



March 27, 2023

Guardian ad Litem Budget Testimony - Judiciary Finance and Civil Law Committee

Dear Chair Becker-Finn, Vice Chair Frazier, Minority Leader Scott, and Committee Members,

I am Gerard Bodell, a volunteer Guardian ad Litem and the volunteer board president of CASA Minnesota, a nonprofit supporting the role of screened, trained, and supervised community volunteers.

I'm here today to support this funding bill but also to ask that you earmark \$450 thousand in funding to build back and sustain the community volunteer guardian ad litem program.

- Guardians ad litem advocate for abused and neglected children. We do not provide direct services to children; we advocate for the best interest of the child and we recommend the direct services that other professionals provide.
- The guardian ad litem role was created over 40 years ago with Community Volunteers.
- Several states today have a hybrid system like Minnesota, blending part time and full-time employees with community volunteers for effective outcomes and to meet caseload demand.

Pay Employees More, but this alone won't solve our issues

Recruiting talented people to work within public child welfare programs is now a **crisis**, according to the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

- Open positions and turnover are at record highs both locally and nationally (20-40%) driving higher costs to recruit and train. There simply aren't enough paid resources to properly support the number of children.
- Employees take up to 30 cases each while volunteers take 3 cases each – we inside the system absolutely know that 30 cases, or even 20 cases per worker is not sustainable or effective child protection. Child welfare League of America suggests a caseload of 12-15 children per worker – we are far beyond this standard considering we can see an average of 3-4 children per case.

Why does the Matter and Why is it Urgent

- Minnesota's workforce numbers are not expected to grow to meet increasing staffing demands.
- On average, 2 children die each month in MN while in child protection ([Minnesota Child Fatalities from Maltreatment Report](#)).
- The improvements needed across the system are numerous and part of why I volunteer, sadly the number of volunteers has fallen from 263 just 5 years ago to fewer than 50 today because the state has stopped accepting new volunteers due to supervision needs.

Volunteer Guardians ad Litem offer a Solution – together with paid employees, resources become more plentiful for all involved.

- Community Volunteers offer a diversity and inclusion strategy, providing the opportunity for more GALs that look like the children and families we serve. We have a back log of hundreds of highly diverse volunteer applicants waiting and wanting to help.
- The volunteer model is strong nationally with 98,000 screened, trained, and supervised community volunteer guardians in 49 states plus DC.
- Community Volunteers lower employee caseloads, stress, and burnout. In Minnesota they also provide a diverse pool of trained candidates as future paid staff.
- Volunteers bring the voice of the Community into the in the courtroom, building trust and confidence in the system.
- Research has proven that Adverse Childhood Experiences negatively impacts mental and physical health and that having at least one trusted adult relationship substantially mitigates that impact - *the community volunteer is a one key adult relationship*.
- Many Volunteers go on to have an impact on a more community wide or systemic basis – *Denise Graves (\$12M Peris Hill Housing), Mike Tikkanen (Author, speaker), Rep. Edelson, Rep. Klevorn, are examples*.
- The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges fully endorses volunteer GALs and are working to expand these critical programs.

IN CONCLUSION

CASA Minnesota is supportive of allocating more resources, **not fewer**, for children in need of child protective services. Please advance this bill to increase employee pay **and** earmark \$450 thousand (<1% of program budget) to fund 3 additional supervisors which helps build back 100 volunteers. Without funding for volunteer supervision, the volunteer program will be allowed to disappear through attrition which we are already seeing. Minnesota's hybrid system of employees and volunteers working together can be better and will be better by improving employee pay and funding volunteer supervision.

Sincerely,



Gerard Bodell

Volunteer Guardian ad Litem 4th Judicial District and Board President CASA Minnesota