

Joanne (Jo) Perreault
Guardian ad Litem, Washington County Court
Email: Joperreault@yahoo.com

STATEMENT BEFORE COMMITTEE ON CHILD ABUSE
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I am an experienced Guardian ad Litem, with over 11 years of service and 40 years as a Legal Assistant in both the public and private sectors of Vermont and New Hampshire. I first became a GAL when my own daughter was an infant (1976), and have continued throughout the years as time and employment allowed. It is without question the most challenging, and oftentimes satisfying, job I have ever held. It is also not unusual for me to have a family/client state to me “No one was listening until you came on board.”

Presently, I am in all three courts: Civil (divorce); Juvenile (abuse, neglect, truancy), and Criminal (competency). I am competent, compassionate, and well-versed enough in my job as to understand the charges made and not be intimidated by any party I have to interview. As with any job, the more frequent the cases the better aware the GAL becomes of what to look for and questions to ask in order to make a fully-informed recommendation to the court. If I do not agree with counsel or the State, I am not afraid to stand alone and advise the court why. In all my years as a GAL, I can honestly say that the courts I have appeared before, and counsel I have worked with, have both listened and/or sought my assistance in working with victims and clients. In fact, it is not unusual for me to bring “something new” to the discussion and have the court ask DCF to further investigate. (I.e. finding an unknown third party hiding in the residence upon visitation).

It is vital the GAL obtain the names and contact information of **all parties** involved in the case to ease communication, visit with the child(ren) as soon as possible, ask questions, be prepared for court appearances and to recommend to the court and counsel what I believe to be in the child’s best interest. DCFs philosophy is “reunification”, however, where a child has been removed from the home premises, “reunification” is not always my first intent. In fact, if I have **any** doubt it would be detrimental to return the child home, then an alternative solution is sought. There are many instances when it is best to “keep the child within the immediate or extended family”, but there is **never** justification to returning a child(ren) to an unsafe environment.

DCF – What Works

My experience with DCF (and SRS before that) has always been positive, professional and team-spirited on every level. If I have any questions or need to discuss a case, the assigned Caseworker is usually timely in returning my call or email. I am also advised of and requested to participate in Team Meetings on my cases at their office.

The amount of “requirements” a parent is required to go through in order to get their child(ren) back. I.e. Extensive counseling/parenting programs; Substance Abuse Screening and Clean UAs; Finding suitable housing and employment; Keeping alleged perpetrators away from child(ren).

If visitation is in question, ability of the GAL to work up a Visitation Schedule with the family showing dates, times, places and Supervisor prior to court hearing saves considerable time.

DCF – What’s Not Working

- Too many times a Caseworker is “replaced” by another without any explanation as to why and the GAL finding they are not fully versed on the file.
- DCF Caseworker to get the Case Plan Review and Dispositional Plan to **all parties** well in advance of upcoming court appearance so that it can be reviewed and discussed.
- Need for 2 Caseworkers to be involved with same case in event one is away or out for an extended period of time.
- DCF Offices in various counties not sharing information. (I.e., Case in Orange County against a male charged with child molestation not shared with DCF in Washington County when new charges are brought involving the family). DCF can easily check Contact Information in the system on a particular client.
- DCF asking the GAL’s to either supervise visits or advise them who can. DCF’s responsibility!
- DCF not always listening to the GAL when she expresses concern for the “living conditions” of the child(ren) in the home place.
- GAL not being taken seriously when she informs DCF a child is “being coached by one parent to make false accusations against another” – and GAL has witnessed.
- “Reunification” to a “blood relative” not always in child’s best interest.
- DCF Staff – high caseloads.
- Many errors in initial Affidavit filed with the court. (I.e., a child’s DOB, home addresses, etc.)

Concerns

1. Juvenile Court Proceedings to become public. **Under no circumstances** should this happen.
2. Follow-up of some kind in lace where parent relapses and continues drug abuse/neglect.
3. Returning child (ren) to an unsafe environment.
4. Investigative lapses - Many calls to DCF re “abuse allegations” by numerous people, many different Caseworkers “investigating” the same child(ren)/family, and finding calls to be “unsubstantiated” because the child is too frightened to testify and no further action, until it is too late.