



**FLORIDA
GUARDIAN AD LITEM**

2021 Annual Report



**Florida Statewide
Guardian ad Litem Office**

*Dennis W. Moore
Interim Executive Director*



Thank you for reading this report and for your dedication and concern for the welfare of Florida's most vulnerable children - those who are abused, neglected, and in dependency court. The Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office represents these children and advocates for their best interests, including their legal interests. Guardian ad Litem representation aligns with the child welfare system's goal to serve children's best interests. It is the most developmentally appropriate, efficient, and effective way to promote their safety, health and well-being. Every child in dependency court needs a guardian ad litem.

The Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office focuses exclusively on the child's unique needs in each case. The Office continuously strives to represent more children and enhance our advocacy, partnerships, and outreach for their benefit. This year, we have made significant strides and ended the year representing more than 90% of the children in Florida's child welfare system under 18 years old. We have identified a federal funding stream that will allow us to reach 100%. We continue to grow our public-private partnerships by reaching out to communities, corporations, and not-for-profit partners to expand the Office's support network for children. We have incorporated input from youth in new ways to enhance our advocacy.

I am honored to be associated with people who give so much to the children in our communities. I continue to learn from the children we represent, and I am humbled in our representation of them, giving them a voice and helping them find their own.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dennis W. Moore".

Dennis W. Moore
Interim Executive Director

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, whether civil or criminal. s. 39.822, Fla. Stat.

Mission:

To provide the most vulnerable children in Florida with an adult from their community who will be a consistent, positive presence in the child’s life as part of a multi-disciplinary team that may include trained volunteers, pro bono attorneys, staff attorneys, and child welfare professionals providing the highest quality community advocacy and legal representation to protect each child’s rights and best interests. To provide dependency judges with thorough and accurate information regarding the children under the court’s jurisdiction.

Vision:

To represent every child under the jurisdiction of Florida’s dependency courts.

“I am for the child ... it’s the most sacred oath I know.”

– Judge Jonathan Sjostrum,
2nd Judicial Circuit



When a child is abused, abandoned, or neglected ...



and cannot remain at home in a healthy, safe environment, the child is removed, and a court case begins. **The judge appoints the Guardian ad Litem Office to represent the child and advocate for the child's best interests, including legal interests.**

The Guardian ad Litem is the only one in the case that focuses exclusively on the child.

When the Guardian ad Litem Office is appointed, the child gets:

- **Representation** of the child using the best interests standard.
- **Support and understanding** from a trained volunteer who represents only one or two children at a time.
- Judicial decision-making that is informed by **comprehensive reports** and recommendations throughout the case to make the best possible child-centered decision.
- **Independent advocacy** from a multi-disciplinary team that collects information about the child's family, situation, needs, and wants.
- **Stability**, because a Guardian ad Litem often serves as the safe and stable adult throughout the child's case.
- **Community support** and resources through public-private partnerships.



Florida Compared to the Ten Most Populous States

Data released in 2021 by Child Trends*, the nation's leading research organization focusing exclusively on improving children and youth's lives, shows that Florida leads the way in many categories.

Data and evidence establish that the complete information about the child provided to the court by Florida Guardian ad Litem legal representation and community advocacy positively influences multiple outcomes related to children's well-being and permanency. Florida is the best performer among the ten most populous states in five key outcomes:



- The lowest average length of time in foster care.
- The lowest percentage of children in foster care over five years.
- The lowest percentage of children waiting for adoption who spent five-plus years in foster care.
- The lowest average length of stay of children waiting to be adopted.
- The highest percentage of children adopted from foster care by relatives.



Florida was the second-best performer among the ten most populous states related to the highest percentage of children in foster care placement with relatives and the lowest average stay in foster care before adoption.

*<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>



Impact in 2021:

37,890 children represented

13,878 volunteers

280,380 total volunteer hours

1,421,468 miles driven

Guardian ad Litem Multi-Disciplinary Teams give children a voice and help them use their own.

The Guardian ad Litem Office uses a team approach to represent children using trained volunteers, certified Child Advocate Managers, and Guardian ad Litem Attorneys. **The Office's multidisciplinary team model has been recognized as a best practice** in child representation since 1993 and is recommended by many advocacy organizations, including the Quality Improvement Center on the Representation of Children in the Child Welfare System. The unique perspective and expertise of each multi-disciplinary team member complements the others. All are critical in advocating for the best interests of children.

Guardian ad Litem volunteers bring a community-based, common-sense perspective to cases. They visit children regularly to understand their circumstances, wishes, and needs and explain the process so they can understand. Volunteers are supported and supervised by certified Child Advocate Managers who help them navigate the complex dependency system. In addition, Guardian ad Litem Attorneys provide essential legal counsel, attend hearings and depositions, negotiate outside the courtroom, and take on appeals.







Guardian ad Litem is legal representation.

Giving someone a Guardian ad Litem is the traditional way to represent people who cannot represent themselves. Children cannot legally hire attorneys on their own, so a guardian ad litem or next friend represents them and acts

in their best interests. In Florida, judges appoint the Guardian ad Litem Office as an entity, so there is always an attorney in court with the child, someone who can counsel them, explain the process, and attend out-of-court proceedings as needed.



The Office's 200+ attorneys use the best interests legal standard and make sure no child goes to court alone. The best interests standard is aligned with the goals of the dependency court, where the judge stands in the shoes of the parent and has an affirmative obligation to protect the child's best interests.



Guardian ad Litem Attorneys advocate for things like:

- expedited permanency
- compliance with statutory timeframes
- stability in placements and schools
- appropriate healthcare
- mental health treatment
- visitation
- involving children in court hearings when it is in their best interests
- thoughtful transition planning
- normalcy activities

“He would be my voice in the court. He was there to help me and cope and let me know everything was going to be okay.”

– Foster child



Guardian ad litem volunteers are trained child advocates,

but they are so much more to the children they advocate for.

Guardians ad Litem become trusted friends and mentors who can be a link between the community and the child. Volunteers are often the only stable adult in the child's life, a factor that can help abused and neglected children heal from the trauma they have experienced.

“When you come into foster care, from the beginning to whatever the outcome of the case is, it is common to have multiple case managers and placements. I have even met multiple attorneys throughout my case. But I have only had one GAL and one attorney from the GAL program to represent me. My GAL has become family to me. Even though I am now adopted, my GAL still supports me through my healing process, and I see her regularly. No other person involved with my case could've done what my GAL did for me.”

– Foster child



Guardians ad Litem represent children and advocate for their best interests, from the beginning until the end of the child's case:



1

Children who are abused and neglected enter the child welfare system and a dependency case starts.



2

The judge appoints the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Office to represent the children and advocate for their best interests, including their legal interests.



3

The Guardian ad Litem Office assigns a multi-disciplinary team with a trained volunteer, attorney, and certified Child Advocate Manager.



6

Guardians ad Litem advocate for the child until permanency is reached or the case is closed – through appeals if needed. Many GALs establish relationships with children that last a lifetime.




5

The GAL Team provides information to the judge, makes recommendations for the child's best interests, reports the child's wishes, and takes all legal actions necessary in the child's best interests.



4

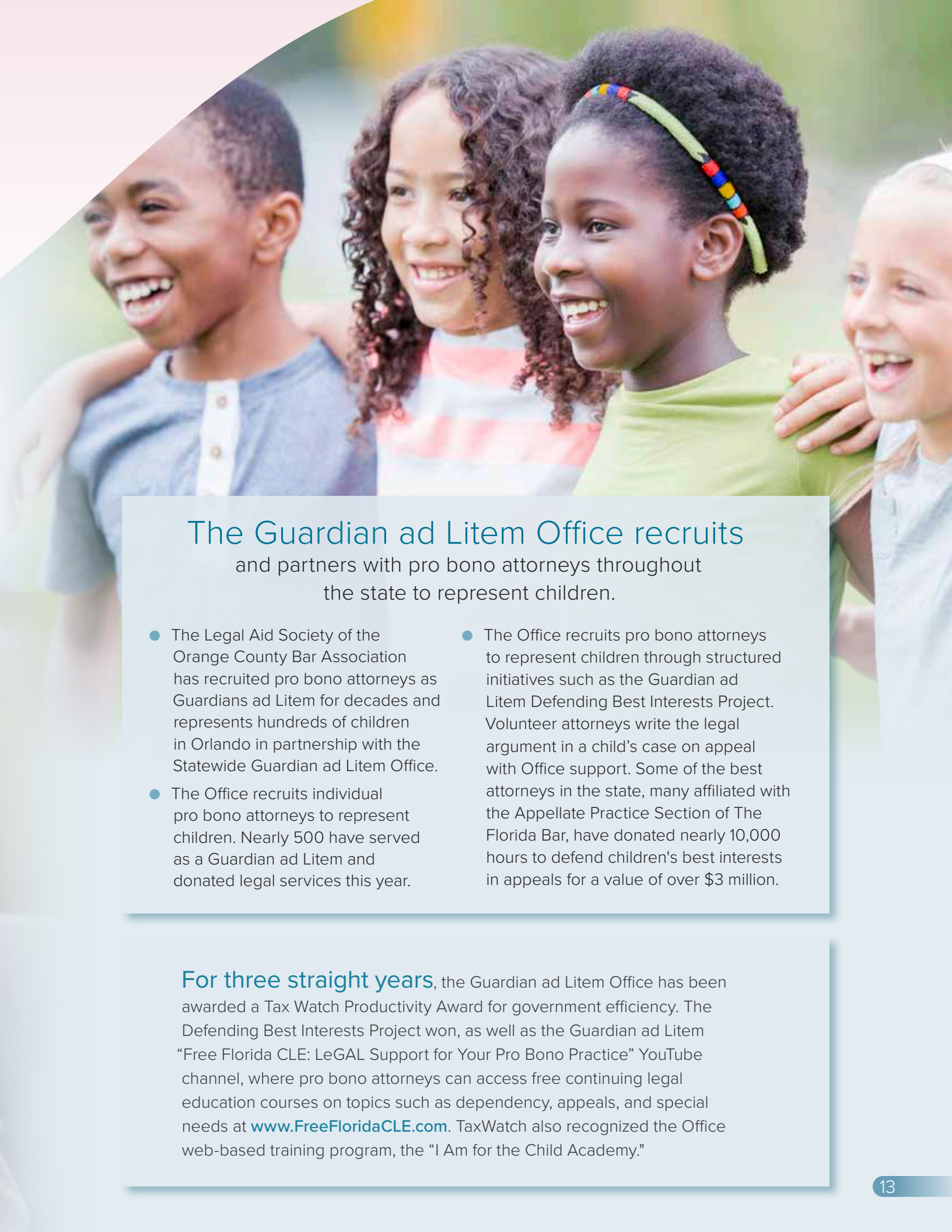
GALs meet with the children regularly, get to know them, and gather information from others, including parents, relatives, teachers, and anyone important to the child.

A young woman with voluminous, curly hair is seated and engaged in a conversation. She is looking towards the left of the frame. In the foreground, the back of another person's head and shoulders is visible; they are wearing a light-colored blazer and holding a pen over a yellow notepad, appearing to be taking notes. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a window with greenery outside. The overall lighting is bright and natural.

“They actually ask you, how are you, what are your plans in life, what do you want.”

– Teenager in foster care

The Guardian ad Litem Office has always been the voice for the child in dependency court. This year, we began an initiative to incorporate young adults who have previously been in the child welfare system to provide input beyond their cases and into decision-making about Office policies and practices. The **Advisory Council**, composed of former foster youth, is a formalized way to enhance the Office’s approach to delivering informed, quality representation and advocacy.



The Guardian ad Litem Office recruits and partners with pro bono attorneys throughout the state to represent children.

- The Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association has recruited pro bono attorneys as Guardians ad Litem for decades and represents hundreds of children in Orlando in partnership with the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office.
- The Office recruits individual pro bono attorneys to represent children. Nearly 500 have served as a Guardian ad Litem and donated legal services this year.
- The Office recruits pro bono attorneys to represent children through structured initiatives such as the Guardian ad Litem Defending Best Interests Project. Volunteer attorneys write the legal argument in a child's case on appeal with Office support. Some of the best attorneys in the state, many affiliated with the Appellate Practice Section of The Florida Bar, have donated nearly 10,000 hours to defend children's best interests in appeals for a value of over \$3 million.

For three straight years, the Guardian ad Litem Office has been awarded a Tax Watch Productivity Award for government efficiency. The Defending Best Interests Project won, as well as the Guardian ad Litem "Free Florida CLE: LeGAL Support for Your Pro Bono Practice" YouTube channel, where pro bono attorneys can access free continuing legal education courses on topics such as dependency, appeals, and special needs at www.FreeFloridaCLE.com. TaxWatch also recognized the Office web-based training program, the "I Am for the Child Academy."



Guardian ad Litem connects children with people and resources in their communities.

As an organization, the Office collaborates with courts, counties, local charities, professional associations, corporations and more, to bring awareness to the needs of dependent children to improve the system in furtherance of their best interests.

Children represented by the Guardian ad Litem Office benefit from not-for-profit organizations affiliated with local programs throughout the state. These entities provide resources directly to children, from prom dresses to camp tuition to eyeglasses and

more. They also support circuits by providing funds for training, volunteer recognition, representation of children, and other initiatives.

The Guardian ad Litem Office is aided in its mission by the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation which supports the Office and the children it represents. The Foundation provides targeted support for unfunded needs of children, aids in volunteer recruitment and retention, assists circuit non-profit organizations, and builds public-private partnerships statewide, including:

The Guardian Trust
Florida Blue Foundation
Make It Happen Fund
TRUIST

Sunshine Health
Duke Energy
Gas South
Kappa Alpha Theta

Security National
Mortgage Company
National CASA/GAL
Association for Children

“The 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

Every child needs a Guardian ad Litem.

In 2021, the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office ended the year representing 91% of the children in the child welfare system under 18 years old. Our top priority is to represent 100% of Florida's abused, neglected, and abandoned children and provide proactive, child-centered representation in the courtroom and the community.


Recently, a new funding source was made available through federal Title IV-E funding, which provides an opportunity to represent all children without added state funding. The Guardian ad Litem Office has worked with the Department of Children and Families to maximize the use of this funding, and Statewide Office's FY 2022-23 Legislative Budget Request seeks legislative authority to access and spend these federal dollars.





A man and a child are shown from the chest up, making heart shapes with their hands. The man is in the background, and the child is in the foreground, both smiling. Their hands are positioned to form a heart shape in the center of the frame.


Representing tens of thousands of children every day in courtrooms and communities for over **40 years.**


You can help:


 Become a Guardian ad Litem or volunteer with our local office


 Provide pro bono services for children

 Donate to the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation

 Contribute your professional skills

 Support a non-profit organization supporting Guardian ad Litem and the children we represent locally

 Become a corporate partner or host a special event

 Talk to your elected officials about the importance of best interest advocacy for children



www.guardianadlitem.org

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