



LEGISLATIVE BRIEFING SHEET



Enhancing the Vermont Guardian ad Litem Program

Overview

The Judiciary’s budget includes a request for \$264,234 to enhance the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program. The Judiciary will use the requested funds to partner with one or more nonprofit organizations to recruit, train, and supervise volunteer GALs. The funds will also support an existing pilot partnership in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties.

Position

The Supreme Court **supports** allocation of general funds to partner with nonprofit organizations.

By partnering with nonprofits that have ties to local communities, the Judiciary improves the likelihood of **recruiting more volunteers** to help serve growing numbers of children involved in juvenile proceedings. Nonprofit partners will train, support, and supervise volunteer GALs with oversight and support from the Judiciary’s programs manager for the GAL program.

Impact

This proposal **furtheres the Court’s commitment to ensuring equal access to justice** and to ensuring that programs and services respond to existing and emerging needs. Specifically, it responds to opioid-driven increases in the juvenile docket.

Nonprofits may raise funds unavailable to the Judiciary and expand resources for the Program.

Vermont will join 40 other states that rely in whole or in part on nonprofit partners to coordinate GAL services.

Concerns

- Some volunteers might have concerns working with a selected nonprofit partner.

- If no additional funding is approved, the Judiciary will discontinue the contract with the nonprofit partner for the pilot and resume assigning a part-time Judiciary employee to coordinate services. This change might be disruptive for GAL volunteers in the Franklin and Grand Isle Counties.

As of January 2017, approximately **290 volunteer GALs** serve Vermont’s children.

Background

What GALs Do: GALs are trained, unpaid, court-appointed advocates who help ensure that the child’s best interests and rights are protected throughout the child’s involvement in the court process. GALs gather information, explain the court process and choices to the child, advocate for the best interests of the child, and help ensure that the court, parties, and service providers work together to meet the child’s best interests in a timely fashion.

Benefits of GALs: Studies show that a child with an assigned GAL is more likely to be adopted, half as likely to reenter foster care, substantially less likely to spend time in long-term foster care, and more likely to have a plan for permanency. Volunteer GALs improve representation of children, reduce the time lawyers need, and help achieve better educational outcomes.

The Current GAL Program: 33 V.S.A. § 5112 requires the Judiciary to assign a GAL for every child who is a party to a juvenile judicial proceeding, including delinquency proceedings when the child’s interests conflict with those of the parent(s). A full-time programs manager, a half-time administrative assistant, and five part-time regional GAL coordinators administer the program. General funds pay these employees’ salaries.

GAL Pilot: In January 2017, the Judiciary expects to sign a contract with a nonprofit organization to see if this model can improve GAL recruitment and services in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties. The contract amount for the six-month pilot will not exceed \$60,000.

For More Information

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