



YEARS

1980-2020

Guardian ad Litem Program

2020 Annual Report





“The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program stands as a shining example of what heart-felt, tireless advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable among us can accomplish. Children who have been abused, abandoned, and neglected deserve to have an advocate who understands their needs and can help them find a safe and permanent home.”

Judge Kelly J. McKibben,
18th Judicial Circuit

For 40 years, thousands of Floridians have volunteered with the Guardian ad Litem Program to help abused, abandoned, and neglected children return safely to their families or find loving homes. The commitment, compassion, and resilience of GAL volunteers, our staff and lawyers, and that of the children, is inspiring and humbling.

When a child has a guardian ad litem, he or she has so much more than a representative in court. We stand by these children. We get to know them and tell their story. Our volunteers are trained and supported and advocate for only a few children at a time. We can honor a child's unique needs and connect them to their communities. We bring judges

comprehensive information so they can make the best possible decisions regarding safety, permanency and well-being. Our lawyers represent kids in court and out. We respect their childhood and advocate for what is in their best interests.

We will keep working to provide even better representation to more children. Thank you to all who contributed over these 40 years. I invite others to join us and give Florida's most vulnerable children more hopeful futures.

Alan Abramowitz
Executive Director

Best
Interests
is our only
interest



1974 – The United States Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which among other things, provided funds to states to appoint guardians ad litem to represent abused and neglected children.



Advocacy

When a child is abused, abandoned or neglected and cannot remain at home in a healthy, safe environment, he or she may be removed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and a dependency court case begins.



The Guardian ad Litem Program is appointed by the judge to represent these children and advocate for their best interests including their legal interests. We recruit and train volunteers from the community to become child advocates and work with Program staff and attorneys to represent children.

*“From the moment I met her, my Guardian ad Litem was supportive and caring. **She always made sure the judge heard my voice.** They fought for us in court to make sure my mother had regular visits with her children. They advocated for placement with my sister’s father even though the initial decision was no.”*

A Guardian ad Litem shall be appointed by the court at the earliest possible time to represent the child in any child abuse, abandonment, or neglect judicial proceeding....

§ 39.822(1), Fla. Stat.



1980 – The first CASA office in Florida opens its doors in January 1980 in Jacksonville and was physically located in the State Attorney’s office. By the end of the next year, there were GAL Programs in ten judicial circuits with 407 volunteers representing 1,026 children.



Commitment

2019

Representing Children –

38,191 total children represented

10,000+ Floridians volunteered as Guardians ad Litem

551 Pro Bono Attorneys donated legal services

343,000+ hours donated by Volunteer Child Advocates

2,898,000+ miles driven



“The biggest impact the Program has had is to show me – and other kids like me – that *we matter*. They show us that they are for the children, and they actually listen to me and care about my opinions and needs.”



“We are all together.”

That was his answer when I asked the oldest child what he likes best about his new home. He was one of six brothers and sisters who had been in and out of the system. This time when they were placed in foster care, the girls were in one home and the boys in another. A relative was willing to adopt them if the

termination of parental rights succeeded, but there were just too many delays. We filed a motion to compel a change of placement and move them to the relative’s home. The court agreed and the children are a family again.

Guardian ad Litem Volunteer, 2nd Judicial Circuit

1990 – All of Florida’s judicial circuits have a GAL program operating under the supervision of chief judges. By 2002, GAL volunteers represented children on 6,847 cases.



Understanding

Guardians ad Litem are people like you

Guardian ad Litem Volunteers are trained child advocates. They work as part of a team alongside the Program's Child Advocate Managers and Program Attorneys to provide judges with first-hand accounts of the child's situation and make recommendations about what is in the child's best interests.

Guardian ad Litem Volunteers are best interests advocates, but they are so much more to the children they advocate for. Guardians ad Litem become trusted friends, mentors, and can be a link between the child and his or her community. Volunteers are many times the only stable adult in the child's life. This is critically important to children who have been traumatized and placed in the child welfare system.

“...she supports and encourages me, she shares her life knowledge with me, and accepts me as I currently am, while seeing the person I can become.”

I remember a case where two teenage girls without parents couldn't be placed with their adult sister because her home was too dangerous. Within 2 weeks, the GAL Team had galvanized the community to get them an RV and everything they needed to live together as a family, and made a motion to the judge

so they could live with their sister. When I think about what a unique resource GALs are for children, how they can leverage the community and their own knowledge and resources for kids who would otherwise have no one, I want to tell everyone to be a guardian ad litem.

Child Advocate Manager, 5th Judicial Circuit





2002 – Governor Bush’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Child Protection recommends that the Florida Legislature set among its highest priorities the full funding of the Guardian ad Litem Program concluding: “if there is any program that costs the least and benefits the most, this one is it.”





Representation

It was almost a TPR, but this incredible 15 year old boy didn't want us to give up on his mom. This strong, sweet teenager was bouncing around placements, trying desperately to stay in touch with his mother. Her mental health was declining despite on-and-off attempts to get back on track. The GAL volunteer worked really hard to find a stable placement for him with a family friend who helped maintain his relationship with his mom. If not for the GAL finding that placement, the communication we kept among the caregiver, child, therapist, and others, our understanding of what he wanted, and seeing that giving his mom some time was in his best interests, anyone would have picked up that file and said mom's rights should be terminated. But mom kept working and we did too. When she finally became stable, we asked the judge to reunify. Now this boy is at home with his mom, thriving. This is a case where I know we made a difference.

Guardian ad Litem Program Attorney,
11th Judicial Circuit

"The voice of the Guardian ad Litem is the most important voice in the courtroom."

Judge Cindy Lederman,
11th Judicial Circuit

The Guardian ad Litem Program advocates for children's best interests, and that includes their legal interests.

The Program has more than **170 lawyers** who advocate at every court hearing for things like expedited permanency, compliance with statutory timeframes, stability in placements and schools, appropriate healthcare (including mental health treatment), visitation, involvement in court hearings when it's in the child's best interests, and normalcy activities. GAL representation continues through an appeal of a child's case, and our appellate attorneys participated in over 760 cases last year. Consistent appellate advocacy protects individual children and allows the Program to push for case law that prioritizes their best interests statewide.

The GAL Program has won Florida Taxwatch's Productivity Award two years in a row for its innovative collaborations with pro bono attorneys.

In GAL's Defending Best Interests Project, pro bono attorneys partner with GAL staff to write appeals on behalf of children, donating over **4500 hours** for a value of over **\$1.3 million**. In our "FAWL in Love with GAL" initiative, members of the Florida Association of Women Lawyers mentor older youth in foster care using "episodic mentoring" – the notion that mentees can benefit from mentors in as little as 20 minutes a month.



2004 – The Program is transferred out of the state court system. The Statewide GAL Office is established and begins creating uniform standards, training, and best practices throughout the state.



YEARS



Healing

In 2019, the Program created a Trauma Informed Advocacy Workgroup to align GAL representation with scientific principles related to the impact of trauma on the children we represent, their families and our staff. By recognizing those aspects of our representation that help children overcome trauma and build resilience, such as having a safe and stable adult in their lives, we can benefit children to an even greater degree.

Meeting the needs of children statewide:

The Guardian ad Litem Program continually looks for ways the system can be improved to serve the best interests of children.

Because we are representing children in every judicial circuit, the GAL Program has a unique statewide perspective on improving representation and outcomes for children. We collaborate with stakeholders on issues from head trauma and brain injuries in infants to suicide prevention. We share what we learn with other dependency stakeholders and make our trainings available free of charge on our *I Am for the Child Academy*.

Each year we advocate at the Legislature to prioritize the best interests of children. Most recently, we championed bills to increase adoptions by expanding the availability of adoption incentives, and to expedite permanency in a bill titled *“A Year is a Long Time in the Life of a Child Act.”*

2012 – The Florida Legislature authorizes GALs to transport children to facilitate the relationship between children and their GALs and address unmet needs of the children. The Program continues efforts for systemic improvement including bills

to promote normalcy (2013), to eliminate barriers to getting driver licenses (2014), engaging incarcerated parents in case planning (2016), and increasing accountability among stakeholders to expedite permanency (2019).



Partnership

[T]he statewide guardian ad litem is an elegant combination of effectiveness and accountability, of individuals joining hands with government to give a voice to innocent kids who are suffering through no fault of their own.

Florida Trend

Government alone cannot meet the needs of Florida's abused, abandoned, and neglected children.

Individual guardians ad litem help children connect with people and resources in their communities, and the Program also has partnerships throughout Florida supporting our mission and donating critical resources to the children we represent.

We collaborate with counties, local charities, professional associations, and corporations, and our local programs are supported by a

not-for-profit organization in every judicial circuit. These entities provide resources ranging from backpacks, camps, and MRIs for individual children to holding GAL volunteer recognition events, funding positions, and helping recruit foster parents. The Program's direct-support organization, the Florida GAL Foundation has also established statewide partnerships to further the Program's mission.



“I didn't think much of it when my GAL was appointed – I'd become accustomed to fighting my own battles, but they helped me in ways I never expected. To this day, when I think of my GAL, I am reminded that good people still exist and that it's perfectly okay to have those people fight by my side.”



Triumph

In 2019 the Florida GAL Foundation began a scholarship program to recognize outstanding foster care youth continuing their education called the TRIUMPH Award. The three finalists all received a laptop computer to

help further their educational success. Additionally, first place received a \$5,000 college scholarship, second place received a \$3,000 college scholarship and third place received a \$2,000 college scholarship.

2016 – The Guardian ad Litem Program reaches a milestone of having 10,000 volunteers.

2020 – Florida’s Guardian ad Litem Program celebrates its 40th year, with gratitude to the citizens, organizations, and state and local government decision-makers who have supported us and with a continued commitment to the best interests of the abused, abandoned, and neglected children we represent.



Best Interests is our only interest

When children have an advocate of their own, they spend less time in care, get reunified or adopted sooner, and have better educational outcomes. The Guardian ad Litem Program needs the support and commitment of people like you to advocate for them and help build stronger and more resilient children, families and communities throughout Florida.



Alan F. Abramowitz, Executive Director

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