteer model above other models of representation as this allows the community to become involved in advocating for their own community children.

The relationship we have with volunteers is symbiotic – we can't function without each other. Florida's children are best served when a well-trained volunteer is matched to them when they are in need. Our volunteers are best served when all of our staff is available to support, guide, and coach them in making difficult best interest recommendations.



**“Florida’s children are best served when a well-trained volunteer is matched to them when they are in need. Our volunteers are best served when all of our staff is available to support, guide, and coach them in making difficult best interest recommendations.”**

‘It takes two flints to make a fire’ (Louisa May Alcott). In other words, we need each other. Volunteers need CAMs (Child Advocate Managers) who are trained and available, attorneys who are engaged and approachable, and leadership with a sense of urgency and abilities to make hard decisions as needed. In turn, we need our volunteers to be willing, available, and teachable in order for the most vulnerable children in Florida to receive quality advocacy.

Whether volunteers become involved in child advocacy through direct child representation, or as members of our non-profits organizations, the voices we raise up for children will be strong and unwavering. We must not take these relationships for granted – we are interdependent on each other and without dedicated volunteer board members, volunteer child advocates, and Program Staff the children will be the ones to lose.

## TRAINING

# GIVE A FISH... TEACH HOW TO FISH

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This ancient proverb provides an excellent metaphor for the team of trainers within our circuit programs.

On a daily basis, Guardian ad Litem trainers help circuits embed training, curriculum and processes throughout by training a team of volunteers and staff who advocate for the best interest of children and their families.

A good trainer exhibits certain attributes. Comfort in front of people, knowledge of the subject matter, experience, a passion for learning, interest in people, etc. - These are the minimum pre-requisites. But while nice to have, none of these guarantee great results. Remember, if you want to catch a fish, you've got to go where they bite. In order to get there, the most exceptional trainers in each circuit share these qualities:



**“Remember, if you want to catch a fish, you’ve got to go where they bite.”**

***A command of the material.*** A good trainer knows the material, lives it, breathes it and can infuse their own experience into it. They may not know every facet but they know where to get answers if they don't.

***Preparation and practice.*** A good trainer makes delivering a class look easy and seamless. You don't want participants to see “behind the curtain.”

***Rhythm and energy.*** There are ebbs and flows of energy within a class. A great trainer is attuned to his or her own energy level and that of the class. A good trainer takes note when participants are tuning out, antsy, restless or distracted. Engagement rather than entertainment is the key.

***Allows and encourages participants to learn from themselves and the class in order to create as many organic learning moments as possible.*** In many training classes there is a wealth of knowledge in the classroom and ‘cross-pollination’ can be an effective way to illustrate the material and provide new perspectives. Our recent work in facilitation processes and training techniques is a great example of this.

Lastly, Guardian ad Litem trainers share a common purpose. They bring together individuals who have varying skills, contrasting personalities, and different responsibilities. They see value in the contributions and abilities of each participant and they look for ways to improve the status quo. In other words, they are passionate about the ‘secret sauce’ of successful facilitation, adult learning and behavioral change, and they enjoy teaching others how to fish as well.

## NORTH REGION UPDATE

# SUPPORT STAFF COLLABORATION PROJECT

A collaboration initiative for the Guardian ad Litem Program support staff started over a year ago to provide this staff statewide an opportunity for networking and information sharing. Deborah Moore, Circuit Director in the 2nd Circuit (Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Wakulla) has been serving as the Support Staff Project Liaison.

Each Region has a point of contact person to help facilitate the initiative: Jennifer Manis, Administrative Assistant in the 19th Circuit (Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, St. Lucie), represents the South Region. Renee Oliver, Administrative Assistant in the 14th Circuit (Bay, Calhoun, Gulf, Holmes, Jackson, Washington), represents the North Region. Elizabeth Aaberg, Administrative Specialist in the 18th Circuit (Brevard and Seminole), represents the Central Region.



**“We appreciate all that our support staff contribute to our child advocacy efforts and ultimately the success of our Program!”**

Ongoing monthly GoToMeetings have been initiated and are available to all support staff. In addition to the networking and sharing of best practice ideas, training topics are presented via webinars. Some of the topics offered include Optima, Time Management, Customer Service and Handling Interruptions. A Support Staff Contact List was also added to the P-drive and a Support Staff Work Place Group page has been created. This provides a platform for our support staff to reach out to each other to share information and ideas.

Recently, eight support staff from Circuit 1 (Escambia, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton), Circuit 2 and 14 accompanied CAMs and Recruiters from their circuits to Chipley for an in-person meeting opportunity. The meeting was facilitated by Renee Oliver, North Region Point of Contact. This was a wonderful opportunity for the support staff to meet in person and network together. As opportunities present themselves where Support Staff from other areas can meet in person without incurring additional travel expenses, they will be arranged.

Deborah Moore recently contacted one support staff in each circuit for feedback and the feedback was positive. Support staff especially appreciated the webinars on Optima Updates/Refreshers and the opportunity to gain helpful information or best practices from their colleagues. We appreciate all that our support staff contribute to our child advocacy efforts and ultimately the success of our Program!

## CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

# CREATING A PRACTICE MODEL FOR DIRECT SUPERVISION

It's not often that several circuits get to collaborate on a project that could have an impact on the entire state. Circuit 6 (Pasco, Pinellas), Circuit 12 (Desoto, Manatee, Sarasota) and Circuit 13 (Hillsborough) recently got that opportunity. All three circuits recognize how important the role of the CAM2 is, and wanted to create a structure for CAM2 training and support.

Under the facilitation of Rex Uberman, all 3 circuits are working on creating a standardized "Method of Coaching" that can be utilized throughout the state. Over 120 articles, books, and research briefings were reviewed, looking at best practices in management and analyses of human behavior when it comes to organizational management. The groups came up with 10 indicators of focused and effective management, such as communication, emotional intelligence and dealing with workplace conflict.



Each of the circuits are currently working on 3-4 of the indicators, with the ultimate goal of developing a practice model for direct supervision that can be deployed statewide throughout our program. The final product will be similar to how child welfare has developed a "practice model" for the child welfare process. Based upon both the science of management as well as the art of management, the model will help CAM2s develop and constantly grow and excel in performance as supervisors in the Guardian ad Litem program.

Facilitator Rex Uberman states, "I was most impressed by the commitment and focus of the CAM2s and Circuit Leadership. From the beginning it was my observation that the teams in each circuit, across the board, were not only engaged but enthusiastic to get to a final product they could use in their work to bring out the best in our organizational and individual performance. These strategies of management were first identified, then defined and then described and operationalized by each of the three teams."

## **SOUTHERN REGION UPDATE**

### **COLLABORATION - HOW WORKING TOGETHER IMPROVES ADVOCACY**

We often think of collaboration when we talk about working with our community partners on cases and systematic issues. But collaborating among each other to improve our advocacy, our child impact and the overall functioning of our Program is also a critical component of our roles. What I love doing is working with our staff to look at the Circuit as a whole and determine what goals they want to work on as team over the next year.

Brainstorming together as a team really helps ensure that we are focusing on the right things. When setting goals and reviewing data, it is so important to get input from as many people as possible. One common goal identified this year was proactive advocacy.



**“Staffing a case is an integral part of our advocacy and it is an important tool when establishing our advocacy plan.”**

Staffing a case is an integral part of our advocacy and it is an important tool when establishing our advocacy plan. Now you might think that “staffing a case” is a standard task. However, bringing our teams together to look at issues and develop advocacy plans can be done in different ways. Everyone identifies different ways to bring the team together to look at issues in their Circuits.

For example, Circuit 19 (Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, St. Lucie) really wanted to try “internal permanency round tables” in which the whole office is invited to come and sit in on case staffings to offer suggestions on ways to overcome barriers in a case. Seeing members from the whole staff come together to think outside the box has been great.

Circuit 15 (Palm Beach) wanted to bring back “Rocket Dockets” in order to staff cases that are close to reaching permanency and are just stalled for some reason. They organize these by division and bring the other parties to the table as well. Circuit 11 (Miami-Dade) conducts 60 day staffings to ensure everyone is staying engaged and following up on the identified needs.

Each Circuit is unique and by collaborating together we are developing strategies to improve outcomes for the children we represent based on the input and ideas from everyone on our team.

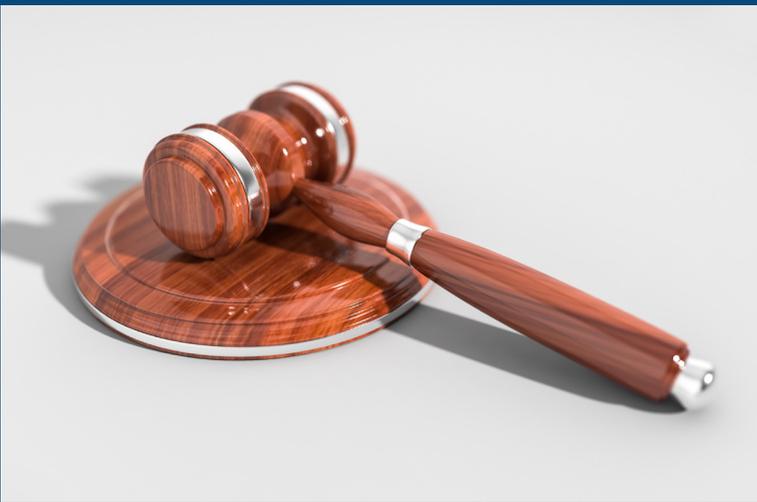
## LEGAL UPDATES

# EXCITING PRO BONO INITIATIVES

The Guardian ad Litem Program has several exciting pro bono initiatives under the leadership of Thomasina Moore.

The Defending Best Interests (DBI) Project matches appellate pro bono attorneys with Guardian ad Litem appeals, allowing hundreds of Florida appellate attorneys to assist the Program with its mission. So far, pro bono attorneys have donated over 4600 hours of legal services with the project, writing over 235 briefs and representing the interests of over 450 children during the appellate process. In 2018, the Guardian ad Litem Program was awarded the Prudential Productivity Award for the project as the donated legal services provided a value of over \$1 million in work.

The project continues to grow, strengthening the partnerships between the Guardian ad Litem Program, the Pro Bono Committee of the Appellate Practice Section, and other pro bono attorneys, making sure the child's voice is heard.



The Guardian ad Litem Program has several exciting pro bono initiatives that supports and helps its mission of providing for the needs of the children it serves.

A newer pro bono initiative is the Program's partnership with the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, FAWL in Love with GAL. This mentoring project connects attorneys with older youth who are at a higher risk of aging out of foster care. Together, they work towards the best possible permanency outcomes. The Guardian ad Litem Program matches attorneys with youth who can benefit from extra support. The Program's pro bono team supports the pro bono attorneys and assists in creating the match. The pro bono attorneys - who become a trusted, consistent positive role model- counsel and advise the youth. The project allows attorneys to become involved in a limited scope while making a marked impact.

The Guardian ad Litem Program supports and provides resources for the mentors, including a free Continued Legal Education (CLE) training that includes information about dependency law and practice, bias elimination, independent living and foster care and includes two hours of ethics and one hour of bias elimination credits. The project has received positive feedback and interest during its initial launch and continues to receive more interest and participation from pro bono attorneys throughout the state.

*Continued on next page.*

## LEGAL UPDATES

# EXCITING PRO BONO INITIATIVES *(CONTINUED)*

A brand-new initiative, Total Engagement, establishes a one-stop shop for law firms and attorneys to find various pro bono opportunities to support children and families the Program serves. Because many law firms create pro bono goals for their attorneys, the Guardian ad Litem Program is a great partner as our pro bono opportunities are diverse and utilize various legal specialties. The Program works with the law firms so they can work under the Guardian ad Litem Program umbrella to reach their pro bono goals. The Program provides possibilities for law firms to make an impact on their community, while providing support to the individual pro bono attorneys. More to come on this exciting program!

The Guardian ad Litem Program also participates in Pro Bono Matters with The Florida Bar Foundation. This project matches attorneys and law school students who are seeking pro bono work with Guardian ad Litem Program cases for which an AAL (Attorney at Law) is required. In addition, the Program utilizes this project to recruit pro bono attorneys for specific needs, including immigration or criminal proceedings. With this partnership, the Guardian ad Litem Program continues its mission of providing for the needs of the children it serves.



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