

Defending Child Welfare

At any given time, an estimated 1,400 to 1,600 abused, neglected, or abandoned children are working their way through the social services system in Palm Beach County, one of Florida's most populous counties.

Navigating the legal maze is no easy task, yet only about half of those children have been appointed a guardian ad litem to help, says Vicki Tucci, circuit director for the 15th Judicial Court Guardian ad Litem Program.

A guardian ad litem, or GAL, is a volunteer adult who serves as an advocate for a child who comes into the court system as a result of parental abuse or neglect. Tucci first learned about the program while a student at South University — West Palm Beach. Now that she's on faculty at South University teaching courses in paralegal and legal studies, Tucci finds that some of her students are following in her footsteps by working as interns with the program.

"It's a volunteer opportunity where you really get to make an impact," Tucci says.

When Tucci joined the GAL program in Palm Beach County two years ago, the staff numbered 40. Now, the job of training volunteers and operating the program is split among just 24 workers — a cut of 40%. Those lost positions, Tucci says, mean the loss of advocacy for children.

A GAL is what Tucci calls "the most consistent person" in the life of a child going through the court system. GALs do not provide homes or have control over a child's life. They spend a few hours a month visiting the child and speaking to teachers, therapists, and doctors to find out what is in the child's best interests. Each GAL stays with a case until the child finds a permanent home. In Florida, these volunteers are called guardians ad litem. In some states they are referred to as child advocates, or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA).

The numbers Tucci cites above are for "just one county in one state," she says. The National CASA Association estimates that approximately 780,000 children in the United States are caught up in the court and child welfare systems. Last year, only about a third of those children had an advocate as they went through the court process.

Even though these state and local advocacy programs are based on volunteer support, many also rely on state funding that is being cut as legislatures face budget shortfalls. In March, New Jersey's governor Chris Christie proposed eliminating the state's Child Advocate Office.

In hopes of stabilizing financial support for the Palm Beach County GALs program, Tucci founded the nonprofit Speak Up for Kids one year ago. She received the 2009 Child AbuseWatch Child Advocate Award for her work.

Speak Up for Kids raises money that goes directly to the GAL program through private donations. She admits that "it's hard to get out there and get resources as we are trying to reach out into a community where resources have dwindled."

Sally Erny, chief program officer of National CASA, says that not only has government funding been cut for advocacy programs, but private funding has too. Many private foundations have seen their endowments sink.

National CASA, which is based in Seattle, has a network of more than 1,000 community program offices throughout the country that support child advocacy programs. The Florida guardian ad litem programs are affiliated with it.

Last year, many programs received federal stimulus money, but "that will probably be drying up," Erny says. "It was helpful for last year, but not this year."

National CASA offers a competitive grant program with funds from the federal U.S. Department of Justice. This year, the group granted more than \$11 million to state and local programs. Usually the grants are aimed at program development and expansion, but this year, Erny says, "we supplied sustainability grants and also offered some bridge funding to help get through this difficult time."

Programs are looking at other ways to sustain themselves, Erny says. Personnel cuts are happening in many programs, she says, and more state programs are looking at sharing services between agencies.

Tucci agrees. In her county, “we are starting to see collaborative and creative partnerships forming. We are trying to be inventive, spreading resources by partnering up with other agencies.”

Recently, Tucci’s guardian ad litem program teamed up with a legal aid office. “What had historically happened is legal aid and guardian ad litem were assigned largely the same children,” she says. Though there are times where both offices may need to be working on a specific child’s case, Tucci says more attempts are being made “to keep one program on one child until we can cover all children.”

“We have a work group that includes Guardian ad Litem, legal aid, the public defender’s office and the state attorney. We are trying to make sure that we are using resources best and there is no duplication there,” she says. “Historically, there have been a lot of walls. We need to pull our walls down and ask how we can all work together. Our goal is to advocate for 100% of the kids.”

Despite the staff reductions and budget cuts, Tucci says, “we are helping more kids in our county than we ever have before, and that’s because of collaboration, not because of money.”

Tucci knows first-hand what it’s like to be a child advocate. She first learned about the program while taking a paralegal class at South University. “I thought, ‘I would love to do it, but I’m a single mom.’ My son was just about two years old at the time.” She did eventually become a guardian.

An internship with a legal aid office while she was still a student led to a job, and after five years, Tucci returned to South University to receive her bachelor’s degree. From there, she went to law school. Now, she runs the county’s guardian ad litem program and teaches at South.

Tucci says she often has students who are interested in child advocacy. “If they are local they can do an internship with my office,” she said. “I have two people currently on staff who were students of mine at South.”

Tucci says that GALs “are doing this for nothing. They aren’t paid. They’re nonbiased. They are a powerful voice. Judges really value input guardians give.”

“In the world of child welfare,” she says, “it’s easy for us to get overburdened and worn down and burned out.” When she walks into a class of people waiting to be trained as advocates “it’s such an uplift.”