Reasons for discontinued service among Guardians ad Litem

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ABSTRACT

High attrition among Guardians ad Litem can compromise the quality of care for youth in the dependency system. In order to improve the retention of Guardians ad Litem and the quality of work completed, the characteristics of volunteers who have discontinued service as well as the reasons these volunteers provide for discontinuing service were examined. These analyses were conducted using a Grounded Theory approach as well as descriptive and bivariate statistics. The most frequently reported reason for discontinued service was the volunteers' inactivity for six months or longer. In addition, younger volunteers aiming to gain experience in the field had the shortest length of service, while older volunteers and volunteers who no longer wished to continue had the longest length of service. Our recommendations include 1) standardized and consistent tracking systems of volunteers, 2) create a track for student volunteers who cannot commit to the preferred length of service, 3) recruit older adults who may have more time and life experience to commit to the program, and 4) enhance volunteer commitment by increasing socialization, celebrating accomplishments, and cultivating volunteers' work expectations.

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1. Introduction

Cases of child abuse and neglect can lead to multiple court proceedings and involve a number of participants including family members, case managers, and legal staff. Children entering the dependency system due to abuse or neglect are appointed an attorney by the court and, using a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) model, a paid staff advocate and a volunteer advocate. Most often, these staff and volunteer advocates are part of a state government organization: The Guardian ad Litem program. Statewide Guardian ad Litem programs are parsed by judicial circuits and are overseen by a program director, regional director, and statewide director. These volunteer child advocates, referred to hereafter as Guardians ad Litem (GALs), are primarily responsible for monthly visits to the child through the lifetime of the case and writing summary reports for the court's review. Additional responsibilities include coordinating with school officials, finding resources for the child, ensuring all parties are up-to-date on the child's wellbeing and needs and establishing permanency (National CASA Association, 2015). The effectiveness of GALs in child welfare cases has long been established. Aside from providing a sense of permanency and supporting opportunities to thrive, youth with volunteer advocates spend less time in care (Calkins & Millar, 1999), are more likely to be

adopted (Abramson, 1991; Poertner & Press, 1990), are more likely to be reunified with family (Calkins & Millar, 1999; Leung, 1996), experience fewer changes in placement (Abramson, 1991; Calkins & Millar, 1999; Leung, 1996; Litzelfelner, 2000), and receive more services (Calkins & Millar, 1999; Leung, 1996) than youth without court appointed volunteer advocates.

Given the high number of individuals involved in a single case, and the high turnover of individuals employed in the state's child welfare system (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), oftentimes the GAL may be the most knowledgeable person regarding a child's case. Given their critical role in child welfare, and the high turnover of paid members of a child's case team, retention of these volunteer youth advocates is an important matter of public concern. Low volunteer retention can present challenges to the agency and service continuity that may be preventable.

High turnover of volunteers is cited in the general volunteerism literature. Thirty-five percent of individuals who begin work with a volunteer agency discontinue service before 12 months and the average length of service before ending service is approximately 18 months (Hidalgo & Moreno, 2009). For GALs, the sensitive nature of their work and the required time investment in cases can be particularly taxing. To date, there are 76,000 volunteer advocates in the US representing more than 251,000 children (National CASA Association, 2015). Little to nothing is reported, however, about turnover rates and reasons for discontinued service among GALs. Because there is significant variability in each GAL program, there is little to no meaningful aggregate data about reasons for discontinued service that can be applied

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across counties. The first step in reducing volunteer loss and in increasing volunteer commitment should begin by examining attrition rates by judicial circuit.

In the current study, we began this examination by exploring attrition among GALs in a single Florida judicial circuit. In this judicial circuit, the qualifications for becoming a GAL are minimal; individuals must be at least 19 years of age, "with common sense and good judgment" (Guardian ad Litem Program, 2015). Volunteers who are 19 or 20 years old are may volunteer but are not assigned a case to cover independently. Guardians ad Litem must successfully complete 30 h of in-person and online certification training, conduct a practice home visit, must pass a background check, and are told they will spend an average of 10–12 h per month working on the case. Guardians ad Litem are asked to make at least a one-year commitment to the program. Upon completion of training, GALs are assigned to a child advocate manager (CAM) who supervises the GAL throughout their tenure with the program. CAMs are paid state employees.

Attrition in this study is defined as the number of GALs who discontinue service after they are certified relative to the total number of GALs in a program. Guardians ad Litem may discontinue service at any time after certification, including before beginning a case, during a case, or between cases. Guardians ad Litem may either choose to discontinue service or, less often, may be asked to discontinue service based on poor performance. Since 2012, the attrition rate for volunteers in this circuit is slightly lower than the national average although sizable at approximately 30% (29.6%–30.2%); the generally accepted rate estimated by the Florida state Guardian ad Litem office is 25%. This high attrition puts a strain on other members of the Guardian program (e.g., child advocate managers, other volunteers) and can compromise the quality of advocacy for the children. Understanding why GALs discontinue service will aid in reducing this attrition with the long-term goal of providing the highest quality of advocacy. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the characteristics of GAL volunteers who have discontinued service as well as reasons these volunteers provide for discontinuing service.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

This study utilized a retrospective chart review design. We reviewed volunteer files for all Guardians ad Litem (GALs) who discontinued service from the program between 2012 and 2014 (n = 156). During this period there were approximately 230 active GALs at any given time (225–236 from 2012 to 2014). There were no significant changes in the GAL program during the study period that were expected to impact the GAL attrition rate. The majority of volunteers who ended service was female (72%), White non-Hispanic (66%), and employed at least part-time during their service (55%). The average age of volunteers who ended service was 41 years with a range of 20 to 85 years. The average time served was 22 months with a range of 0 to 168 months (14 years). See Table 1.

2.2. Procedures and measures

Information gathered for this study is housed within the GAL office and is not public record. Only GAL staff is able to access volunteer files. With assistance from GAL staff, a member of the research team was given access to archived volunteer files. Volunteer files contain several pieces of information relevant to the volunteers' tenure with the program. Information in the file originates from several sources including their interview with the recruiter, the program director, the training coordinator, and child advocate managers (CAMs). This team member reviewed each volunteer file for demographic characteristics (age, sex, race) at the time of service termination, reason for joining the GAL program (obtained at initial interview), length of service with GAL, reason for service termination, a summary of volunteer's qualities (obtained at

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample, n = 156.

Variable	n(%)
Sex: female	113 (72%)
Race/ethnicity	
Hispanic	10 (7%)
White, non-Hispanic	101 (66%)
Black, non-Hispanic	30 (20%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	5 (3%)
Multi-race	4 (3%)
Work status (at time of certification)	
Full-time employed	50 (37%)
Part-time employed	25 (18%)
Not employed	20 (15%)
Student	16 (12%)
Retired	18 (13%)
Other	7 (5%)
	Mean (std. deviation)
Age (in years)	41.51 (17.3)
Time served (in months)	22.23 (20.4)

exit interview), and whether or not the interviewer would recommend this GAL to another circuit (obtained at exit interview). The research assistant extracted each variable from various elements of the file and recorded the redacted information in a spreadsheet document. The exit interview and certificate of completion were used to determine and calculate the following variables: year of service termination, the length of service (calculated in months), and age at service termination (calculated in months). The exit interview was also used to determine the reason for discontinuing service, brief summary of volunteer's qualities, and if the case manager would recommend the volunteer to another circuit. The response for goals of volunteering was found in an interview packet that is conducted before the volunteer is able to start the program and begin training. It should be noted that the format of these forms changed over the two years that were examined. Changes were minimal and included adding or removing questions, adding check boxes, and re-arranging questions. Importantly, all questions included in this study remained constant throughout the study period.

2.3. Analytic plan

Descriptive statistics were used to examine demographic characteristics. Two trained researchers coded the qualitative responses using a Grounded Theory approach.[21] Grounded Theory was chosen as it allows the researcher to identify patterns that emerge from the data instead of fitting the data to pre-determined themes. Given the exploratory nature of this study, it was decided that this was the best approach. In brief, one researcher first independently read each item and developed ideas for themes. Second, both researchers collaborated to develop a coding scheme based on these themes. Finally, each researcher then independently coded each item using this scheme. When responses were not discernable (typically due to illegible handwriting or incomplete responses), these responses were left uncoded. Codes were not mutually exclusive and multiple codes could have been assigned to each response. The coders conferred when discrepancies existed between them. Agreement between coders, measured using Cohen's kappa, ranged from .51 to .95 with 82% of agreement scores at or above .57. Reliability statistics are presented with the results summaries (Figs. 1–3). Bivariate statistics were then used to examine differences in the goals for volunteering, summary of the volunteer, and reason for discontinued service based on sex, age, race, length of service for the volunteer, and work status. Probability levels were set at $\alpha = .05$ and adjusted with a Holm–Bonferonni correction to control for Type I error. Thus, p-values ≤ .005 should be considered statistically significant.