



FIFTH CIRCUIT GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

NEWS RELEASE

Child advocate volunteers sought for Guardian ad Litem program

The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program is currently in desperate need of volunteers to be advocates for abused, neglected or abandoned children whose cases are in the court system.

A GAL is a trained volunteer appointed by the court to advocate on behalf of a child. The GAL becomes familiar with the child's case and makes recommendations to help ensure a safe, stable and permanent environment for the child.

"Around 1400 children in Marion, Citrus, Hernando, Sumter and Lake Counties have been removed from their homes due to abuse, abandonment or neglect. GAL volunteers make a profound difference in the life of these children by helping judges decide whether a child should be reunited with his or her family, remain in foster care or in the worst of circumstances, placed for adoption," said Marcia Hilty, Circuit Director of GAL Program for 5th Judicial Circuit. "They make sure important services are provided. Simply put, a GAL volunteer makes sure everyone does what is best for the child."

Research has shown that when a child whose case is being heard in dependency court is assigned to a GAL volunteer, they spend less time in foster care and do better in school. However, there are more children in the system than volunteers to serve them at this time.

Eligible volunteers must be 21 years of age and older (adults between 19 and 21 years are also eligible to work alongside a certified volunteer GAL), successfully complete the pre-service training program and be cleared of any serious criminal history via a level II criminal background check. A GAL must complete 30 hours of pre-service training. On average, volunteers should expect to spend 10-15 hours a month on a case, and most cases last 10 months. The volunteer works as part of a team including a volunteer supervisor and program attorney.

Pre-service training includes two days of classroom training. The next GAL classroom training dates are March 11th and 12th in Ocala or April 15th and 16th in Lecanto. All participants must complete an application process prior to training. To become a volunteer, contact Diana Hollwedel at 352-812-6971 or email Diana.hollwedel@gal.fl.gov For more information, visit www.guardianadlitem5.org