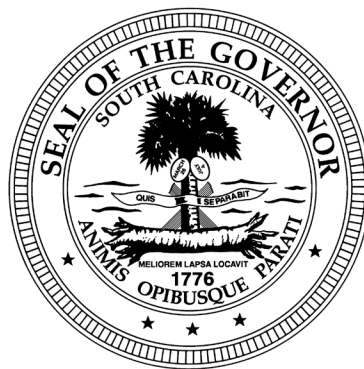




*2009 Judicial Survey:
Evaluation of
Volunteer
Guardian ad Litem
Impact on Child
Abuse and Neglect Cases*



**South Carolina Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program
Office of the Governor**

The South Carolina Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Program conducted a survey in April, 2009, to measure the impact of Volunteer Guardians ad Litem on child abuse and neglect cases. All South Carolina Family Court judges were invited to participate.

The survey was designed by senior staff members to evaluate three specific areas: the usefulness of GAL activities in judicial decision making, the effectiveness of volunteers in outcomes for children, and the quality of local programs and volunteers. Judges were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the program and to state any concerns, suggestions for improvement, and other comments about the program. The survey used a 1 through 5 rating scale, with 5 being the highest rating and 1 being the lowest.

The survey was mailed on April 1, 2009, to 57 Family Court Judges. A second mailing was sent April 6. An email reminder was sent to non-respondents on April 13 and April 20. A final mailing was sent on April 25, 2009. The deadline to respond was April 30, 2009. Judges could respond in writing or complete the survey electronically. There were a total of 45 responses, for a 78% response rate.

Overall Results:

The response to the survey was extremely positive. The overall satisfaction rating with the program by the Family Court Judges was 4.7 out of 5.0. The ratings in all areas were above average.

Usefulness of GAL activities in Judicial decision making:

The most useful information provided to the Court by the GALs was from their direct contact and interviews with children and their Court reports with a 4.7 rating. This is consistent with the goals of the program to provide child-focused information to assist judges in their decision-making process. The least useful information was from GALs review of records.

Effectiveness of volunteers in case outcomes:

Volunteers were found to be most effective in case outcomes by providing information at Permanency Planning Hearings and Judicial Reviews, advocating for permanent placement of children and conveying the child's wishes to the Court. The average rating in those three areas was 4.4. Our volunteer training focuses on a safe, permanent home as quickly as possible for each child, and this rating indicates our volunteers are advocating effectively for timely permanence in Court proceedings. Volunteers were only slightly less effective (4.3 rating) at making recommendations in the best interest of children and in impacting placement stability and safety for children.

Quality of local programs and volunteers:

In the quality of local programs and volunteers, the highest ratings (4.8) reflected that children are better served when there is a volunteer GAL involved in their case. The GAL volunteers were also rated 4.8 for being appropriate and professional in the court room. All ratings were 4.5 or higher in this category.

Comments:

The comments from the Judges were very positive about the program. Many expressed their appreciation for the program and the volunteers, and some commented about the need for more volunteers. *"Where would I be without my guardians who are looking out for the children? In the dark as far as their best interests! Thanks to you all!"*

This survey has provided valuable feedback to the program. The comments and suggestions will be evaluated and incorporated into future trainings where needed. Detailed results are available upon request.

**Results of 2009 Judicial Survey:
Evaluation of Volunteer GAL Impact on Child Abuse and Neglect Cases**

Overall, how satisfied are you with the Volunteer GAL Program?					
1 Not Satisfied	2	3	4	5 Very Satisfied	Number of Responses
0%	0%	2%	25%	73%	44
Overall Rating: 4.7 out of 5.0					

Usefulness of GAL activities in Judicial decision making		
Type of Activity	Average Rating <i>Rating Scale: 1 (Not Useful) to 5 (Very Useful)</i>	Number of Responses
Information received from GAL contacts and interviews with children	4.7	43
GAL written reports to the Court	4.7	43
Information received from GAL contacts and interviews with biological parents	4.4	43
GAL verbal testimony to the Court	4.2	43
Information received from GAL review of records	3.8	43

Effectiveness of Volunteers in Case Outcome Areas		
Type of Activity	Average Rating <i>Rating Scale: 1 (Not Effective) to 5 (Very Effective)</i>	Number of Responses
Information from ongoing GAL involvement for Permanency Planning Hearings and Judicial Reviews	4.4	44
GAL volunteer advocacy for permanent placement of children	4.4	42
GAL volunteer effectiveness at conveying the child's wishes to the Court	4.4	44
Impact of GAL volunteer recommendations in the best interest of children	4.3	43
Impact of GAL volunteers on placement stability and safety for children	4.3	43

**Results of 2009 Judicial Survey:
Evaluation of Volunteer GAL Impact on Child Abuse and Neglect Cases**

<i>Quality of Local Program and Volunteers</i>		
Type of Activity	Average Rating <i>Rating Scale: 1 (Almost Never) to 5 (Almost Always)</i>	Number of Responses
Children are better served when there is a Volunteer GAL involved in their case.	4.8	43
Local program volunteers are appropriate and professional in the court room.	4.8	44
Volunteer GALs have adequate legal representation.	4.7	44
Local program volunteers are beneficial to judicial decision making.	4.6	44
Local program volunteers are well prepared for Court.	4.6	44
Local program volunteers are well trained to perform in their role.	4.5	42
Local program volunteers make appropriate recommendations in the child's best interest.	4.5	43
Local program volunteers sufficiently and independently research case facts.	4.5	43

<i>Appearance of bias towards a particular outcome by local program volunteers</i>					
1 Almost Never	2	3	4	5 Almost Always	Number of Responses
48%	23%	21%	5%	5%	44

<i>Frequency of continuances in cases because of a Volunteer GAL</i>					
1 Almost Never	2	3	4	5 Almost Always	Number of Responses
68%	16%	2%	9%	5%	44

Results of 2009 Judicial Survey: Evaluation of Volunteer GAL Impact on Child Abuse and Neglect Cases

Comments

Do you have any concerns about your local GAL Program?

“I feel that our programs are very good except that there are often not enough to go around.”

“Need more funding to pay attorneys for volunteer GALs.”

“Program seems slow to recognize volunteers with an agenda and weed them out.”

“Need more volunteers.”

“Our programs in this Judicial Circuit are exceptionally good.”

Eleven respondents indicated they had no concerns, and the remaining respondents did not comment.

Do you have any suggestions for improvement of the GAL Program?

“We need more volunteers and we should let them know how much we appreciate them.”

“Need more volunteer GALs!”

“All programs should have a designated attorney for the volunteer GAL.”

“None except that orders appointing GALs should be submitted rather than brought to Court for the judge to sign unless judge actually hearing a case w/that GAL. Otherwise, outstanding.”

“DSS needs to meet w/the GAL ahead of time to see if any differences in recommendations could be resolved before court. This is more DSS’s issue rather than the GAL.”

“Keep up the excellent work.”

“Keep up good work and provide adequate funding.”

“Recruit more GALs.”

Five respondents indicated they had no suggestions, and the remaining respondents did not comment.

Other comments:

“The GAL Program is exceptional in {withheld} circuit and is a great asset.”

“Keep up the good work!” (2)

“These people are the eyes and ears of the Court. We would be lost without them.”

“GALs from the SC Vol. GAL Program are essential. They are the voice of the children. They are independent b/w (sic) parents position and DSS position. They do the follow up on the treatment plans. It would be a setback if we didn’t have GAL program.”

“These GALs deserve a lot of praise.”

“I am retired, but still hold court one week per month in {withheld} County. I find the volunteer guardians in that county very capable and and conscientious. Their legal representation is adequate also.”

Two respondents indicated they had no comments, and the remaining respondents did not comment.