



## *Triage – Which Child will Have a Voice? Which Child Will Know Someone is on their Side?*

**By Alan Abramowitz, Executive Director, Florida Guardian ad Litem Program**

The most rewarding aspect of being a guardian ad litem is knowing the immense difference guardians ad litem make in so many children's lives every day. As the Executive Director of the Guardian ad Litem Program, I have had the opportunity to travel the state to see and hear first-hand, the positive impact our volunteers and staff make on children and families involved in Florida's child welfare system. Through being the voice for a child and advocating for the child's interests our volunteers and staff are making a difference in children's lives and families our volunteers serve.

Often the most difficult challenge guardian ad litem staff and volunteers face is the knowledge that thousands of Florida's abused and neglected children do not have that powerful voice advocating for their interests at their time of need. Day after day our staff struggles to determine how to effectively and efficiently allocate our very slim resources -- which child will have a voice, which child will know someone is on their side? Our staff and volunteers are forced to "triage" the huge number of cases we see every day. Like medical professionals who "triage" their patients by reviewing the severity of a patient's condition to determine their priority in getting treated, our staff must review the severity of a child's trauma, abuse, abandonment, and neglect to determine which child will be given a volunteer guardian ad litem. We must balance the immense needs of Florida's abused and neglected children with the number of volunteers the Program can support.

The Guardian ad Litem Program is dedicated to ensuring all of Florida's abused and neglected children have a voice – we plan, we agonize, and we hope. Our volunteers need training, mentoring and constant support. Volunteers need support from the moment a child is removed from their home to the final goal of that child having a permanent home. Supporting our volunteers frees them to provide a voice for more children. Unfortunately, we cannot give these most vulnerable of Florida's children a voice if there is not adequate funding available to support the work of guardian ad litem volunteers. Without additional funding, dramatic changes will have to be implemented, tough decisions will continue to need to be made, and the Program will have to change how it provides that voice to Florida's abused and neglected children. We believe every one of these children deserves a voice, deserves to be protected, deserves a permanent home, and deserves to be safe. The Program strives to be that voice. The Program will continue to strive to ensure all children have a voice, given the resources of the Guardian ad Litem Program.

This year, the Florida Governor and legislature focused on *efficiency*. The legislature recognized that the Program was efficient and effective. The Program was able to be efficient without compromising our core values. The legislature recognized the Program's efficiency by ensuring the Guardian ad Litem Program's funding remained whole. This year, our volunteers do not have to abandon any child's case. Their voices will be heard. The Program is grateful that both the Governor and the legislature support our mission to be a voice for Florida's abused and neglected children. On behalf of the thousands of children, I thank you.

"if there is a program that costs the least and benefits the most, this one is it, the volunteer is an 'indispensable intermediary between the child and the court, between the child and DCF'..."

~ Blue Ribbon Panel findings

Myself, the staff, and volunteers are committed to finding unique and effective ways to ensure all children have a voice. Through the Program's strategic plan, and increased funding, we will work to achieve this goal.

