

Alan Abramowitz

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MEASURE PROVIDES DUE PROCESS COSTS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

📅 February 1, 2018 📁 Regular News

Measure provides due process costs for special needs children

A bill to have the state pay the due process costs when pro bono attorneys represent children with special needs is continuing to advance in the Florida Legislature.

HB 57, sponsored by Rep. Frank White, R-Pensacola, passed the House Judiciary January 11. Later that day, its companion, **SB 146**, sponsored by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Jacksonville, passed the Senate Appropriations Committee. Both bills are now headed to the floors of the respective chambers.

The bills authorize the Justice Administrative Commission to pay for the expert witnesses, depositions, and other due process costs for attorneys who volunteer to represent children with special needs. The state already picks up those costs when it hires attorneys from a special “registry” to represent those children, but, due to a glitch, forgot to guarantee the expenses for pro bono attorneys taking those cases.

White told the House panel the registry attorneys get \$1,000 plus the due process costs when they get a case, and this bill simply provides that the pro bono attorneys will also have those costs covered.

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office, said some attorneys who wanted to take cases pro bono wound up signing up for the registry because of concerns they would have to pay the expenses.

“This is a great bill for us,” he said at the House committee meeting. “I think it’s going to increase the amount of pro bono attorneys who come forward.”

HB 57 passed the Judiciary Committee 18-0, while SB 146 passed the Appropriations Committee 17-0.

GAL PROGRAM CLAIMS U.S. SUPREME COURT VICTORY

📅 February 1, 2018 👤 Jim Ash ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

GAL program claims U.S. Supreme Court victory

Senior Editor

Administrators with Florida's Statewide Guardian ad Litem program are declaring victory after the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear a last-minute appeal from the biological father of a toddler born addicted to cocaine.

The high court's refusal to review the Fourth District Court of Appeal's ruling in *M.L. v. the Department of Children and Families* cleared the way for the boy to be adopted by the St. Lucie foster parents he had come to regard as his family.

Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz praises the justices for "putting the needs of the child first."

"The child's parents had basically abandoned him," Abramowitz said. "But he was in a loving, stable foster home, and it was in his best interest to have a forever family."

Victories are rare in a social services system responsible for 25,000 children in "out-of-home care" while it struggles to keep pace with a deadly opioid crisis. A new study by the Florida Coalition of Children found that 60 percent of child removals last year were due to substance abuse, a four-fold increase.

And no victory is total, or clear cut, at least according to Florida Rural Legal Services attorney Andrea White, who represented M.L., the "purported biological" father.

M.L. attended the birth and is listed on the birth certificate, but because the mother was married to someone else at the time — an estranged husband who had been out of the picture for six years — M.L.'s legal standing was practically nonexistent, White said.

'I would say a parent's ability to assert his or her right has a shelf life when an abused child is awaiting permanency.'

"The husband was the legal father because they were married. Period. End of story," White said. "That's Florida law and it's really brutal on that point."

The state removed the six-day-old infant from the mother after doctors saw signs of cocaine withdrawal. It was only after the state had placed the child in foster care, and was attempting to terminate the mother's parental rights to facilitate an adoption, that M.L. tried to intervene.

A trial judge refused to allow it, saying M.L. was at the mercy of the estranged husband. But the Fourth DCA disagreed, at least on that point.

"While a biological father who is a stranger to an existing marriage into which a child is born has extremely limited rights, his ability to establish his paternity is not left entirely to the husband's 'whim,'" the judges wrote.

Instead, the three-judge panel ruled against M.L. because he waited too long.

Even though M.L. had joined the Florida Putative Father's Registry, and obtained an affidavit from the estranged husband, the Fourth DCA noted that he had failed, after 18 months, to get a DNA test.

"The Florida Legislature has stated that 'time is of the essence' in these cases, and at the time of the prospective biological father's motion to intervene, the child had spent his entire life in the dependency system," the judges wrote.

The U.S. Supreme Court refused to review the Fourth DCA's ruling.

White says the mother kept M.L. mostly in the dark, and that he believed she would reunite with the infant. He didn't know about the adoption until after he was referred to legal aid and obtained counsel, White said.

"You know, our clients here are not always the most sophisticated," White said. "They don't understand the law, they don't understand legal proceedings. This was his first child... He kept asking the caseworkers to help him."

White says she's happy the child found a loving home, but the case has devastated her client and left her frustrated.

"If he had had more money and acted more swiftly, he would have his child right now — or at least have the chance to have him," White said. "Our job shouldn't be to determine who the shiniest parent is, who has the better house, who has the nicer car."

Abramowitz said the real tragedy would have been to tear the child from the only family he had ever known.

"I would say a parent's ability to assert his or her right has a shelf life when an abused child is awaiting permanency."

FAWL LOBBY DAYS

📅 February 15, 2018 📁 Regular News



THE FLORIDA ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN LAWYERS converged on Tallahassee in late January for its annual Lobby Days. The three-day event is designed to engage the membership in the advocacy of issues important to women lawyers. There was training on the legislative process, advocacy skills, and the issues FAWL supports. Members also engaged with state leaders on issues and networked with other members from across the state. Pictured above, Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program, presented a program, “Children’s Legal Rights: Everything You Need to Know About the GAL of Florida.” Attendees also heard a program, “Why Legislation May Help the Gender Pay Gap: Laying the Groundwork for Salary History Ban,” featuring Linda Bond Edwards. Former House Speaker Dean Cannon presented “Advocacy at the Capitol 101.” Attendees also held a joint luncheon with the Tallahassee Women Lawyers at the Florida State University College of Law that featured a panel discussion on the federal JNC process, which was moderated by Edwards and included panelists Len

Collins, conference chair of Northern District JNC, Linda L. Shelley, a member of Northern District JNC, Judge Martin A. Fitzpatrick, and Gwen Adkins. FAWL members also met with Justice Peggy Quince at the Supreme Court.

GALS HONOR APPELATE PRACTICE SECTION

June 1, 2018 Regular News



THE STATEWIDE GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM created the “Defending Best Interests” program last year hoping a few dozen appellate lawyers would help abused and neglected kids. Florida Bar **Appellate Practice Section** lawyers blew the doors off all expectations, tackling 60 briefs, and earning **GAL’s** highest honor, “I Am For the Child Award.” It was presented May 4 at a GAL disabilities conference in Orlando. From the left are Neiko Shea, vice president of Child Welfare and Healthy Kids at Sunshine Health; GAL Foundation board member and Appellate Practice Section Pro Bono Committee Chair Joe Eagleton of Brannock & Humphries; GAL appellate lawyer Thomasina Moore; and GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz.

EXPERTS DIVIDED OVER CHILD, PARENT REPRESENTATION

📅 June 15, 2018 👤 Jim Ash ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Experts divided over child, parent representation

Senior Editor

While it was too early to take formal action at its May meeting in Key West, the Board of Governors heard advocates defend widely divergent majority and minority reports from the Special Committee on Child and Parent Representation.

"I think you can see that they both come from a good place," said Bar President Michael Higer. "I know that they will continue to talk, they will continue to work within our committee system... and that ultimately we will be on one page together."

Higer formed the 29-member panel last year at the urging of former presidents who are determined to continue the mission of the 1999 Florida Bar Commission on the Legal Needs of Children.

The special committee is chaired by former Florida Attorney General Bob Butterworth, with former Bar presidents Edith Osman, Jesse Diner, and Miles McGrane serving as vice chairs. The panel includes influential lawmakers, the secretary of the Department of Children and Families, judges, children's advocates, academics, and others.

Higer and President-elect Michelle Suskauer charged the special committee with addressing "the concurrent need for high-quality legal representation for children and parents in dependency proceedings."

At an inaugural meeting last October, Suskauer asked the special committee to "draft legislation that will make Florida's provision of counsel an exemplar to the nation," and to "propose specific actions that The Florida Bar can undertake to improve the quality of

The panel is tasked with proposing specific actions that The Florida Bar can undertake to improve the quality of representation for children and parents.

representation for children and parents.”

Late last month, the special committee issued a majority report that calls for sweeping changes, including the creation of an independent “Statewide Office of Dependency Representation” (SODR) that would oversee a “Division of Parent’s Attorneys” and a “Division of Children’s Attorneys.”

To bolster SODR’s independence, the proposed legislation would create a 13-member Dependency Representation Commission with members appointed by the governor, Supreme Court chief justice, Florida Bar president, and others.

Among the commission’s duties would be vetting nominees for the SODR executive director and setting criteria for the “training, experience, and education necessary for appointment as counsel for children and parents in dependency proceedings.”

If approved by the Legislature, the SODR legislation would create a structure similar, but not identical, to one that was recommended by the 1999 commission. Commissioners called for the creation of a “Statewide Office of Children’s Advocate” that would oversee guardians ad litem and legal counsel for children.

The proposed SODR legislation sets a goal of finding an attorney for every child in the dependency system in Florida by 2021.

“The sad part is, as much as a good job as we’re doing, children in the foster care system in the custody of the state of Florida have problems,” said Howard Talenfeld, a special committee member from Plantation who presented the majority report. “Some never get out of state custody, they graduate to the streets, many, unfortunately, end up sleeping in homeless shelters. They are vagabonds, they move from apartment to apartment.”

The majority based its recommendations on state agency figures — ones the minority report disputes — that show 27,000 of the 30,000 children in Florida’s dependency system don’t have legal representation.

According to the majority report, the representation gap exists despite a 2014 law that requires legal representation for children in the system who face the biggest challenges — those who reside in a skilled nursing facility or are being considered for placement in one; those who have been prescribed psychotropic medication but refuse to take it; those with developmental disabilities; those in residential treatment centers or who are being considered for one, and human trafficking victims.

According to the majority report, the lack of representation proves that Florida's reliance on a network of attorney registries, funded by the Judicial Administration Commission and overseen by chief circuit judges, lacks oversight.

"In addition, there are no established uniform criteria (other than ABA recommended practice guidelines that have not been approved by The Florida Bar), and no one has the responsibility or can be held accountable for ascertaining whether attorneys are providing even minimally competent representation, let alone high-quality representation," the report states.

But a minority group, led by Statewide Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz, disputes the majority report's most basic assumptions, including the need to assign an attorney to every child in dependency.

"The fact is, all children are under the disability of non-age, which has been recognized in both the Florida Constitution and in Florida statutes," the minority report states. "And most children in the dependency system simply lack the capacity to understand the proceedings or assist counsel because they are under the age of 6."

Abramowitz echoed the point when he presented the minority report to the board.

"Most children who come into care are under 1 year old, that's the largest group that comes in," Abramowitz said. "The next largest is 1 to 2, the next is 2 to 3. Most of the kids are under 7. These kids cannot direct their own representation, and we already have an attorney on their case."

The minority report contends that a similar push for a constitutional amendment requiring legal representation for children in dependency failed because the estimated cost was between \$50 million and \$100 million.

Abramowitz said the current system, which relies on three-member teams of guardians ad litem, case managers and registry, pro bono or other attorneys, could always be improved.

But it works, Abramowitz said.

"The guardian ad litem program has 170 attorneys, plus hundreds of pro bono attorneys, and we all agree we need proactive, well-trained attorneys fighting for them," Abramowitz told. "The minority report believes that court-managed registries are a valuable tool."

GAL PROGRAM HONORED FOR BOOSTING CERTIFICATION

📅 July 1, 2018 📁 Regular News



GAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Alan Abramowitz, left, accepted the Excellence in the Promotion of Board Certification Award from BLSE Chair Steven D. Rubin. The GAL Foundation has implemented a program that will pay for the board certification application fee for attorneys in Juvenile Law who will work with the GAL Program, the Department of Children and Families, or the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, and for the attorneys who accept appointments to represent dependent children with special needs. "We have amazing attorneys fighting for kids, and we encourage them and all attorneys in juvenile court to strive for excellence," Abramowitz said. "Certification is the path that gets us there."

GAL program honored for boosting certification

The Florida Bar's Board of Legal Specialization & Education recognized the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program at the Annual Convention for promoting board certification in juvenile law among attorneys who represent abused and neglected children and their families within the state dependency system.

To encourage its own and other attorneys to pursue the lengthy, demanding certification process, the GAL Program has used incentives since last year, when the Bar first established the category of "Board Certification in Juvenile Law." At that time, the GAL Foundation agreed to pay the \$250 application exam fee for two attorneys each from the GAL Program, the Florida Department of Children and Families, and the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, which represents parents in dependency court.

Additionally, the GAL Program began giving its attorneys time off to prepare their applications for certification, as well as a salary increase once they achieved it.

"We also offer pro bono opportunities, because they help other attorneys get certified," GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said.

"We value the hard work, professionalism, and dedication to excellence that are necessary to attain board certification," Steve Rubin of Boca Raton, who chairs the BLSE, wrote to Abramowitz in notifying him of the award. "It is an honor to be further singled out as a leader among those Florida Bar members who are known as experts and specialists."

Sen. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples and herself board certified in real estate law, agreed.

"Expanding the number of attorneys certified in juvenile law will help the vulnerable children we are charged with protecting," she said.

In 2017, 95 Florida attorneys achieved their certification in juvenile law; 10 percent of them work for the Guardian ad Litem Program.

"We have amazing attorneys fighting for kids, and we encourage them and all attorneys in juvenile court to strive for excellence," Abramowitz said. "Certification is the path that gets us there."

The Board of Legal Specialization & Education honored the GAL Program with the 2018 Award for Excellence in the Promotion of Board Certification at The Florida Bar's Annual Convention on June 14 in Orlando.

For more information about becoming a best-interests volunteer or other ways to get involved in changing a child's life, please visit guardianadlitem.org.

GOVERNOR SIGNS BILL HELPING ABUSED AND NEGLECTED KIDS IN COURT

📅 May 15, 2019 📁 Regular News

A bill aimed at helping abused and neglected children in dependency court is now Florida law after unanimously passing both chambers of the Legislature.

Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law **SB 124/HB 115**, which streamlines communication related to abused and neglected children who have multiple court cases, sometimes known as “crossover kids.”



The measure was championed by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Jacksonville, and Rep. Tyler Sirois, R-Merritt Island, and the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program.

“There are more than 1,000 Florida kids who have multiple court cases,” Bean told the Senate Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee. “The core mission of this committee is to help kids, and that’s what this bill does.”

“Some abused and neglected children have cases in dependency and delinquency courts at the same time,” Sirois told the House Judiciary Committee. “Others may need a probate court to appoint a guardian if they have

some kind of incapacity when they turn 18. Often these proceedings can be in different counties or circuits.”

The measure amends the Florida Statutes to allow a guardianship petition for a child in dependency court to be filed either where the child resides or in the county with jurisdiction over the dependency case. For children with dependency and delinquency cases, it requires the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) to notify the court and the parties in a dependency case of certain events, for example if the child is transferred from one DJJ facility to another. It also allows delinquency court judges to receive and consider information provided by the Guardian ad Litem Program and the child’s attorney ad litem if the child is under the jurisdiction of the dependency court.

Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said dependent children are increasingly moved from their home counties or judicial circuits, and in order to protect their best interests, it is critical to get accurate, up-to-date information to the court and agencies serving the child in both locations.

The proposal passed all its committees and both chambers unanimously. Gov. DeSantis signed it on April 26 and it became effective immediately.

GOVERNOR SIGNS 'A YEAR IS A LONG TIME IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD ACT' INTO LAW

📅 Jul 01, 2019 📁 Regular News

Gov. Ron DeSantis recently signed into law the "A Year is a Long Time in the Life of a Child Act," a measure designed to reduce the amount of time abused and neglected children spend in foster care.



A top priority of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, which represents these children in dependency court proceedings, the measure also garnered strong backing from the Legislature. It passed both chambers unanimously after speeches by sponsors Sen. Ben Albritton, R-Bartow, and Rep. Spencer Roach, R-North Ft. Myers, in their respective chambers.

Senate Bill 262 aims to improve communication and accountability in the dependency process so that maltreated children may reach safe, permanent homes within one year.

That could mean reunification with the parents, adoption, or placement with a permanent guardian, such as a relative.

The measure requires parents whose children have been placed in the dependency system to be referred for services within seven days. They must keep their contact information current and notify the court of any barriers to completing their case plans. The Department of Children and Families must anticipate barriers and give parents strategies to overcome them, and also must make sure parents get updated contact information if the caseworker on the child's case changes.

To illustrate the need, Rep. Roach, a GAL volunteer, told House members he'd recently heard of a young boy in his district whose first month in the foster system was spent in a different home each night.

"I'd like you to think about that — a four-year-old child, 30 days, 30 different homes," he said. "Can you imagine the trauma to that little boy? That is unacceptable and no child should have to endure that."

Sen. Albritton, telling his fellow senators they were “in the presence of greatness,” introduced five-year-old Carli Smith, who was in the gallery with the adoptive parents who had fostered her. It had taken three years, Sen. Albritton said, going back and forth between her foster family and her biological parents, before “it was recognized that the parents weren’t going to get to the place where they could provide the kind of home that precious little angel needed.”

“That kind of instability over a long period of time is deeply harmful to children,” said Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz. “That is why this bill was so needed.”

Gov. DeSantis and First Lady Casey DeSantis had previously signaled their concern about child protection, with the governor appointing the First Lady to chair the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet, and both participating in Children’s Week activities during the 2019 legislative session.



Rep. Roach told his fellow lawmakers 24,000 children are languishing in Florida’s foster care system.

“With your vote today,” he said, “I’d like you to indicate to these 24,000 children that they’ve been heard and help is on the way.”

They did. “A Year is a Long Time in the Life of a Child” passed every committee and floor vote unanimously.

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer, visit **GuardianAdLitem.org** or call 1-866-341-1425.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM WINS TAXWATCH PRODUCTIVITY AWARD FOR 'FAWL IN LOVE WITH GAL' PRO BONO PROJECT

📅 Aug 14, 2019 📁 Top Stories

 Speaking Out - GAL

Florida TaxWatch is honoring the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program with its Productivity Award for efficiency in government – for the second year in a row.

This year it's for a partnership between the program — which represents abused and neglected children in dependency court — and the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, in which pro bono attorneys mentor teenage girls who are aging out of foster care. Known as "FAWL in Love with GAL," the initiative kicked off in May with training that is continuing at law schools

statewide.

FAWL member attorneys volunteer one hour monthly to mentor young women who are close to aging out of the child welfare system. The training covers such topics as mentoring and working with adolescents, issues facing youth in foster care, and eliminating bias.

Currently, nearly 1,000 young Florida women face aging out of foster care without a permanent home.

"The opportunity to be positive role models for young women is perfect for our members," said FAWL President Kyleen Hinkle. "They are high achievers who can help young women follow their dreams."

Through meetings or visits to the mentor's office, the foster youth are 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. The youth benefit from these relationships as studies show youth with mentors achieve higher educational, social and financial success.

Last year, the GAL program won a Productivity Award for “Defending Best Interests,” which saved taxpayers \$650,000 by recruiting pro bono appellate attorneys to write briefs in termination of parental rights cases.

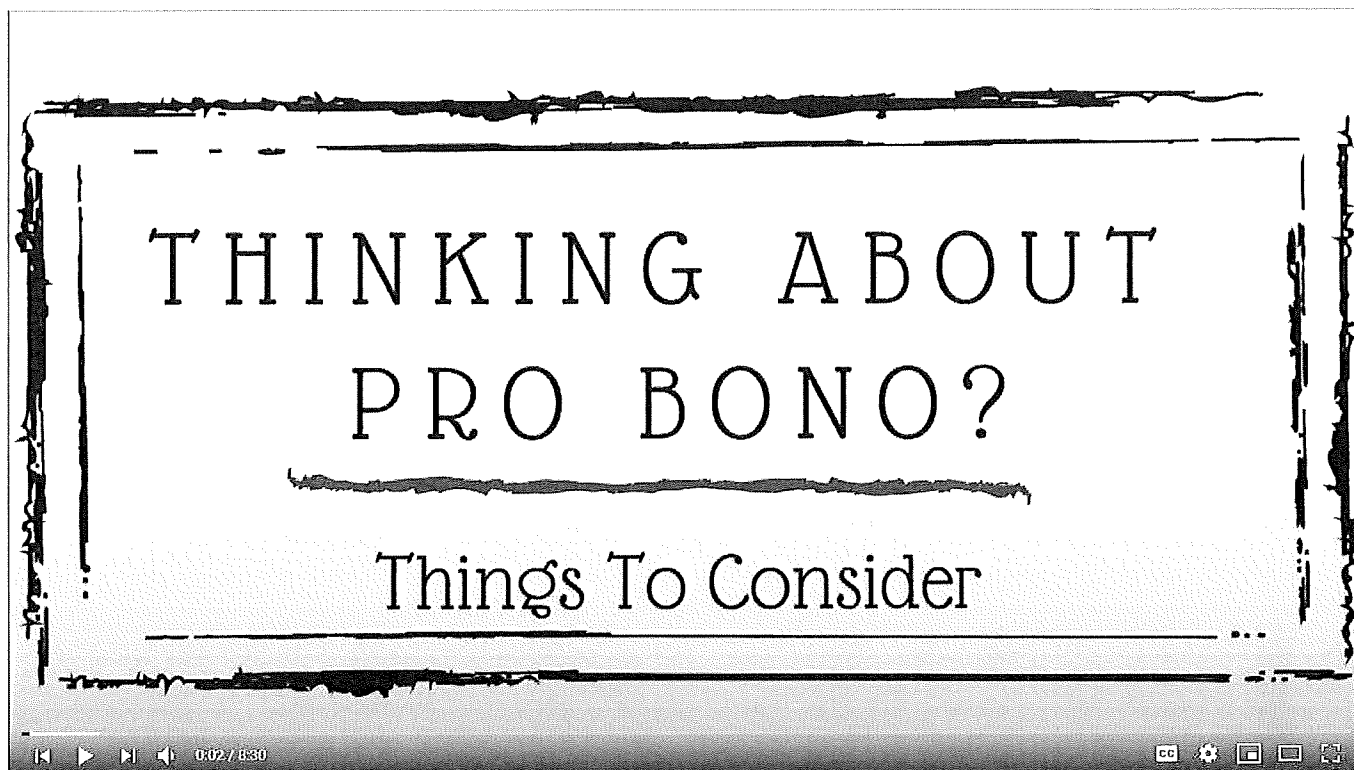
“The Guardian ad Litem Program has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to saving the taxpayers money and serving the public good through pro bono initiatives,” TaxWatch CEO Dominic Calabro said.

“We believe in the power of volunteerism,” agreed GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz. “We try to create opportunities for people to use their strengths to help children.”

Upcoming “FAWL in Love with GAL” trainings will be held in Miami on September 13, in Jacksonville on September 27, and in Tallahassee on October 4. For more information, contact Thomasina Moore at Thomasina.Moore@gal.fl.gov or 850-445-3497. To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to volunteer, visit **GuardianAdLitem.org** or call 1-866-341-1425.

GAL'S NEW YOUTUBE CHANNEL HAS FREE CLE, ENCOURAGES PRO BONO

Jun 29, 2020 By Gary Blankenship Senior Editor News in Photos



Partnering with the Appellate Practice Section, the Young Lawyers Division, and the Florida Association for Women Lawyers among others, Florida's Guardian ad Litem program has launched a YouTube channel offering free CLE to encourage lawyers to do pro bono work.

Thomasina Moore, director of Appeals and Pro Bono Initiatives for the GAL program, said the strategy is simple: providing more free CLE will encourage more attorneys to take pro bono cases. It's called Free Florida CLE: LeGAL Support for Your Pro Bono Practice.



"We want to create a one-stop shop for free CLE education for Florida lawyers," she said. "Anyone who wants to can look at it and get the credit. They do not have to take a [pro bono or guardian ad litem] case."

"I've found if you build it, they will come," Moore added of her belief that providing the instructional support will boost the number of volunteer attorneys.

The videos collectively have generated several hundred views in less than three weeks, with little publicity.

Another goal is to provide CLE in digestible bites. Rather than take one course that may last six hours, lawyers can tackle the subject in the shorter videos as their time allows — and get credit as they go along.

"All of the courses are either CLE-certified or pending certification," Moore said.

She has worked with other legal groups in preparing the videos. The Appellate Practice Section has collaborated on nine videos, from preparing the record for appeal to doing oral arguments to appellate motions practice.

FAWL has helped with six videos aimed at attorneys who work with teens in foster care. The topics range from an overview of dependency court to mentoring.

Moore said the YLD is contributing videos based on its stigma-free campaign.

Videos on the Free Florida CLE channel are organized by subject. At the moment, those topics include: Appeals for the Pro Bono Practitioner; FAWL in Love with GAL: Forging Their Future on Helping Foster Kids; Special Needs Advocacy; Trial Skills; and Mental Health Education. New subject areas on domestic violence and the YLD's stigma free campaign are in the works, Moore said.

The channel has about two dozen videos covering the various topics, and Moore hopes that will increase to 28 to 30 by July. There are also introductory videos on lawyers explaining why they find satisfaction doing pro bono work.

A wide variety of lawyers and judges have appeared in the instructional videos, she said, including Fifth District Court of Appeal Judges Meredith Sasso, Dan Traver, and Jamie Grosshans; Second DCA Judge Morris Silberman; and Sarah Lahlou-Amine and Nicholas Shannin, respectively the past and current chairs of the Appellate Practice Section.

The first videos went up on June 5, and Moore said the idea started with instruction from GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz to set up an online training area with free instruction.

“At the Guardian ad Litem program, we want volunteers, we love the volunteers we work with, but if we can get more pro bono interest generated, that’s also important,” Moore said. “It’s really our channel but not just to promote Guardian ad Litem, it’s really to get an interest in the subjects out there.”

The site can be found by searching “Free Florida CLE” on YouTube or a search engine, typing **freefloridacle.com** in a search engine, which will default directly to the channel, or **clicking here**.

ABA HONORS GUARDIAN AD LITEM'S MARTIN AS A 'REUNIFICATION HERO'

📅 Jul 07, 2020 📁 Regular News



June was National Reunification Month, stressing the importance of helping vulnerable families stay together, and the ABA honored the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program's Calvin Martin as a "Reunification Hero" — one of 11 nationally.

Martin is the director of Program Advocacy and Inclusion for Guardian ad Litem's Statewide Office, which represents abused, abandoned, and neglected children in dependency court. The ABA recognizes Reunification Month as an annual reminder that many children can ultimately be reunited with their parents, given the right services and supports—which the GAL Program works to achieve.

"I want the child welfare system to look at reunification through the eyes of the child, as the ultimate goal for the system," Martin says. "By creating a platform for the parent to be successful, the best interests of the child will be met."

In announcing this year's Reunification Heroes, the ABA noted that it takes "compassion and perseverance to keep families together." Martin does this, in part, by providing training for case managers and child advocates about implicit bias within the child welfare system. He guides staff and volunteers to address their own biases when making decisions about removing children from their homes and reuniting them with their families. He also works to develop "a culture of encouragement" that alleviates barriers to reunification.

"By focusing on education and poverty, we can help parents succeed and ultimately reduce the number of kids in our care," Martin says. "Many families can be safely reunited thanks to mental-health or substance-abuse treatment, parenting classes, or batterer's intervention programs."

Martin also serves on the Governor's Florida Faith-Based and Community-Based Advisory Council, which provides "annual recommendations to the governor and Legislature that will encourage the government and the faith-based community to work

together to improve social services for Floridians." Zackary Gibson, the state's chief child advocate and director of the Office of Adoption and Child Protection, says the council gives Martin more scope for his views on inclusion.

"We need a collective impact approach, where communities and government come together, and Calvin brings that," Gibson says.

Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz says Martin's recognition reflects on the entire program.

"Reunification is a process that allows a family to come back together and rebuild over time, and we are committed to keeping families together when it can be done safely," Abramowitz said. "Calvin has a real heart for service, and I am glad to see his efforts recognized."

ABRAMOWITZ RE-APPOINTED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE STATEWIDE GUARDIAN AD LITEM OFFICE

📅 Jul 29, 2020 📁 Top Stories



Gov. Ron DeSantis has reappointed Alan Abramowitz as executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office for another three-year term.

The Guardian ad Litem Program represents abused, abandoned, and neglected children in Florida's dependency system, and Abramowitz has been executive director since 2010.

In announcing the re-appointment, DeSantis wrote to Abramowitz, "Your appointment is evidence of my utmost confidence in your ability to serve with excellence and distinction."

Abramowitz said he was honored to serve the governor and the children of Florida.

"I am inspired by the children we serve, the volunteers who give those children a voice, and the hard-working staff who change their lives for the better," he said. "I want to thank the governor and Legislature for their unwavering support, which has given our volunteers the tools to advocate more effectively for children's safety, permanency and well-being."

Sen. Ben Albritton, R-Bartow, a long-time supporter of the Guardian ad Litem Program, said, "Alan not only has a real passion to help improve the lives of children in our state, he actually puts that passion to work. He talks the talk and walks the walk. He's a deeply valued friend of mine, and we couldn't be more excited that our governor reappointed him."

Abramowitz, who served in the Florida National Guard and the U.S. Army, is board certified in juvenile law. He also previously served in the Peace Corps as a volunteer.

Abramowitz received his bachelor's degree from Kansas State University, his master's degree from the University of Central Florida, and his law degree from Florida State University.

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Foundation, or to become a volunteer, visit www.flgal.org or call 850-922-7213.

ABRAMOWITZ WINS NATIONAL AWARD FOR LEADERSHIP OF STATE ADVOCACY FOR ABUSED CHILDREN

📅 Oct 27, 2020 📁 Top Stories



Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the State of Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, has been named “State Director of the Year” by the National Court Appointed Special Advocate/Guardian Ad Litem (CASA/GAL) Association for Children.

Abramowitz received the award at the organization’s virtual Awards of Excellence program on October 21.

The Guardian ad Litem Program represents abused and neglected children in court proceedings, using a multi-disciplinary team approach that includes an attorney, a social worker, and a trained volunteer. Abramowitz has led the program for more than eight years, during which he has brought more than 10,000 Floridians to advocate for children and created public-private partnerships statewide for the benefit of children. The National CASA/GAL Association, together with state member programs like Florida’s, supports and promotes court-appointed volunteer advocacy so every child who has experienced abuse or neglect can have a safe, permanent home, and the opportunity to thrive.

The organization’s State Director of the Year Award honors a state director who has taken action to establish or develop the state network and has shown commitment to applying the National CASA/GAL mission, vision and strategic framework at a state level.

“Alan and his team have worked diligently with the Florida Legislature, year after year, advancing initiatives to improve the experiences of children and youth in care,” said Florida GAL Foundation President Lori Duarte-Roberts, past chair of the National CASA Board of Directors. “Through their efforts, statewide policy changes have been made to help remove barriers to youth in care obtaining a driver’s license, champion measures for normalcy for children in care, and incorporate principles of trauma-informed care into the program’s representation and culture.”

Florida Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Jacksonville, has worked with Abramowitz for years on many of his legislative efforts.

"This award reflects the tremendous impact he's had on public policy," Bean said.

Abramowitz is not only the executive director, but represents children as a guardian ad litem himself.

"The children inspire me, and they inspire all the staff and volunteers," he said. "I have personally seen how one caring person can make a difference in a child's life, and I want every child to have a guardian ad litem in his or her corner."

Abramowitz expressed his gratitude to all those who work for the program, the non-profit organizations that support the mission, and the tens of thousands of volunteers who have represented so many children over the years. He also thanked the Legislature, "for giving us the tools so that volunteers and staff can advocate appropriately for children in foster care," and Gov. Ron DeSantis and First Lady Casey DeSantis for their work on behalf of vulnerable children, citing the "Hope for Healing" initiative.

In celebration of this recognition, a \$20,000 grant award will be provided to the State of Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation for program-wide professional development for the benefit of all staff and volunteers of the Guardian ad Litem Program.

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM WINS AWARDS, PUSHES NEW TRAINING EFFORTS

📅 Dec 04, 2020 👤 By Gary Blankenship ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Top Stories



The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program has received two awards from Florida TaxWatch as it continues to expand recruiting and training for volunteer lawyers for its programs and other pro bono efforts.

TaxWatch has given Productivity Awards to GAL's Free Florida CLE: LeGAL Support for Your Pro Bono Practice and for the new I Am for the Child Academy, a web-based training program for attorney and non-attorney GAL volunteers. It's the third year in a row that the office has received TaxWatch awards.

The **training resources** are timely, GAL Office Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said, as despite — or perhaps because of — the coronavirus pandemic there's been a surge in lawyer and nonlawyer volunteers this year.

"Even through we had a pandemic going on, we've added 1,700 volunteers," Abramowitz said. "By the end of the year, this year of the pandemic — we're still going through the process of training, getting certified, and representing and advocating — it will be 2,000 volunteers. That's pretty impressive."

One of the training resources for the new lawyer volunteers is Free Florida CLE, a YouTube channel launched by the office earlier this year (www.freefloridacle.com). Thomasina Moore, the GAL office's director of Appeals and Pro Bono Initiatives, said Abramowitz set the goal of getting 1,500 views on the channel's training videos in its first year.

The program, which began at the start of summer, has more than 5,000 views, and has 39 posted videos, with many more in the works.

Moore said the Appellate Practice Section, the Young Lawyers Division, and the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, among others, worked with the program to develop playlists of videos on specific topics. The videos carry CLE credit and lawyers can watch as many or as few videos on each playlist as they feel they need. ▲

Topics covered include Appellate Practice for the Pro Bono Practitioner, FAWL in Love with GAL: Forging Their Future (on mentoring and otherwise helping teens and youngsters), Special Needs Advocacy, Trial Skills, Mental Health Education, and Domestic Relations Advocacy. There are also introductory videos and ones that answer commonly asked questions in implicit bias, expert testimony, and judicial notice.

New projects include the “Winning Your Appeal at Trial” series, with the assistance of the Appellate Practice Section.

“It’s going to be a five-hour training. It’s going to cover things that you need to do to preserve your record on appeal, when are motions for rehearing needed, what constitutional arguments need to be made at trial in order to preserve the record for appeal,” Moore said. Again, the topics will be individual videos so that lawyers can view as many or as few as they need and on their own schedule.

“We’re also working right now with the Florida Defense Lawyers Association. They’re going to do a playlist for us. It’s going to cover a broad spectrum of trial work. We’ve asked for mediation training to be in there,” she continued. “And then also client relations.... We’re really excited about that. They’ve wholeheartedly embraced the concept of doing videos for us.”

Finally, the Haitian Bar Association in Miami, using a YLD grant, is doing training on interacting with the South Florida Haitian community.

“This will be available to any GAL on how to deal with issues that are unique to that community,” Moore said. “It bolsters the community-based concept.”

The program is always looking for suggestions for new topics to include on the channel.

The video training is aimed at more than just GAL volunteers.

Moore said that Abramowitz expressed the philosophy that if the program provided CLE that was generally useful for lawyers, particularly those doing pro bono, then it also would produce more GAL volunteers.

She recounted that an appellate lawyer recently contacted her about finding some needed CLE and after being directed to the FloridaFreeCLE site, the attorney wound up volunteering as a guardian.

“We did want to make it something that is useful for anyone,” Moore said.



That's also the goal of the new I Am for the Child Academy. Abramowitz said it provides **online training** for volunteers who can't get to classroom sessions — something particularly useful in rural areas.

The program is for both attorneys and non-attorneys, is publicly available, and also free. Volunteers can register if they want a certificate after completing the training, but it's not required, Abramowitz said.

"What we find is most of the stuff we train on, we want everyone to know," he said. "Studies show the better trained attorneys you have, the better outcomes you have. Children appear in every court. They may be in criminal court as victims, they could be in delinquency, dependency, family law. You name the court, there's likely to be a child there.

"We really want to emphasize not only how to work with children but all the issues involving children such as dependency, substance abuse, homelessness, mental-health issues. These are issues that attorneys need to know about because their clients have these issues and if they have clients, the clients have children."

The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office, in addition to the training and main GAL program, has other efforts to help lawyers.

The Defending Best Interests Project lines up volunteer attorneys to represent children in appeals. And FAWL in Love with GAL works with the Florida Association for Women Lawyers to connect attorneys with teenage girls who need mentoring.

For more information about the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office or to volunteer, go to <https://guardianadlitem.org/>.

ABRAMOWITZ NAMED CEO OF THE ARC OF FLORIDA

📅 May 05, 2021 📁 Top Stories



Alan Abramowitz

Long-time Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Director Alan Abramowitz has a new gig. Abramowitz has been named chief executive officer of The Arc of Florida, which supports community-based organizations that advocate for and with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"I am committed to ensuring that every person and family we serve has access to information, advocacy, and opportunities to support full participation in the community," Abramowitz said.

"Inclusion, opportunity, and support are the foundation for each person to reach their full potential. I look forward to traveling around the state and listening to and learning from our community partners."

The Florida Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Office represents more than 35,000 children per year and Abramowitz managed a network of more than 10,000 court appointed volunteers who represent children in child welfare cases. Abramowitz has served in this capacity for more than 10 years under Governors DeSantis, Scott, and Crist. Prior to this, he held leadership positions at the Florida Departments of Children and Families and Juvenile Justice. In addition, Abramowitz served as a JAG officer in the Army Reserves and the National Guard, and was a Peace Corp volunteer.

"Alan is an excellent choice to be the new CEO of The Arc of Florida," said Sen. Aaron Bean, president pro tempore of the Florida Senate and chair of the Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee. "He has the respect of people throughout government, including the Legislature. He also has the leadership skills and experience to lead The Arc in its mission. Most important is that he has the heart for the critical advocacy and service the organization provides for vulnerable Floridians."

Mark A. Swain, board chair of The Arc of Florida and long-time advocate for people with disabilities said, "We are very fortunate to have someone with Alan's experience, skills, leadership qualities, passion, and commitment to excellence as our new CEO. He has the full support and confidence of The Arc's board as well as our many community

stakeholders. We look forward to working with him as we face unprecedented challenges and seek new opportunities to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

Abramowitz will begin in his new position on June 1.

The Arc of Florida for almost 70 years has been Florida's preeminent grass roots advocacy organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. With 28 chapters across the state and private partners that are committed to the same mission, The Arc of Florida advocates to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy full inclusion in their communities and access to supports and services that make community living possible. In addition to its advocacy work, the organization manages a network of more than 300 dental providers who have made access to dental care possible for thousands of Floridians who would otherwise go unserved.