



MENTOR MANUAL

Dear Mentor:

On behalf of everyone at the Guardian ad Litem Program, we welcome you to our FAWL in Love with GAL Project. Thank you for your selfless service on behalf of Florida's Children!

A mentor's positive influence in the transformative years of adolescence can have a profound and lifelong effect on youth. Your presence in their life can impact the decisions they make and help guide them on a positive path. Your knowledge and advice as an attorney can assist them with making positive choices and navigating complicated processes.

The GAL's mission is to represent Florida's abused, abandoned and neglected children by vigorously protecting their best interests in the dependency system. Together, we can help these youth have a brighter future.

Please use this mentor manual as a resource. The information, tips and suggestions contained herein are intended to assist you with your role as a mentor.

There is no higher calling than helping a child, and we are honored you chose to donate your valuable time to be a mentor and play this crucial role in helping Florida's children. We hope you will find your mentor experience interesting, challenging and rewarding.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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## Executive Summary

Lawyers play many roles, acting as both counselors and advisors. For teens in foster care, having an attorney to act as both is vital. For attorneys acting as lawyers to teens, their job

*is about being aware of the child's developmental level and relating to them there. It is about truly listening to them without judgment. It is about creating a safe place for them to talk.... It is about establishing trust. It is about getting to know what they truly desire to do, and what they want to become, and helping them get there.... Every lawyer who takes on a child's case needs to know it is OK to work with both their heart and their head and do things out of the ordinary that will help their client succeed in life.*

- Pamela Bress, Senior Staff Attorney, Brevard County Legal Aid, Inc.

In Florida, there are nearly a thousand teenage girls in foster care in need of that person. Someone to listen with their heart not just to their legal concerns, but to their hopes and dreams as well. They need someone to help them reach those dreams.

Through *FAWL in Love with GAL*, attorneys will work with the GAL Program towards the best permanency outcome for these foster youth, an outcome that takes into consideration the child's legal needs as well as their views and aspirations. Volunteers will form a mentor-mentee relationship with the youth, enabling the youth to develop professional and personal relationships with the pro bono attorney who will guide them as they progress through not just the dependency system, but these critical years of their lives. Through meetings or visits to the mentor's office, the foster youth will be given the opportunity to get guidance, share their concerns and ask legal questions in a non-threatening environment. The volunteer mentor can identify both their legal and non-legal needs. Studies show youth with mentors achieve higher educational, social and financial success.

*FAWL in Love with GAL* is built on the concept of "episodic mentoring," the notion that mentees can learn a great deal from mentors in as little as 20 minutes a month. It offers the foster youth, many of whom will soon be on their own, the advantage of learning how to ask questions and hold conversations to promote their own development, empowering them for the future. It offers pro bono attorneys an opportunity to volunteer with a shorter, more defined time commitment while still improving a child's life.

**Come *FAWL in Love with GAL*.**

***What will be your mentoring moment?***

## Mission and Vision

### **Mission**

To assist older youth in the dependency system with transition by providing a positive role model and mentor while providing the legal community the opportunity to have an impact on their community.

To strengthen the relationship between the Program and the pro bono legal community by educating attorneys about the Program and dependency system.

### **Vision**

To provide a mentor from the legal community to all youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood who will act as a supportive person, share their experience and knowledge and help the youth achieve more positive outcomes.

## Mentor Position Description

The FAWL in Love with GAL project is designed to match FAWL members with mentees who are transitioning from foster care to independence. The GAL Program will match each mentor with a foster youth in their area.

### Mentor Responsibility:

- Commit to mentor one youth in foster care.
- Commit to meeting mentee at least once a month.
- Schedule meetings with mentee.
- Act as counselor.
- Act as adviser.
- Create a trusting relationship with mentee.
- Consider all needs of child, including legal needs.
- Render candid advice.
- Empower youth to make positive choices.
- Honor commitments.
- Assist youth with communication skills.
- Establish boundaries.
- Act in the best interest of the child.
- Uphold and comply with GAL Program's standards and guidelines as well as any local circuit program guidelines.
- Will provide support and encouragement to the youth without any form of discrimination on the basis of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, ethnicity, marital status, political belief, mental or physical handicap or any other preference, personal characteristic, condition or status.
- Will not accept a fee for services.
- Update GAL team and youth's Child Advocate Manager (CAM) on progress of mentor-mentee relationship.
- Communicate child's needs to GAL team.
- Work with GAL team to formulate plan to meet youth's needs.
- Communicate any issues with mentoring role to GAL Pro Bono Liaison.

### Mentor Eligibility:

- Active member of Florida's Association of Women Lawyers.
- Completed FAWL in Love with GAL training.
- Either:
  - Active member of The Florida Bar
  - Law school student who has completed background check and confidentiality form.

## Mentor Roles: Working with the Child

Youth in foster care have experienced trauma. Trauma can effect each youth differently. Each youth reacts and adapts differently to the abuse or neglect they have experienced. It is important to understand the youth's history and its effect on the youth's behavior and current situation.

**Be realistic.** Understand it is going to take time to create a trusting relationship. Understand what you can do and what you cannot.

**Set expectations.** Explain your role to the child in a manner that matches the child's level of understanding, as well as to the caregivers or parents. Discuss what the youth is hoping to get from the relationship.

**See their perspective.** Put yourself in the child's shoes.

**Be honest.** Do not tell youth what you think they want to hear unless you know it is the truth.

**Be observant.** Listen to both what the youth says and what is unsaid. Understand the youth may not be comfortable with opening up. Understand there may be underlying trust issues.

**Establish boundaries.** Youth in care may not have a concept of suitable boundaries because they come from family environments where boundaries were unclear, inconsistent, and/or inappropriate. Two examples of common boundary issues include:

- A child might display inappropriate boundaries by wanting to sit on everyone's lap or asking for an unusual amount of physical contact from the Volunteer.
- The children may be verbally or physically aggressive, and have no regard for rules or authority because they are modeling what they learned from their parents.

## Mentor Roles: Working with the GAL Team

The Guardian ad Litem Program's mission is to advocate for the best interest of all children. The goal is to find permanency as soon as possible. They work in a multidisciplinary team model to achieve the most effective advocacy. The GAL team includes:

- **GAL Volunteer Advocate:** A lay volunteer who creates a relationship with the child and gathers information that is reported to the court. The Volunteer advocates for the child's needs and desires in the court and community.
- **Child Advocacy Manager (CAM):** Trained professional staff member who oversees the case and works with the volunteer to advocate for services for the child. The CAM acts as a point of contact for other partners in the child welfare system.
- **Child's Best Interest Attorney:** Represents the child's best interests in the dependency process. There is no attorney-client relationship between the CBI Attorney and the child; however, representing the best interest of the child is the sole purpose of their advocacy.

Your main point of contact will be the CAM on your case. The CAM will provide you information regarding the child, and the child's case and goals.

The CAM will also assist you in arranging mentoring meetings, including coordinating transportation of the child.

As a mentor, you will be developing a relationship with the child. This relationship can provide a new perspective regarding the child's needs and desires. The child may share vital information with you, and this information can be shared with the GAL team to improve the advocacy. However, it is important to maintain trust with your mentee. If you do decide to share information with the GAL team, communicate with your mentee that you are sharing, explaining the purpose.

However, some information must be shared with the team:

- Any allegations of physical or sexual abuse or neglect.
- Any threats of violence or harm toward self or others.
- Any signs of mental or physical health concerns.

The CAM is there provide support during your mentoring experience. The CAM will be available if you have questions or issues.



## **Extended Foster Care – An Overview**

**Fla Stat. §39.6251** – Allows youth who have not achieved permanency through Chapter 39 by the time they turn 18 to remain in licensed foster care, under the protective supervision of the Department, and under the jurisdiction of the Court. Basic requirements include:

1. Licensed Care on 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.
2. Engaged in a qualifying activity:
  - a. Completing secondary education or equivalent
  - b. Enrolled in postsecondary or vocational education
  - c. Employed for at least 80 hours per month
  - d. Unable to participate in one of the (a)-(c) activities due to documented condition that limits ability to do so.

### **Predictable Issues the youth may face:**

1. Has anyone clearly explained to the youth all of the available options regarding Extended Foster Care (EFC), Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS), etc? Benefits and drawbacks?
2. Has the youth received all of the required documents and information prior to turning 18?
3. What can qualify as a “supervised living arrangement”? Who decides?
4. What if the youth changes their mind regarding Extended Foster Care benefits?
5. What is the role of the Guardian ad Litem at this point?

### **Other Important Programs and Considerations:**

1. **Fla. Stat. §409.1451** –*Provides for benefits even if the youth does not remain in extended foster care:*
  - a. Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) – A substantial monthly stipend for certain youth for housing and utilities while enrolled in college/vocational school.
  - b. Aftercare Services – A myriad of services and sometimes money for youth who are not in EFC and not receiving PESS.
2. Fla. Admin. Code 65C-41 regarding extended foster care
3. Master Trust / Social Security Benefits
4. Medicaid and Food Assistance
5. Keys to Independence Program

