



IMPORTANT STATISTICS FISCAL YEAR 2015–16

Staff

3 regional administrator positions
137 field staff working in 69 offices
7 administrative, training, legal staff positions

Attorneys

80 contract attorneys
123 pro bono attorneys
10 staff attorney advocate positions
76 conflict attorneys

Volunteers

5,075 volunteer advocates
487,200 hours of service
\$11.48 million saved due to volunteer efforts
Volunteers donate, on average, 8 hours of service monthly. Independent Sector valued volunteer time during 2015 at \$23.56 / hour.

Program statistics

65,042 child abuse and neglect hearings
17,019 abused and neglected children received legal representation
242 juvenile appellate cases filed

PARTNERS

National CASA Association
N.C. Bar Association – Juvenile Justice and Children’s Rights Section
N.C. Child Fatality Prevention Team
N.C. Child Fatality Task Force
N.C. Collaborative for Children, Youth, and Families
N.C. Department of Health and Human Services
N.C. Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
N.C. Department of Public Instruction
N.C. Governor’s Crime Commission
N.C. Youth Advocacy and Involvement Office
N.C. Office of Indigent Defense Services
Strong Able Youth Speaking Out Inc. (SaySo)

PARTNER QUOTE

National Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Association
Tara Perry, CEO

“We envision a world where every abused or neglected child has the opportunity to thrive in a safe and loving home. Our volunteer advocates champion the child’s best interest in the courtroom and community.”



OUR MISSION

North Carolina Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program equips community volunteers to serve abused and neglected children by advocating for their best interests in court.

In 1983, the North Carolina General Assembly established the Office of Guardian ad Litem Services as a division of the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. Pursuant to G.S. 7B-601, when a petition alleging abuse or neglect of a juvenile is filed in district court, the judge appoints a volunteer GAL advocate and an attorney advocate to provide team representation to the child, who has full party status in trial and appellate proceedings. All GAL advocates are trained, supervised, and supported by program staff in each county of the state. The collaborative model of GAL attorney advocates, volunteers, and staff ensures that all North Carolina children who are alleged by the Department of Social Services to have been abused or neglected receive GAL legal advocacy services.

The role of Guardian ad Litem advocates is to:

- Fulfill state and federal statutory mandates to protect and promote the best interests of juveniles in abuse and neglect court proceedings
- Help the courts work efficiently toward safety and permanence for children
- Conduct independent investigations to determine the facts, needs of the child, and the resources appropriate to meet those needs
- Determine the wishes or expressed preferences of the child and report those to the court
- Provide a voice for abused and neglected children in every county of the state

WHY USE VOLUNTEERS?

When speaking about child victim advocacy in court, the question sometimes arises, “Why use volunteers?” Answering that question for North Carolina entails an evolving history spanning nearly a decade, but the short answer is that volunteers are effective. The model of co-appointing volunteers and attorneys to speak for abused and neglected children in court provides strong, competent advocacy for the children who need it.

“The GAL is that independent voice advocating for the child’s needs, without regard to budget or funding stream. Children know their voices are heard and the judge is considering their desires and wishes, as well as their best interests. As children in our caseloads age, the GAL and Attorney Advocate guide them through appearances in court and help them understand how court works, and why decisions are made. We do a better job in this critical effort because of the work of the GAL.”

Honorable Judge J.H. Corpening



OUR TEAM APPROACH

Components

Brief Description and Situation

Staff

“For over three decades, GAL staff have equipped citizen volunteers to advocate in court for the state’s abused and neglected children. The powerful ripple effect of each staff member’s knowledge, experience, and support is evident as thousands of GALs ensure timely permanent outcomes for tens of thousands of children.”

Cindy Bizzell, GAL Administrator

GAL staff recruit, train, and supervise volunteers. These roles, along with thorough screening and criminal record checks, help ensure the safety and best interests of child clients.

Staff duties include assuring quality representation for children, promoting positive community relations to foster commitment to the program, while educating the public, maintaining a record keeping case management system, and developing and providing appropriate in-service training opportunities.

Staff must have knowledge of volunteer administration, child development, juvenile court, applicable laws and statutes, program development, and evaluation techniques. They often serve on local interdisciplinary task forces and committees that affect the availability of services for GAL child clients.

Attorneys

“GAL attorney advocates are skilled litigators who have a sincere interest in juvenile law and strive to protect the legal rights of abused and neglected children in juvenile court. Through collaboration with volunteer advocates, GAL attorneys ensure that juvenile court judges have the proper evidence and information needed to make decisions in the best interest of children.”

Deana Fleming, GAL Associate Counsel

GAL attorneys represent children’s best interests in more than 59,000 court hearings, including non-secure custody hearings, adjudicatory proceedings, dispositional proceedings, review hearings, permanency planning hearings, proceedings to terminate parental rights, and post termination of parental rights hearings. In addition, they often participate in team meetings and any court ordered pre-trial conferences.

Although juvenile appeals are expedited, the number of appeals is rising. Attorneys from law firms across the state contribute pro bono time and expertise to handle more than 75 percent of all GAL appeals.

Volunteer advocates

“Every child that’s born has a purpose and has a right to be happy in childhood. Every child has the right to have a chance to be successful in life. That’s what it means to be a GAL, for me to be able to speak up and fight for that right for children.”

John C., GAL Volunteer

“I became a GAL to let a child in foster care know that someone is looking out for them when those who should be can’t. I have learned to be open-minded and forgiving to the parents who have put them in a stranger’s care. I learned that kids can be resilient in the most unfortunate situations.”

Charlene W., GAL Volunteer

Volunteer advocates are screened, interviewed, and receive 30 hours of initial training. At least six hours of in-service training are offered each year to maintain the knowledge and skills needed to advocate for best interests of child clients.

The state’s GALs are adults who come from diverse communities, cultures, and life and work experiences. On average, advocates donate eight hours each month to perform their statutorily mandated duties. They visit child clients, conduct interviews, read reports, monitor court orders, collaborate with service providers, formulate fact-based, child-focused court reports with recommendations, and testify in court hearings.

While GAL attorney advocates are appointed to every case, the program does not yet have a volunteer advocate for every child. In those instances where no volunteer advocate is available, GAL staff are required to perform the volunteer advocate’s duties, limiting their ability to focus on their primary duties of recruitment, training, and supervision. Currently, 2,200 children need the services of a volunteer advocate.