



STATEWIDE GUARDIAN AD LITEM OFFICE

Long Range Program Plan

Fiscal Years 2022-2023 through 2026-2027

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AGENCY MISSION AND GOALS

STATEWIDE GUARDIAN AD LITEM OFFICE

Mission: *“I am for the Child”*

Goals:

1. To provide a guardian ad litem to represent all abused, abandoned and neglected children in court and to advocate for their best interests, including their legal interests.
2. To conduct an independent investigation of a child’s circumstances, provide reports and recommendations to the court on the child’s best interests, and give the child a voice in court.
3. To maintain a consistent core program of training and professional certification for GAL staff and volunteers incorporating evidence based practice and trauma informed training as well as facts surrounding equity and diversity in child advocacy.

AGENCY OBJECTIVES

Priority # 1:

Provide effective independent advocacy and legal representation for every child subject to the jurisdiction of Florida's dependency court.

Priority # 2:

Advocate for improved outcomes, including timely permanency, for Florida's abused, abandoned, and neglected children.

Priority # 3:

Recruit and train volunteer advocates for children.

AGENCY SERVICE OUTCOMES AND PERFORMANCE PROJECTION TABLES

Outcome: Average number of children represented.

Baseline					
FY 2020/21	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26	FY 2026/27
23,157	24,616	26,064	26,644	27,512	28,092

Explanation: The baseline number is the average of 12 months of point-in-time data, from July 1 of one year to June 30 of the next. Point-in-time monthly counts and averages of those counts significantly understate the total number of children served by the Program in a given year, because such counts are not cumulative. During FY 20/21, the Guardian ad Litem Program represented a cumulative total of 34,879 individual children throughout the entire year.

Outcome: Average percent of children represented.

Baseline					
FY 2020/21	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26	FY 2026/27
75.2%	85%	90%	92%	95%	97%

Explanation: The percentages reflected in the chart above show the average proportion of children in the dependency system appointed to the GAL Program as compared to the total number of children with a dependency case as identified by the Office of the State Courts Administrator (OSCA). It is determined by taking an average of the number served at a point in time each month. The percentages above are based on a total of 28,372 children eligible for appointment of a GAL at the time of submission of this Program Plan.

Outcome: Percent of cases closed with Permanency Goal achieved.

Baseline					
FY 2020/21	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26	FY 2026/27
64.7%	63%	66%	69%	72%	75%

Explanation: Federal child welfare standards measure achievement of permanency through reunification with family, adoption, or a permanent guardianship arrangement. Court supervision and case management by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Community Based Care Lead Agencies and Case Management Agencies is terminated when permanency is achieved. The GAL Program defines permanency as being achieved when an order closing the case to reunification, adoption or permanent guardianship is entered.

Outcome: Number of new volunteers certified as a GAL.

Baseline					
FY 2020/21	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26	FY 2026/27
2,043	2,116	2,216	2,316	2,416	2,516

Explanation: This is the cumulative number of new volunteers certified during the fiscal year.

Outcome: Average number of active volunteers.

Baseline					
FY 2020/21	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26	FY 2026/27
11,230	10,117	10,250	10,350	10,450	10,550

Explanation: This number is the average of monthly point in time counts of certified volunteers.

LINKAGE TO GOVERNOR'S PRIORITIES

GOVERNOR'S PRIORITY #2 – IMPROVE FLORIDA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

- Increase access to and expand options for quality educational choices for Florida families.
- Revamp Florida's curriculum to lead the nation and expand civics and computer education.
- Maintain the Florida higher education system's status as number one in the nation while still making necessary adjustments to improve it.
- Provide quality career and technical education options for Florida's students and workforce.

Guardian ad Litem advocacy for children includes educational advocacy for the children we represent from pre-K to post-secondary education. The GAL Program continually offers training for volunteers and staff on educational issues. Approximately 45% of all GAL volunteers have enhanced training that can help identify educational issues for children within the child welfare system, where many of these children struggle due to multiple moves, learning or physical disabilities and mental health issues.

Over the last year, Guardians ad Litem have worked to ensure that the children they represented had adequate resources to enable them to continue their schooling. The GAL Program has partnerships with not-for-profit entities throughout the state that support the children represented by the Program, and these partners provided children with laptops and other school supplies to facilitate educational success continually and especially when schools were closed.

The GAL Program also has a new partnership with Educate Tomorrow to allow interested GAL volunteers to learn more about how to support and mentor children aging out of foster care so they can successfully transition to post-secondary and vocational educational opportunities of their choosing.

GOVERNOR'S PRIORITY #4 – HEALTH CARE

- Focus resources on continuing to combat the opioid crisis and substance abuse in general, and addressing mental health.
- Promote innovation in healthcare that reduces the cost of medical procedures and services and increases access to care for Floridians.
- Reduce the cost of prescription drugs through state and federal reform.

The GAL Program offers training to its volunteers and staff on substance abuse issues, including opioid addiction and suicide awareness, makes efforts to increase awareness, and advocates for necessary services for the children we represent as well as for parents trying to reunite with their children.

GOVERNOR'S PRIORITY #6 – PUBLIC INTEGRITY

- Protect taxpayer resources by ensuring the faithful expenditure of public funds.
- Promote greater transparency at all levels of government.
- Hold public officials and government employees accountable for failure to serve the public interest at all times.

The GAL Program maximizes public funds by recruiting and retaining volunteers to advocate for abused and neglected children in dependency court. The contribution of GAL volunteers over the past 40 years is well documented, and even expressed in the Florida Statutes, where the Legislature acknowledged the findings of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force which concluded that "if there is any program that costs the least and benefits the most, this one is it," and that the guardian ad litem volunteer is an "indispensable intermediary between the child and the court, between the child and DCF." The Program's efforts to involve community members in advocacy for children has far reaching results that cannot be accomplished by government alone, including but not limited to:

- establishing linkages between vulnerable children and families and their communities;
- increasing accountability for child welfare partners by involving citizens in the process;
- providing a community perspective in court proceedings and expanded knowledge of available resources;
- creating a network of citizens who volunteer time and resources for children that would otherwise be provided through taxpayer dollars; and
- increasing awareness of child abuse and neglect throughout Florida.

The GAL Program is continuing its efforts to recruit and retain volunteers as well as maintaining programs honored by Florida Tax Watch. The first project, Defending Best Interests, recruits attorneys to provide appellate services when termination of parental rights or dependency cases are appealed to the state's higher courts. Working with some of Florida's best appellate lawyers, the Defending Best Interests Project has yielded thousands of hours of donated legal services to defend the best interests of children in the appeals process.

The second award-winning initiative, "FAWL in Love with GAL," is a partnership with the Florida Association for Women Lawyers (FAWL), and trains and recruits attorneys to serve as mentors and advisors to youth in foster care who are close to aging out of the system. It is generally understood that young people who age out of foster care without a family or support system are at greater risk of homelessness, low educational attainment, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Thus, providing mentors to young women to help them become productive independent adults is of pivotal importance. The GAL Program is fortunate that these mentorships are provided at no cost to the state.

TRENDS AND CONDITIONS STATEMENT

Chapter 39 of the Florida Statutes requires appointment of a guardian ad litem to represent all abused and neglected children in dependency court. The Guardian ad Litem Program was initially established in Florida in 1980 under the jurisdiction of the courts, and on January 1, 2004, the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office was created to provide infrastructure to increase functionality and standardization among the existing programs. Section 39.8296, Florida Statutes, establishes the State Office as an independent entity with oversight and responsibility for providing legal, operational and technical assistance to all guardian ad litem and attorney ad litem programs within the judicial circuits. Every year since 2004, an annual report has been filed which describes the environment, issues and strategies employed to address the GAL's basic mission to represent all dependent children, as defined within Chapter 39 of the Florida Statutes and the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Annual reports can be viewed at the Guardian ad Litem Program's website, <http://guardianadlitem.org/about-us/annual-reports-long-range-program-plans/>

The GAL Program is part of a complex system of child welfare, which includes the courts, the Department of Children and Families, Community Based Care lead agencies, the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel and local case management agencies, each of which impact the operations of the others. Therefore trends which may more directly impact one aspect of the system can affect GAL representation and the ability to recruit and retain volunteers, including the impacts of COVID-19:

- Despite everyone's best efforts, residential facilities were closed to outside visitation, in-person contact was limited, and events pivotal to family reunification and permanency were cancelled or delayed. Although the court system worked hard to implement alternate methods for critical hearings, delays were experienced across the state, resulting in fewer cases being closed and fewer children being served.
- The impact of extended periods of family separation and increased stays in out-of-home care is unknown but we expect cases will likely last longer and the need for services will be more extensive. Trends which cause dependency cases to become increasing complex or lengthy negatively impact the Program's ability to recruit and retain volunteers.
- The number of Floridians willing and able to volunteer at the end of FY 19-20 and throughout FY 20-21 was reduced. The Program made significant efforts to mitigate negative impacts, for example through online training, video conference meetings and telephone contacts.
- The hold back of quarterly budget releases to offset what was projected as a general revenue deficit for FY 20-21 also negatively affected the Program's ability to represent children and recruit/retain volunteers.
- Over the past several years, lengths of stay in the child welfare system have been increasing. When children stay in the system longer, their cases take longer to close and as a result, the GAL Program may not be able to take on new children coming into care. The longer children stay in the system, the greater the risk of disruptions in placements and other negative outcomes which require more intense advocacy and a greater expenditure of resources, including by GAL. Department of Children and Families statistics show that the length of time for children exiting the system has been steadily increasing and is almost six months longer than it was in

January 2014. Child Welfare Key Indicators Monthly Report – August 30, 2021 (http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/qa/cwkeyindicator/KI_Monthly_Report_Aug%202021.pdf).

- A lack of foster homes has caused children to be placed outside their home counties. When more than 35% of children are placed out of their home counties, GALs must travel farther, spend more time, and incur greater effort to provide effective, well-informed advocacy unique to each child. This negatively impacts the ability of GAL volunteers to take on additional cases. Both of these factors are affecting the number of children the GAL Program can represent.

However, the GAL Program is continually exploring new ways to reach additional children. Consistent with section 39.8296, the Program is working with the Department of Children and Families to draw down Title IV-E funding to increase representation of children.

EXHIBIT II – PERFORMANCE MEASURES AND STANDARDS

Department: Justice Administrative Commission	Department No.: 21
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Program: Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program	Code: 21.31.00.00
Service/Budget Entity: PGM: Stw/Guardian ad Litem	Code: 21.31.00.00

Approved Performance Measures for FY2020-21	Approved Prior Year Standard FY 2020-21	Actual Prior Year Standard FY 2020-21	Approved Standards for FY 2021-22	Requested Standards for FY 2022-23
Average number of children represented	26,500	23,157	26,500	24,616
Average percent of children represented	80%	75.2%	80%	85%
Percent of cases closed with Permanency Goal achieved	70%	64.7%	70%	63%
Number of new volunteers certified as a GAL	1,464	2,043	1,464	2,116
Average number of active volunteers	5,057	11,230	5,057	10,117

EXHIBIT III – ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Department: Justice Administration	
Program: Statewide Guardian ad Litem	
Service/Budget Entity: Statewide Guardian ad Litem	
Measure: Number of new volunteers certified as a GAL	
Action:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Performance Assessment of <u>Outcome</u> Measure	<input type="checkbox"/> Revision of Measure
<input type="checkbox"/> Performance Assessment of <u>Output</u> Measure	<input type="checkbox"/> Deletion of Measure
<input type="checkbox"/> Adjustment of GAA Performance Standards	

Approved Standard	Actual Performance Results	Difference (Over/Under)	Percentage Difference
1,464	2,043	579	39.5%

Factors Accounting for the Difference: N/A - Target Exceeded

Internal Factors (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Personnel Factors	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff Capacity
<input type="checkbox"/> Competing Priorities	<input type="checkbox"/> Level of Training
<input type="checkbox"/> Previous Estimate Incorrect	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)	

Explanation:

External Factors (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Resources Unavailable	<input type="checkbox"/> Technological Problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Legal/Legislative Change	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural Disaster
<input type="checkbox"/> Target Population Change	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)
<input type="checkbox"/> This Program/Service Cannot Fix The Problem	
<input type="checkbox"/> Current Laws Are Working Against The Agency Mission	

Explanation:

Management Efforts to Address Differences/Problems (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)

Recommendations:

EXHIBIT III – ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Department: Justice Administration	
Program: Statewide Guardian ad Litem	
Service/Budget Entity: Statewide Guardian ad Litem	
Measure: Average number of Volunteers	
Action:	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Performance Assessment of <u>Outcome</u> Measure	<input type="checkbox"/> Revision of Measure
<input type="checkbox"/> Performance Assessment of <u>Output</u> Measure	<input type="checkbox"/> Deletion of Measure
<input type="checkbox"/> Adjustment of GAA Performance Standards	

Approved Standard	Actual Performance Results	Difference (Over/Under)	Percentage Difference
5,057	6,173	-270	122%

Factors Accounting for the Difference: N/A - Target Exceeded

Internal Factors (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Personnel Factors	<input type="checkbox"/> Staff Capacity
<input type="checkbox"/> Competing Priorities	<input type="checkbox"/> Level of Training
<input type="checkbox"/> Previous Estimate Incorrect	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)	

Explanation:

External Factors (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Resources Unavailable	<input type="checkbox"/> Technological Problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Legal/Legislative Change	<input type="checkbox"/> Natural Disaster
<input type="checkbox"/> Target Population Change	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)
<input type="checkbox"/> This Program/Service Cannot Fix The Problem	
<input type="checkbox"/> Current Laws Are Working Against The Agency Mission	

Explanation:

Management Efforts to Address Differences/Problems (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Identify)

Recommendations:

**EXHIBIT IV – PERFORMANCE MEASURE VALIDITY AND
RELIABILITY**

Department: _____ **Justice Administration** _____
Program: _____ **Statewide Guardian ad Litem** _____
Service/Budget Entity: _____ **Statewide Guardian ad Litem** _____
Measure: _____ **All Performance Measures** **X**

Action (check one):

- Requesting revision to approved performance measures.
- Change in data sources or measurement methodologies.
- Requesting new measure.
- Backup for performance measure.

Data Sources and Methodology:

The Guardian ad Litem Program uses a case management and volunteer software system called OPTIMA to compile the data reported. Each circuit GAL office records and reports data on the children represented using the judicial case number. Data is transmitted to the Statewide office on a date certain each month.

Validity:

The methodology for collecting and reporting the data supporting all performance measures is a valid approach to data collection. Data is reported on a date certain each month. It is regularly reviewed at the circuit level for accuracy. Reports are examined and audited by the Statewide office which monitors data integrity.

Reliability:

The methodology is sound and consistent. The Program has used OPTIMA for numerous years. Users are given instructions and definitions on data entry and maintenance. Training is provided to achieve uniformity. The Statewide office provides technical assistance as necessary. The process is dependable and results in consistent information from year to year.

EXHIBIT V – ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES CONTRIBUTING TO PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Measure Number	Approved Performance Measures for FY 2021-22 (Words)		Associated Activities Title
1	Average number of children represented		Represent children
2	Average percent of children represented		Represent children
3	Percent of cases closed with permanency goal achieved		Represent children
4	Number of new volunteers certified as a GAL		Represent children
5	Average number of volunteers		Represent children