



January 2020 Newsletter

I am For The Child

Newsletter Date - January 2020

A Message from Marcia Hilty, Circuit Director

Dear Volunteers and Supporters of the Guardian ad Litem Program,

Happy New Year! I'm so glad to be entering another year working with such extraordinary people.

In an effort to ensure 2020 is reflective of the highest quality advocacy, we are focused on enhancing the number of children seen monthly for face-to-face visits and the achievement of timely adoptions. These goals were selected because the data shows we are not meeting established expectations.

For instance, over the last year or so, our reports indicate we are on average visiting just 80-82% of the 1,300 children we're assigned to. This means approximately 234 children are consistently not being seen, or at the very least, there's no evidence in Optima to show they've been seen. Given how important visits are to the work we do and their direct relationship to our credibility with the courts, we've got to make improvements.

The same holds true for our rate of adoptions. Sadly, the 5th Circuit, when compared with the other 19 Circuits, is consistently listed as dead last in this category.

In an effort to make improvements, our Child Advocacy Management Supervisors are devising action steps for immediate implementation. Mid-month reminders to you will be included among the action steps. With regard to adoptions, more multi-disciplinary meetings, giving you the opportunity to discuss obstacles preventing progress, will be held. Additionally, in an effort to implement a more cohesive, collaborative and effective inter-agency strategy, I'm working with Kids Central and Children's Legal Services personnel.

While I know the data doesn't tell the whole story, it does suggest there's room for improvement. Therefore, with your help, I'm sure we will soon see positive results.

Once again, best wishes for the New Year and thank you for all you do to improve the lives of the children we serve. Your efforts are sincerely appreciated.

Respectfully yours,
Marcia Hilty, Circuit Director

Around the Circuit - Hernando County

What a busy Fall/Winter Hernando GALP has had!! So many changes it's been hard to keep up! CAM I Lynn Needs retired in September after being with the GALP for about 3 years and moved closer to family in Ohio, CAM I Jerri Putnoky retired just before Thanksgiving after working for GALP for over 5 years to spend time with her brand new grandbaby boy, CAM Kate Strohl retired again, also just before Thanksgiving to go back to truly being retired. Her most recent stint with GALP was for a little over a year.

But, life moves on and when CAMs go, new CAMs come on board. We have been so fortunate to have two experienced GALs come on board as CAMs.



Although Sabrina Nardini had only been a GAL in Hernando for a little over a year, she brings a lot of passion with her to the position of CAM I. Sabrina has also worked in the school system. She filled Lynn's vacancy and started with us in early November.



Then, Denyse Atchinson, a GAL from Citrus County, started with us just before Thanksgiving after Jerri's departure. As a volunteer for over 12 years and also a former Voices board member, Denyse also is passionate about advocating for children. To say that we hit the jackpot with these two ladies would be an understatement. We are so glad to have them with us!

The children served by the Hernando Guardian ad Litem Program once again had a wonderful Christmas, and it was in part due to the dedication of a couple of volunteers. Marissa Hawley and her husband of Jeff's Sand Trap in Weeki Wachee, held their annual toy drive and collected many toys, gifts and \$1000 cash for our children. The cash went to Voices for Children. Peg Donovan and Dotty Emond and family attended, and they made sure the gifts made it to the GAL Holiday party for distribution. Diana Gissoni arranged for us to be able to store the gifts at Christian Church in the Wildwood 2 weeks before the party! Another GAL, Kara Jacobs, who is intimately involved with the church, allowed us to hold our Holiday Party at their facilities. Peg Donovan, who is a current Voices board member in addition to being a GAL, brought gift cards for our older children to be distributed by their CAMs and GALs. And no holiday party would be complete without Crank Works of Brooksville. Their annual bike race to benefit Hernando GALP yielded approximately 25 brand new bicycles this year! So many children had a much brighter Christmas due to their efforts and those of our volunteers who contributed and distributed the gifts to our children.

We are so appreciative of the hard work and dedication of all of our GAL volunteers. We can't say it enough – we couldn't do it without you. And I would also like to thank the Hernando GALP staff who keeps plugging away through thick and thin to make sure our children receive the best advocacy possible.

Submitted by Susan Landry, Hernando County CAM II

Around the Circuit - Citrus County



We have several pieces of news for Citrus County after the start of the new year and new decade. First, Darlene Edsall decided to retire after 10 years of service to the GAL Program to devote more time to her grandchildren and pursue other interests. Replacing Darlene as our new Office Manager is Gaye Ryf! We feel so lucky to have found such an amazing person to fill this important role. Gaye is super nice and has a great sense of humor, which is very important in our Citrus County office. Though Gaye has a lot of relevant experience, as we all know, child welfare can be complicated, so please be patient while she learns all the ins and outs of dependency. And, don't forget to come in and say hi to her when you are going to court or near the courthouse!

Speaking of patience, the courthouse has been undergoing some renovations recently. The main entrance was closed for a while, but now has reopened with a brand new security system. Once again, we are asking you to be patient while the deputies work out the kinks with this new system. Although it may be frustrating, ultimately, this extra security will make sure we are as safe as possible.

Finally, we would like to thank our 5th Circuit Supervising Attorney, Rashel Johnson, for coming to our January Brown Bag Lunch. She was able to provide some important tips and recommendations to enhance our courtroom presentation. An email was also sent to all Citrus County GALs that included these great tips. Some recommendations Rashel provided include: organizing talking points for each hearing, observing visitation between parents and children, and always be prepared to discuss modification of the parents' visits. These great guidelines will certainly help us continue to advocate for the best interest of our children.

Submitted by Amy Nourie, Citrus County CAM II

Around the Circuit - Lake County



In Lake County the game of the month in December of 2019 became "Who can find Amarilys?" Her office was so full of presents for children we never knew if she was in the office or not. With the assistance of some of the Best Donors in the State, we were able to provide over 700 children with Christmas presents. Many of these donors have helped the GALP for years and every year we receive new donors who want to help provide a smile to a child on Christmas morning. Our donors also assist the young adults we serve by providing laundry baskets full of household products such as kitchen appliances, bedroom and bathroom essentials, and of course cleaning products. Thanks to them many Children in Lake County were able to wake up on Christmas morning with a twinkle in their eyes. Not only do we have Great Donors, we have some wonderful Elves! We have volunteers who help make the cards that we distribute to the groups, write the wishes on the cards, help

pick up presents, help organize the presents when they start to arrive in the office, and most of all, help office staff keep their sanity during this chaotic time. A Big Thank You goes out all involved during the Christmas Rush!

Now it is 2020! What an exciting Year we are going to have with The Guardian ad Litem Program. There are many changes coming and we will go into all of that at another time. But for right now I'm going to tell you of the upcoming Brown bag dates. The first will be February 10, 2020 at 11:30 at the Ag Center in Lake County. I will be talking to volunteers about various things happening in Lake County. Other dates will be sent out in e mail soon. Our Advocacy in Lake County, and across the 5th Circuit, is going to be stronger than ever. We plan to provide our Volunteers and Staff with the training and tools to help our children achieve Permanency faster. So Happy New Year to All and of course, A Big Thank you to all for what you do for the children and the Guardian ad Litem Program.

Submitted by Connie McMaster, Lake County CAM II

Around the Circuit—Marion County



We are pleased to welcome Linn Benton to the Marion County office! She has been a CAM in our Lake County office, and is excited to be moving her office closer to home. She was born and raised here in Ocala, and is a 4th generation of one of the founders of Belleview, the Abshier family. She graduated from Vanguard High School, and has a Bachelor's Degree in Human Services from St. Leo University. She is married, with 9 children, 27 grandchildren, and 1 on the way. She has worked in insurance, loan processing, law enforcement, family and criminal law, special and elementary education, case management, and Dependency. She loves to travel, and just recently went to Scotland as one of her bucket list destinations. She loves the mountains and the beach, and if she could be anywhere in the world, it would be one of these 2 places. She is very much looking forward to working with all of the wonderful people in the Marion office, and looking forward to meeting everyone.

Submitted by Buff Moring, Marion County CAM II

Around the Circuit - Sumter County

Beginning February 1st, Magistrate Brenda Coleman will be returning as the Sumter County General Magistrate.

Early Childhood Court has been initiated in Sumter County and we currently have six participating families; Magistrate Kissner will continue to facilitate meetings until further notice.

The Sumter Community Action Partnership meetings are held every 2nd Tuesday of the month, however due to the Child Protection Conference, February's meeting has been canceled and meetings will resume on March 10, 2020. The meetings are held at the Sumter Adult Education Center in Room 3103, Sumterville, from 12-1 pm.

Submitted by Trelany Pennington, Sumter County CAM I

A Message from Diana Gisonni, Director of Recruitment/Training

Dear Volunteers,

Experience has showed us that having an inside contact has better outcomes in our efforts to promote the program within 55+ communities, Faith Based Organization and Social Groups. We have new rack cards with easy to read information that we would like distributed to Doctor's offices, Vet offices, Beauty Salons, Barber shops and any type of office or business that will allow us to place this information. If you are a member of one of these groups / organizations or would be willing to place this information in an office or business you frequent, we would appreciate it very much.

For more information and to pick up the rack cards:

Hernando, Citrus & Sumter - Call Diana at 352-812-6971
Marion & Lake - Call Amarily - 352-343-2736

A Message from Rashel Johnson, Supervising Attorney

GREAT COURTROOM ADVOCACY

Great advocacy is more than visiting your child, investigating the case, attending court, making recommendations, and following up on needs related to the case. Great advocacy is also about having great courtroom presentation.

Being prepared: *Great courtroom presentation starts with strong preparation.* Many dependency docket days are packed with cases creating a need for parties to be organized and concise in their presentations. Think ahead about the most important recommendations you want to make on behalf of your child. Matters to be considered include services needed, the wishes of the child, and your stance on changing visitation. Prepare a list of talking points to bring to court.

Breaking News: If new information has arisen since speaking with your Child Advocate Manager (“CAM”) or drafting your report, please provide that information to your CAM via email or phone immediately upon receipt even if it is a day or a few hours prior to the hearing. ***THIS IS VITALLY IMPORTANT!*** Waiting to provide updated information or a change in your recommendation until the court proceeding does not allow for the best legal advocacy for your child. Some items cannot be raised without proper notice to all parties.

During the hearing: While in court, follow your attorney’s lead when presenting information. Please do not ask case managers questions or speak without first conferring with your attorney. Attorneys will try to help you get all needed information on the record, while keeping your presentation concise. Once the judicial officer provides a ruling, we must respectfully accept the ruling and can discuss how to respond to adverse rulings after court.

Courtroom decorum: Let the CAM in court know if you need additional assistance such as a listening device. Remember, microphones are everywhere in a courtroom so please do not hold full conversations in the jury box or gallery. Ensure your phone is off or on silent before entering the courtroom.

Hearing Types

Shelter Hearings: This hearing is to decide whether or not the child will be removed or remain in the home. Important issues discussed are placement, visitation, family finders, special needs, and child records.

Arraignment Hearings: This hearing is to discuss the Dependency Petition and upcoming hearings. It is a hearing solely covering the “process”. Important issues discussed are parents’ pleas to the petition, location of the parents, if parents are notified and served with the petition, appointment of attorneys for the parents, upcoming mediation and hearing dates, and services needed for the child. Visitation can be raised at this hearing.

~ GAL Review of Discovery, Home-studies, and Family connections are important at this stage of the proceedings.

Mediation: This setting is to discuss findings of dependency, conditions for return, case plan tasks, and important matters that require discussion of the parties. ***Everything that is discussed in mediation is confidential.*** The child’s wishes should be considered in mediation.

Judicial Review Hearings: This hearing is set to review the progress of the case. If reunification is the case plan goal, then the parents’ progress on the case plan will be reviewed, as well as placement needs, services for both the children and parents, and visitation.

~GAL Review of Discovery, Home-studies, and Family connections are important at this stage of the proceedings.

A Message from Rashel Johnson, Supervising Attorney

GREAT COURTROOM ADVOCACY cont'd

Status Hearings: This hearing is set to discuss a specific issue. Other matters should not be raised as the law requires notice before new issues are raised at hearings; however, it is important to be aware of any impending issues and your recommendation on visitation.

Dependency Adjudicatory Hearings: This trial is to decide whether or not the petitioner has met the burden to prove dependency.

Disposition Hearings: This hearing is to decide services, placement and Conditions for Return.

Advisory Hearings: This hearing is to discuss the Termination of Parental Rights proceedings. It is a hearing solely covering the "process". Important issues discussed are parents' pleas to the petition, location of the parents, if parents are notified and served, appointment of attorneys for the parents, and upcoming hearing dates.

Termination of Parental Rights Adjudicatory Hearing: This trial is to decide whether or not the petitioner has the burden to prove that termination is in the best interest of the child.

Your presence is greatly appreciated at all hearings. If you cannot attend court, please alert your CAM as soon as possible. Thank you for your service to the Guardian ad Litem Program – you are making a difference! We could not do this without YOU!

Submitted by Rashel Johnson, Supervising Attorney

Farewell to Doug Feldkamp, Assistant Circuit Director



Doug Feldkamp, Circuit 5 Assistant Director, retired in early December! Doug started out as a volunteer, then came on as a CAM, then CAM II, then AD. His presence is missed by everyone throughout the entire circuit. We all hope he is enjoying his time on the golf course, on his boat in the Gulf of Mexico and with his beloved dog.

A huge "THANK YOU" to Voices for Children

We would like to extend our gratitude to Voices for Children of North Central Florida for making match dollars available to secure the Federal Victims of Crime Act Grant. This funding will enable us to hire four new positions within our circuit. These positions include a Best Interest Attorney, two Child Advocate Managers and one Child Advocate Manager Assistant. We are currently in the process of interviewing for these positions and are looking forward to bringing these additional folks onboard.



Voices for Children

Voices for Children wishes to welcome our newest board members:

Susan Connolly
Jim Fitzsimmons
Lori Patterson
Rebecca Wall
Lisa Kasprack
Sandy Caspers

Each bring enthusiasm and their own skill set to our board allowing us to explore additional projects for the children in our community.

Voices wishes to acknowledge our sponsors/donors who were so generous in providing gifts for the holidays. In addition to these organizations many individuals provided gifts. Their support insures these children our remembered during the holidays:

ADT Security Services, Orlando
Auntie Anne's, Ocala
Bellevue Eagles, Belleview
Bowen & Schroth, Eustis
Cadence Bank, Dunnellon
Capitol City Bank, Citrus Springs
Central Christian Church, Ocala
Christ's Church of Marion, Ocala
Immaculate Heart of Mary, Candler
Kloeckner Metal, Tampa
Marion Technical College, Ocala
New Covenant United Methodist Church, The Villages
Paddock Mall, Ocala
Payne's Furniture Outlet, Summerfield
The Rainbow Family & Friends Club, The Villages
Raymond James & Associates, Crystal River
Renasant Bank, Ocala
Royal Oaks Ladies Golf Club, Ocala
Simed Health, Ocala
The Soulliere Villas Club, The Villages

GAL OFFICES

Marion County
34 NW 1st Avenue
Ocala, FL 34475
352-671-5757

Citrus County
110 N. Apopka Avenue
Inverness, FL 34450
352-341-8770

Hernando County
20 N. Main Street
Brooksville, FL 34601
352-754-4226

Lake County
418 West Alfred Street
Tavares, FL 32778
352-343-2736

Sumter County
115 N. Florida St.
Bushnell, FL 33513
352-569-6980

5th Circuit GAL Management Team

Marcia Hilty, Circuit Director

Connie McMaster, Assistant Circuit Director

Rashel Johnson, Supervising Attorney

Buff Moring, CAM II, Marion County

Amy Robertson, CAM II, Special Projects

Connie McMaster, CAM II, Lake County

Amy Nourie, CAM II, Citrus County

Susan Landry, CAM II, Hernando County

Verna Cardona, Administrative Assistant

Diana Gisonni, Director of Recruitment / Training

**Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're
worthless, but because they're priceless.**

~Sherry Anderson~

Newsletter Publisher - Diana Gisonni

We are on the Web
www.guardianadlitem5.org