



NOVEMBER 2019



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

# NEWSLETTER

## FEATURED

Knowledge is Power

A Bright Future for  
Florida Guardian ad Litem

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Statewide!

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## A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ

# KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

It's often said knowledge is power, and certainly knowledge is a powerful factor in successful advocacy.

That's why the entire Program has worked hard to expand its grasp of facts and information, theory and practice, networking and technology and more – everything we must know to represent the best interests of abused and neglected children as they deserve.

I'm excited about several developments in the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program and urge you to take advantage of the many training opportunities and tools we have now. There is the 'I am for the Child Academy', which now offers more than 80 courses and has 8,126 accountholders; webinars on cutting-edge topics; Workplace for leadership development; and a certification process for Child Advocate Managers.



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Mary Kay McAnally, Director of Education and Development, recently told me enrollment in our course offerings on our I am for the Child Academy had reached 36,363! We had to take a moment to let that sink in.... training courses the Guardian ad Litem Program offers on the Academy are currently being looked at over 36,000 times – the SAME information shared STATEWIDE to tens of thousands of people. What opportunities this gives us to help increase advocacy for our children!

Many of the Academy courses are webinars that had been offered statewide to our staff in real time by subject matter experts. The webinar presentations are coordinated by Regional Director Kristen Solomon on a monthly or bimonthly basis, and recently included such topics as “Abusive Head Trauma: An Overview for Guardians ad Litem,” and “2019 Legislative Updates.” Staff who participate in real time can question the experts, using our GoToWebinar platform. Then, having the webinars also posted to the Academy ensure everyone has the opportunity to take advantage of them when it’s convenient.

Workplace is an innovation that was implemented in response to staff requests for more accessible trainings in such aspects of leadership as team-building, wellness and self-care. Workplace is coordinated by Regional Director Kim DelGaudio, and it’s meant to encourage colleagues to share their techniques and ideas. Along with the General group, there are other groups for specialized networking: GAL Connect, Volunteer Recruitment Team, Support Staff Team, etc. You can join Workplace by going to [work.facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/workplace) and setting up an account using your work email.

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# A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

(CONTINUED)

We are also implementing professional certification for Child Advocate Managers. In collaboration with the Florida Board of Certification, this opportunity will enable our already hard-working CAMs to enhance recruiting and retention and better guide volunteers on how to navigate the system, identify issues that should be escalated, and find resources that can be accessed to help children reach permanency as expeditiously as possible.

Knowledge is power, and we should harness it in an effort to provide children with the best possible advocacy. I urge you all to take advantage of these resources and am grateful to everyone who made them a reality, especially Director of Operations Frank Prado, who oversaw the development and implementation of all these good works!

## PROGRAM OPERATIONS UPDATE A BRIGHT FUTURE

As stated in previous newsletters and consistent with our commitment to achieving better outcomes for our children, the Guardian ad Litem Program will continue to invest and focus on the development of our staff through training and teamwork. In preparation for the upcoming Child Advocate Manager (CAM) Certification, the procedures for onboarding new CAMs is changing.

The new process will introduce new CAMs to all of the concepts they will learn during the Certification training, and will provide a guideline for those established CAMs to ensure they are familiar with the certification concepts as well.



***“It’s an exciting time to be part our team as we practice heartfelt child advocacy together and provide children with hope for a better future.”***

One of the exciting changes is a revamped legal training for CAMs and Attorneys that we are calling CAM/ Attorney Blended Training. This will include a day of training for CAMs, a day of training for attorneys, and then one more day of training both CAMs and Attorneys together. This blended concept will provide a way to train new CAMs and Attorneys on how to work together using a mock case scenario from shelter to permanency. (The role of the Volunteer Child Advocate will be included as well.) Participants will learn how to navigate many of the steps required to focus on child centered advocacy in the community and in the courtroom, such as critical thinking, conflict management, and productive Advocacy Team staffings.

We believe the next several months will establish the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program as leaders in the Child Welfare system in this state and nationwide. It’s an exciting time to be part our team as we practice heartfelt child advocacy together and provide children with hope for a better future.

## LEGAL UPDATE

# CREATIVE LEGAL ADVOCACY: THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX TO CREATE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR OUR CHILDREN

Creativity may not seem synonymous with the legal profession, but it is an ability vital to overcoming barriers to achieving better outcomes for our children. Our children face a myriad of challenges during their time in the child welfare system. So too, do the volunteers, child advocates and attorneys who represent their interests and seek to minimize the time spent in dependency as well as the trauma they face while a part of the system. The usual cadence of our legal advocacy is to attend the various hearings in the life of a case as well as mediations and staffings.

Disrupting the rhythm that more often than not leads to long permanency time frames requires intention and forethought. A creative attorney is a thoughtful attorney and one who questions what measures can be taken to lead to more expeditious permanency, engages in collaborative discussions on the implementation of those measures, and works to successfully execute the strategies and mechanisms to accomplish the desired outcomes.



***“Achieving better outcomes for our children requires attention and creativity. Better results may come with small tweaks to our practice, or more expansive strategies to attain solutions previously unimagined.”***

Our attorneys are as influential outside the courtroom as they are in front of the judiciary. They can lead the charge in ensuring the creation of case plans that effectively address the circumstances of the child’s removal in as short a time frame as possible. This begins even before mediation. Creative methods that may be employed include scheduling pre-case plan team meetings and communicating recommended tasks to the other parties, well before the scheduled mediation. This may include inviting the child, an incarcerated parent or a relative that may be a part of the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) process.

Creative solutions may also include propounding Notices of Production on Non-Parties and Requests for Production (RFP), or objecting to a RFP and filing motions to strike same where needed. Creativity may mean retaining a private investigator to uncover information that a parent or caregiver seeks to hide. It may also mean negotiating a resolution to avoid a hearing or filing stipulations to shorten hearing or trial time and using measures more commonly found in the civil litigation arena, such as motions in limine and video depositions.

Achieving better outcomes for our children requires attention and creativity. Better results may come with small tweaks to our practice, or more expansive strategies to attain solutions previously unimagined.

## BEHAVIORAL HEALTH UPDATE

# USE COMPREHENSIVE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS (CBHAS) TO ENHANCE ADVOCACY

A Comprehensive Behavioral Health Assessment (CBHA) is a Medicaid funded in-depth assessment of a child's emotional, social, behavioral and developmental functioning. Requirements for CBHAs are extensive and details can be found in the Medicaid Specialized Therapeutic Services Coverage and Limitations Handbook. Eligibility for and components of a CBHA, who can receive them, how they are used by child welfare, and how we can use them to enhance our advocacy are addressed below.

Medicaid eligible children under the age of 21 are eligible for CBHAs if they:

1. Are a victim of abuse or neglect and have been determined by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) or designee to require out-of-home care or are placed in shelter; or
2. Committed acts of juvenile delinquency, have an emotional disturbance, and at risk of placement in a residential setting.



***“Required components of the CBHA depend on the age of the child. All CBHAs require the completion of a standardized assessment tool, such as the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS), to identify needs that require intervention and strengths to build on.”***

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DCF requires all Medicaid eligible children (birth through age 17) who enter out-of-home care to be referred for a CBHA within seven calendar days of shelter. Identified needs and recommendations are to be included in the family's case plan. A score of 3 in “Risk Behaviors” or “Problem Presentation” areas indicate a high level of urgency for mental health services and should result in a referral for services by child welfare.

Volunteer Child Advocates can use CBHAs to increase their understanding of a child and their family early on and enhance advocacy in important ways, as summarized below:

1. Advocate for completion and obtain a copy as soon as available;
2. Review and make note of key information (relationships with others, needs and strengths, assessments and services, medical and educational status, functioning, mental health diagnosis, and recommendations).
3. Review the CANS, noting areas that indicate the need for services.
4. Identify questions and the need for follow-up, which may include obtaining key documents and information.
5. Advocate for recommended services and timely service referrals to address areas of concern noted in the CANS.
6. Review the family's case plan to ensure recommendations are included.
7. Advocate for CBHAs for youth involved with juvenile justice who meet the eligibility criteria, if beneficial.

# **C2 WELL BEING PROJECT**

By Deborah Moore

Circuit Director, 2nd Circuit - Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty and Wakulla Counties

About a year ago, our program implemented “C2 Well Being Project.” We partnered with “Working Well,” a non-profit organization that helps organizations and businesses create wellness programs.

Before we implemented the project, I talked with staff to determine the interest level and reinforced that the project is voluntary. We had a great response from staff and many creative activities were suggested.



**“We had a great response from staff and many creative activities were suggested... Our C2 Well Being Project is our way of taking care of ourselves and each other.”**

When the weather is good, at least half of our staff take short walk breaks together. We take turns bringing bottled water in to encourage everyone to drink more water during the day. Most any day, staff can find apples, oranges, grapefruit, etc. in our kitchen. For years, the food at staff get-togethers (birthdays, holidays, etc.) was mostly indulgent comfort foods. Now, staff bring in vegetarian and low calorie options.

We especially enjoy our “Wellness Week” themes including, “Try Something New” (I brought in a couple variations of hummus and vegetables) and “Drink More Water” (everyone received info about the benefits). One of our favorite activities was a “virtual run/walk event.” We met at a park to run/walk a 3 mile trail. Several staff brought their children in strollers, scooters and bikes. The weather was great and we enjoyed healthy snacks at the finishing line. The virtual event offered staff who couldn’t make it the opportunity to walk/run on their own and submit the completion dates and times. Several staff coordinate after hours walks and bike rides together.

Recently, we invited Tallahassee Memorial Hospital Animal Therapy program to bring several therapy dogs to our office for our staff. I received rave reviews from staff and requests to invite them back each month!

Our C2 Well Being Project is our way of taking care of ourselves and each other. I checked in with staff about how they feel about our project. Staff said, “I like it quite a bit,” “I’ve had fun with it,” “I like the wellness walks and healthy snacks,” Staff suggested we coordinate more walks after work at a nearby park now that the weather is so nice.

## CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

# “YOU COULD NOT, ALL EVENING, WIPE THE SMILE OFF HIS FACE”

By Lesley Scott  
Circuit Director, 9th Circuit - Osceola County

The annual gala hosted by the Guardian ad Litem Foundation of the 9th Circuit has become a popular event over the years, raising funds and awareness for the Program and the foster children of Central Florida. The Foundation always outdoes itself, and this year more than 500 people turned out for “An Evening in Old Hollywood.”

Our main speaker was Aurora McCreary, who recently appeared on Survivor. She said the hardest part of the competition was describing on camera her time in foster care. She was one year old when she and her brother went into the dependency system. “For the next seven years, we went to more homes than we could count, we learned different teachers’ names, and we tried to remember that if we stayed together, everything would be better,” she said.



**“You can help them  
be children... Tell  
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Aurora and her brother were indeed adopted together, and their parents taught them to look forward. She didn’t want to look back for Survivor – but she did for the children served by Guardian ad Litem, at our gala. “This program allows those children to be normal,” she said. The money raised at “An Evening in Old Hollywood” goes, in part, to things like soccer games and dance lessons, Aurora said – along with other ways for children to discover themselves.

“You can help them be children,” she said, thanking attendees for their generosity. “Tell these children they can be children and grow up to be whatever they want.”

We were also very moved by Jalen, a young artist represented by the Program. He donated a painting to the auction, and brought his sisters and foster family to watch as his artwork raised a whopping \$2,500. Then he beamed all the rest of the evening. I’m so proud that Jalen got a confidence booster from helping us. Next he’ll go to Jacksonville to speak at the gala for Guardian ad Litem Program of the Fourth Circuit (Clay, Duval and Nassau Counties)

I want to thank the elected officials who attended: Congressman Darren Soto, State Rep. Mike La Rosa, Osceola Sheriff Russ Gibson and Osceola County Commissioner Brandon Arrington. We appreciate you! Above all, thanks to our wonderful Foundation. They really know how to throw a bash – in fact, they had to flick the lights at 1:00 a.m. because 200 people were still there.

# A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO RECRUITING

by Paul Nigro

Circuit Director, 19th Circuit - Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie Counties

A little over a year ago we worked with child welfare and community leaders to develop a network of agencies and individuals focused on improving the child welfare system. One of the initiatives identified as a priority was increasing the number of Guardians ad Litem and foster homes in the community. We also wanted to raise awareness about the child welfare system and erase some of the stigmas and negative perceptions about dependency and foster kids that our recruiters were running into.

We recruited people from the Community Based Care (CBC), foster licensing agencies, foster parent associations and related organizations to serve on the committee. Altogether we had about a dozen members. During the initial planning sessions, the recruiters for the different agencies all talked about the challenges they faced reaching broader audiences, overcoming misconceptions about child welfare and a lack of resources. Everyone decided that the most effective way to bring in quality Guardian Volunteers and foster homes was to try and eliminate the barriers our recruiters were facing. We put together a strategic plan which included events, a marketing plan and joint recruiting efforts.



***“The original goal was to bring people together and embrace the concept of community based care. A year later we’ve also seen a win-win effort that brought great benefits to the Program, local partners and most importantly, our kids.”***

After a year of practice, here are just a few of the benefits we’ve realized.

**Greater resources** – We’re all dealing with limited resources. By bringing together other professional recruiters and getting everyone to buy into the same goal, we’ve been able to create consistent, quality messaging and marketing materials and distribute them to a broader audience. Our marketing plan, called our Myths of the Month, is a social media marketing plan that aims to dispel a different myth about foster care or the child welfare system. Each month partners put together a marketing kit based around the central theme. The kits are distributed to dozens of partner agencies and community leaders who push it out to their followings.

**New avenues for recruiting** – With this partnership, we’re able to leverage relationships and connections of dozens of individuals and organizations to get our message in front of different audiences. For example, several faith based agencies have invited us to presentations in front of large congregations we had never been able to penetrate before. The CBC brought an initiative, One School One Child, which they had been using to target schools to recruit foster parents. The message and presentation has been adjusted to now recruit foster parents and Guardian ad Litem Volunteers along with infrastructure like a tracking sheet, marketing materials, contacts, etc.

The original goal was to bring people together and embrace the concept of community based care. A year later we’ve also seen a win-win effort that brought great benefits to the Program, local partners and most importantly, our kids.



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**Helping Children Reach Home Through Heartfelt Advocacy**

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**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH UPDATE ARTICLE SOURCES:**

**USE COMPREHENSIVE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS (CBHAS) TO ENHANCE ADVOCACY**

1. [Specialized Therapeutic Services Coverage and Limitations Handbook / Agency for Health Care Administration March 2014](#)
2. [The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths \(CANS\) / The John Praed Foundation / praedfoundation.org](#)
3. [Services for Children with Mental Health and Any Co-Occurring Substance Abuse or Developmental Disability Treatment Needs in Out-of-Home Care Placements / State of Florida Department of Children and Families / DCF Operating Procedure No. 155-10 / 175-40 / November 15, 2017](#)