



SEPTEMBER 2019



**GUARDIAN
AD LITEM**

FOR CHILDREN

NEWSLETTER

FEATURED

Guardian ad Litem Program's
Record of Leadership

Program Regional Updates

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with what's happening
Statewide!

WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

- A MESSAGE FROM ALAN
- PROGRAM OPERATIONS
- LEGAL UPDATE
- GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION
- NORTH REGION UPDATE
- CENTRAL REGION UPDATE
- SOUTH REGION UPDATE

A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ

FLORIDA HAS A LONG RECORD OF LEADERSHIP IN CHILD WELFARE REFORM

Normalcy. Foster care to age 21. The Regis Little Act to Protect Children With Special Needs. Keys to Independence. Justice's Best Friend. The Incarcerated Parents Act. The Pro Bono Matters Act.

And many more.

As child advocates, it's our job to call the dependency system to account when it fails. But it's also vital to reflect on our very real successes as a state.

"What all these reforms have in common is that children and youth who had been in foster care told their stories to people who listened with respect and compassion," said Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz.



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Consider:

- In 2013, the Florida Legislature passed the Nancy C. Detert Common Sense and Compassion Independent Living Act, extending foster care from age 18 to age 21 for youth who wish to ease the transition to adulthood. Previously, they "aged out" of the system at 18, and many did not feel ready; now they have the option to remain.
- Also in 2013, the Legislature passed the normalcy bill, known as "Let Kids Be Kids." Its goal was to bring "normalcy" to the lives of children in foster care by replacing a restrictive system with a "reasonable prudent parent" standard. Before, many rules had prevented children in out-of-home care from leading normal lives and participating in everyday activities with their peers. "With the passage of this bill, children in foster care will learn what it means to be part of a family and not part of a bureaucracy," Detert and then-Rep. Ben Albritton, the sponsors, wrote.
- In 2014, the Legislature created the Keys to Independence statewide pilot program. This paid the costs of driver education, licensure and insurance for children in out-of-home care. Lawmakers said they'd found that when children aged out of care without knowing how to drive, many ended up homeless or in jail because they lacked the tools for independence. The Legislature appropriated \$800,000 to fund the pilot, which was made permanent in 2017.

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FLORIDA HAS A LONG RECORD OF LEADERSHIP IN CHILD WELFARE REFORM

(CONTINUED)

- Also in 2014, the Legislature passed a sweeping overhaul of the child welfare system, followed in 2015 by further reforms. The changes created the Critical Incident Rapid Response Teams to quickly investigate child deaths as well as the position of assistant secretary for child welfare at the Department of Children and Families. The legislation also required child protective services to be “trauma informed” – given that treatment practices are more effective when they take into account a child’s need for safety and healing.

- Additionally, the 2014 session saw the expansion of legal representation for highly vulnerable children. Now-Senate President Bill Galvano sponsored a measure requiring that five categories of dependent special-needs children have appointed attorneys to represent their wishes: those in skilled nursing facilities; those who’d been prescribed psychotropic medication and refused to take it; those with developmental disabilities; those placed or being considered for placement in locked residential treatment centers; and those who were victims of human trafficking.

More recently, the Legislature passed other measures championed by the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, extending and strengthening supports for dependent children and their families and caregivers.

- “Justice’s Best Friend,” passed in 2017, authorized judges to allow children in proceedings involving abuse and neglect to have therapy dogs and facility dogs with them in court to reduce their trauma and aid their testimony.

- The “Pro Bono Matters” Act, passed in 2018, which reimburses the due process costs of registry attorneys and pro bono attorneys who represent certain children with special needs.

- The “Engaging Incarcerated Parents” Act, also in 2018, addresses delays in permanency for children caused by failure to adequately involve incarcerated parents in the case plan.

- “A Year is a Long Time in the Life of a Child,” passed in 2019, aims to reduce the time children spend in foster care by requiring that their parents be referred for services within seven days. DCF must anticipate barriers and give parents strategies to overcome them.

- “Charting a Positive Path for the Future,” passed in 2019 and designed to make sure children who “cross over” between delinquency and guardianship are served by judges who are familiar with their cases and have input from their Guardians ad Litem.

Abramowitz credited volunteers, advocates, lawmakers and legislative staff, state agencies, child welfare professionals, children and youth previously in foster care, and media for Florida’s trailblazing legislation on behalf of abused and neglected children.

More progress is in the works, he said.



PROGRAM OPERATIONS UPDATE

A CELEBRATION

Every once in a while it's advantageous to take a look at ourselves from the perspective of others. How would others describe us? How would they describe you?

A recent article about leadership by John Baldoni was posted on WorkPlace a few months ago. It used GRACE as an acronym that translates to: Generosity, Respect, Action, Compassion, Energy. As we travel around the state for various events, we believe our employees are living examples of GRACE. We find extraordinary commitment to both our children and the Guardian ad Litem Program mission. We see our Core Values at work as our Staff deals with the everyday business of ensuring the well-being of the children we represent.

Our Staff is entrenched in heartfelt child advocacy and nothing gets in their way. They are known for their perseverance, as well as their resiliency, when it comes to advocating for children. They aren't easily distracted and are genuine in their commitment to the children we serve, as well as the volunteers we support. Without such strong employees, our mission would be unattainable and because of them the children will have a chance at a bright future.



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Because we are a volunteer driven agency, many times we direct the praise toward the volunteers, or foster parents, or other agency personnel because we are not desirous of the accolades. But every once in a while we need to look within and take notice of the work WE are all doing, and the Staff who are making it all possible.

This introspection should include everyone – Support Staff, Recruiters, Trainers, Attorneys, Child Advocate Managers, local Circuit Management, Program Staff and Leadership. Without each of these roles within our Program we cannot reach our full potential as child advocates for Florida's children. So take a moment, or two, and celebrate each other. Congratulations, you deserve it!

OF COURSE WE FILE SHELTER PETITIONS!

This article is a success story of an uphill legal battle a Guardian ad Litem team in the 7th Circuit fought on behalf of a child who was not being removed from her father's care despite the trauma she was suffering.

It begins with a four year-old minor child D.R. who was initially sheltered by the court on October 30, 2017 and placed in the custody of her paternal grandmother and subsequently adjudicated dependent. Her father was considered a parent without allegations, and once he obtained housing on December 3, 2018, D.R. was placed in his custody. On April 26, 2019, the Department received the first of four additional abuse reports regarding D.R. as the victim.



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The allegations consisted of exposure to domestic violence perpetrated by the Father. The abuse reports continued to be closed with no indicators. However, D.R.’s behaviors began to deteriorate and her disclosures to her counselor became increasingly concerning. The Guardian ad Litem filed for a Motion to Change Custody; however, it was not deemed an emergency and was set out several weeks for an evidentiary hearing. D.R. was having difficulty sleeping, reportedly began wetting the bed and made statements that she did not want to live.

The Guardian ad Litem and the child’s therapist continued to sound the alarm as the trauma symptoms escalated. All of the evidence was based on child hearsay. The corroborating witness was the victim of the domestic violence who refused to testify. The assigned Child Advocate Manager and Best Interest Attorney attempted to work with the Department but were told no action would be taken to remove D.R. until the Motion hearing as the intakes closed with no indicators. This was not an acceptable response. An emergency internal staffing was called. The Circuit Director, Supervising Attorney, Best Interest Attorney, Child Advocate Manager and Volunteer determined that the only way to protect this child was for the Guardian ad Litem Program to file our own petition requesting the Court to place the child in shelter care.

The assigned BIA and CAM gathered witness statements from the child’s therapist, daycare teachers, and the DV victim’s employer. A shelter petition was filed that afternoon. Legal staffings were held into the evening hours to prepare for argument as to standing of the Program to bring forth such a petition. Chapter 39 does not speak to this issue so we looked to the Rules of Juvenile Procedure and relied on Rule 8.305 and the wording stating “person filing the petition” without specifically delineating “The Department” as it does in other parts of the rule.

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LEGAL UPDATE

OF COURSE WE FILE SHELTER PETITIONS!

(CONTINUED)

The following day the shelter hearing began as expected with the Father's attorney objecting to a shelter petition being filed by Guardian ad Litem Program and though the Judge found it unusual procedurally, she allowed the hearing to move forward. Of note, the Judge gave the Department at least two opportunities to join the Guardian ad Litem's Petition, which they declined.

After more than two hours of evidence and witness testimony, culminating into an impassioned plea that the Guardian ad Litem could not turn a blind eye to this child's suffering, the Court granted the Program's shelter petition, and D.R. was removed from the Father and subsequently placed with her mother and siblings. Melissa Shephard, child advocacy manager, saw the relief on D.R.'s face when the child learned she would not be returning to her father's home and the young child whispered "yay." Ms. Shephard expressed it best that "We Just Did That."

GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION UPDATE

THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION IS ALL ABOUT SUCCESS

The mission of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation is to help the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program represent abused, abandoned and neglected children throughout Florida's dependency system. We do that by raising additional support for our staff, our volunteers and our circuit programs' non-profit partners.

The Foundation's Board of Directors is a vital part of our success over the past three years. Since 2016, the Foundation has raised over \$500,000 – of which almost 40 percent was passed on to local Guardian ad Litem nonprofits to serve the children in those circuits. The remaining 60 percent was spent on more than 20 training events, volunteer and staff recognition awards, and normalcy activities.

Current Board Members are: Lori Duarte-Roberts, President (SunTrust Bank), Kristi Aiello (Florida Blue) Bert Earp (Carr, Riggs & Ingram), Jessica Hendrickson (Duke Energy), Tom Robinson (retired), Leslie Schultz-Kin (Akerman), Neiko Shea (Sunshine Health), Christina Weaver (L3Harris Technologies), and David Van Der Like (American Airlines). Guardian ad Litem Foundation Staff: Eric Clark, Foundation CEO. Representing the Guardian ad Litem Program on the Board: Alan Abramowitz, Frank Prado, Sonia Valladares, and Holly Rodriguez.

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Current Board Members (Pictured with the 2019 Triumph Award Recipients): Lori Duarte-Roberts, President (SunTrust Bank), Kristi Aiello (Florida Blue) Bert Earp (Carr, Riggs & Ingram), Jessica Hendrickson (Duke Energy), Tom Robinson (retired), Leslie Schultz-Kin (Akerman), Neiko Shea (Sunshine Health), Christina Weaver (L3Harris Technologies), and David Van Der Like (American Airlines). Guardian ad Litem Foundation Staff: Eric Clark, Foundation CEO. Representing the Guardian ad Litem Program on the Board: Alan Abramowitz, Frank Prado, Sonia Valladares, and Holly Rodriguez.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION UPDATE

THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION IS ALL ABOUT SUCCESS

(CONTINUED)

With continued growth of the Board, the impact that the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation is able to provide the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program will only increase.

One of our recent major accomplishments was the inaugural TRIUMPH Awards in April. The TRIUMPH Awards are given to foster youth and represent qualities such as determination, resilience, high aspirations, overcoming obstacles and academic achievement.

All twenty Guardian ad Litem Judicial Circuits had the opportunity to nominate their most deserving youth (high school junior, senior or college freshman), and each nominee received a \$100 check from the Foundation. The 3 finalists received larger awards to help further their educational success. Robert Hurley of the 6th Circuit was awarded the \$5,000 scholarship, Jasmyne Prophet of the 5th Circuit received \$3,000, and Angela Dawkins of the 15th Circuit received \$2,000.

The Guardian ad Litem Foundation Triumph Award Recipients: Robert Hurley, Jasmyne Prophet, and Angela Dawkins.



The Triumph Awards will be a yearly event, and the Board encourages all circuits to nominate a young person. Further, with the continued support of Sunshine Health (Neiko Shea), the Foundation is once again assisting eight circuits with training events for Guardian ad Litem volunteers. The topics are selected by the local circuits to be most helpful to their service areas.

Additionally, the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation is pursuing:

- Funding for staff training opportunities
- Statewide marketing efforts
- Assistance with normalcy funds

The Foundation and its Board of Directors welcomes your input and suggestions on ways we can better assist you.

Please contact Foundation CEO Eric Clark at eric.clark@gal.fl.gov or one of the board members.

NORTH REGION UPDATE

AWESOME ADVOCACY IN THE NORTH

By Paul Crawford, North Region Director

I never cease to be amazed at the awesome advocacy being performed on behalf of our children. Recently at an ACT Review, I was once again reminded of how valuable and impactful our Advocacy Teams are. In one of the cases reviewed, as a result of our team's commitment to a medically needy child, her life was very likely saved and she is now beginning to thrive.

I have the privilege of hearing numerous stories of our Staff and Volunteers going the extra mile to ensure the children's best interest is served and all their needs are being met. I greatly admire all of our teams as they persevere, overcoming many obstacles and frustrations each day.



“I believe our greatest asset is a highly dedicated, well-trained team of Staff and Volunteers working together to achieve the best outcomes for the children we serve.”

I believe our greatest asset is a highly dedicated, well-trained team of Staff and Volunteers working together to achieve the best outcomes for the children we serve. We can celebrate this in the North Region and around the state. We have a great number of experienced and knowledgeable Staff recognized in their local communities as child welfare experts. They have earned credibility in our Courts and respect from our community partners.

The selection and proper training of people we bring to our team is critical. Over the past year, we have employed several new Staff, both in legal and operational roles, who bring a fresh perspective, energy and passion to our Team. I love to see our Staff working together collaboratively, complementing each other's strengths. We have also recruited, trained and certified 769 new Volunteers in the past year alone. This is a great accomplishment!

Recruiting and retaining our incredible Volunteers is critical for us to accomplish the highest level of advocacy for our children. The Volunteer Child Advocates add great value to our teams and directly to our children. They serve out of their compassion and good-will, giving of their time and resources in order to make the lives of children better. This includes our non-profit partners as well - they make possible many things that would go unmet if not for their valuable contributions.

To sum it all up, I am proud of our Team and how it has grown over the past few years. It is a humbling experience to work alongside such high quality women and men. I am honored to be part of this group.

CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

CENTRAL REGION SUPERSTARS

By Kim DelGaudio, Central Region Director

When looking back over the past 3 ½ years since I became the Regional Director for the Central Region, it is easy to see how much the region has grown. Our total number of volunteers has blossomed from 4589 in January 2015, to 7700 in July 2019. We are also advocating for a larger number of children going from 8743 in January 2015 to 10,555 in July 2019.

I have watched our workforce grow and change over the last few years, and I know we have a strong team of dedicated and committed volunteer child advocates and staff who are utilizing “heartfelt advocacy” every day, all day. Central Region rocks!



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In those short few years, the Central Region has gone through many leadership changes. Five out of seven of our Circuit Directors started in their positions from just before the regional transition, to just a few short months ago (Holly Rodriguez, Tabitha Lambert, Toni Latortue, Mariela Ollsen, Carol Jewell). These five ladies never cease to amaze me with their creativity and their support for their staff.

Our two steadfast and very experienced Circuit Directors (Lesley Scott, Cookie Mooney) are always available to lend an ear and offer support to their colleagues. They have a historical perspective that is critical to us moving forward. We’ve also hired three new Supervising Attorneys (Brittany Rutan, Paula Adams, Jeff Simons), several new Assistant Directors and many new CAM IIs. Our leadership teams are stronger and more dedicated than ever, and I am always thrilled to hear about the new projects and goals our circuits are working on.

I’m also always impressed when I visit the circuits and spend time with staff and volunteers. I love the creative solutions the circuits come up with to resolve the issues that we face in advocacy, from helping our kids (and staff) by having dogs available to comfort and support them (such as Tibet in Circuit 13 - Hillsborough and Tonx in Circuit 9 - Osceola, among many others) to participating in different models of court and teams (Early Childhood Court and Teen Team, for example). Our staff are utilized in new and creative ways with VOCA funding or by employing Assistant CAMs.

Most of all, our staff and volunteers are passionate about what they do, excited about new and creative projects and ideas and are motivated to move mountains for children. I am so honored to work with this team - Central Region rocks!

SOUTH REGION UPDATE

THINGS ARE GETTING BRIGHTER AND BRIGHTER IN THE SOUTH!

By Kristen Solomon, South Region Director

I began as the Regional Director in 2014 for the Southern Region and during that time we have been through a lot. Our staff has grown via VOCA grants in Palm Beach County (Circuit 15) and in Miami-Dade County (Circuit 11), we moved offices in Miami, suffered lots of damage in the Florida Keys (C16) from hurricanes, and had transitions in leadership in Broward (Circuit 17) and in St. Lucie, Martin, Okeechobee and Indian River counties (Circuit 19).

Throughout it all, one thing remained the same: their commitment to our children. Each Circuit has evolved over the last couple of years and the advocacy teams continue to get stronger and more unified as we move forward. They consistently embrace the “team” concept and have come together to ensure our children receive the outcomes they deserve.



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I am proud of the projects they have taken on in order to change the way we look at things. From the implementation of the 60-day staffings, to the use of the acronym PLEASE for visit reports, from Rocket Dockets to internal permanency roundtables, they have been creative in ensuring we are on top of the needs of our children and that we are proactive in achieving outcomes. It has also been great to see the collaboration between the Circuits as they share their best practices with each other.

This past year, we came together and discussed how we wanted to focus on the importance of visitation. Since the quality of our relationships with the children we represent affects everything we do as advocates, everyone felt this was key to improving our outcomes. From day one we started talking about the quality of the interactions and the documentation regarding the visits. This is when the use of PLEASE started to spread across the Region!

Our team in Broward County started using it as a way to capture important aspects of a visit, such as placement (P), likes and wishes of the child (L), education (E), advocacy needs (A), services (S) and everything else (E). It resonated with others as a way to capture important details since the contact logs in Optima are open text boxes.

With greater detail in our visit reports, the advocacy teams are more knowledgeable of the situation and are able to make well informed recommendations on behalf of the child.



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