

Alan Abramowitz

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GOV. SCOTT SUPPORTS GAL BUDGET

📅 February 15, 2015 📁 Regular News

Gov. Scott supports GAL budget

Gov. Rick Scott's proposed budget recommends an increase of \$4.3 million and 77.5 new positions for the Guardian ad Litem Program.

"That would enable us to reach our goal of 100 percent representation," said GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz. "This is the fifth year that the governor has supported our program's expansion strategy to reach all dependent children. Whenever I have met with the governor, he says great things about the program and the volunteers."

Abramowitz said he plans to submit a second issue requesting \$2.7 million for salary adjustments to accompany the GAL's certification initiative.

"Two independent studies done by Five Points Technology, Inc., highlight the need for salaries that are more consistent with pay in other agencies doing similar work," Abramowitz said. "The salary adjustments would be targeted primarily at 'child advocate managers' and 'best interest attorneys.'"

GALS SEEK PAY EQUITY

📅 March 15, 2015 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

GALs seek pay equity

'TREAT US THE SAME AS OTHER ATTORNEYS WHO WORK FOR THE STATE'

Senior Editor

Attorneys at the Guardian ad Litem Program are so passionate about their work that many have taken pay cuts to give voice to abused and neglected children in dependency court. Their salaries are the lowest attorney salaries in state government and they pay more for health insurance than other state lawyers.

Their boss thinks it's high time they were given raises.



Karen Trautman has been a Florida lawyer for 35 years and took an \$8,000 pay cut from Children's Legal Services to be a best interest attorney at the Guardian ad Litem office in Sarasota.

Even with her lengthy experience, she makes \$45,000.

Unlike her other state job that paid almost 100 percent of her health insurance, she now pays \$50 per month. And she notes that a co-worker with a child pays \$180 a month for health insurance.

"I think it sounds terrible for what I do. Just be fair. Treat us the same as other attorneys who work for the state," she said.

Mary Kathleen Clendining supervises 11 attorneys at the GAL Program in Palm Beach County that serves about 1,800 children using more than 500 volunteers. This mother who adopted two foster children, including one with chronic paranoid schizophrenia, took a \$10,000 pay cut from her Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel job representing parents in dependency court to come to the GAL Program, because she "wanted to do more advocating to better the system."

She makes \$60,000.

"Every single one of my lawyers is here because the job really means something to them. We're the only people who are strictly for the children, making less money, and that makes it seem less important. And it's not," Clendining said.

"I have lost some very good attorneys. A young attorney just left, and she said, 'I love my job. I love what I do. But at this point in my life, it would not be financially responsible to stay.' It was sad to see her go, but I couldn't offer her more money to keep her here."

Clendining calls GAL work a "job that feeds your soul," but she knows her staff members also need to feed their families.

"Our attorneys are paid less than anyone else," said Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the statewide GAL Program. "We're not seeking equity. We're just seeking to raise their salaries some to reduce turnover."

Abramowitz is seeking \$2.7 million for salary and benefits increases so he can adjust the minimum starting salaries for operational and legal staff and "retain excellent staff."

To bolster his case at the Legislature, Abramowitz asked for a compensation analysis by Five Points Technology, Inc., to see if pay raises would improve the program that serves some of Florida's most vulnerable children.

Abramowitz is seeking raises recommended by the salary analysis:

The minimum program attorneys' salary of \$41,268 would rise to \$45,000, to bring them up to the salary of Department of Children & Families Children's Legal Services attorneys.

A senior attorney for the GAL makes a \$45,304 minimum salary. He's hoping to boost that by \$6,323 to \$51,627.

The minimum supervising attorney's salary of \$47,569 would jump \$13,341 to \$61,000.

The study also recommended increasing health insurance benefits for GAL attorneys.

Abramowitz stresses that he's committed that all of the GAL attorneys will be required to become board certified in juvenile law, a new area of certification that has been approved by The Florida Bar Board of Governors and is currently pending before the Florida Supreme Court.

Among Five Points' findings:

* "GAL attorneys are the only attorneys who do not receive the benefit of paid insurance, when compared to attorneys in the State Personnel System and those in the Justice Administration System," including assistant public defenders and assistant state attorneys. "The first significant difference when compared to attorneys in the JAS pay plan is the JAS attorneys receive almost 100 percent paid insurance benefits and the GAL attorneys *do not* (the state pays only a portion of insurance costs.)" While average starting salaries for GAL attorneys are similar to state attorneys and public defenders, "it does not account for insurance benefits that range from \$600 to \$1,800 per year for just health insurance (depending on the type of coverage)."

* Turnover in the GAL Program was 30 percent for program attorneys and 25 percent for supervising attorneys in FY 2013-14, higher than that of assistant public defenders and assistant state attorneys.

* "GAL senior attorney and supervising attorney minimum salaries are significantly below the pay of comparable positions in the State Personnel System — 14 percent lower for senior attorneys and 36 percent lower for supervising attorneys. These differences increase dramatically when compared to actual average salaries."

* "Compared to DCF Children's Legal Services attorneys, GAL program attorney current actual average salaries are 8 percent lower than DCF minimums. For senior attorneys, this difference is 11 percent, and for supervising attorneys, the difference is 54 percent."

* A survey of GAL attorneys showed almost half are seeking other jobs because of salary issues. Interviews revealed high student loan payments are a significant concern to many GAL attorneys.

* GAL attorney caseloads are around 150 — exceeding the "no more than 100" cases recommended by the ABA, Center on Children and the Law, and National Counsel for Children. They do not have support staff, such as paralegals, as many other state attorney positions do, making the high caseloads even more difficult to manage.

Although the funding he seeks will not bring GAL salaries to equity with other comparable certified attorney positions in state government, Abramowitz said, "It will help stem turnover rates the program is experiencing."

He notes that Florida TaxWatch conservatively estimates the cost of turnover to be 50 percent of the annual salary of lost positions, and that would calculate to at least a \$2 million cost in lost productivity, training and development, recruitment costs, and institutional knowledge of those who left the GAL Program in FY 2013-14.

As GAL attorney Trautman said: "We work just as hard as other state attorneys, without the benefits. We are a valuable asset to the court system. The judges rely on us."

Clendining, the GAL supervising attorney, said, "We all know from *Law and Order* what the state attorney does and what the public defender does. But the nature of what we do, I don't think people understand.

"People don't want to hear about the atrocities that occur to these children on a daily basis. We are not superfluous. We are essential. And because we use so many volunteers, we are the government agency where you get the most bang for your buck."

REGIS LITTLE BILL ON THE WAY TO THE GOVERNOR

📅 May 15, 2015 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Regis Little bill on the way to the governor

Senior Editor

In honor of Regis Little, an 18-year-old former foster youth with disabilities found stabbed to death in an Orange County parking lot, legislators named a proposed new law “The Regis Little Act to Protect Young Adults With Special Needs.”



CSCS/HB 437, sponsored by Rep. Janet Adkins, R-Fernandina Beach, and **SC/SB496**, sponsored by Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, is on the way to Gov. Rick Scott to sign into law.

From subcommittees to the floor debates on these bills, in both the House and Senate, the votes were unanimous in support. On April 22, on third reading, Sen. Detert adopted the House version and added the law's new name.

The legislation provides a mechanism for identifying guardians and guardian advocates so that probate court judges can appoint them when the dependent child with disabilities is 17, *before* leaving foster care at 18.

The Florida Bar Legal Needs of Children Committee made the Regis Little issue a priority.

“There is strong language to ensure the rights of incapacitated youth in foster care are protected by adhering to existing law that requires use of the least restrictive type of decision-making assistance for these young adults,” said Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, and former chair of the Bar committee.

After locating Regis' sister in another state, and receiving her support in honoring Regis, Abramowitz said, the sponsors decided to name the new law after him.

The name “Regis Little” is sadly familiar to Florida's child advocates and became a call for action for foster youth who age out of the system but don't have the ability to take care of themselves.

As Gerry Glynn, chief legal officer of Community Based Care in Central Florida, detailed during testimony at the Legislature, when Regis Little turned 18, he refused services from the Department of Children and Families, Family Services of Metro Orlando, and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.

He had had enough of state services, after bouncing around nine group homes and mental-health facilities from 2000-08 in his short, tragic life.

When he was only a baby, he was taken from his mother after she was arrested for shoplifting and found to be using drugs. The state placed him with a family friend who molested him. Before he was old enough to go to kindergarten, his mother had died of cancer and his father had disappeared. For a few years, Regis lived with an aunt, until he became too much for her to handle.

As a foster child, he was diagnosed as bi-polar, hyperactive, and with an IQ of 65, he was taking at least five psychotropic medications. Yet again, he was molested in a group home. His education was patchy, with records often taking months to catch up with his new school. As a high school junior, he still could not read or write. There was no stable, consistent person advocating for him.

Even if the governor signs the bill into law, the challenge will be finding guardians for the estimated 90 teens who would qualify, said Glynn, also a former chair of the Bar committee, who helped write a scholarly article: "Confidentiality-based Barriers to Advocacy and Survival: A White Paper for Empowering Foster Youth, In Memory of Regis Little."

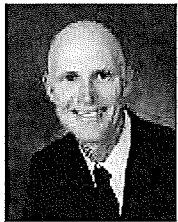
Glynn said guardians would be found by looking first to relatives, then to some committed adult, and finally by trying to get someone to serve as a guardian pro bono.

GOVERNOR SIGNS REGIS LITTLE ACT TO PROTECT CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

📅 July 1, 2015 📁 Regular News

Governor signs Regis Little Act to Protect Children with Special Needs

Gov. Rick Scott signed into law on June 10 the **Regis Little Act** to Protect Children with Special Needs, which ensures vulnerable foster youth have a guardian in place at age 18.



The issue was a priority of The Florida Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee.

In 2008, Regis Little was a child of Florida's foster care system. With an IQ of 65, he was bipolar, hyperactive, and aggressive. He hated being alone and was afraid of the dark. Upon turning 18, Regis walked out of foster care and died alone in an Orlando parking lot after being stabbed over a stolen beer.

"This legislation will help provide Florida's young men and women with disabilities the tools to succeed as they transition into adulthood," Scott said. "I want to thank Rep. Janet Adkins and Sen. Nancy Detert for working to improve the quality of life for families across Florida through their work this legislative session."

Florida Guardian ad Litem Office Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said: "Regis Little, a young man who needed the protection of a guardian but died tragically, was a call for help from all of Florida's dependent children with disabilities. A call for help that was answered after much hard work by many dedicated child welfare advocates."

Vulnerable young adults who leave the foster care system without a guardian are subject to a variety of safety issues, Abramowitz said. Unless a court appoints a guardian, they can simply walk away from their housing, or be exploited by unscrupulous people. Guardians help young adults make crucial life decisions.

"This legislative proposal arose out of the Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee starting in 2011," said Chair Tamara Gray. "The white paper written by Gerry Glynn and Deborah Schroth's paper, 'Review of Guardianship Issues for Children With Disabilities Who Age Out of Foster Care,' paved the road for this legislation.

"The work of the committee has been important, as we have passed this law and previous laws to ensure children with special needs have an attorney. It was nice to be able to honor Regis Little by naming the legislation after him [to help prevent] similarly situated youth from having the challenges that he did that led to his death. Regis's sister, LaQwiesha, told me that the law that the Legislature passed would have saved Regis's life if it existed in 2008. She appreciated having Regis honored in this way."

FLORIDA GAL PROGRAM HONORS AKERMAN FIRM

📅 July 15, 2015 📁 Regular News

Florida GAL program honors Akerman firm

The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program awarded Akerman LLP the 2015 "I Am for the Child Award" at its Second Annual GAL Disabilities Conference in Orlando.

The 2015 GAL Disabilities Conference: Imagining the Future, brought together legal professionals who work with abused, abandoned, and neglected children who also have a disability.

In making the announcement, Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, stated: "In Florida we have accomplished so much, yet there are still approximately 4,500 children in foster care who do not have a GAL standing by their side. The generous support from Akerman is helping to change that grim statistic for the better. For that, we are so grateful."

Each year, the GAL Program gives statewide awards to its staff, volunteers, and community supporters.

"Many of our circuits nominated the local Akerman offices as their Community Advocate and Community Partner of the Year for all the support they have shown and given the GAL Program," Abramowitz said. "Akerman lawyers and staff have not only contributed countless volunteer hours and donations to benefit foster youth in Florida and throughout the U.S., but also have taken on cases, advocating for children both in the courtroom and in the community."

He said over the past year, more than 100 Akerman attorneys and staff in Florida alone have become certified guardians ad litem for dependent youth, and every day additional lawyers and professionals from their firm are signing up to become GALs.

"Giving back is essential to our firm. It is part of our relationships with clients; it shapes the experiences of our people; and it drives us to be a positive force in our communities," said Akerman Chair and CEO Andrew Smulian. "We are committed to community partners who address the core needs of children and advocate for those without a voice."

We are deeply humbled by this recognition of our work and are grateful to the Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program for their continued collaboration on such an important and worthwhile cause."

For more information about the GAL Program, visit www.GuardianadLitem.org.

REALTORS SUPPORT GAL FOUNDATION

📅 October 1, 2015 📁 Regular News

Realtors support GAL Foundation

The Women's Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter collected 851 new suitcases/rolling bags to benefit the children in foster care that are represented by a guardian ad litem volunteer, according to Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program.

Abramowitz said the Women's Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter has 34 chapters statewide and they teamed up with local circuits.

"What started out as a small challenge in January turned into a big impact in August," said Pamela Banks, president of the Women's Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter. "We are truly proud of the outpouring of support from our many members and their generosity. We look forward to a continued partnership with the Guardian Ad Litem Foundation."

"We have so many people who want to make a difference in the lives of children. It is inspirational to see the Women's Council of Realtor's Florida Chapter step up and be there for abused children, to meet their needs by ensuring they don't have to carry their belongings in a trash bag," Abramowitz said.

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program's mission is to advocate in court for the best interests of Florida's children who are abused, abandoned, or neglected.

GALS SUPPORT ADOPTION BILL

📅 December 15, 2015 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

GALs support adoption bill

Senior Editor

Mr. Abramowitz,

I am writing you to inform you of the injustice that is being done with my current foster sons. We have had these two boys since they were 5 months and 20 months old. They have been in our care for over two years with very little parental engagement. TPR [termination of parental rights] is in five days and suddenly parents filed a motion to intervene for a great uncle who finally came around for placement. This is a horrible situation. The uncle knows nothing about them or the older child's very serious medical condition. They have become very bonded with us and our bio children. We feel this uncle will just give the kids back to his nephew. They are throwing out a Hail Mary but will probably win. The GAL, state attorney, and case worker all feel as though the kids should stay with us.

Any advice?

— Kala Hamilton

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Guardian ad Litem Program, received that email on October 21, and he says he hears about these situations all the time. That's why the GAL Program supports a bill in the Legislature to make a change to the statute governing adoption intervention that would fix a clash between Ch. 39 and Ch. 63 of the Florida Statutes.

Foster parents, some traveling for hours to get to Tallahassee, told their own stories to the Senate Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee on November 20. They described scenarios that they believe are injustices harmful to children they have sheltered for months and even years.

After hearing sometimes tearful testimony, the senators, without debate, voted 5-0 to pass **CS SB 590**, by Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice.



As Detert explained, “This bill allows judges to make decisions regarding adoption intervention using the child’s best interest standard, as defined in Ch. 39. Currently, under Ch. 63, an adoption agency may intervene in an open dependency case when a parent consents to terminate their parental rights and allow their child to be adopted by someone else. The adoption agency files a motion with the court to intervene in the case and typically tells the court who the parent would like the child to be placed with.

“This sounds like a good idea. But the current law permits even a parent who has murdered a spouse, committed egregious acts against their children, or who wishes to punish a foster parent that has provided a caring home for their child for a lengthy time, to choose who their child should be placed with — without requiring the court to consider what is in the best interest of the child, as it would for any other dependency case.”

Ninth Circuit Judge Daniel Dawson, who has spent most of his 25 years on the bench in the dependency area, testified that he has seen many of these cases, and so have his fellow dependency judges around the state.

“Virtually all of the judges who are experienced juvenile dependency judges have indicated this has become a serious problem in our courtrooms,” Dawson said.

“Virtually every one of these cases that I have seen, there has been either spite on behalf of the parent wanting to remove the child from either a relative or a foster parent and place the child somewhere else. Many times they don’t care where else the child is placed, as long as it’s somewhere other than where the child has been, anywhere from a year to a year and a half to two years.

“Or, I’ve actually had cases where they tried to have someone try to adopt the child that they knew would return the child to their custody.”

A December 24, 2014, case out of the Fifth District Court of Appeal — *In Re: The Adoption of K.A.G., a Child* — illustrated the conundrum judges face. The 4-year-old child’s father, in jail awaiting trial on charges of killing the child’s mother, chose his mother (the child’s grandmother) to adopt the child. But the Department of Children and Families placed the child with his aunt.

"Father asserted that because his parental rights were still intact, he had a constitutional right to make a permanency determination for the child," according to the opinion. The trial judge held an evidentiary hearing and entered a final judgment dismissing the grandmother's petition. The Fifth DCA said the trial court failed to determine whether the father's consent was valid and erroneously required the child's grandmother to prove by clear and convincing evidence, rather than by a preponderance of the evidence, whether adoption served the child's best interest. The Fifth DCA reversed and remanded the matter for further proceedings. Among several issues addressed, the Fifth DCA agreed that the father's consent to terminate his parental rights was conditioned on his mother (the child's grandmother) adopting the child.

Abramowitz shared that a petition posted by the South Florida Foster and Adoptive Parent Association in support of Sen. Detert's bill received 2,228 signatures within 24 hours, now totaling about 5,000 signatures.

The problem, as described by those who testified, is that an abused, neglected, or abandoned child is placed with foster parents who provide a stable environment so the child can begin to heal, and may want to eventually adopt the child. But, in the 11th hour, sometimes years later, a private adoption agency convinces the biological parent to sign away parental rights and have the child placed with someone the agency or parent chooses. Some testimony suggested the biological parents may receive money to do so.

"Every dependency judge I've talked to likes this bill," Judge Dawson testified. "They scratch their heads to why in the world this even exists at this point. We spend all this time doing what we believe is in the best interest of the child; that's our standard. And then we get this one little anomaly over here, where it is taken out of our hands. They call it 'best interest,' but that's not really the standard. It's whether or not we harm the child if we grant this. . . A lot of judges believe that even moving the child at all is not a good thing for the child. But sometimes it is the lesser of two evils, when you have to move the child for the safety of the child. But that is not what is happening here. The child is obviously in an environment the court believes is safe, or they wouldn't have them there. And now we are coming in and trying to move the child to some other individual, for no other reason than the parents signed the surrender."

As Detert said in closing on her bill: "Our main focus is children. This flaw in our law can be fixed and will smooth out the road for children in the future."

'JUSTICE'S BEST FRIEND'

📅 November 15, 2016 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

'Justice's Best Friend'

GAL WANTS TO EXPAND LAW TO ALLOW DOGS IN DEPENDENCY COURT AND FOR ADULTS WITH MENTAL DISABILITIES

Senior Editor

In Tallahassee, Circuit Judge James Hankinson swore in 13 dogs as officers of the court, and, with tails wagging, their paws were covered in ink to officially "sign" the oath.

In Jacksonville, Judge David Gooding swore in four dogs as canine guardians ad litem, and allowed them in the dependency courtroom to help abused, abandoned, or neglected children testify.

In Tampa, a guardian ad litem volunteer brings Tibet, her yellow Lab-golden retriever mix to court, and he sits at the feet of a girl testifying about her abuse. Tibet has also been with children undergoing traumatic abuse and sexual assault exams.

Using trained therapy dogs in court is not new in Florida. For the past decade, there has been growing acceptance, and therapy dogs are used in court in some circuits, but not in others. There has been a Florida law on the books for five years that allows therapy dogs to go into criminal court to help children who are victims of sexual abuse.

But what is new is an effort spearheaded by Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the **Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program**, to reflect the current practice and to encourage therapy dogs in courts statewide.

"Chief judges and dependency judges realize it's a good thing for kids. It's all about reducing trauma. Anything we can do to let people know this is OK, because in some circuits it's not happening," Abramowitz said. "Why should these kids not have the ability to get through their testimony better?"

The GAL program believes the law should be amended to:

- Include children in abuse, abandonment, and neglect proceedings;



- Identify adults with intellectual disabilities who could use dogs in court;

- Add “facility dogs” to the statute. Facility dogs were originally bred to be highly trained service dogs, such as seeing-eye dogs, but did not work out for that role, perhaps because they were not sturdy enough to hold someone’s weight if their master fell, or they were a little too social.

Now, the proposed legislation to amend F.S. §92.55 is in bill drafting and potential sponsors are being lined up. The original bill in 2011 passed 132 to 0. There is no cost to the state, Abramowitz said, and the law does not mandate the practice, but makes it clear it is permissible.

“I don’t know anyone against this,” Abramowitz said. “The act will be called ‘Justice’s Best Friend.’”

Chuck Mitchell of Tallahassee is helping lobby for the bill. He knows all about using Rikki, his 11-year-old golden retriever mix, to help get the truth out of traumatized witnesses.

A retired commercial building contractor, Mitchell reluctantly adopted Rikki, after she was scooped out of Lake Pontchartrain as an 8-week-old puppy after Hurricane Katrina blew through New Orleans, and the word was spread that many rescued dogs needed homes.

Rikki showed remarkable empathy by being gentle to a neighbor with Parkinson’s disease. Trained to go to hospitals, courthouses, and schools, Rikki has had more than 25,000 interactions in her long therapy career, and she recently retired to become a

"couch potato."

Mitchell has become a driving force behind the expansion of Animal Assisted Therapy nationally. (Learn more by reading *Encounters With Rikki — From Hurricane Katrina Rescue to Exceptional Therapy Dog*, by Julie Strauss Bettinger, who gives 20 percent of royalties to the Tallahassee Memorial Foundation to benefit the hospital's Animal Therapy Program.)

Mitchell tells the poignant story of a 7-year-old girl who had been brutally sexually abused by a day-care worker when she was 4. At first, she was able to tell only a little of what had happened to her mother and in front of a video camera, but then completely shut down. Months and then three years had gone by.

Mitchell and Rikki were called to the courthouse, where they sat on the floor with the little girl, who fed Rikki her treats and stroked her silky golden fur. The prosecutor leaned over and gently asked, "Do you know what happened between you and Mr. ____?" Without looking up, the girl kept petting Rikki and began telling new details. She was able to make a statement, Mitchell said, and law enforcement had enough to arrest the man.

When it came time to give a deposition, the girl had her hand on Rikki's leash and they walked down the courthouse hallway. Mitchell, who tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, actually curled up under the table, holding Rikki's leash and feeding her carrots. Rikki rested her head on the lap of the little girl, who cried into the dog's fur and spilled out her testimony.

The new law does not specify dogs, but says therapy animals. But dogs have won the spotlight in reducing trauma in courthouse settings.

"For any of us who have had a dog or a cat growing up, we know that at the end of a bad day, you put that cat in your lap or lay down on the floor with that dog, you are going to feel better," Mitchell said. "It's because petting a dog, your blood pressure goes down. Your breathing rate goes down. Your cortisol, stress levels drop. Your oxytocin levels go up. There are chemical reasons why touching these great animals is a big deal.

"In this high-tech, low-touch world, this is the ultimate low-tech, high-touch solution to all of our anxieties," Mitchell said. "Any of these great dogs that can do something for people, they are harnessing the power of love."

LAWYERS HONORED FOR ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

📅 December 15, 2016 📁 Regular News

Lawyers honored for advocacy for children with special needs

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program recognized 21 attorneys for their work representing special needs children who have been abused or neglected.

"These attorneys embody hard work, heartfelt advocacy, and commitment to collaboration in representing dependent children with special needs," said 18th Circuit Judge Kelly J. McKibben. "The children are victims of human trafficking, have a serious developmental disability, are on psychotropic medication, or live in nursing homes or residential treatment centers, and these attorneys zealously represent their interests in court every day."

Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, and Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami, sponsored legislation requiring that five categories of dependent special needs children have appointed attorneys to represent their wishes before the court and in matters concerning care and treatment. Gov. Rick Scott signed the bill into law on June 25, 2014. Florida's 20 judicial circuits each have a registry of specially trained attorneys who perform this work. Registry attorneys often work collaboratively with the Guardian ad Litem Program to see that children receive the services they are entitled to and to help them become part of a caring, permanent family before aging out of foster care.

This year, the **GAL Program** recognized one registry attorney from each of Florida's judicial circuits, as well as one appeals attorney and one statewide winner, according to Alan Abramowitz, GAL executive director.

"The success of this effort depends on dedicated child welfare attorneys in every circuit who have joined the Special Needs Registry, and added their voices and their expertise to ensure these children find a safe, permanent home," said Grainne O'Sullivan, director of Children's Legal Services for the Department of Children and Families.

When announcing the award, Abramowitz said, "The Guardian ad Litem Program recognizes the great work attorneys on the Special Needs Registry perform in dependency courts across the state. These attorneys are driven by their passion to make

a difference in the life of a child with special needs. Their impressive and dedicated representation of some of Florida's most vulnerable dependent children is valued by not only the children they represent, but also by their peers who have recognized them for this award."

Robert Latham of Miami-Dade, the state winner of the GAL Program's Excellence in Advocacy Award, said, "I am honored and humbled to be this year's statewide recipient of the Guardian ad Litem Program's Excellence in Advocacy Award, which recognizes contributions to the child welfare system by attorneys for special needs children. I am so grateful to be on the list with many attorneys who I call when I need help. These are really wonderful people who have devoted their lives to helping others, and this award recognizes the enormous value their work contributes to making life better for Florida's families."

2016 GAL Program's Excellence in Advocacy Award Winners include:

- **Robert Latham** – 11th Circuit and statewide winner.
- **Susan Winterberger** — First Circuit.
- **Stephanie Johnson** — Second Circuit.
- **Heidi Kempf** — Third Circuit.
- **Connie Byrd** — Fourth Circuit.
- **Brenda Smith** — Fifth Circuit.
- **Bowdre McAllister** — Sixth Circuit.
- **Carol Kelley** — Seventh Circuit.
- **Nancy Wright** — Eighth Circuit.
- **Barbara Glass** — Ninth Circuit.
- **Deborah Wells** — 10th Circuit.
- **C. Michael Kelly** — 12th Circuit.
- **Scott Horvat** — 13th Circuit.
- **Lawrence Kranert, Jr.,** — 14th Circuit.

- **Penny Martin** — 15th Circuit.
- **Richard F. Joyce** — 16th Circuit.
- **Linda Singer** — 17th Circuit.
- **Pamela Bress** — 18th Circuit.
- **Crystal Marsh** — 19th Circuit.
- **Kathy Bruno** — 20 Circuit.
- **Leonard Helfand** — Appeals.

“Every child in our dependency system is so important,” said Penny Martin, the award winner in the 15th Circuit. “It is especially rewarding to see some of these children, who have endured so many losses and difficulties, do better and achieve greater results because of extra attention to their needs.”

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer Guardian ad Litem visit or call 1-866-341-IGAL.

BILL EXPANDS USE OF DOGS IN JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS

📅 May 1, 2017 📁 Regular News

Bill expands use of dogs in judicial proceedings

As a way to reduce trauma and facilitate testimony, judges would be able to allow children in cases involving abuse and neglect and intellectually disabled persons to have therapy dogs and facility dogs present for court proceedings.

The Legislature passed **HB 151** by Rep. Jason Brodeur, R-Sanford, and Sen. Bill Montford, D-Tallahassee, April 6. The bill is on the way to Gov. Rick Scott.

Rep. Brodeur said it was an easy decision to sponsor the measure after seeing evidence that therapy animals and facility dogs had measureable clinical benefits, such as reducing stress hormones and blood pressure.

"Having the dogs available for kids creates a more trauma-sensitive courtroom, which not only helps people who have experienced traumatic things, but enables victims and witnesses to better recollect facts and recount them to judges. Everybody wins," Brodeur said.

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the **Guardian ad Litem Program**, agreed.

"When we started working on this bill, I immediately said we should call it 'Justice's Best Friend Act,' because if you are a judge, or a GAL, or a victim advocate, you want a child to be able to tell his or her story without feeling intimidated," Abramowitz said. "Therapy dogs and facility dogs help you do that. They help bring out the truth, which brings about justice."

Abramowitz said the legislation was necessary to encourage the expansion of existing therapy dog programs and to specifically authorize the use of facility dogs, which are dogs bred and trained to provide unobtrusive emotional support to children and adults in facility settings.

Sen. Montford also recognized the value of having a dog to comfort victims and witnesses.

"It is an honor to sponsor this legislation," he said. "As a state, we are committed to providing every tool possible to offer comfort and healing for the children in our court system."

Montford's district contains one of the largest therapy dog programs in the country, Tallahassee Memorial Hospital's Animal Therapy Program. Representatives of the TMH Program routinely brought therapy dogs to the legislative committee meetings to demonstrate their positive impact. Chuck Mitchell, an Animal Therapy Program volunteer and manager of the Second Circuit's Courthouse Therapy Dog Program, explained why he believes the therapy dogs were so important: "I feel like the best way to describe it is that we help children find their voices; when things are too sad, or too hard, or too scary to say aloud to an adult, children somehow manage to connect with the dog and tell their story."



Sen. Lauren Book, D-Broward, co-sponsored the bill. Book is CEO of **Lauren's Kids**, an organization whose mission is to prevent sexual abuse through education and awareness, and to help survivors heal with guidance and support.

"Every year in Florida, tens of thousands of children become victims of abuse," she said. "When victims are able to tell their stories on the stand, they can take the first step toward healing into thriving survivors. We've seen how courtroom therapy dogs can be a lifeline for child victims: offering comfort during a really difficult and scary time for kids who have already suffered a great deal. When this good bill becomes law, more children

– and adults with intellectual disabilities – will be able to receive comfort in the courtroom from these special animals, and provide difference-making testimony against their abuser.”

DRIVER'S LICENSE PILOT PROGRAM FOR FOSTER KIDS IS MADE PERMANENT

📅 May 15, 2017 📁 Regular News

Driver's license pilot program for foster kids is made permanent

A pilot program helping youth in the child welfare system get driver's licenses was expanded and became permanent with the passage of SB 60 and HB 217.

Known as the "Keys to Independence Act," the program assists youth with getting a learner's permit or driver's license, helps find driver education courses and insurance, and offers financial assistance.

The program has served more than 1,200 youth, and quadrupled the number of children with licenses, prompting Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina, and Rep. Jennifer Sullivan, R-Eustis, to file legislation to make it permanent and enhance it.

Logyn Robinson, a Bradenton high school senior who lives in a foster care boy's group home said: "It's a relief to know there is help for youth in state care to get their permit or license. Being able to drive, and learning how to do so safely for that matter, is a life-changing experience in itself."

Sen. Bean said the bill was necessary to empower youth to succeed as adults: "We heard so much great testimony from foster youth working on their education, trying to find jobs, starting a life for themselves, often while leaving abusive or neglectful circumstances behind them. As the people responsible for constructing the child welfare system, we should give these youth the tools to lead successful, independent lives as young adults."

In addition to making the pilot permanent, **SB 60** expands eligibility for the program and enables youth whose placements change a grace period to complete the program. Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, was especially pleased that the program could be expanded within its existing resources.

"As GALs, we represent the child's best interest. I thought to myself: What could be better than giving kids in the system some of the things we all want for our own kids — the ability to learn, a bit of a cushion as they get started, and ultimately to be independent," Abramowitz said. "The Keys program does that, and it should be available to as many teens as possible."

To learn more about Keys to Independence, a program administered by Community Based Care of Central Florida, visit www.keystoindependencefl.org.

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM AWARDED \$40,000 YOUTH ADVOCACY GRANT

📅 September 1, 2017 📁 Regular News

Florida Guardian ad Litem awarded \$40,000 youth advocacy grant

The Florida Statewide **Guardian ad Litem Program** has been chosen for a 2017 National CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) Association Youth Advocacy Grant aimed at improving outcomes for the state's abused and neglected children.

This is the second year the GAL program has won the \$40,000 grant from the National CASA Association, which distributes funds from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice, and Delinquency Prevention, for the purpose of increasing the number of maltreated children who are assigned a volunteer guardian ad litem to advocate for their best interests.

Alan Abramowitz, the statewide GAL office's executive director, said the new grant will continue his program's Fostering Futures Training Initiative, which focuses on advocacy and mentoring for older youth by providing them with volunteers specifically trained to serve as the one significant adult relationship they need to help them transition to adulthood.

"This grant will change the course of negative outcomes for older youth in care," Abramowitz said. "It's a perfect fit for our efforts to help dependent teens 'aging out' of care succeed."

"Volunteer Florida congratulates Florida Guardian ad Litem for securing this grant to expand training to the volunteers who advocate for young people in the foster care system," said Chester W. Spellman, Volunteer Florida chief executive officer. "This funding not only increases the number of volunteers statewide, but ensures that volunteers have the unique training they need to mentor youth in foster care and help them become self-advocates as they become older."

Abramowitz said the new grant award was based on the Florida GAL program's success from 2014 to 2016. Of the 179 youth served during that time, he added, 76 percent were promoted to the next grade level, while 96 percent had clean arrest and delinquency

records.

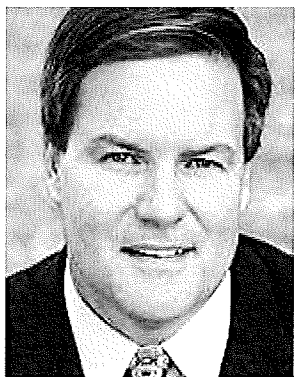
To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer, visit <http://guardianadlitem.org> or call 1-866-341-1GAL.

PUTTING 'PRO BONO MATTERS' INTO ACTION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

📅 September 1, 2017 📁 Regular News

Putting 'Pro Bono Matters' into action for children with special needs

The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program is supporting the "Pro Bono Matters Act of 2018," newly filed legislation by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina Beach, and Rep. Frank White, R-Pensacola.



The measures, **SB 146** and **HB 57**, would help special-needs children in dependency court by giving more support to pro bono attorneys who want to help them.

Under the bill, the Justice Administrative Commission would provide pro bono attorneys due-process funding for costs associated with the representation.

"This bill is simple and makes good sense," said White.

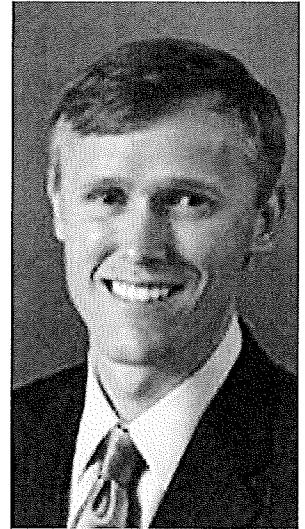
"The state already pays for due-process costs for special-needs children who are represented by state-funded attorneys on a registry. If we can encourage attorneys to take a case pro bono by paying for due-process costs, the state saves at least \$1,000 per case."

As part of its push to find attorneys to represent special-needs children pro bono, the GAL program is also working with The Florida Bar Foundation, which just launched a new website, **www.FloridaProBonoMatters.org**, to match Floridians in need with attorneys who might take their cases on a volunteer basis.

Florida Bar Foundation CEO Bruce Blackwell said both the Foundation and the GAL program will gain by their partnership, with Bean's bill as a catalyst.

"This bill will help the Foundation, through our new website, recruit dedicated attorneys to accept cases to provide holistic representation for children with special needs," Blackwell said. "removing barriers, such as costs associated with handling pro bono cases, volunteer attorneys can focus on providing critical legal services, which will benefit not only the youth, but their entire local community."

"Guardian ad Litem's collaboration with The Florida Bar Foundation's 'Pro Bono Matters' initiative demonstrate some of the best of Florida's child advocates: a focus on the unique needs of each child and the ability of public-private partnerships to meet those needs," Bean said.



GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said the collaboration would help his program locate pro bono attorneys for children within the 15-day window that Florida law permits.

"creating a process to find a pro bono attorney within 15 days, this law will help us find more pro bono attorneys wanting to make a difference in the lives of children," Abramowitz said.

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer visit <http://guardianadlitem.org> or call 1-866-341-1GAL.

GAL FOUNDATION OFFERS CERTIFICATION EXAM FEES

📅 Oct 15, 2017 📁 Regular News

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation will pay exam fees for some Florida attorneys seeking board certification in juvenile law as a means to improve legal representation in proceedings involving abused and neglected children.

The foundation's September 27 announcement follows the first class of Florida attorneys to become board certified in juvenile law, as 94 did in August.

Considered The Florida Bar's highest level of achievement, board certification requires a rigorous evaluation of an attorney's skills, professionalism, ethics, and expertise. Just 7 percent of eligible Bar members are certified in the 26 areas of the law approved for certification by the Florida Supreme Court.

"I believe all stakeholders in dependency court benefit when we increase expertise in juvenile court, and ultimately this will improve outcomes for children," said state Sen. Rob Bradley, R-Fleming Island, who is board certified in city, county, and local government law.



GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said the program has approximately 170 lawyers representing over 25,000 children in dependency proceedings using a team model that includes 10,000 volunteers. Noting that 10 percent of the first class of attorneys certified in juvenile law are employed by the GAL Program, Abramowitz said, "Having a highly skilled lawyer practicing in dependency court is crucial to furthering the best interests of children."

Because certification in juvenile law is relatively new and the process lengthy and demanding, Abramowitz asked the GAL Foundation to create an incentive to encourage attorneys to apply. The Foundation will pay the \$250 application fee for two attorneys each from the GAL Program, the Department of Children and Families, the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, which represents parents in dependency court, and from among attorneys accepting appointments for dependent children with special needs under section 39.01305.

Attorney Steve Rubin of Boca Raton, who chairs the Bar's Board of Legal Specialization and Education, said expanding the number of attorneys certified in juvenile law "will help clients and the courts in choosing quality representation" in dependency courts statewide.

Florida GAL Foundation President Lori Duarte-Roberts said the best interests of abused and abandoned children are furthered when lawyers in their cases are working at the highest level. "The foundation's initiative is important," she said. "It sends the message that excellence in this field is valued, that we appreciate people who dedicate their careers to advocating for abused children and their families, and that we should all be striving to improve because these kids deserve our best."

Learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program and its foundation at www.guardianadlitem.org or www.flgal.org.

BILL WOULD PAY COURT COSTS FOR PRO BONO LAWYERS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS

📅 November 15, 2017 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Bill would pay court costs for pro bono lawyers for special needs kids

Senior Editor

More pro bono attorneys will step up to represent dependent children with special needs if they don't have to reach into their own pockets to pay court costs.

That's the idea behind the Pro Bono Matters Act of 2018, supported by Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office, and Nikki Fried, representing Florida Children's First.

On October 24, Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Jacksonville, presented **SB 146** to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which passed unanimously. The next day, Rep. Frank White, R-Pensacola, presented the companion bill, **HB 57**, to the House Civil Justice & Claims Subcommittee, where it also passed unanimously.

The proposed legislation would require the Justice Administrative Commission to provide a pro bono attorney, who agrees to represent dependent children with certain special needs, access to the same funding for expert witnesses, depositions, and other due-process costs of litigation as an appointed registry attorney.

"Working with the good folks at Guardian ad Litem, this is the hurdle, this is the obstacle, this is the bottleneck in getting attorneys to volunteer," Bean said.

In the long run, Bean said, the state will save money by paying the court costs, because more pro bono attorneys will volunteer.

Sen. Rob Bradley, R-Orange Park, an attorney who is co-sponsoring the bill, said it was almost like a glitch bill.

"In 2014, we took a big step as a legislature in requiring that our court systems provide legal counsel for dependent children who have special needs. I thought that was a huge step forward in improving the quality of representation for the children of the state of Florida as they go through the maze of the judicial system, and their futures are dictated and determined by decisions from the court," Bradley said.

"I think this really is almost a glitch situation, in the sense that we provided funds to pay for these attorneys, but we also provided a system whereby pro bono attorneys would be first on the list before we got to attorneys who would be paid for their services.

"And I don't think anybody contemplated that those pro bono attorneys would not only not be paid for their services, but have to come out of pocket for what can be hundreds, even thousands, of dollars," Bradley said.

"If you don't practice law or have never been involved in litigation, I assure you court reporting and transcripts, expert witnesses to testify to the child's mental or physical condition, these can be very expensive, but necessary, to come up with a just outcome in a particular matter.

"So I think we are really discouraging good attorneys from offering their services if we are now telling them: 'Thanks for all you've done, but, by the way, here's a bill for \$3,000.'"

Bradley said it should have been part of the 2014 legislation appointing attorneys to dependent children with special needs.

"This is money that should have been paid all along and is money well spent," Bradley said.

Fried, co-chair of the Legislative Affairs Committee of The Florida Bar's Young Lawyers Division, helped write the 2014 bill, calling it "my baby."

"That's why we created the program to begin with," Fried said. "There were not a lot of qualified attorneys to begin with. We started out paying them \$3,000 a case, but budget restraints forced us to compromise and bring it down to \$1,000 a case."

That's why pro bono attorneys are so needed, she said.

"The last thing we want is for an attorney to agree to take a case pro bono and not go through with it because they are losing money on the case," Fried said.

Bean noted it was fitting the bill was being heard during Pro Bono Week.

"We are going to save money, but more importantly, we will get some quality attorneys, people that love kids and are ready to volunteer."