

Vermont GAL Program Newsletter



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What's New?

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Television Channel 17, Public Access TV, Chittenden County featured the Guardian ad Litem Program in its "Live at 5:25" show on August 9, 2006. Host Rob Reiber interviewed Chittenden County Guardian ad Litem, John Wilson and Coordinator, Mary Hayden. For more information, log onto www.cctv.org.

VPR

VPR featured the Guardian ad Litem Program on its Wednesday "Vermont Edition" with Steve Zind on August 23. Steve interviewed Windsor County Guardian ad Litem Andrew Mann, Coordinator Mary Hayden, and Judge Katherine Hayes about the status of the Program since Steve Zind last reported on it in 2004. To listen to a recording of the program, go to www.vpr.net/vt_edition/archive/index.shtml and download the Guardian ad Litem mp3 dated August 23, 2006.

Our VPR Underwriting ad continued through the end of September in anticipation of the October Basic pre-service Training.

Commercial Radio Public Service Announcements

We have re-circulated our radio "ad" throughout the state in anticipation of the October 2006 Basic pre-service Training. Thanks to Greg Hooker from the Point FM for producing the ad and playing it regularly around the state.

Recognition

Windsor County

Windsor County court staff honored their GALs at a recognition picnic on September 1. GALs received thank you gifts from Judge Eaton. GAL, Terry Boone, of Norwich was recognized for donating his expertise and time to produce the commercial radio public service announcement for the Guardian ad Litem Program produced at the

Point FM radio studio. Before joining the GAL Program in 2000, Terry worked in radio broadcasting for many years and continues to consult on media and marketing issues for businesses. Terry's professionalism and knowledge about the "world of radio" were crucial to the process. Windsor County also recognized GAL, Andy Mann, for help with training new GALs and with public awareness, and GAL, Floreen Bishop, for re-doing the children's room in the courthouse. Thank you, Terry, Andy and Floreen!

Orleans

Orleans County honored its GALs at a Pizza Luncheon on September 25, 2006. New GALs who have been working on shadowing assignments were sworn in by Judge Cashman and were issued their Certificates of Completion. Judge Cashman and Judge Devine lead an in-service training discussion for the GALs. GAL, Russell Hinton, Orleans County Fair blue ribbon baking winner provided homemade apple pies!

Bennington

Bennington County honored its GALs back in April 2006 to coincide with the statewide Guardian ad Litem Recognition Day ceremony at the Supreme Court.

Several courts are planning recognition events later in the year and we will update you in future newsletters.

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GALs in Custody Cases

The GAL Oversight Committee under the authority of the Family Court Oversight Committee has established a committee to study the role of the GAL in the domestic custody cases. The committee chaired by Alex Banks, Esq. of the South Royalton Legal Clinic, will be looking at qualifications, training curriculum, funding, and the rules, policies and procedures for Guardians ad Litem serving in domestic custody cases. If any GALs wish to communicate their thoughts or opinions concerning the role of the GAL in custody cases, Chair Alex Banks welcomes your comments. Alex can be reached by email at alex.banks@vermontlaw.edu, or mail your comments to Alexander Banks, Esq., South Royalton Legal Clinic, PO Box 117, South Royalton, VT 05068.

TRAINING

Pre-Service Training

BASIC pre-service CASA Training will be offered Wednesday, October 25, Thursday, October 26, and Friday, October 27 in the Champlain Room at the Costello Courthouse in Burlington. All applicants referred for training as well as court staff will receive training information directly from the GAL Program Office.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Four GALs to attend 9th Annual Conference on Child Sexual Abuse October 14-15
Guardians ad Litem from Chittenden, Caledonia and Franklin Counties will attend the 9th Annual New England Conference on Child Sexual Abuse at the Sheraton in Burlington, VT under scholarships from the Vermont Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Sexual Abuse. The Center, which also awarded the Guardian ad Litem Program a 2007 grant to pilot a GAL CHINs supervision model in Rutland County has been very supportive of the GAL Program. Thank you to the Center on behalf of the Vermont Guardians ad Litem!

Other Training Opportunities

Oct 13

4th Annual Vermont Collaboration Conference on Children, Youth & Families for child and family advocates as well as parents and family members. There will be 3 workshops, including such topics as "Impact of Trauma on Lives of Youth", "Kin as Parents" and Vermont's Growing Youth Movement". Guardian ad Litem, Betty Farr, Addison County, will be attending. GALs who may still want to attend this conference will need to register as soon as possible by going to www.uvm.edu/~cdci/conferences.html

Oct 18, 19 & 20

VT Conference on Addictive Disorders sponsored by ASAP of VT, Health Dept and Valley Vista, Lake Morey, Fairlee, contact two-boys@adelphia.net for registration information or Debby Haskins at asapvt@sover.net or 456-1100

Oct 20, 21, and 22

Gateways to Permanency: New England's Foster Parent Association Conference, Sheraton Hotel, Nashua, NH. (603)224-8909; or go to www.nhfapa.org

October 31

Medical Issues in Child Maltreatment for the Non-Medical Team Member, sponsored by VT Family Services Division (DCF), 9:30 am to 3:30 pm, Langevin House, VTC, Randolph, contact Cathy Jackson at 241-3041 or cjackson@srs.state.vt.us

- November 1 **Restoring Connections - Improving Care for Children & Families Impacted by Trauma**, Margaret Blaustein & Kristine Kinniburgh, featured speakers, Capitol Plaza, Montpelier, contact Kristi Petrochko at 223-4744 or kpetrochko@eastersealsvt.org or go to www.traumacenter.org
- November 2 **Infant-Parent Relationships**, sponsored by Washington County Mental Health, Michael Trout, Director of the Infant-Parent Institute of Champaign, IL, keynoter on the effect of trauma and disabilities on attachment in early life, Montpelier Elks Lodge, contact Michael Curtis at michaelc@wcmhs.org
- November 8 & 9 **Victim Centered Approaches to Advocacy - Meeting the Needs of all Victims - Voices for Justice, 6th Annual Tri-State Conference**, sponsored by the VT Center for Crime Victim Services & VT Network Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Violence & others, Woodstock Inn, Woodstock, contact Andrea Van Liew at 241-1259 or avanliew@ccvs.state.vt.us
- November 17 **2nd Annual VT Coalition of Residential Programs (VCORP) - Excellence in Direct Care**, Rutland Holiday Inn, contact Heather Houle at hjhoule@aol.com
- December 4 & 5 **Attachment, Self-Regulation, Competency - Framework for Intervention with Traumatized Youth**, sponsored by AHS, New England Counseling & Trauma Institute, others, Margaret Blaustein, Ph.D. & Kristine Kinniburgh, LICSW, trainers from the Trauma Center & Justice Resource Institute, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, The Inn at Essex, contact Tammy Leombruno at 878-4990 x 34
- December 4 & 5 **Restoring Connections - Improving the Care for Children & Families Impacted by Trauma - the ARC Model**, (in conjunction with the November 1 session, but different), Essex Inn, Essex, contact Kristi Petrochko at kpetrochko@eastersealsvt.org or 223-4744 or go to www.traumacenter.org

Longer Term Training Opportunities

March 23 – 25, 2007

20th Annual VT Foster & Adoptive Association Conference, Wyndham Hotel, Burlington, contact Mary Alberty at malberty2001@excite.com

April 19, 2007

3rd Annual Kinship Care Conference, sponsored by Vermont Kin as Parents, Sheraton Hotel, Burlington, contact Lynn Granger at lmgin@adelphia.net

May 18, 2007

2nd Annual Conference Working with Youth, Sheraton Hotel, Burlington, contact Kreig Pinkham at 229-9151 or kpinkham@adelphia.net

Brown Bag Lunch In-Service Training Topics

It is suggested that each Court hold regular monthly brown bag meetings for GALs to meet for support, information, or in-service training on a particular topic. Here are some suggested topics for your local Court brown bag lunches.

Youth Aging Out

What services are available to youth who age out while still in the foster system to help them make the transition to adulthood. How do GALs advocate aging out youth? Invite DCF to address this topic and discuss programs, services and options which may be available to youth transitioning out of custody.

Domestic Violence

October is Domestic Violence Awareness month. Invite your local advocates to discuss domestic violence dynamics and the impact on children, including what family services a GAL might support.

Tips for Having those “Difficult Conversations”

Guardians ad Litem are expected to advocate independently for the best interests of children. This sometimes puts GALs in the difficult position of having to express an opinion to a child, parent or professional that is not always welcome. Here are some tips for getting through those tough discussions. (*Reprinted from “The Connection”, a CASA Publication.*)



Having a “Difficult Conversation”

By Isabel M. Morales, member of the National CASA Curriculum Advisory Committee
Senior Project Associate, the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice, Casey Family Services

You are about to meet with a parent who is frustrated with the system and sees you as a part of it.

You have to tell a child you are recommending residential treatment instead of going home.

A child tells you he does not want to be adopted after you have found him the “perfect” home.

You need to ask a parent who cannot be reunified with her child who else in the family might be able to care for the child.

These are examples of the “difficult conversations” we all dread—the ones that make our stomachs clench up and our heads ache, the ones we would rather avoid than have. It is difficult giving bad news or hearing someone’s anger and frustration (especially when it is directed at us).

There are many techniques available to help you get through these difficult but necessary conversations. This column reviews a handful to get you started.

1. Stop talking!¹

As simple as this seems, it is certainly the foundation for any meaningful dialogue. Too often we approach a difficult conversation as if we already know the whole story and only need to find the right way to get our message across.

“Seek first to understand, then be understood.”² As Steven Covey’s quote suggests, we should concentrate first on understanding the other person’s situation.

In short, stop talking! If you are doing all the talking, you are not gathering the information you need—you are not in what the Harvard Negotiation Project calls a “learning conversation.”³ This is easier said than done.

We often listen as if listening is a passive stance rather than a critical component of good communication. By actively listening, we respectfully elicit another person’s story, fears and emotions. Only when we have heard and understood the other side can we hope to be understood in return. If the frustrated parent in the example above feels that you have heard his perspective, he is better able to listen to you and understand your suggestions and to focus on his child’s best interests.

Embracing both perspectives is important and valid to the speaker and provides the opportunity for a meaningful exchange.

“I’m recommending residential treatment I know that it is disappointing to you and you’re probably not happy with me right now, but I do think it is where you need to be to get what you need.”

Many helpful resources are available both in print and on line that teach active listening skills. It is well worth the time to practice and apply them.

2. Know what you bring to the table.

News item: It’s not all about them.

A “difficult conversation” is not something that just happens. Nor is the difficulty only on the side of the other person. You bring to each interaction your perceptions, your beliefs, your assumptions and your biases, just as the other person brings his. Be aware of how your “baggage” may affect your interactions with other people and their response to you.

One of the most damaging behaviors is our tendency to assign intent to another person’s actions. Most often, we don’t know what their intent was because we haven’t asked. (*“He’s never home when I stop by because he is avoiding me.” “If she respected my role as a volunteer she would return my phone calls.”*) If we’d ask, we might discover that there is a part of the story we didn’t know (work schedules and caseloads change, family crises happen).

Be transparent by being explicit about your intent, your goals and the requirements and limitations of your role. Help the other person do the same by asking questions and helping to articulate her intent, goals and role. (*"It sounds as if you and I have a different view on this; can you tell me more about how you see this?"*)

More news: It's not all about you.

Sometimes we get caught up in how this conversation will affect our self-image, reputation, role or even schedule. (*"If I give someone bad news, I won't be seen as the friendly, helpful person I try to be."*)

Acknowledging and removing your own personal concerns from the conversation will help you be a more effective advocate.

3. Find out what is behind the "no."

People approach a difficult conversation with a solution in mind. Their purpose in approaching the conversation is to convince you of the rightness of their position. They are prepared to dig their heels in, stand firm and say "no" to any other solutions. If you feel the same way about your "right" solution, you will be in a standoff. For a GAL volunteer, a standoff is detrimental to the child. Instead, discover the "why" behind the "no."

"What is it about reunification that worries you?"
"Do you need more information about what it would take to parent your daughter full time?"
"What would have to happen for you to feel okay about being adopted?"

With careful questioning and listening, the child, who says she does not want to be adopted, even by the "perfect" family, may be able to tell you that she is still connected to her birth family and is afraid adoption means she will never see her siblings again.

4. Look for the third option ...and the fourth..or the fifth.

Too often we get stuck between what the other person wants and what we want. It's all or nothing; if one is right, the other must be wrong. Instead, approach the issue with the knowledge that there is always a third option, and sometimes a fourth and a fifth. Only after all of the options are revealed can you arrive at the best solution.

"I agree that it is important that your child stays connected to you and your family. Who else is he close to? Would one of them be able to parent fulltime?"

5. Practice, practice, practice!

As with learning any new skill, you will feel awkward and stumble now and then. With practice, however, you will find that you can play an important role in diminishing the difficulty in the next "difficult conversation."

Notes:

1. "Mind Tools on Active Listening," rnindtools.com
2. Steven Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*
3. Stone, et al., *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*

The Guardian ad Litem Program is grateful for all of your hard work and dedication to the children in Vermont.