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May 15, 2012

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A triple treat of good news for the GALs

By Jan Pudlow

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!”

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Mark Wilson and Alan Abramowitz: When economic times are bad, children hurt

Mark Wilson and Alan Abramowitz

My View

The Florida Chamber of Commerce and its six pillars for securing Florida's future serve as a framework for local, regional and state strategic planning.

Two pillars in particular, Quality of Life and Civic and Government Systems, serve as an organizing force that helps define an important relationship between the Florida Guardian ad Litem program's public-private partnership and the Florida Chamber.

The Quality of Life pillar recognizes that Florida's future depends on preserving a wide range of integrated elements that express the robustness of our culture and the positive perceptions of those things that make us healthy, safe, comfortable, secure and involved. While there is no doubt that Florida's economy is beginning to move in the right direction, the fact remains that many of Florida's families are struggling. When families struggle, children suffer. And that often leads to child abuse and neglect.

A Bureau of Labor Statistics study shows that for every 1-percent increase in unemployment there is a concomitant increase in confirmed child maltreatment reports one year later. The inability to pay rent, the frustration of not finding a job and the incapacity to pay for mental health treatment often lead to increased child neglect and abuse.

Guardian ad Litem program volunteers and staff serve to be the "best interest" voice for neglected or abused children. Thanks to GAL volunteers, children are less likely to re-enter foster care and more likely to be adopted, have more services provided to them and do better in school.

While government cannot successfully raise children, it can help foster public-private partnerships that provide parents and families the support to meet their children's needs. In part, that theory is at the core of the Florida Chamber's Civic and Government Systems pillar. It recognizes that civic and government structures play essential roles in delivering services,

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organizing markets and providing opportunities for the public to become engaged.

Florida's diverse nonprofit organizations help meet the needs of communities and provide essential services to family's every day in Florida. In fact, in 2009, approximately 3.3 million Florida volunteers contributed more than 500 million hours of service to local organizations — a multibillion-dollar savings to taxpayers.

The Florida Chamber recognizes the many contributions Florida's GAL program plays in our state's overall quality of life and in Florida's ability to link top-quality public programs with private sector contributions. Their success stories demonstrate that they are an indispensable intermediary between children and the court and between children and the Department of Children and Families.

To Florida GAL volunteers and Florida's business community — thank you for giving your time, talents and treasures to help improve the quality of life for children and families statewide.



Alan Abramowitz

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For more information about the Florida Chamber of Commerce go www.flchamber.com. For more information about Guardian ad Litem go to www.GuardianadLitem.org.

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Alan Abramowitz: Guardian ad Litem p rotects children, and does it well

I was thrilled to learn recently that Florida's statewide Guardian ad Litem Program will receive the prestigious Davis Productivity Eagle Award for streamlining efficiencies to focus on commitment to children.

The Eagle Award is the highest honor from the Davis Productivity Awards program, which recognizes state employees and public agency leaders whose work "significantly and measurably increases productivity" and "saves money for Florida taxpayers and businesses."

The Davis Awards, a major government improvement initiative that is chaired by Lt. Gov. Jennifer Carroll, is co-sponsored by Florida TaxWatch, the Florida Council of 100, the state of Florida and Prudential.

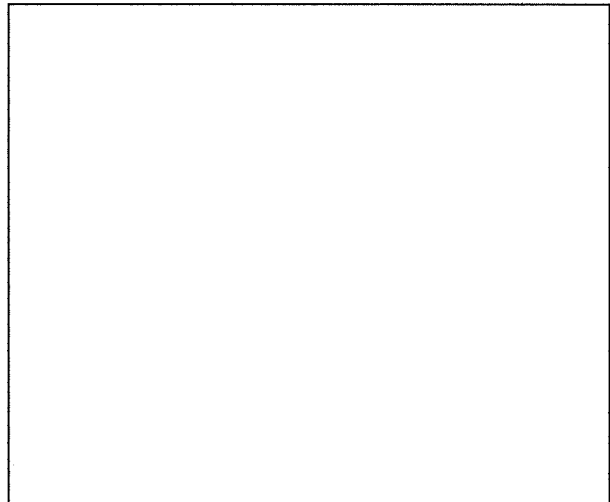
The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program is being recognized for cost avoidance and increased productivity through utilizing the gifts of time and talent by our nearly 8,000 dedicated volunteers. In addition, the GAL Program established a public/private partnership leveraging money with local nonprofits; established an online portal for volunteers, resulting in cost savings; and established online training for program staff and pro bono attorneys, resulting in

free continuing legal education credits.

The GAL Program is cost-effective: For every dollar we save through the efficiencies recognized by the Davis Awards team, more children's voices can be heard in our state's dependency courts. The best interests of Florida's dependent children are our only interest. We are pleased to provide abused and neglected children the representation they need so their problems can be addressed in efficient and effective ways.

The public/private partnerships created by the GAL Program emphasize the relationship among citizens, businesses, professionals and nonprofits in communities to protect Florida's most vulnerable children and help families. As we continue to support our volunteers, we work diligently toward a time when all children who need a Guardian ad Litem will have a voice.

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Volunteers with Guardian ad Litem can transport foster kids to activities, under new state law

By Jerry Shaw Special to Treasure Coast Newspapers

Thursday, July 12, 2012

Neglected and abused children can benefit greatly by talking with volunteers, who help them with support and friendship through the state's foster care program.

However, until this month, the children were limited by their surroundings, usually their home group, when coming into contact with trained volunteers.

Now volunteers are allowed to transport the children to various events or drive them to areas where they can engage in fun activities.

A new state law, effective July 1, allows trained volunteers with the Guardian ad Litem program to drive kids around during their visits so the children can experience everyday activities other children enjoy. The children in foster care can also visit more often with their siblings, who may be in other home groups because they are from large families.

"There are a handful of volunteers already leading the charge to bring a sense of normalcy to the children's experiences, engaging them more in the community," notes Travis Erickson, director of the 19th Judicial Circuit program, which covers Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin and Okeechobee counties.

The GAL program is a public and private partnership, which has more than 8,000 trained volunteers statewide to help abused and neglected children.

There are some 300 volunteers with GAL in the 19th circuit. The volunteers work with case managers and the children's caregivers to help make them aware of a child's special needs.

Under the new transportation program, volunteers can take children to the mall, the park, restaurants or different areas to play.

The children often open up more when they are allowed to travel with volunteers.

The idea of including transportation for Florida's program first started as a safety issue, according to Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the state GAL program in Tallahassee.

In California, some volunteers found the transportation program built up trust in their relationship. A few children opened up about the abuse they were facing. But the major reason for transporting children around the community involves their overall improvement.

Abramowitz said two volunteers from St. Lucie County recently sent him an email with pictures of the children.

"The kids looked so happy," he said. "They (the volunteers) are really able to help the children."

Older children in foster care are aided by the new transportation law because volunteers can drive them to job interviews and help them to become more self-sufficient by interacting with others in the community.



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Chief guardian has own caseload

By DEBORAH CIRCELLI, STAFF WRITER 

DAYTONA BEACH -- The 17-year-old Deltona foster teen isn't fazed by the fact the man he plays basketball with and advises him is the head of the Florida Guardian and Litem Program.

Alan Abramowitz is just the person he sees every month who has represented his needs in court as his guardian.

Abramowitz has taken him out to eat, bought him shoes, encouraged him to study for his GED test and talked to him about his future.

As executive director of the statewide program, Abramowitz oversees 8,000 volunteer guardians and 500 paid staff who represent the needs of 20,000 children.

"He's just a normal person," said John, who lives in a foster group home, but whose last name is not being used because of confidentiality laws. "I don't go around saying I got the head person for the state. He's just a caring person."

Because of his personal on-the-job experience and a recent study looking into the needs of foster children, Abramowitz has been able to make changes, including helping get a new law passed that went into effect in July allowing guardians to transport foster children to various activities.

Previously, guardians could only visit children, at their foster homes, school or court, but couldn't take them to the park, to lunch or visit with their siblings.

"These children will have additional opportunities to experience day-to-day activities and the extra time together will undoubtedly help create greater trust among the children and the volunteer making us better advocates," Abramowitz said.

In Volusia and Flagler counties, 225 volunteers are guardians, but more are needed because 40 percent of about 600 local children appointed to the program are served by staff. The goal is to have all volunteers who can be mentors and provide more one-on-one attention, Abramowitz said.

The teen John who has been represented by Abramowitz since January, is glad Abramowitz is seeing "with his own eyes" what foster children face.

Abramowitz, who lives in Tallahassee but also has a home in DeLand, has been guardian to four children in the past year throughout the state. He also was a volunteer guardian for two years in the late 1980s when he was in law school.

Additionally, his parents, who are Florida residents, also volunteer for the program.

By handling a few cases now, he said, "it helps me understand how to best support our volunteers in giving children a voice."

"The most enjoyable part of any job in child advocacy is spending time with children," Abramowitz said.

John has been in foster care on and off about nine years because of neglect at home.

He got his GED in April and is starting classes later this month at Daytona State College for his associate degree.

He said Abramowitz taught him to "appreciate life" and that "everybody makes mistakes but learn from it. Stop procrastinating and do what you said you were going to do."

Abramowitz said the teen is doing "really good."

"He's put himself in a great situation (going to college). I don't take any credit for that. This kid is smart," Abramowitz said.

Sandi Wise of Deltona is guardian to five foster children, mostly teens. She said the teens are more open about issues they are facing or concerns when she talks to them away from the group home. She's taken them to the mall, park and pet store.

"I was able to take one to the doctor for her foster mom. She could see that I really cared," Wise said. "It builds this trust. This bond. They open up more when they have the opportunity of privacy."

For information about volunteering for the guardian ad litem program, call 386-239-7803.

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Prescription drug abuse taxes state's children/family agency
By DEBORAH CIRCELLI, STAFF WRITER ✉



Brothers David Abramowitz, left, and Alan Abramowitz, are tackling the challenges in the state's child welfare field. (NJ | Nigel Cook)

A curly-haired 2-year-old girl holds out a large stuffed animal to David Abramowitz as he walks into the Ormond Beach house.

He swoops her into his arms after introducing himself to her mother, who has been in an intervention program through the state Department of Children & Families and Community Partnership for Children where she gets substance abuse treatment while keeping her children at home.

A 3-month-old sits in a bouncy chair smiling.

As they sit on the couch, the 20-year-old mother, who was addicted to prescription drugs, explains how she loves her children "more than anything." She and the children's father had a "haze over us" and couldn't have succeeded without the state's help, she said.

State and local child welfare officials are dealing with a surge in abuse and neglect cases primarily blamed on prescription drug abuse. A program has been implemented the past two years and restructured locally to provide more intervention to families to keep children in their homes.

Lack of funding, though, limits the Intensive Family Intervention program to 40 families at a time -- 10 cases for each of the four case workers for Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties. But Abramowitz is looking at reworking funding to expand the program and provide more substance abuse treatment. He is meeting later this month with treatment providers to find solutions.

About 80 percent of the cases of abuse or neglect in the region, which includes Volusia and Flagler and 18 other counties, involve prescription drug abuse, he said.

"The biggest problem we have now is prescription drugs -- Ambien, Oxycodone. All these things. You get addicted to it and it's death. It's very difficult," Abramowitz said. "There are not enough beds, not enough detox centers. There is not enough to overcome this."

The number of children in foster care and other out-of-home placements is up 17 percent from two years ago with 1,043 children in placements in Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties, reports show. The number of children removed from their homes is up 10 percent in the three-county area from just last fiscal year. But the state has also prevented hundreds of children from being removed locally through prevention and diversion programs, including one by a local provider, Neighbor To Family.

Abramowitz said the last thing investigators want to do is remove a child, but he said "if there is no place to put the mother or father for detox because of lack of resources" they may have no choice.

"Ultimately, we want to keep the child at home with the mother and/or father," he said. "We know how important that is."

Abramowitz is understanding and says "I'm very proud of you" to the local mother, whose name is not being used because of state confidentiality laws, and who has been clean for two months. But he's also quick to tell her his top priority is the safety of the children.

"My job is kids. I want her to get her high school diploma and I want her to go to West Point," the retired Army colonel told the mother about her children.

Like his brother, Alan Abramowitz, 50, executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, which represents foster children in court, David Abramowitz, 53, is out in the field riding with investigators to understand the challenges faced by families and his workers. Both are married with children of their own.

His brother is not only a guardian for a Deltona foster teen, but previously as the local administrator for DCF handled some investigations and advised his older brother to also be hands-on.

David Abramowitz, who took over in January as regional director after a 30-year career in the Army, has driven with investigators throughout his 20-county area on about 40 cases. Two years ago, he was in Iraq in the U.S. Army as chief of staff of the Iraq Assistance Group in charge of training the Iraqi Army.

Now his focus is on families.

One of his most heart-wrenching visits, he said, was seeing a 23-year-old mother and her fourth child in a hospital in Gainesville. The baby, which had been born 10 hours earlier, was shaking from drugs in its system, he said.

"It was the saddest thing I've ever seen," Abramowitz said.

On the recent visit to the Ormond Beach mother, he encouraged her to pursue attending college.

"I see a lot of potential in you," Abramowitz said.

The mother said it feels good "to see I don't have to live like that anymore."

She's been using drugs since she was 13 starting with marijuana, but more recently was abusing pain pills.

She told Abramowitz that when she gets stressed out she still get the urge to use, "but I know what I have to lose. I don't want to lose my children. I don't want to go back to where I was."

She said the Intensive Family Intervention program has provided "not just moral support but guidance." Child welfare workers visit three times a week or more with the family

over a three to six-month period, including referring them to treatment services.

The local mother has been in an outpatient program.

On the ride back to the office, Abramowitz talked to the DCF investigator and case manager about how they try to help families. About 100 families locally, including 220 children, were helped in the program from March 2011 through June 28 of this year.

"I believe every child has a right to a safe home," said Debra Hodge, intensive family intervention specialist for Community Partnership for Children. "(At times), it gets very difficult, but I've learned to detach from it. I go in knowing I'm going to do the best I can do."

She said she gives parents "the tools" but can't control the outcome.

Bridgette Addis-Tucker, a DCF child protective investigator, said "you come into this job to make a difference in a child's life – not to remove" them from their families.

"I want to help people. I want to make a difference in this world," Addis-Tucker said.

Linda Mandizha, program administrator for DCF overseeing child protective investigators in East Volusia County, said the "services we put in the home are not to watch (families) fail, but to give them the support to achieve.

"We're human. They're human. We know that," Mandizha said. "We just want to plan for safety while we are getting them better."

The number of children receiving services outside their homes in foster care, group homes or with relatives/nonrelatives has increased.

The numbers in out-of-home care for Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties are:

1,043 Aug. 8, 2012

926 June 30, 2011

887 June 30, 2010

790 June 30, 2009

The number of children sheltered or removed from their homes in the three-county area are:

664 Fiscal year 2012

600 Fiscal year 2011

585 Fiscal year 2010

464 Fiscal year 2009

Reports received by investigators in the three-county area:

8,971 Fiscal year 2012

9,014 Fiscal year 2011

8,286 Fiscal year 2010

8,210 Fiscal year 2009

SOURCE: Community Partnership for Children

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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."



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orlandosentinel.com/news/opinion/os-ed-guardian-ad-litem-111212-20121109,0,4616071.story

OrlandoSentinel.com

My Word: Guardians ad litem stand up for kids

By Alan Abramowitz

November 12, 2012

[Kate Santich](#)'s Oct. 23 online post, reporting well-deserved honors to advocates for at-risk and disabled youth, brought to mind another group of unsung heroes for abused children — volunteer guardians ad litem.

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Local Deals/Newspaper Inserts

This tireless group of more than 8,000 voices across the state speak for children in court when they cannot speak for themselves, often serving as mentors, parent figures, role models, advisers, educational advocates and friends.

Recently, a guardian ad litem shared the story of a teenager (I'll call him "Mike") who wanted to attend the homecoming dance at his school. Mike has a low IQ and is diabetic. He faces tremendous challenges as he approaches adulthood. This would be his last year in high school, and the dance was important to him.

The adults in Mike's life assured him he could go. But someone failed to purchase his ticket, and at the last minute, Mike's guardian ad litem was notified that he couldn't go to the dance.

By this time on a Friday evening, no one was available at the school to help remedy the situation, and the local school board office could not help. The dance was the next night. That's when the guardian ad litem remembered another volunteer with strong ties in this Central Florida community. The guardian ad litem contacted the volunteer, who knocked on the school principal's door at 9 p.m. Friday. By midnight, Mike had a ticket to the homecoming dance.

The guardian ad litem spoke with Mike on the following Monday. Mike reported with joy that all the girls on the school dance team had taken turns dancing with him; he had the time of his life.

He will always remember that a small group of people cared enough to keep their promise to him.

Florida's guardian ad litem volunteers make a difference in the lives of abused and neglected children and young adults every day. These dedicated community voices are focused on one and only one priority: the best interests of the children they serve.

Alan Abramowitz is executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program (guardianadlitem.org).

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Alan Abramowitz: DJJ Roadmap offers hope to Florida's at-risk children

5:32 PM, Nov 9, 2012 |
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Written by
Alan Abramowitz
My View

As executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program — the agency that represents children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned — I am honored to support and endorse the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Roadmap to System Excellence.

Since many older children represented by Guardian Ad Litem enter the juvenile justice system, I have a keen interest in what happens at DJJ. The Roadmap guides the agency's comprehensive reforms, which will make our state a national leader in humane and effective juvenile justice administration.

DJJ's reforms are designed to redirect children away from the juvenile justice system, focus on rehabilitation and reduce juvenile delinquency.

Data and research drive DJJ's reforms, which are already having a positive effect statewide. (Did you know that juvenile delinquency in Florida has declined 35 percent in the past five years?)

I was volunteer guardian for a young man, "John," who is a perfect example.

He was diverted from DJJ into a civil citation program that addressed his misbehavior and offered him tools for positive change. This opportunity gave John the chance to make up for his offense. Because he avoided a criminal record, he is now in college and on track for a respectable career.

Helping children and families in their home communities strengthens their rehabilitation and reunification, and DJJ Secretary Wansley Walters is realigning resources to emphasize front-end, community-based programs that offer children the right help at the right time. Front-end help can prevent children from developing patterns of delinquency, better positioning child advocates to stabilize kids' lives.

We can all help pave a path to a child's future of hope and emotional security. I encourage you to participate in DJJ's Roadmap Town Hall meetings, the first of which is in Tallahassee on Thursday, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Ghazvini Center for Healthcare Education, 1528 Surgeons Drive.

The Roadmap to System Excellence is an effective, comprehensive and collaborative approach to guide at-risk and troubled children to better choices and brighter futures.

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, was appointed by Gov. Rick Scott to the DJJ State Advisory Group and is former chair of The Florida Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee. For more information on DJJ's Roadmap to System Excellence, go to <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/roadmap-to-system-excellence> or email roadmap@djj.state.fl.us.

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'Normalcy Bill' May Give Youth in Foster System More Freedom

Rep. Albritton sponsors bill to allow foster parents more freedom in decision making

By [Kevin Bouffard](#)

THE LEDGER

Published: Wednesday, March 27, 2013 at 4:36 p.m.

LAKELAND | At 17, Caitlin McRae, a junior at Kathleen High School, still searches for a normal life — things like dating, getting her driver license and just hanging out with friends at home.

"I don't think I live normally," McRae told The Ledger. "I'm not allowed to have friends stay over. It upsets me because sometimes I'd like to have my friends over and do what we want to do."

Although McRae has had her driver learning permit for almost a year now, she doesn't feel ready to take the test because she's had only about three hours of practice behind the wheel during that time, she said. She has a boyfriend but is allowed only on "dates" accompanied by his parents.

McRae may look and act like a normal teen, but her status as a foster child under state custody restricts her from doing even such routine activities because they currently require permission from caseworkers and other supervisory authorities.

Supervisors often refrain from giving foster children permission even for such routine activities, including playing school sports, because of concern over legal liability, such as injury, if something goes wrong, said Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the state's Guardian ad Litem program, which provides independent volunteers to advocate for the interests of youth in state custody.

"Everybody knows it's unfair to the children," Abramowitz said of the current restrictions on nearly 8,000 children in Florida's licensed family foster homes or youth group homes. "When you get removed from a parent, all of the sudden, you're around a bunch of strangers. We need to make sure their lives continue as normally as possible."

McRae is certainly not alone in feeling she can't live a normal life. Abramowitz and others in the foster care system told The Ledger many examples of children restricted or nearly so from doing normal activities because of bureaucratic obstacles over permission:

A Polk County girl almost barred from participating in a school music recital because a newspaper photographer would be there. A state law requires confidentiality of foster care records, prohibiting the publication of names or pictures of foster children.



SCOTT WHEELER | THE LEDGER

Caitlin McRae, 17, who has her restricted driver license, behind the wheel with her guardian ad litem, Sue Schultz, with her in Lakeland on Tuesday. McRae, who lives in a group home, has trouble getting enough practice behind the wheel because no one but Schultz will take her.

A teen told he could not take a high school band trip because they couldn't do a background check on everybody the band might encounter.

A foster youth could not go on a boat trip with the foster family because of fear of drowning.

Home studies and criminal background checks required before a foster youth could sleep over at a friend's house.

Forbidding a foster child from accepting a ride home from school with a friend's parent without prior approval.

A 17-year-old boy already in college not allowed to date until his foster care provider did a background check on the girl.

"Help is on the way," said state Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula, whose district includes Mulberry, Fort Meade and southwest Polk.

Albritton sponsored House Bill 215, nicknamed the "Normalcy Bill," which gives greater autonomy to foster parents and group home supervisors to authorize participation in age-appropriate activities for the children in their care.

Albritton's bill unanimously passed the House on March 13 and the Senate in a 38-0 vote on Wednesday. Albritton said he expects Gov. Rick Scott will sign it within the 15 days mandated by state law.

Albritton said he got involved in the foster care system after he and his wife, Missy, explored becoming foster parents. Missy Albritton is now a member of the board of directors at Bartow-based Heartland for Children, the non-profit organization that oversees foster care providers in Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties.

"I saw a problem evolved from the state spending too much focus on the safety of children and not enough on giving these kids a normal life," Albritton said. "Our goal is for the foster care setting to be as normal as possible."

The bill accomplishes that by relieving direct caregivers of legal liability if they act as a "prudent parent" in allowing foster children to participate in the kind of normal activities other children do, including playing sports, dating or sleeping over at a friend's house, he said.

Albritton cited the example of a foster teen who was the kicker on his high school football team that made it to the state championship game. But the young man nearly missed the Friday night game because it took several days to get permission to play after his team won the semifinal game the previous Friday.

"He kicked the game-winning point for his team," Albritton said.

One reason the bill passed unanimously is that nobody, even officials in the foster care system, opposed it, he said.

Florida is only the second state after California in 2005 to adopt the prudent-parent standard in foster care, said Abramowitz, who helped draft the Normalcy Bill with input from foster care providers, guardians and, especially, the foster children.

The reform is long overdue, said Teri Saunders, CEO of Heartland for Children. Even before former Gov. Jeb Bush led the initiative to privatize the state's foster care services a decade ago, the state kept tight restrictions on foster children's activities.

"This needed to be done. Our foster families and child-care facilities need to be empowered to make these decisions," Saunders said. "I think this will empower our caregivers to apply the common-sense lens."

Living in foster care is difficult even under the best of circumstances because children feel different from their peers, said Sue Schultz of Lakeland, guardian ad litem for McRae and more than 50 children during the past eight years.

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The obstacles in getting permission for even routine activities only increases the emotional burden.

"It does hamper their ability to hang out with other kids — to be a kid," Schultz said.

"It (the Normalcy Bill) is freedom to be a kid."

The three hours of driving practice Caitlin got came through Schultz, the only person who was willing to assume the insurance liability while she was behind the wheel.

Without a driver license, McRae's transition to independent living in June, when she turns 18, will be tougher, she and Schultz agreed. She'll need to provide her own transportation for senior year at Kathleen High and later to college and to a job that will help with school and other expenses.

Mike Holt, 41, a Lakeland foster father, said the new standard would help integrate foster kids into the family. He and his wife, Ann, have had 80 foster children from infants to teens in their home over seven years.

"We treat the foster children as our own children," Holt said. "If somebody asks, 'Are these your children?' we say 'Yes.' They're not our foster children. They're ours."

But the Holts have experienced the red tape of getting permission for their children's activities including sports, cheerleading and stay-overs with friends.

"They're going through enough being foster children," Holt said. "This will give these children a sense of us being the parents. It also will help ease some of the work off the caseworkers, and it will help us parent these kids."

[Kevin Bouffard can be reached at kevin.bouffard@theledger.com or at 863-401-6980. Read more on Florida citrus on his Facebook page, Florida Citrus Witness, <http://bit.ly/baxWuU>.]

Gov. Scott: "Let Kids Be Kids"

☰ Category: [Politics](#)

🕒 Created on Thursday, 11 April 2013 21:08

✍ Written by [OrlandoAdvocate](#)

📄 Hits: 20



Tallahassee – Today, Governor Rick Scott signed House Bill 215, the "Normalcy Bill" which reduces rules and regulations that currently limit the activity of children in foster care.

The governor and First Lady Ann Scott were joined by Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins, foster child advocate Tanya Wilkins, Guardian Ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz, Representative Ben Albritton, Senator Nancy Detert and Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Wansley Walters for the signing.

Governor Scott said, "Florida families have always been my top priority, and I believe that this legislation will help foster families and group homes become an even stronger family setting."

This bill, also referred to as the "*Let Kids be Kids*" bill recognizes the importance of allowing children in foster care the ability to take part in everyday activities, without the involvement of case managers, provider agencies or the court system. The "Reasonable and Prudent Parent" standard incorporated in the bill allows foster parents to give foster children permission to do daily, age appropriate, activities such as joining a school athletic team or going to the beach with friends.

"Children in foster care deserve to be treated like any other kid in the state, and this new law will help to accomplish that," said bill sponsor, Representative Ben Albritton. "I am very thankful that we have a Governor that values kids here in the state and puts that belief into action, and I am pleased to join him in signing this bill into law."

Senate sponsor Senator Nancy Detert said, "In our quest to protect children in our care we have, in essence, bubble wrapped them and prevented them from leading normal lives. Under this new bill, foster care kids will still be protected but they won't be red flagged as 'foster care kids.' This bill will allow them to live a more normal life."

Department of Children and Families Secretary David Wilkins spoke at today's event in support of the new law. "Because of Governor Scott and the leadership, advocacy and

support of the Florida Legislature, youth who have been in foster care, foster and adoptive parents, and volunteer advocates across the state, signed this important legislation which truly puts Florida's most vulnerable children first," said Wilkins. "Reducing regulations empowers foster caregivers to be the parents that children in foster care need and help them have the same opportunities as any of our children."

"When children are alone and against the world, foster parents give them time to rebuild their lives. Foster parents provide needed structure, a listening ear for a hurt soul, and help our children get ready for the real world," said Tanya Wilkins, Florida's Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption. "These changes will allow foster parents to encourage sports and music, slumber parties or even part-time jobs – activities that build self-esteem, develop friendships and help define a child."

Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Wansley Walters said, "I want to thank Governor Scott for signing HB 215, and I want to congratulate Florida's Guardian ad Litem Program for their hard work on the passage of this important legislation. The bill promotes the concept that all children deserve the opportunity to have a normal family-like upbringing. Furthermore, this legislation empowers caregivers to make decisions regarding children that focus on the health and safety of children while also boosting their emotional and developmental growth."

As Governor Scott prepared to sign the bill, Alan Abramowitz, Guardian Ad Litem Executive Director, gave words in celebration of this new law. "The children have championed this bill and our state leaders have listened. On July 1, our Statutes will reflect the values we hold for children in foster care. The law will recognize them not as "foster kids," but just kids," he said.

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New rules bring normalcy for kids in foster care

By Andy Fillmore
Correspondent Ocala Star Banner

Published: Sunday, May 5, 2013 at 8:31 p.m.

Former foster child Georgina Rodriguez is pursuing her associate's degree at Hillsborough Community College and plans to continue her college education after that. This is possible, in part, because one of her six sets of foster parents broke the rules when she was in their care.

Rodriguez, now 21, was in the Florida dependency court system from age 6 to 18 due to an abusive home situation. "Foster parents were not supposed to, but my foster parents in Plant City took me out on their boat," Rodriguez said in a recent telephone conversation.

"I would go with them to their farm along with their biological kids. They showed me they really cared. I wasn't singled out as a foster child. It made a difference," Rodriguez said. She still recalls the family outings as a breath of fresh air in a difficult time. They had a lasting impact and helped her as she grew. "My Plant City foster parents still keep in touch today," she said.

On April 11, a bill signed into state law changed the foster care rules so that those kinds of empowering excursions are no longer taboo.

The "Quality Parenting for Children in Foster Care Act," SB 215, sponsored by Sen. Nancy Detert and Rep. Ben Albritton and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott, intends to bring "normalcy" to the process of caring for foster children.

The language of SB 215, which takes effect July 1, acknowledges that children in foster care should "participate in life skills activities" that are "age-appropriate" and "increase their ability to live independently and become self-sufficient" when they age-out of the foster care system at 18. For certain, "reasonable and prudent parenting standards" must be followed when a child is allowed to participate in "extracurricular, enrichment and social activities."

But the law states that "foster parents, family foster homes, residential child-caring agencies or other authorized caregivers employing the reasonable and prudent parenting standard in their decision making shall not be held responsible under administrative rules or laws pertaining to state licensure ... as a result of the actions of a child engaged in the approved age-appropriate activities."

In other words, foster parents and guardians will be less encumbered when they work with foster kids.

Although potential risk must be weighed, a “caregiver is not liable for harm caused to a child who participates in an event approved by the caregiver,” the law says.

Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Guardian Ad Litem child advocacy program, remarked earlier that the bill, also known as the permission-to-parent bill, “needed to be passed so children in foster care can be like every other kid” by moving from school to school, playing school sports, using the phone or participating in school trips.

Under the old rules, such activities would have been permitted only with precautions like background checks. The purpose: satisfying liability concerns.

One young adult described not be allowed to join the traveling high school band.

As of February, 30,552 abused and neglected children were under Florida dependency court system supervision. That statistic comes from Marcia Hilty, 5th Judicial Circuit director for the Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program, which represents 21,157 of those children statewide.

GAL assigns volunteers to act as advocates for the children. Those advocates may stay with a particular case, involving one or several children, for years, always seeking the best interests of their charges.

According to Hilty, the 5th Judicial Circuit (Citrus, Hernando, Lake, Marion and Sumter counties) has 1,667 involved in the court system — 1,426 of whom are represented by GAL.

Spruce Creek South resident Norman Abels, 75, a GAL volunteer for six years, praised the passage of SB 215.

“It will give us the ability to give these kids a more normal life,” he said. “Without normalcy there’s no outlet for the kids.”

Abels emphasized the importance of Voices for Children of North Central Florida, a 501(c)3 nonprofit community-based group that raises funds to aid children in foster care under GAL supervision.

Abramowitz reflected on the meaning of the newly passed law: Sleepovers, high school sports, driving, going to the beach and other regular activities we all take for granted are now permitted by the foster parent or caregiver just as any decision reasonable prudent parents make all the time,” he said.

“The red tape and obstacles have been removed so children in foster care can participate in regular activities as all other kids in our community.”

The Florida Bar News

June 15, 2013

Law loosens strings on kids in foster care

By Megan E. Davis

Associate Editor

For most kids, playing sports, sleepovers with friends, and going to prom are normal parts of growing up.

But for thousands of foster children in Florida, these activities that most kids take for granted are often out of reach.

"When a normal parent thinks of a kid spending the night at a friend's house, they think, 'Oh, OK, I know this person's parents. It's fine,'" said Ebonie Thrower, a former foster child in Naples. "What I think of is going back and forth to court and getting fingerprints. It's taxing and embarrassing."

A new law approved by Gov. Rick Scott aims to change those circumstances by easing restrictions to afford foster children an opportunity for a more "normal" childhood.

The Quality Parenting for Children in Foster Care Act, championed by the Florida Guardian Ad Litem Program and sponsored by Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, and Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Bartow, garnered support from a wide swath, including lawmakers and child advocates.

Former and present foster children called it the "Let Kids Be Kids Bill" while foster parents touted it as the "Permission to Parent Bill."

"The foster care system in Florida has historically focused on safety and concerns about liability," Detert said. "Typical rites of passage are anything but typical for children in foster care. Each one requires additional layers of bureaucracy. By taking up their time and having them go through bureaucratic gobbledygook, we've bubble-wrapped the kids and deprived them of normalcy."

When it takes effect July 1, the law will empower foster parents to decide whether to allow children in their care to participate in activities based on the caregiver's own assessment using a "reasonable and prudent parent standard," without seeking approval from the child's caseworker or the

courts.

The law states that children are entitled to participate in age-appropriate extracurricular, enrichment, and social activities and that doing so aids their emotional and developmental growth.

Foster parents are required to consider a child's age and developmental level, potential risk factors, the importance of providing a family-like experience, and the child's history when deciding which activities are appropriate.

"It's great because it's putting into law what our values are for children who happen to be in foster care," said Alan Abramowitz, executive director of the Florida Guardian Ad Litem Program.

Still, the work toward normalcy isn't over, he said.

"Now comes the part when we have to ensure that it occurs because there may be other obstacles independent of the caregiver being able to make the decisions of a reasonable, prudent parent," Abramowitz said. Those could include issues such as agency procedures or insurance concerns, he said.

"What we're doing as the Guardian Ad Litem Program is coming up with a standard so we can have our volunteers looking at this issue," Abramowitz said. "If we see that a caregiver is being vetoed for regular activities, we know that there's a problem. If there are policies contrary to the law, we can do something about it."

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Rays, guardian ad litem team up

Posted: Jul 10, 2013

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) - The Tampa Bay Rays are lending their support to the Florida Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program, which appoints people to mentor and advocate for abused and neglected children.

GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz will throw out the ceremonial first pitch at Wednesday night's game against the Minnesota Twins.

Ray's first baseman James Loney and his wife, Nadia, were named honorary guardians ad litem and will be featured in public service announcements to recruit volunteers for the program.

Florida's GAL program has nearly 10,000 volunteers statewide. Volunteers mentor abused, abandoned and neglected children, including foster kids, and also advocate for them in court, school and other places.

Abramowitz says it's crucial to give such vulnerable children a voice.

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Committee Notes

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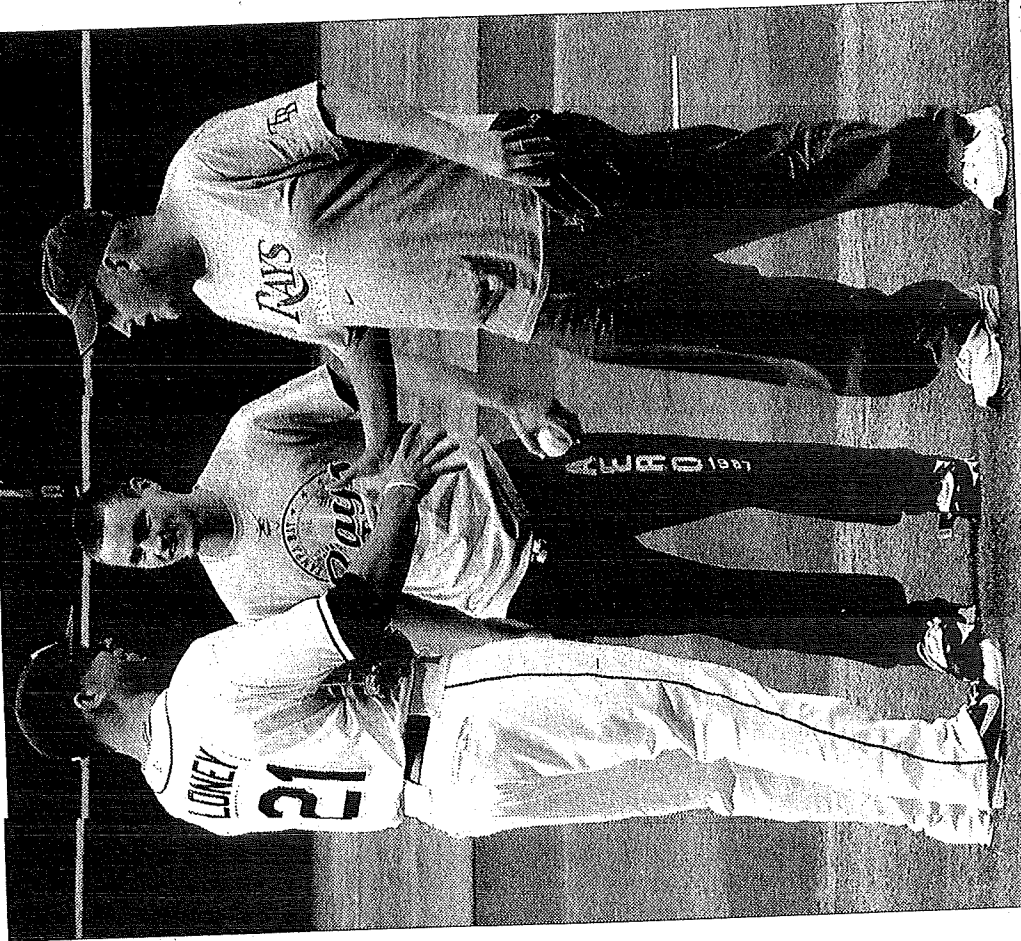
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applicant's qualifications to serve as a guardian; and
names of all wards who are adults and the initials of any ward who
then acting as guardian, the court file number and circuit court in
statement as to whether the applicant is acting as a limited or plenary
or both, of each ward.

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corporation's qualifications to serve as a guardian; and
names of all wards who are adults, and the initials of any ward who
is then acting as guardian, the court file number and circuit court in
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WHEN HE WENT TO THE PITCHER'S MOUND at Tropicana Field to throw the first pitch at the Tampa Rays game, Statewide Guardian ad Litem Director Alan Abramowitz, wearing a shirt that said GAL Program #1, faked a shoulder injury, so he could give the ball to Justin Meade, a youth in foster care. Justin, who was brought to the game by his GAL Fran Abilock, got to throw the first ceremonial pitch instead. Justin, who had plenty of practice because he plays pitcher on his high school team, pitched a strike. "I didn't have to embarrass myself by throwing the ball the wrong way," said Abramowitz, who last held a baseball when he was 10. "God thing Justin did the throw or I would have been on 'Sports Bloopers.' The Tampa Rays are big into helping children in so many ways. The partnership with our program is just another way they have helped the community and children in need of representation from the Guardian ad Litem Program." Rays first baseman James Loney (pictured) did a public service announcement with his wife, Nadia, for the GAL Program, and it was shown on a large screen before the game. More than 200 GALs and 20 foster children were at the July 10 game, and the Rays won, beating the Minnesota Twins 4-3.

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DETERT

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ABRAMOWITZ

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September 15, 2013

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Lawyers ad litem help medically fragile kids leave nursing homes

By Jan Pudlow
Senior Editor

The medically fragile infant was housed in a wing of a nursing home designed for geriatric patients in Tampa, and the child's parents lived more than 400 miles away in Pensacola.

Guardian ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz asked Paolo Annino, the Glass Professor of Public Interest Law at Florida State University's College of Law, to serve as the baby's attorney ad litem.



Now, the infant has been moved to a loving medical foster home in Pensacola, where the baby gets held and hugged a lot more, and his parents are able to visit often and are working toward a chance at reunification.

"This is a case where everyone worked together. The amount of work the GAL did was amazing in this case," Annino said. "Everyone was focusing on the child, and everyone realized the appropriate place for this baby was not in a nursing home."

Though the infant is a "DCF [Department of Children and Families] child," where there have been findings of abuse or neglect, Annino said, parental rights have not been severed. Bringing the baby back to Pensacola, he said, "will help the possibility of reunification" and, if that happens, the parents would need to receive a tremendous amount of help to care for their child.

Important right now, Annino said, is the one-on-one attention the baby receives from medical foster parents, where medically fragile children are given "lots of hugs and rubbing heads and hands. With really young children, tactile attachment is so important."

Annino, who handles such cases pro bono, praised Abramowitz for his efforts at receiving funding from the Legislature to hire attorneys ad litem for medically fragile children and coordinating their legal representation.

Because of a \$325,000 legislative appropriation, the number of medically fragile foster children in DCF's custody has been winnowed down from 35,

before the law was passed, to the current 11 living in skilled nursing homes.

Personally visiting each medically fragile foster child housed in Florida's nursing homes, Abramowitz has witnessed tiny bodies hooked up to ventilators and felt voiceless children's eyes track him as he moved across the room.

"These children are special. It stays with you when you see them," Abramowitz said, noting that three Florida nursing homes have closed down or stopped taking kids, leaving the state with only four nursing homes handling medically fragile children.

"In fact, DCF doesn't want these children there either," Abramowitz said. "We want them in a homelike setting."

Abramowitz wants to place the children in medical foster homes, but there aren't enough of them. He said it takes a "special, caring person willing to commit to a child who is so fragile, and needs a lot of time. You have to be patient. These are top-tier foster parents," he said, adding that retired nurses make great medical foster parents. "They are out there, and we need to connect with them."

In an August 22 letter to Sen. Tom Lee, R-Brandon and Rep. Neil Combee, R-Auburndale, Abramowitz thanked the sponsors of the bill to appropriate \$325,000 for attorneys ad litem.

"Because of your support in ensuring dependent children with disabilities who are living in skilled nursing facilities are given an attorney ad litem, these children will now have an effective advocate who will ensure that their medical needs are met, the services they need are supplied, and a more suitable placement is provided," Abramowitz wrote.

Because many of these children are placed in nursing homes away from their "county of jurisdiction," Abramowitz said, "the GAL Program and the new attorneys ad litem work closely together for the child."

"When you see the faces of the children impacted by this initiative," Abramowitz wrote to the lawmakers, "you cannot help but want to move heaven and earth to ensure that they are not only advocated for, but that they obtain permanency."

With GALs and attorneys ad litem working together, Abramowitz said, "We believe this advocacy team can reach the common goal of the GAL Program, the DCF, and the Florida Legislature of reducing the number of disabled children living in skilled nursing facilities . . . to zero. We all want disabled children to be reunified with their families, in medical foster homes, or placements that are better suited for children — with more activity, social interaction, permanency, and joy."

Abramowitz notes that attorneys at the GAL Program, who are experts in dependency law, have caseloads as high as 200. That's why well-trained attorneys ad litem, who can advocate for long-term guardianships and deal with administrative law hearings, are so essential.

For the FY 2014-15, Abramowitz is asking for a modification of the proviso language to allow excess funds to be "used to reimburse attorneys in other

matters which have been court-ordered or for training on matters pertaining to children with disabilities.”

Abramowitz explained that this would allow the GAL Program to “maximize dollars, utilizing pro bono attorneys where available, and attorneys ad litem for children who require guardianships, are considered or are placed in residential treatment centers, or children who are victims of human trafficking.”

The attorneys ad litem on the cases are working.

“Once we put a flashlight on these hidden children, we see they are kids that can work with present services in the community and remove them from nursing facilities, which is inappropriate,” said Annino.

“In my case with the infant, there was no litigation. We were able to negotiate and everyone worked together. Sometimes, there is no litigation because the attorney ad litem is there facilitating, and keeps asking: ‘Why?’ I don’t go in saying, ‘I’m going to sue you.’ I say: ‘Why can’t this happen?’ The role of the attorney is to be an advocate, and what that means is asking the different stakeholders, ‘Why can’t this child be in the community?’ The goal is not to litigate.”

But, for a group of nearly 200 medically fragile children and almost 5,000 at risk, litigation is the vehicle aimed at systemic change. Beyond the 11 foster children currently in nursing homes, there are about another 180 medically fragile children in Florida’s nursing homes, sparking two lawsuits that are still pending in the U.S. Southern District.

Annino is using his clinical law students to help in a class-action lawsuit pending in federal court in the Southern District of Florida ([Case No. 12-60460-CIV; T.H. et al. v. Elizabeth Dudek, secretary of the Agency for Health Care Administration, et al.](#))

(See October 1, 2012, Bar News story, [“Law students fight to bring the ‘hidden children’ home.”](#))

“The good nursing homes at least do a good job of taking care of the child’s body,” Annino said. “But they do a terrible job of taking care of the child’s soul. That’s the substantive matter. Nursing homes are not a good place for children. The state disagrees with that. They also disagree with the law. For me, the law is black letter law.”

Since that lawsuit was filed by Annino’s Public Interest Law Center, Miami disability rights attorney Matthew Dietz, and The Northern Florida Center for Equal Justice, Inc., the U.S. Department of Justice filed a separate lawsuit in July 2013 against the State of Florida. The DOJ alleges that “nearly 200 children with disabilities in Florida are segregated unnecessarily in nursing facilities.”

On August 13, the State of Florida filed its answer, with its first affirmative defense that Florida does not have to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act: “In enacting Title II of the ADA, Congress exceeded the scope of its enforcement authority under Section 5 of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Title II of the ADA is therefore invalid and unenforceable.”

State health leaders have gone on the offensive to counter the lawsuits, announcing that they have taken action to improve the care of the children in nursing homes, and changed protocol to help make sure the children are living in the right places to serve their needs.

While the lawsuits are pending in federal court, Abramowitz is on a separate, passionate mission to reduce the medically fragile foster children in nursing homes, by enlisting the expertise of attorneys ad litem.

Ideally, Abramowitz said, these children need to be adopted into forever families.

"It's the individual attention, the love, just the need for a child to have a family like everybody else," Abramowitz said. "Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you shouldn't be part of a family. We want children to be part of a family. Every child is adoptable."

[Revised: 09-09-2013]

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April 15, 2014

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Bills would provide lawyers for special-needs kids

By Jan Pudlow

Senior Editor

With the crucial support of Statewide Guardian ad Litem Director Alan Abramowitz, bills in both the House and Senate are moving forward to provide state-paid attorneys for dependent children with special needs.

"It's the first time in history we have a director of the GAL supportive of attorneys representing children," said Howard Talenfeld, a Ft. Lauderdale attorney who serves as president of Florida's Children First, an advocacy group pushing the proposed legislation.



When Talenfeld was president of The Florida Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee in 2009, he fought unsuccessfully to persuade the former GAL director to support legislation that would provide attorneys for dependent children, a key recommendation of the predecessor 2002 Legal Needs of Children Commission. He referred to the child advocates' clashing views on representation over the years as "the Crusades."

"It's very important to signal to the guardians of the world that the Crusades are over," Talenfeld said the day before [CS/SB 972](#), sponsored by Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, passed unanimously out of the Senate Judiciary Committee on April 1.

Abramowitz was there to support the bill, as was Steve Metz, chief legislative counsel for The Florida Bar. The bill now heads for its third stop in the Appropriations Committee.

A companion bill in the House, [CS/HB 561](#), sponsored by Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami, passed unanimously out of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on April 2, and next goes to its third stop in the Judiciary Committee.

When pro bono attorneys are not available, the court-appointed attorneys would be paid through a new and specific line item in the Justice Administrative Commission budget, and would not negatively impact the GAL budget, Abramowitz said. Attorneys' fees would be capped at \$3,000 per child, per year.

"The GAL's 'best interest' attorneys and volunteers, working with attorneys created by this new legislative proposal on these complex cases, will be a formidable advocacy team to get children permanency," Abramowitz said.

"I have never seen it as an either/or issue. I think each child needs a guardian, clearly, because that's what the law says. Guardians do a lot more than legal. They mentor for the child and work in the educational system. They work with the child in group homes and with foster parents. A lot of stuff doesn't even get to court that we can fix."

But, Abramowitz said, there is clearly a need for attorneys, too, for five categories of special needs children:

- * Children placed in skilled nursing facilities. Currently, there are only 11 children in foster care in this status in Florida, and this category was the only one specified in legislation, based on proviso language in the 2013 General Appropriations Act. "With the attorneys and GAL Program working together, the outcomes achieved in these cases have shown that we can work collectively to achieve results that are clearly in the children's best interest," Abramowitz said. "Some of the children who were in nursing homes are now adopted or reunified with their parents."
- * Children who are prescribed and refuse to take psychotropic medication. There is already a requirement in the Florida Administrative Code for these children to have attorneys. The proposed law would "simply fund the process when a pro bono attorney is not available," Abramowitz said.
- * Children with developmental disabilities. "With our GAL 'best interest' attorneys already carrying high caseloads, I consider attorneys in this category an added resource to ensure the child is placed on the Medicaid Waiver or getting the services he or she needs," Abramowitz said.
- * Children placed or being considered for placement in locked residential treatment centers. "This is already required under case law, based on the 2000 Florida Supreme Court opinion *M.W. v. Davis* and Rule 8.350, Florida Rules of Juvenile Procedure," Abramowitz said. "The GAL Program would continue to advocate for placement that is in the 'best interest' of the child. The proposed bill would simply fund the attorney when a pro bono attorney is not available."
- * Children who are victims of human trafficking. "The unique issues that these children have, especially with regard to being witnesses in criminal cases, and possibly facing prosecution, justifies the child having an attorney," Abramowitz said.

As Abramowitz told his staff and supporters: "I passionately believe in the work we do for these children, and I believe this legislation will not interfere with our representation of children or our ability to secure resources to represent 100 percent of the children in Florida's dependency system. There is no question in my mind that this will enhance the GAL Program as we work with the attorneys appointed as a result of this new legislation."

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"Alan Abramowitz"
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v>
05/01/2014 11:33 AM

To Jodi Abramowitz/D20/DCF@DCF, David
Abramowitz/D04/DCF@DCF, <abeprof@aol.com>
cc
bcc
Subject FW: Alan Abramowitz Receives National ACYF
Commissioners Award

From: Kelly Razzano
Sent: Thursday, May 01, 2014 11:32 AM
Subject: Alan Abramowitz Receives National ACYF Commissioners Award

Good Morning!

Congratulations to Alan for receiving the Administration on Children, Youth and Families National Commissioners Award! Please read the press release below for the full article. Thank you!

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 1, 2014

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Alan Abramowitz Named as Recipient of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families National Commissioners Award

Tallahassee, Fla. - Each year, the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services - Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) Commissioner's Award honors one person from each state for their exceptional contribution to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect.

The 2014 Commissioner's Award recipient for Florida is Alan Abramowitz, Executive Director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program. Mr. Abramowitz, a member of the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet, leads over 9,000 volunteers in what is widely considered one of our state's most effective advocacy initiatives, reaching over 20,000 children with quality representation of their best interests in dependency courts.

Governor Scott said, "The leadership and passion of Alan and the rest of the GAL volunteers to be a voice for children is exceptional. I congratulate him on receiving this national award and look forward to working with him to improve outcomes for children in the dependency system."

"Volunteers are the heart and soul of the GAL Program," said Alan Abramowitz. "The difference a person can make in the life of a child happens every day around the State. Guardians ad Litem have a heartfelt commitment to make a difference in the lives of abused and neglected children by providing them a credible and conscientious voice in the dependency court system."

Over the past three years the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program has been recognized with the

Angels in Adoption Award in 2012 by the Congressional Coalition On Adoption Institute, the 2012 Eagle Award Winner of the Prudential Davis Productivity Award, and the 2013 and 2014 Davis Productivity Award.

In his previous employment with the Florida Department of Children and Families, Mr. Abramowitz served as the State Director of the Child Welfare Office, Chief Legal Counsel for Central Florida and manager of various regional and statewide offices. His background also includes serving as Assistant General Counsel for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, an Assistant State's Attorney for the Eighteenth Judicial Circuit, and an Assistant Public Defender for the Tenth Judicial Circuit. Alan has served as The Florida Bar Chair of the Rules of Juvenile Procedure. He has also served as chair of The Florida Bar Legal Needs of Children Committee and has appeared three times before the Florida Supreme Court advocating for rules impacting children in dependency court.

Mr. Abramowitz holds a Juris Doctor Degree from Florida State University, as well as a Master's Degree in public administration and sociology and a baccalaureate degree in psychology from Kansas State University where he played football for the Kansas State Wildcats. He has served with the U.S. Peace Corps (1990-92), the U.S. Army Reserves and the Florida Army National Guard. Alan and his wife, Jodi, have two children.

For information on the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, visit www.GuardianadLitem.org.

Kelley Razzano

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State News

5:39 PM

Gov. Scott Signs Bill Aimed At Helping Foster Kids Get Driver Licenses

By

Listen

Florida's foster kids may soon have an easier time obtaining a driver's license and auto insurance. Governor Rick Scott signed a bill into law aimed at doing just that Thursday.



Covering the cost of insurance is among the obstacles Guardian Ad Litem Executive Director Alan Abramowitz says Florida's foster kids continually face in trying to learn to drive. And, he says the new law creating a three-year pilot program to help cover those costs will go a long way.

"Also, the fact that many kids could not get anyone to put them on their insurance, we actually made it so youth in foster care could get approval from the court in statute to contract for their own insurance. Also, we made money available for driving school, getting their learning permits, and all the costs associated with learning to drive and getting that driver's license," said Abramowitz.

According to Abramowitz, less than three percent of foster kids who leave the system have a driver's license. The new law will take effect July 1st and is expected to cost \$800,000.

The so-called "Keys To Independence Act" also builds upon legislation Scott signed last year allowing foster care kids to do every day activities, like going to a sleepover, without court approval.

"It's so great that last year when they passed the 'Normalcy Law' or the 'Let Kids Be Kids Law' about how children could have normal lives, they haven't stopped. They're continuing to make sure children in foster care have the same ability to become productive members of society like everyone else. In this case, it's given them the keys to independence," Abramowitz added.

The sponsors of both efforts are Rep. Ben Albritton (R-Wauchula) and Sen. Nancy Detert (R-Venice).

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