



## Guardian ad Litem staffing: cost-effectiveness analysis

Summary of findings and recommendations

# Background

# Cost-effectiveness analysis

The Guardian ad Litem Program asked a team of independent consultants from Management Analysis and Development (MAD) to **analyze the relative costs and effectiveness of using paid employees and volunteers** in the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) role—and, if warranted, to make recommendations about whether and how to continue to staff the program.

MAD's cost-effectiveness analysis approach compares the effectiveness of two or more activities that are already fully implemented. It is distinct from a cost-benefit analysis, which anticipates the benefits of two or more potential activities. Here, “effectiveness” and “benefits” are distinguished only by the approaches of review versus estimation, not the importance or scope of program impacts.

MAD ultimately recommends that the Guardian ad Litem Program end the use of volunteers in the GAL role and **instead consider other ways to benefit from volunteers** and their time, passion, and expertise. This document summarizes the findings that led to MAD's recommendation.



## Prior studies

A 2017 report from the National Center for State Courts recommended movement toward a universal employee model. A 2018 evaluation by Office of the Legislative Auditor recommended greater clarity and consistency in GAL work expectations, performance measurement, and compliance with program requirements.



## Demand for service

Volunteers in the Fourth and Second Districts played an important role in reducing case backlogs when the two districts had fewer GAL employees. In 2017, the two districts had 378 volunteer and 42 employee GALs. In 2023, there were 53 volunteer and 37 employee GALs, plus 21 employees assigned to ICWA cases.



## Paradigm shifts

The philosophy of child protection work has evolved over the years to focus more on family reunification than child removal. There is also increased awareness of child protection as a system in which all parties contribute but none can achieve the desired outcomes alone.

# Findings

## Understanding effectiveness

- MAD learned about effectiveness from the GAL Program's three key performance indicators and other program and administrative data.
- MAD also used extensive comments from interviewees to learn about GAL work performance, skills, and strengths.
- Employees and volunteers had **comparable performance in most respects**, including job tenure, time use, and most performance measures.
- Volunteers were **less effective** than employees at completing continuing education and working within the requirements of the GAL role.

## Cost analysis

- MAD learned about costs from administrative data about GAL and supervisor compensation, training expenses, information technology expenses, and the value of staff attorney time in case consultation.
- Volunteers had much lower average costs per person (about \$3,500 versus \$54,000).
- However, volunteers carry much smaller caseloads than employees (typically one to two cases).
- Volunteers thus had only **somewhat lower average costs per case** (about \$2,100 versus \$2,400).

## Other differences: observed performance and background

Coordinator interviewees noted several ways in which volunteers are somewhat less likely to meet work expectations, though they noted such issues were rare. They said volunteers sometimes had difficulty committing to meetings, trainings, or consistent casework, and that they take more **time to fully learn the work** of a GAL. The most common challenge was volunteers' somewhat greater difficulty learning and understanding the role of the GAL: maintaining **appropriate behavior, boundaries, and expectations** for oneself and other parties to a case.

MAD asked interviewees about the importance of a GAL **sharing a racial or cultural background** with the children or families they serve. Interviewees broadly agreed this was true (though not to the exclusion of other lived experiences). Several interviewees also offered comments about recruitment of BIPOC individuals into the GAL role.

Most of these—but not all—spoke about the **difficulty of recruiting racially diverse candidates**. Those who distinguished between volunteers and employees noted that, currently, **employees are somewhat more racially diverse than volunteers** and recruitment of diverse employees has been more effective in recent years than it was for volunteers in the past. Those interviewees attributed the difference partly to racial disparities in household income and wealth, which afford comparatively few BIPOC individuals the financial security to offer their unpaid time and labor.

## Other differences: GAL time and tenure

Interviewees discussed the time Guardians ad Litem spend on their cases in two different ways.

Some discussed the **time necessary to learn the role**, and the importance of a full and varied caseload in becoming effective. In particular, several GAL coordinators said an employee's larger caseload is one of the factors that translates into success in the role.

On the other hand, some interviewees discussed the value of **deep, long-term engagement with children**—an opportunity they believed was uniquely available to volunteers with their small caseloads. However, program data does not suggest that volunteers have much longer relationships or more frequent or intensive contact with the children they represent.



# Guardian ad Litem accountability and program risk

Guardians ad Litem expressed pride in their independence and the flexibility with which they approach their work. This was true of many GAL interviewees and particularly strong among current and former volunteers. However, several interviewees with experience with both employees and volunteers spoke about the latter's **greater difficulty fulfilling and working within the statutory role** of the Guardian ad Litem.

The use of volunteers thus poses **a unique risk** for the Guardian ad Litem Program: compared with employees, there are fewer mechanisms for ensuring satisfactory GAL performance and compliance with program or statutory requirements.

Judicial Branch policies that prevent volunteers' use of state IT systems also create additional **information security risks** by forcing volunteers to rely on personal devices and informal technology support.

# Recommendations

On average, volunteer Guardians ad Litem offer **comparable performance and some cost savings** to the Guardian ad Litem Program.

But the use of volunteers—whose adherence to work standards and the GAL statutory role are perceived as less consistent, and for whom limited accountability mechanisms exist beyond termination—exposes the program to **a heightened level of risk**.

Interviewees described the greatest benefits to volunteer involvement in terms of sustained relationships with children in need of stability and the ability to bring greater awareness about the child protection system into their communities. MAD suggests that **a different role for volunteers would maximize these benefits and reduce some of the Guardian ad Litem Program's risk**.

## Recommendation on the use of volunteers

To make the best use of dedicated and experienced volunteers, MAD recommends that the Guardian ad Litem Program, or partners such as CASA Minnesota, **explore other ways to engage volunteers** beyond the GAL role.

For example, volunteers who wish to offer sustained connection and care for children in juvenile or family court could **shift into a mentorship role** with a partner organization. They could support children, or entire families, through or beyond the life of a court case—and offer direct supports that are outside the GAL role.

Alternately, volunteers who wish to share insights or encourage changes in child protection could **focus their advocacy on the entire system**. They could bring their expertise into discussions about policy, resources, or reform to the system. They could also raise community awareness about the current workings, strengths, and challenges of the child protection system in their communities.

MAD also made several **additional recommendations** for the GAL Program based on information that emerged through the course of the study.

The additional recommendations were:

- Create expectations and systems for accountability.
- Strengthen data systems and practices.
- Support program staff.
- Ensure role clarity at all levels.
- Improve communication, internally and externally.

# Additional study details

Where possible given the availability of administrative data and interviewees, MAD focused on:

- Administrative and program data from the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts
- A lookback period from July 2020 to June 2023 (state fiscal years 2021–2023)

MAD's analysis included:

- Available administrative and program data about costs, key performance indicators, case assignments and work activities, length of service, and continuing education
- Individual and group interviews with 35 stakeholders: current and former volunteers and employees, GAL program supervisors, officers of the court recruited via Children's Justice Initiative participation, and CASA Minnesota and National CASA representatives and their recommended stakeholders

For a copy of MAD's full report, contact Tami Baker-Olson, GAL Program Administrator.