

A Child's Advocate  
In Court



# VOLUNTEER

Durham County Guardian ad Litem Program

A Guardian ad Litem is a trained community volunteer who is appointed by a district court judge to investigate and determine the needs of abused and neglected children petitioned into the court system by the Department of Social Services. The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Volunteer makes independent recommendations to the court for services, which focus on the needs of each child. The Guardian ad Litem advocates for a permanent and safe home for every child within the shortest time possible.

201 North Roxboro Street  
3rd Floor, Judicial Annex Building  
Durham, North Carolina 27701  
(919) 564-7290  
[www.nccourts.org/Citizens/GAL](http://www.nccourts.org/Citizens/GAL)

## QUALIFICATIONS

The main qualifications are a sincere concern for the well being of children and a continuing commitment to advocate for a child until a safe and permanent home is obtained. The volunteer must also be a mature adult of sound character with good verbal and written communication skills. A Guardian ad Litem Volunteer must be objective and non-judgmental and be able to interact with people of various educational, economic, and ethnic backgrounds.

## REQUIREMENTS

The process of becoming a Guardian ad Litem Volunteer requires a written application, three personal/professional references and a criminal record check. A staff member will conduct a personal interview. A volunteer must complete 25-30 hours of required training and will be sworn in by a district court judge before the assignment of his or her first case.

## TRAINING AND SUPERVISION

The North Carolina Volunteer Guardian ad Litem training curriculum is taught by certified and experienced GAL trainers or staff. Volunteers will also receive continuing education on advocacy issues. Guardian ad Litem volunteers are supervised by the program staff.

## ACTIVITIES

- Visits the child and keeps the child informed about the court proceedings.
- Communicates with the Attorney Advocate to develop legal strategies to further the best interests of the child client.
- Gathers and assesses independent information on a consistent basis about the child to recommend a resolution that is in the child's best interest.
- Interviews the parents, guardians, caretakers, social workers, and other service providers, and reads records related to the family.
- Seeks cooperative solutions with other participants in the child's case.
- Writes fact-based, child-focused reports for court hearings.
- Attends and participates in court hearings and other related meetings to advocate for a permanent plan, which serves the child's best interest.
- Testifies, if needed, to inform the court of the child's situation.
- Ensures that the court knows the child's wishes.
- Keeps all records and information confidential.
- Monitors all court-ordered services and keeps the court informed about the needs of the child.
- Consults with local program staff for support and guidance.



## THE FACTS: CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

- 31 children died from child abuse in North Carolina during the last year.
- Child abuse is the #1 killer of preschool children.
- One child in three will be sexually abused before age 18.
- In 2005, more than 110,000 children were reported to be victims of child abuse and neglect in North Carolina alone.
- On the 2005 *North Carolina Child Health Report Card*, our state received an "F" in child abuse and neglect.
- 85% of abused children will grow up to be abusive.
- Abuse and neglect do not discriminate by social, economic, or ethnic background.



## EVERY FIVE MINUTES, A CHILD IS ABUSED OR NEGLECTED IN NORTH CAROLINA.

### A SOLUTION: GUARDIAN AD LITEM



The mission of the Guardian ad Litem Program is to provide trained, independent advocates to represent and promote the best interests of abused, neglected, and dependent children in the state court system and to work towards a plan that ensures that these children are in a safe and permanent home.

- In the past fiscal year, over 3,800 volunteers informed judges of the needs of 15,700 children and of services that could meet those needs.
- Guardian ad Litem volunteers gave North Carolina over 734,200 hours of service, providing a voice in court for children who were victims of abuse and neglect.

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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q: What is a Guardian ad Litem?**

**A:** A Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is a trained volunteer who is appointed by the court to advocate for the best interests of an abused or neglected child. The GAL serves as an important voice for the child in court.

**Q: Who can be a Guardian ad Litem?**

**A:** Anyone. Guardian ad Litem volunteers come from all walks of life and have a variety of professional, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. No special education or experience is required. However, volunteers must be 21 years of age.

**Q: How will I know what to do?**

**A:** Guardian ad Litem offices use a nationally recognized training program. You will learn all about your role in the court system so that you can be confident when you take your first case.

**Q: I work full time. Can I still be a Guardian ad Litem?**

**A:** Many of our volunteers have full-time jobs. Much of the work can be done on the weekend, in the evening, or on the telephone. You will need your employer's permission to take off work when you have a court date (every three to six months, depending on the case).

**Q: What is the time commitment for a Guardian ad Litem?**

**A:** After the initial training, you will usually spend about six to eight hours a month working on your case until the child is placed in a permanent situation. The length of time varies from case to case.

**Q: How many cases will I be expected to take?**

**A:** We have no set minimum number of cases for volunteers. Each GAL accepts only as many cases as he or she has time to handle.

**Q: How is a Guardian ad Litem different from a social worker?**

**A:** The social worker represents the Department of Social Services (DSS), which has legal custody of the child or children involved, and is charged with finding a permanent caregiver for the child. The social worker usually oversees several cases at a time. A GAL doesn't have nearly as many cases and is able to devote more time to each case. The social worker has to provide the child with many services, while the GAL only advocates for the child's needs in court.

**Q: I worry that the parents will be uncooperative.**

**A:** It comes as a surprise to many people that the parents are usually more than glad to tell their version of the events that have caused this case to come before the court. As a GAL, you are just asking questions and listening at the outset, and most parents do not find this threatening. We will never ask you to do anything that makes you feel unsafe. You can arrange to have visits in a public place like a restaurant or at DSS, and you can always take another GAL volunteer with you.

**Q: May I take the child home with me or on special outings?**

**A:** No. You also must not give significant gifts to the child. You are not a parent or caregiver. Your role is to investigate and observe in order to be a well-informed advocate. That in itself is an important gift to the child, and it requires good judgment and objectivity.

## DURHAM COUNTY GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

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