

Alan Abramowitz

2006 to 2012: Florida Bar News Articles (The Florida Bar website at www.flabar.org)

- Abramowitz gets accolades for his community work - 01/15/06
- Expanding Lawyers' Role – Letter 09/15/06
- Abramowitz Named GAL Director – 01/15/11
- Bar Children's Committee focuses on child trafficking – 9/15/11
- Human Trafficking Panel Stakes out Legislative Position – 10/15/11
- GAL program prepares its pitch for more funding – 11/01/11
- A Vehicle for better advocacy – GALs now permitted to transport kids – 04/01/12
“A Voice Heard” – 04/01/12
A volunteer willing to say ‘I am for the child’ – 04-01-12
- A Triple treat of good news for the GALs – 05/15/12
- Florida GAL program earns national award – 09/15/12
- GAL program seeks an additional \$3.9 million from the legislature – 12/01/12

ABRAMOWITZ GETS ACCOLADES FOR HIS COMMUNITY WORK

📅 January 15, 2006 📁 Regular News

Abramowitz gets accolades for his community work

Alan Abramowitz is a top administrator for the Department of Children and Families who enjoys good press and sincere accolades.

The *Orlando Sentinel* described him as "helping turn around one of the most troubled child-welfare systems in Florida," in District 12's Volusia and Flagler counties.

An editorial in the *Daytona Beach News Journal* said his "strength had nothing to do with pushing paper. It had everything to do with establishing connections and setting standards for DCF services."

He chose the Homeless Assistance Center in Daytona Beach for a computer system that allows homeless people to apply for food stamps and welfare without going to a DCF office. And he championed alternatives to jail for mentally ill, nonviolent people who are arrested in Volusia County.

Recently, 43-year-old Abramowitz received the 2005 Florida Prevention Leadership Award for his community work, as well as the 16th Annual Sam Bell Award from Serenity House, which provides substance abuse treatment for the indigent and homeless.

Now, Abramowitz has been reassigned to District 7, which covers Orange, Seminole, Osceola, and Brevard counties.

"The change will mean a bigger caseload, more people to get to know, more challenges," the *Daytona Beach News Journal* said. "We have no doubt Abramowitz is up to the task."

SEPTEMBER 15, 2006 LETTERS

📅 September 15, 2006 📁 Letters

Letters

Expanding Lawyers' Role

In 1995 I was an assistant public defender in the 10th Judicial Circuit. My job seemed very simple at the time. I was to meet with the clients, participate in discovery, and give them very candid advice on how I thought they should proceed with their criminal case.

One morning I went to the county jail to meet a client who had been arrested the night before for burglary. He had shattered a window of a fast food restaurant and entered. After the alarm went off, he waited for the police to arrive, explained to them what he had done, and was booked into the Polk County Jail. He told me that he did not want me to ask the judge to release him from the jail. He said he was fine in jail; he was fed and it was warm. As we discussed the case, the facts became clear. He broke into the restaurant because he was cold and hungry.

Eventually, the state made him a plea offer of credit for time served in jail followed by probation. My client turned down the offer to get out of jail because he was doing fine and wanted to stay there longer, at least until it wasn't so cold. The case eventually resolved itself a few months later with a time served plea to a misdemeanor and my client walked out of jail, back into homelessness, but into warmer weather.

Rule 4-2.1 provides, "In representing a client, a lawyer shall exercise independent professional judgment and render candid advice. In rendering advice, a lawyer may refer not only to law but to other considerations such as moral, economic, social, and political factors that may be relevant to the client's situation." In discussing the scope of the advice, the rule states, "Matters that go beyond strictly legal questions may also be in the domain of another profession. Family matters can involve problems within the professional competence of psychiatry, clinical psychology, or social work."

This candid advice to assist clients and the risk of further involvement with the criminal justice system does not conflict with zealously representing a client, but is a necessary part of it.



Whenever a client needs or is appointed an attorney, there is a certainty that the client is in crisis. Identifying services that address a client's underlying needs, such as housing or recovery program, and not simply addressing his or her particular legal circumstances, will ultimately best serve the client, the client's family, community, and potential victims.

If you ask any criminal defense attorney, he or she will tell you that substance abuse, mental health, unemployment, domestic violence, and housing are often predecessors to criminal behavior.

Many of the high risk factors that lead to criminal behavior are the same risk factors the Department of Children and Families sees in assessing risk in child and elderly abuse cases or economic self-sufficiency. If the factors that lead to criminal behavior, abuse, and poverty were addressed early on, the chances of the necessity of the Department of Children and Families becoming involved in the family's life would be lessened. Addressing prevention is critical to reducing child abuse. This is an opportunity for attorneys to have a positive impact on the community and their clients.

The Domestic Violence Coalition recently initiated a project in Orlando and Brevard to address domestic violence. The idea was to educate beauticians in the community on the services available to battered women. These beauticians could then direct at-risk women they encounter in the course of their employment to services. The program has been a major success.

Attorneys can learn from that success and be an entryway to services and advice for their clients. It is an opportunity to address issues and encourage their clients to make decisions regarding the course of action they want to take for their family before they involuntarily come under a court ordered plan in dependency court or a dissolution of marriage or probation.

A good attorney can get someone out of a tight spot or solve a specific problem, but a truly great attorney counsels the clients so they can see the direction for change in their lives for the future.

Attorneys can become more effective advocates for the clients as well as children. This includes educating themselves regarding resources and services in the community. Call 211 and learn about the emergency number for referrals in the community, be involved in the regional workforce board, literacy council, or join a board for one of the many community-nonprofits or community task forces.



Maybe we have been measuring the wrong thing if we truly want to help those in need of legal advice.

Alan Abramowitz

Bar Legal Needs of Children Committee



ABRAMOWITZ NAMED GAL DIRECTOR

📅 January 15, 2011 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Abramowitz named GAL director

Senior Editor

The day after the governor named him the new executive director of the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Office, Alan Abramowitz headed to the Leon County Courthouse to sign up for training and his own GAL case in the Second Circuit.

"I have to walk in the shoes of the staff, so I can see it from their perspective," said 48-year-old Abramowitz, who leaves his position as director of the statewide Family Safety Program Office within the Florida Department of Children and Families, and serves as vice chair of The Florida Bar Legal Needs of Children Committee.

"Like a method actor, I become the character. I need to walk in their shoes. I am a really good listener," said the friendly man who used to work at a suicide hotline.



So Job One, Abramowitz said, is going out into the field and listening to GAL staff and volunteers; to the abused, neglected, and traumatized children they serve; and to the judges who must make tough decisions about children's lives in dependency court.

And he'll be looking nationwide for best practices.

The last time Abramowitz went through GAL training was as a volunteer in 1987, when he was a law student at Florida State University.

"To this day, I still remember the two children — Gerald and Candice — that I represented as a volunteer. It was very rewarding. I like being an advocate for children," Abramowitz said. "Every day, all over the state, people are volunteers making a difference in people's lives, and I'm glad I'm here to support them."

On December 29, Gov. Charlie Crist appointed Abramowitz to head the statewide GAL office for a term that ends December 8, 2013, to succeed Theresa Flury, who now serves as president and CEO of the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Big Bend.

"With 15 years of experience in social service and juvenile justice, Alan has continually worked to improve the lives of children who depend on the child welfare system," Gov. Crist said. "He is an effective and caring advocate for the young people of Florida, and I am confident the Guardian Ad Litem Program will excel under his leadership."

So is Mary Cagle, statewide director of Children's Legal Services at DCF and chair of the Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee.

"I think it's incredible that Alan got this job. He so understands the vision of the Department of Children and Families," Cagle said. "I think he's going to be a phenomenal director of that program. He's as true a child advocate as you will ever find."

Cagle elaborated that Abramowitz "embraces a family-centered practice," referring to the DCF philosophy that the first choice for every child is to bolster their family with therapy and services and try to reunite that family; and if you can't keep the child safely within that family, then do something else to get the child a permanent home.

"Alan really gets that. He will bring a consistent philosophy. Alan has been part and parcel of the most important innovative child-focused things the department has done over the years. The department people get trained all the time. He will bring all of that to the GAL Program, so they understand how trauma affects kids and the family-centered practice," Cagle said.

"He is also a collaborative worker, and I think that will be great for the Guardian Ad Litem Program and DCF."

Though the GAL staff and 7,000 volunteers who serve about 23,000 children know they are making a difference, Abramowitz said, "We need to measure the great outcomes for children. We need to show how families and children are better served by our work. I think for accountability purposes, we need to show it better.

"I want to not only talk about numbers, but show permanency... We know the state cannot raise a child." If children cannot be reunited with their families, he said, they need to be adopted.

Because of community care and diversion programs, Abramowitz said, "We have reduced by 37 percent the children in foster care in the last four years. Re-abuse is way down in the state, and we lead the nation in adoptions, not only with the number but by how quickly it happens. The GAL is involved in every one of those cases."

Another top priority, Abramowitz said, will be using GALs to serve as education surrogates for children removed from their homes.

Appointed by the outgoing governor, Abramowitz talks about working with the new governor, Rick Scott.

"Our new governor's goal to create jobs is important to our mission. When unemployment is reduced, fewer children are mistreated," Abramowitz said, describing how the stress involved with losing a job can trigger substance misuse and can lead to domestic violence.

"I'll be a big cheerleader for the governor's goal in creating jobs. I pledge to dedicate my enthusiasm and energies to be the best advocate for children."

At his side will be Charlie Nelson, who served as acting GAL director during the search for a permanent director.

"I will be relying on him, big time," Abramowitz said. "I trust him and believe he's very talented. With only 17 people in headquarters, we will have to empower the circuit administrators — because that is where the action happens to support our kids — with training and advocacy."

Last year, one issue that rocked the children's advocate community was searching for common ground on how best to provide lawyers for children in dependency court, while not harming the statewide GAL Program. After hundreds of hours of work by the Legal Needs of Children Committee, the Bar Board of Governors in December 2009 adopted the committee's recommended position on representing children in dependency cases, which included this declaration: "No child shall be denied the right to have the representation by an attorney for the child appearing on the child's behalf in a dependency case whether volunteer or state paid."

But the Florida Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program, under Flury, opposed that position. The proposed Florida Children's Legal Representation Act did not go forward in the 2010 Legislative Session.

Asked about that issue that he voted for as a committee member, now that he is the head of the GAL, Abramowitz said: "My history is about building consensus in the community. The more challenging the issue, the more attention it needs. As the issue comes up, I will work with partners to build consensus. I am a 100 percent believer in the GAL Program. Stay tuned."

For the past decade, Abramowitz managed a variety of regional and statewide offices within DCF, including covering Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, Central Florida, and Palm Beach County.

In 2005, *The Orlando Sentinel* described him as “helping turn around one of the most troubled child-welfare systems in Florida,” in District 12’s Volusia and Flagler counties. An editorial in the *Daytona Beach News Journal* said, “His strength had nothing to do with pushing paper. It had everything to do with establishing connections and setting standards for DCF services.”

Abramowitz chose the Homeless Assistance Center in Daytona Beach for a computer system that allows homeless people to apply for food stamps and welfare without going to a DCF office. He championed alternatives to jail for mentally ill, nonviolent people who are arrested. From 1996 to 2000, he was assistant general counsel for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. From 1992-96, he was an assistant public defender for the 10th Circuit. He volunteered in Thailand with the United States Peace Corps from 1990-92. His first job after law school was an assistant state attorney for the 18th Circuit from 1989-90.

BAR CHILDREN'S COMMITTEE FOCUSES ON CHILD TRAFFICKING

📅 September 15, 2011 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Bar Children's Committee focuses on child trafficking

Senior Editor

A 16-year-old girl running away from an abusive home met a man at a payphone in Detroit who promised her a better life in South Florida.

If she'd be his girlfriend, he'd lavish her with jewelry and trips to the Bahamas. But he turned out to be a pimp with the street name D-Lo.

Holding her in a Marriott Hotel in Miami Beach, he ordered the girl to earn at least \$500 a day through streetwalking.

If she didn't come through, he'd beat her, stick a gun in her mouth, and threaten to kill her. Eventually, he sold her to another pimp.

On Ocean Drive, the girl propositioned an undercover Miami Beach police officer and was arrested. After she was identified as a juvenile victim of sex trafficking, she was not charged and was taken to a safe location. After a jury trial, D-Lo — aka Demond Osley — was convicted of sex trafficking of a minor and other charges, and sentenced to prison for 30 years.

That anecdote of a real victim of child trafficking is one of several sprinkled throughout the 276-page *Florida Statewide Strategic Plan on Human Trafficking*, a two-year study by the Florida State University Center for the Advancement of Human Rights, funded by The Florida Bar Foundation (www.cahr.fsu.edu).

Now, the Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee has formed a subcommittee on human trafficking — with the goal of taking action on many of the study's recommendations and vetting and endorsing proposed legislation.

One of the main challenges is that human trafficking cases are complicated, and only a fraction of all trafficked children are properly identified.

The subcommittee's co-chair, Bill Booth, at the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, said the issue first riveted his attention when his boss had a child trafficking case years ago.

"The child ended up in federal foster care, and that's what started opening our eyes to it," Booth said. "And we haven't found one really since. We've had some suspicions, but nothing directly provable as human trafficking. But it's going on out there. That's what is so frustrating about the cases. They do hide in plain sight."

FSU's Wendi Adelson, who co-authored the statewide strategic plan, said: "I am thrilled that the subcommittee is taking seriously the problem of trafficked children in the state of Florida. This is a problem that will not stop without the dedicated effort of people everywhere, from the highest government officials, to law enforcement, to teachers, health officials, and good Samaritans."

And, lawyers, too.

Alan Abramowitz, chair of the Legal Needs of Children Committee and executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, said he knows a lot of people are looking at the issue of child trafficking, including a Department of Children and Families work group, and this will be the third year of proposed legislation.

"I think it's necessary that the Bar be engaged in this because the decisions and legislative proposals impact children's legal rights," Abramowitz said.

"We need to make sure children's legal rights are protected, that we do the right thing and make sure they are not treated as criminals. If an older child is arrested for prostitution, they are victims. And we need to get them the treatment and support they need."

During the subcommittee's first teleconference on July 27, Abramowitz said a challenge is whether Florida is able to deliver proper services to victims of child trafficking.

"The case I'm familiar with, we had to go to Atlanta. If a child is already in foster care, my thought is that community-based care still has to meet those children's needs as victims of trafficking."

Runaways are a big concern, he said.

"We have to get better at identifying the issue and working with law enforcement," he said.

"In Florida, a lot of advocates want to take it on. The Florida Bar has to be part of it, and the Legal Needs of Children Committee is a natural part of making sure whatever legislation happens supports the right things for children."

The subcommittee took a look at last session's CS/HB 145 and SB 718 — known as the Florida Safe Harbor Act — that died on May 7.

Now, Trudy Novicki, executive director of Kristi House, a child advocacy center in Miami for victims of sexual abuse, said she is optimistic about **HB 99**, filed August 18 by Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami, husband of Kristi House board member Ethel Fresen.

"Simply put, the intent of the Safe Harbor statute is two-fold: to move children from criminal status to victim status, and to create long-term and short-term specialized housing," said Novicki, a former prosecutor who admitted it was a learning curve for her to realize child prostitutes belong in dependency court, not charged with crimes in juvenile court.

"My board has studied the issue, and we've decided this is within our mission, because this is a population of sexually abused children. The majority of children involved in prostitution were sexually abused in their homes," she said. The main obstacle to getting the legislation passed, Novicki said, was its fiscal impact.

HB 99, she said, is revenue neutral, reallocating funding in the dependency system for foster children. And it includes giving law enforcement the discretion to arrest and take the child into custody for protection, another obstacle the previous bills faced.

If HB 99 passes, she said, it is "meant to be a place where girls could come and receive services. We expect, if the model works the right way, that Miami-Dade police and the FBI will drop girls off at a shelter."

Human Trafficking Subcommittee Co-Chair Mary Cagle, director of Children's Legal Services at DCF, said DCF's Office of Refugee Services has hired Tyson Elliott as statewide human trafficking coordinator, who is working on drafting legislation, along with the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, using the Safe Harbor legislation as a foundation.

"All of that is being thrown into something that everybody is vetting," Cagle said. "And they asked us in Children's Legal Services to take a look at it. So we're doing it to provide some legal analysis, because the person working on it is a police officer, and he said he needed some support. He has some rebuttable presumptions."

Abramowitz noted that in Florida, "We don't lock up status offenders. We don't lock up victims. And, in fact, last year they passed that law that DJJ won't commit kids for misdemeanors. And prostitution is a misdemeanor, right?"

When a child ends up in court, Booth said, an "alleged family member" stands at his or her side.

"There is no way for the court or any person there to question to find out if this person is the real father or the real guardian for this child. And maybe check into whether this is a trafficked child," Booth said. "I would think there needs to be a way to give the court more authority and more power to protect these kids that are right in front of them, when they might suspect a situation such as this."

Abramowitz added: "I think the challenge is that if they get arrested and are taken to a juvenile assessment center, or wherever, to be scored out, they are not going to meet detention criteria, because it's a misdemeanor. And what happens is DJJ has to release the child to a 'responsible adult.' Those are the words they use. And there is very little that excludes someone from being a responsible adult."

The subcommittee had its second teleconference on August 24, and planned its third for September 13, after this *News* went to press. They plan to report their progress when the full Legal Needs of Children Committee meets at the Bar's Midyear Meeting in Orlando, on September 22, from 1:00 to 5:30 p.m.

"To me, this is an issue that's burning," Booth said, noting a July 27 story in *The Palm Beach Post* with the headline: "New Homeland Security campaign's goal: Stopping slavery." The story described a new bilingual TV promotional spot airing in South Florida, sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection Division, that asks Floridians to keep an eye out for human trafficking victims, especially young foreign women forced into prostitution in the U.S. and others imported from abroad and forced into indentured servitude.

"It seems to be popping up all over the place. We hear stories all the time. Please, don't hold back on whatever ideas you have," Booth said. "This is exciting. I'm very glad you all are interested in doing this. It's been a long time just sitting on my desk. I'm glad to start

doing something... It worries me that it's going on out there, and we can't find it as quickly as we'd like. I want to be able to help these kids quicker than we are."

HUMAN TRAFFICKING PANEL STAKES OUT LEGISLATIVE POSITIONS

📅 October 15, 2011 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

Human trafficking panel stakes out legislative positions

Senior Editor

The new Human Trafficking Subcommittee of The Florida Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee acted quickly to come up with two main points of agreement and was rewarded with a unanimous vote when the full committee met at the Midyear Meeting.

On September 22, the full committee voted unanimously to support those two positions:

- "The LNOCC supports legislation which authorizes the development of specific services in Florida, including, but not limited to, staff secure safe houses for minors who have been sexually exploited and/or trafficked."
- "The LNOCC supports legislation which empowers law enforcement to treat minors who have been sexually exploited and/or trafficked as victims and not as alleged criminals or delinquents."

Those positions must still be approved by the Board of Governors.

Again this year, legislation has been filed to address the needs of sexually exploited children: **HB 99**, sponsored by Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami; and **SB 202**, sponsored by Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Bill Booth, co-chair of the Human Trafficking Subcommittee, said there has been "pushback from law enforcement" to treat sexually exploited children as perpetrators, when they are arrested for prostitution.

"We would like to have a voice," Booth said of advocating this pair of positions as the bills move through the Legislature.

Alan Abramowitz, chair of the Legal Needs of Children Committee and executive director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program, pointed out the proposed legislation changes the definition of neglect for sexually exploited children, and asked members to

look over it carefully to “make sure there are no unintended consequences.”

Abramowitz planned to meet with the Legislation Committee of the Bar Board of Governors so the committee is free to take a legislative position on the complex issue of trafficked children and how best to serve their needs. (See September 15 Bar News story, “Bar’s children’s committee focuses on child trafficking.”)

Since the story was published, Booth said, “Attorneys have reached out to be added to the subcommittee.”

Abramowitz has authorized the subcommittee to continue to meet to pursue further steps in addressing recommendations made in the 276-page *Florida Statewide Strategic Plan on Human Trafficking*, a two-year study by the Florida State University Center for the Advancement of Human Rights, funded by The Florida Bar Foundation (www.cahr.fsu.edu).

GAL PROGRAM PREPARES ITS PITCH FOR MORE FUNDING

📅 November 1, 2011 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

GAL program prepares its pitch for more funding

Senior Editor

When Alan Abramowitz made his budget request at the Legislature, he brought a cardboard cutout of a child to keep the focus where it belongs.

"It's a human rights issue that children be treated with dignity and that their voices are heard," said Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program.

He's asking for \$3.9 million in FY 2012-13 to hire 64 additional staff positions needed to fully support the work of an additional 1,650 volunteers to provide "best interest" advocacy for 3,367 more children in dependency court — from the current 21,497 to 24,864.

"I've heard some people say it's like spare change in the cushion of a couch. Some of the legislators have said that to me," Abramowitz said, comparing his request to the entire state budget, even in lean times.

Today, the GAL program represents approximately 70 percent of all abused, abandoned, and neglected children in Florida's dependency system.

Is 70 percent good enough?

Florida Statute §39.822 would answer "no." But the GAL program has never truly fulfilled the statutory mandate to provide a GAL for every child.

Abramowitz is just hoping to nudge back up from 70 percent to the previously reached level of 80 percent with his request to build capacity and enhance training to support more volunteers.

He said he's trying to run the office as efficiently as possible, so that funds go to support more volunteers in the field. Instead of hiring an IT director, he found a volunteer. He is personally wearing several hats: general counsel (running matters by the former general counsel he contracts with part-time); legislative affairs director; public information officer; and volunteer GAL so he can stay connected.

"I am trying to prove to the Legislature that I am going to be as efficient as I can, so they can trust me with dollars and to not waste them," Abramowitz said.

His five-year plan is to represent 100 percent of Florida's abused and neglected children.

Now, he is forced to triage cases to protect the most vulnerable children.

"Our staff struggles every day when trying to decide whose case we can advocate for and whose case we cannot," Abramowitz said. "It's a heart-wrenching decision when we know all children deserve a GAL. We really struggle with it. It's hard to tell a child they aren't going to get a volunteer to help them."

He's hopeful the day will come when the triage process is obsolete. And he is heartened by support expressed by Gov. Rick Scott and legislative leaders.

"I don't know of any legislator who is not supportive," Abramowitz said.

"I feel I have an obligation to meet the intentions of the legislation. It requires us to provide 100 percent representation. And my intention and long-term position is to strive to get there. The good thing is, it's such a positive, effective program."

What inspires him is hearing from volunteer GALs who go above and beyond what is required. Abramowitz tells the story of one volunteer in West Palm Beach who represented a child who aged out of foster care and graduated from college. When the young man came back to the GAL office to visit his volunteer, he became very emotional when he saw his picture hanging on the wall.

"Here's a guy who didn't think anyone was thinking about him, and here he was with his picture on the wall. It really impacted him," Abramowitz said. "He reconnected with his GAL volunteer, and last August the volunteer adopted him as a 22-year-old adult."

Now the young man has what most of us take for granted: a permanent family and a place to call home.

Abramowitz shares an email written by Kemp Brinson, GAL volunteer of the year for the 10th Circuit in Polk County, that begins: "A few years ago, I met someone who changed my life forever. I can't tell you her name. I can't tell you what happened to put her where she was. All I can tell you is that when I read about her story for the first time, I cried. She was 13, and she slumped into the chair to my right and gave me the teenage look that says, 'I care about nothing.' The setting was a modest foster home in rural Polk County."

Brinson chronicles how they learned to trust each other, how he tracked down her mother through a former landlord, and found her brother and father through his probation officer.

"Her mother was on the verge of permanently losing parental rights. Despite all odds, when given one last chance, her mother got a job and began putting things back together. I helped dozens of other people involved understand how the system was working for her, and how it wasn't. With the help of a particularly conscientious caseworker, we were able to begin reuniting the family, little by little. There was still a lot of pain. She had troubles with school, family, boys, and emotional issues. We talked about all these. I met some of her teachers. She even let me go to a couple of her school functions. Despite her pain and the walls she erected, her intelligence, grace, and strength glimmered through. As her family situation improved, she began to shine. It was inspiring."

Eventually, the family was reunited and the case was closed. But Brinson has never forgotten the child he helped give a voice in court — and her family.

"The state of Florida cannot raise children. Only people can," Brinson wrote. "I hope this amazing young woman and her siblings learned as much about life from me as I did from them. This connection happened because I fought back my apprehensions and concerns long enough to make that initial call to volunteer for the Guardian ad Litem Program. When people speak of making a difference, of living life to its fullest, this is what they mean."

For more information about how to volunteer, go to www.GuardianadLitem.org or call (866) 341-1425.

A VEHICLE FOR BETTER ADVOCACY

📅 April 1, 2012 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

A vehicle for better advocacy

GALS NOW PERMITTED TO TRANSPORT KIDS IN THEIR CARS

Senior Editor

"My wife says she only learns what's going on with the kids when she's in the car. Otherwise they won't talk to her," Alan Abramowitz said with a laugh.

But as executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, he considers allowing volunteers to transport kids in their cars a serious matter of safety for abused and neglected children.



"A volunteer in California who works for us now said a child disclosed they were being raped in a foster home," Abramowitz said. "And she said, 'I never would have known that if I hadn't been alone with her in the car, and she trusted me.'"

"My view is, safety is the primary reason. I think it protects kids. When they trust you, they will talk to you. And when they talk to you, they will disclose things. The second reason why is normalcy."

In a report dedicated to Sen. Nan Rich, D-Sunrise, one of the earliest supporters of the GAL program, Abramowitz said he agrees with recommendations to expand the Transportation Pilot Project of June 2011 to all circuits, because the pilot "has met the original goals intended of child safety, improved communications, a sense of normalcy, volunteer empowerment, and volunteer retention."

That follows the recommendations made by Jane Soltis, 2011 Child Advocate of the Year, who evaluated the pilot.

This year, legislation — SB 1960, in lines 268 to 272 — recognizes the GAL Program's authority to transport children. However, no volunteer will ever be required or pressured to participate in transporting a child, and no judge can order it.

"I didn't want a situation where the volunteer didn't want to. They have to do it from their own hearts. You're not a lesser volunteer because you don't want to do it," Abramowitz said. "Is it in the best interest of the child? Yes."

He tells the story of a volunteer GAL in the Fifth Judicial Circuit who has an autistic child living in a group home who wasn't able to get out much.

"He's been taking the kid to a park a lot, four hours at a time. The kid is an older kid. His therapist says this kid is like a new kid," Abramowitz said.

"The volunteer sent me a video of the kid climbing a tree. It's very emotional to see what's happening out there, when these children have someone. And you need to transport them to be able to do these things."

Abramowitz is a GAL for a 17-year-old college student, who lives in a group home where the big entertainment offering is G-rated movies.

"I wanted him to be able to date. He's in a group home. It's a little difficult. That's all I thought about when I was 17," Abramowitz said.

The young man loves music, and hinted he would love to go to a concert.

Abramowitz brought that up at a staffing, and a 501(c)(3) paid for the tickets.

"If I'm a volunteer, I can go to them for help so the child can feel normal. Sometimes, it's a ticket to something; it could be a prom dress or membership in a club.

"We brought it up, and everyone was receptive to it. I think the advocacy for this child was getting everyone around the table and saying, 'Let's let him be a normal kid.' And everyone agreed."

So Abramowitz picked up his kid in his car, they grabbed lunch, and went to the concert at Tallahassee's civic center.

"He loved it," Abramowitz said. "I didn't understand one word during the concert because it was so loud, but I enjoyed watching him have his first concert experience. It really gave him a typical normal teenage experience that he will never forget."

'A VOICE HEARD'

📅 April 1, 2012 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

'A Voice Heard'

Senior Editor

Throwing a birthday party for a girl who's never had one before.

Cheering from the stands as a boy scores in a basketball game.

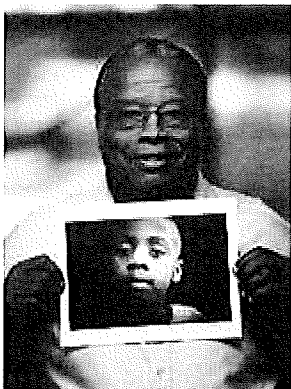
Laughing at a child's jokes.

Helping a teen get a driver's license.

Showing a kindergartner how to tie her shoelaces.

Taking a foster kid from a group home to a park, just to listen.

During his two decades of advocating for children, Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, said he has learned that the most important skill in child advocacy is listening.



"The best person to fight for their child is the parent. Well, in these situations, there's no parent to do it. What makes a parent good? They care about the child. They do homework with the child. They help the child. They are role models for the child. And they listen to the child. We want guardians ad litem to do the same thing," Abramowitz said.

Clearly, the role of a guardian ad litem has expanded beyond the courtroom as an advocate for children in dependency court. As Abramowitz explained, in 1997, when the GAL program was under the court, the court took the position that GAL volunteers were prohibited from providing services and were focused on meeting the courts' needs.

"I'm interested in the child. And as we focus on the child, we'll become better advocates for the court," Abramowitz said. "I'm treating it not as a direct line to the court, but a better line to the child so we can do a better job."

As GAL volunteer Bonnie Marmor, who has a Ph.D. in strategic planning, writes in this year's status report: "The GAL volunteer often becomes a role model, a mentor, an educational surrogate, a friend, a confidant, and most important, a consistent caring person on whom the child(ren) can rely."

Marmor led a project in six circuits where GAL volunteers asked their clients — 152 elementary, middle-school, high-school, and aged-out foster kids — questions about their GAL experiences, with the goals of helping volunteers gain a better understanding of the children they represent and allowing foster children to advise and guide the direction of the program.

"It makes me realize how important our corps of volunteers is. Although I may have my own cases, others have far more serious issues than I have," Marmor said. "There are volunteers who are so special, so dedicated, so committed to making sure that the right things are done for the right reason."

"A Voice Heard" — the simple, poignant title of the report — was supplied by former foster youth Brian Williams, recently accepted into the Fostering Achievement Fellowship Program at Tallahassee Community College.

Here's a sampling of those voices heard:

What is the most important thing I do to help you?

"You helped me.. . get new glasses when I couldn't see the board," answered one K-5 student.

"(You) help me understand and answer questions I have about why my dad and brother and mom are the way they are," answered a middle-school student.

"It's already been done.. . I am aging out with a life, a job, and a new family," answers a high-school student.

If there was one thing you could wish for today, what would it be?

"I already got my wish. . . to come home," an 11-year-old happily reported.

What other things would you like me to do for you?

"I want you to be able to see me forever, or at least until I get married," a 13-year-old told her GAL.

Why do you think I come to see you?

"To make sure I don't get hurt," a K-5 child told the GAL.

"Because you think I am a real neat kid — you tell me that a lot," another child said.

If you were a GAL, is there anything special you would do for the person you visit?

One 17-year-old said she'd "ensure that the kids got to keep their pets." When police first arrived at her home, her precious declawed Himalayan cat escaped through an open door and the girl was not allowed to look for the cat that she feared would not survive outside. After 10 months, the girl is still mourning the loss of her pet, said her GAL volunteer.

What would you have liked your GAL to do that he or she did not do?

"It would have been nice if my GAL could have transported me. If so, I wouldn't have missed my aunt's memorial service. I asked my GAL to take me that Sunday, but she said she would have liked to but she couldn't because she wasn't allowed to transport. It was the weekend and the group home ran on what they called a 'skeleton crew,' so I missed the memorial service. I just always knew that my GAL would have done things like that for me if she had been allowed to."

(See story sidebar [here](#).)

"Stay in my life instead of just disappearing," said a former foster youth, ages 18-23.

A VOLUNTEER WILLING TO SAY 'I AM FOR THE CHILD'

📅 April 1, 2012 📁 Regular News

A volunteer willing to say 'I am for the child'

To join 8,000 volunteer guardians ad litem in Florida, you must be willing to open up your heart to abused and neglected children. You must agree that it's a human rights issue that that foster child's voice needs to be heard. After listening to that child, you must help the judge in dependency court understand what's in the child's best interest.

Even though it is statutorily mandated that every abused and neglected child have a guardian ad litem, the reality is that 10,000 out of more than 32,000 foster children still have no voice in Florida's courts.

"These children have lots of needs. The studies have shown you get better outcomes with children when you have an advocate," said Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the statewide GAL program.

"What we're seeing is a force out there throughout the state that's willing to step forward. We need to reach out to them. That's why the whole 'I Am for the Child' campaign is really there to allow people to do what in their heart they want to do, and that is to be there for a child who has no one."

Amy Goldin is one such GAL volunteer. She's a solo real estate law practitioner in Plantation and a mother of 17-year-old boy. She's also a guardian ad litem to a 17-year-old young woman with a 2-year-old child of her own. In her spare time, she is trying to raise money and recruit volunteers for the GAL program.

She views her mission as urgent.

"In Broward County alone, we have over 700 children who need a guardian ad litem," Goldin said. "It's very scary. We don't want to be one of those newspaper stories. I think it is a crisis."

Horrific stories of abused and neglected children, she said, "are down the street and in our neighborhoods."

When funding is tight for legal services, she said that's when the 501(c)(3)'s become even more important. She was in Tallahassee trying to raise \$40,000 for one of 25 nonprofit charitable organizations where the money goes directly to the GAL program to help with training, volunteer recognition ceremonies, toys, summer camp fees, and anything else to help the children the GALs serve.

Besides searching for contributions of money, Goldin is looking for attorneys willing to volunteer as GALs.

"I worked at Carlton Fields in Tampa, so I know the pressure of hours," she said. "I go out and talk to attorneys in firms, and that's a big problem, the time constraint. Young people are eager to step in and help, but they feel the time pressure with billable hours. What I tell them is, 'Other than going to court — which is a time set — you can be very flexible with your time.'"

She visits her own GAL client after 5:30 on Fridays and on the weekends. Talking to her teachers, guidance counselors, and case workers is mostly done over the phone.

Goldin has found that judges try to be flexible.

"The judges always have listened to me and the program's advice. They want you to attend these hearings. If you say, 'I can't make it at 9 in the morning, because I have a conflict with another hearing,' they will try to work with you," Goldin said.

Employers do need to support the GAL leaving the office for those court hearings.

But, Goldin said: "I don't think people should be concerned this is going to be a second job, because it's not. And a lot of lawyers have specialty experience or backgrounds in immigration law or certain specific issues that we need help with. They may not want to be a GAL, but they are willing to help us out on specific cases. That's something we are interested in, as well."

"Everybody can do something, and there's something for everyone," Goldin said. "It's about the kids. It's about their human rights. They have a right to live. They have a right to prosper. They have a right to be hugged."

For

more information, contact www.GuardianadLitem.org or call (866) 341-1425.

A TRIPLE TREAT OF GOOD NEWS FOR THE GALs

📅 May 15, 2012 👤 Jan Pudlow ▶ Senior Editor 📁 Regular News

A triple treat of good news for the GALs

Senior Editor

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the **Florida Guardian ad Litem Program**, is one happy man for three big reasons.

First, Gov. Rick Scott approved the GAL's entire \$32 million budget for fiscal year 2012-13, with a 6 percent increase of \$1.8 million over last year's budget.

Secondly, the governor signed the law to allow GAL volunteers to transport children, viewed primarily as a safety issue so foster children may have private time with their GALs, which enhances rapport and communication.

And thirdly, the statewide GAL program won the 2012 Davis Productivity Eagle Award for "streamlining efficiencies to focus on commitment to children," and there will be an awards ceremony June 1 in Tallahassee.



Abramowitz said the news has made him "elated," and he used a lot of exclamation points in his memos to his staff when he told them the good news.

On the budget, Abramowitz wrote to his staff and volunteers on April 17: "I received a phone call earlier today from the Governor's Office letting me know that our entire budget, including the additional \$1.8 million nonrecurring contract dollars, will be signed into law. The governor has been very supportive throughout this legislative session and continues to support our program. His office wanted me to let you know he supports the great work you do for children every day. I also want to thank each and every one of you for your commitment to give every child a voice!"

Abramowitz, who also chairs the Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee, explained to the *News*: "The \$1.8 million will primarily be used to recruit additional volunteers so more children can have representation and a volunteer child advocate. Just prior to session, we

changed our request from requesting additional staff positions to contract dollars. We are extremely happy for the additional children that will have an advocate."

The goal is to expand representation to children in foster care from about 65 percent to 75 percent, he said, even though, by law, every foster child is supposed to have a GAL.

"We will be reaching out to the private sector to look for matching dollars for the \$1.8 million. We are going to be reaching out to the faith community for recruiting services and look for matching dollars to show the Legislature that we maximized the dollars through our public-private partnerships," Abramowitz said.

"Also, we are looking to track increased representation with the dollars so at next session we can argue for making the dollars reoccurring."

In July, Abramowitz said he will be presenting the "Balanced Scorecard" to the Children's Cabinet, which charts outcomes by rating circuits based on specific issues the children brought up in "A Voice Heard." (see story in April 1 News.)

"The goal is to have accountability in expanding our volunteer base and meeting the children's needs," Abramowitz said. "The Department of Children and Families is working with us to collect data on performance outcomes we can influence. The children have set the path for our strategic plan."

Also, Gov. Scott signed the law to allow volunteers to transport children (SB 1960). (see story in April 1 News.)

"We are working with the Department of Highway Safety to get the driving records at no cost. We are developing guidelines for approval and standards," Abramowitz said.

The Eagle Award, from Prudential-Davis Productivity Awards and Florida TaxWatch, was awarded to the GAL program for being a state program that "costs the least and benefits the most."

"By utilizing over 16,000 volunteers over the past five years, committed staff working to support child advocacy, engaging nonprofits committed to supporting the program and the children, utilizing pro bono attorneys around the state, and in particular through the Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, has saved the state millions of dollars," according to the nomination letter.

"We have established a private/public partnership securing money with our local nonprofits; established an online portal for volunteers resulting in cost savings; and established an online training for programs and pro bono attorneys in free continuing legal education credits (CLEs)."

"Of the 533 nominations, there were only 16 nominations that received the prestigious Eagle Award," Abramowitz wrote to his staff and volunteers. "And the Guardian ad Litem Program is one of them!"

FLORIDA GAL PROGRAM EARNS NATIONAL AWARD

📅 September 15, 2012 📁 Regular News

Florida GAL program earns national award

The Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program has been honored with the national Angels in Adoption Award, in recognition of helping with 2,221 adoptions in the last fiscal year.

"I want to thank the volunteers and staff, but also our partners in fighting for children, including the foster parents, relatives, the Department of Children and Families, judges, and providers ensuring children don't languish in foster care," said GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz, who traveled to the awards gala in Washington, D.C., September 12, along with the GAL Program's Volunteers of the Year, Glenn and Sherri Eckhardt, and Chief Legal Counsel Mercedes Scopetta.



The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute Angels in Adoption honors more than 150 angels nationwide for excellence in finding forever families for children in the foster care system.

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio selected the Florida GAL Program for the award.

This year's National Angels in Adoption awardees are actress Katherine Heigl, singer/songwriter Josh Kelley, and *People* magazine.

"Congratulations to Florida's guardian ad litem volunteers and staff for this recognition of your continued commitment to Florida's children. Guardians ad litem provide care and attention essential to the safety, security, and success of our state's children," said Gov. Rick Scott. "Dedicated Floridians like these make a better life possible for children in need of a permanent and loving home."

Florida's GAL volunteers advocate for the child at each stage of a dependency proceeding to help the child achieve permanency, Abramowitz said. During the initial stages of the case, he explained, the GAL is often the person who seeks out family members or other individuals with a connection to the child for the potential adoptive placement. Once a child is placed and the goal of the case becomes adoption, the GAL

helps the potential adoptive family understand the adoption process and the benefits of adoption, such as the availability of a subsidy and tax credit. The GAL volunteer helps make sure home studies are completed in a timely manner and that all legal requirements are met.

“The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program’s volunteers reach out and help children in need all over the state every day,” said DCF Secretary David Wilkins. “These volunteers share our strong commitment and passion to help improve the lives of Florida’s children and families. Our partnership with guardians ad litem help give a voice to our children in care and help ensure their safety, well-being, and success.”

GAL PROGRAM SEEKS AN ADDITIONAL \$3.9 MILLION FROM THE LEGISLATURE

📅 December 1, 2012 📁 Regular News

GAL program seeks an additional \$3.9 million from the Legislature

While Florida law dictates that courts appoint a guardian ad litem to every abused, abandoned, or neglected child, only 68 percent receive such an advocate.

The Florida Guardian Ad Litem Program hopes to increase that figure to 75 percent within one year and to 100 percent within five years, said Alan F. Abramowitz, executive director of the GAL program.

With that goal in mind, the agency is asking for an additional \$3.9 million in state funding for the 2013-4 fiscal year.

Abramowitz said with limited resources available, the program is forced to “triage” cases, providing GALs to those children deemed most in need.

“It’s very difficult when we go to a group home to visit a child and see others who don’t have a representative,” Abramowitz said. “That’s why we’re fighting so hard to get additional funding.”

The extra funds would support the program’s “aggressive” recruitment efforts, Abramowitz said.

Those efforts, already underway, are part of an overhaul of the agency's structure, he said. Under the program’s old model, paid staff managed large caseloads of about 45 dependent children, Abramowitz said. The new strategy expands the agency’s use of volunteers. Rather than caseloads of children, paid staff would supervise about 38 volunteers each, who in turn represent about 75 children, he said.

In addition to serving more children, the new model allows the agency to provide higher quality and more intensive services to those children, Abramowitz said.



"You have one person focused on just one or two children," he said.

Abramowitz said children represented by volunteers return to foster care at a rate half that of children represented by staff with large caseloads. Children served by volunteers also tend to perform better in school, he added.

In 2012-13, GAL made the same request as this year and received a total of \$32 million from the state, including a one-time increase of \$1.8 million, he said.

The program is now asking the Legislature to continue appropriating the \$1.8 million on an annual basis. The additional \$2.1 million would provide salary increases for staff, which are appropriate for the jobs and functions they perform as managers of volunteers, Abramowitz said.

The agency has already begun a large recruitment effort.

In December 2007, about 55 percent of the program's children were represented by volunteers, Abramowitz said. Volunteers now represent 72 percent of children served by the agency, he said.

the end of the year, Abramowitz added, the program should have about 9,000 volunteers.

"In 2007, we had 10 percent more money and 50 percent less volunteers," he said. "We're becoming more efficient."

Abramowitz encourages anyone interested in volunteering to visit the program's website at guardianadlitem.org.

"Attorneys do a great job," he said. "They have skills and training that allow them to think of those things that no one else is thinking about."