
Guardian ad Litem Cost- Effectiveness Analysis

Minnesota Guardian ad Litem Board
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Executive summary

In most of Minnesota's judicial districts, all Guardians ad Litem (GALs) are paid employees of the statewide Guardian ad Litem Program. This program is governed by an appointed board (the Guardian ad Litem Board) and managed at a statewide level by a Program Administrator and central office staff. Unlike other districts, the Fourth Judicial District (Hennepin County) and, to a lesser extent, the Second Judicial District (Ramsey County) have historically used a mix of both paid employees and volunteer Guardians ad Litem.

Two previous operational studies prompted changes to the program and discussions about its future staffing. Now, Guardian ad Litem Program leadership seek to perform due diligence about whether to formally end the use of volunteers as GALs. They asked Management Analysis and Development (MAD) to analyze the relative costs and effectiveness of paid employees and volunteers in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts.

This report describes and discusses analyses based on both existing administrative data and extensive interviews with GAL Program staff and stakeholders.

Based on the available data, the use of volunteers creates some cost saving on a per-case basis. The program spends about \$2,400 per case handled by employees and about \$2,100 per case handled by volunteers.

In some areas of effectiveness, volunteers and employees were demonstrated (or are perceived by interviewees) to perform similarly. These areas include:

- Two of three GAL key performance indicators (KPIs): report submission and hearing attendance
- Tenure in the program
- Proportion of overall time spent on case activities, number and duration of some case activities
- Demonstration of the skills needed to be effective in the role

Volunteers also had somewhat stronger performance in some aspects of the third GAL key performance indicator: the number of missed monthly contacts with children, the number and duration of child contacts per year, and the overall proportion of time spent on child contacts.

However, in several other areas, either employees outperform volunteers or volunteers are described as performing differently or having different, and heightened, needs for support. These areas include:

- Other aspects of the third GAL key performance indicator: the annualized average number of child contacts and the average duration of activities associated with child contacts
- Number and duration of some case activities
- Compliance with continuing education requirements
- Different needs for support from coordinators (i.e., immediate supervisors)
- Presumed success at recruiting diverse personnel who are culturally concordant with families

Finally, the study revealed widespread uncertainty about how program stakeholders understand and ensure GAL accountability. This issue introduces risk regarding both employee and volunteer GALs, but the risk is heightened

regarding volunteers because there are comparatively few mechanisms available to create and ensure the accountability of volunteers to the program.

For these reasons this report recommends the Guardian ad Litem Board discontinue the use of volunteers in their current capacity as Guardians ad Litem. While volunteers generally perform comparably to employees in the GAL role, and they offer marginal cost savings, the GAL Program is exposed to greater risk through using volunteers than can be mitigated with those benefits.

Some interviewees, including current and former volunteers themselves, spoke eloquently about the benefits of their service. Some of those benefits—while substantive—fall outside the defined role of the Guardian ad Litem. Other benefits discussed among interviewees within the GAL role were not corroborated by administrative data from the program.

By departing from the use of volunteer Guardians, the GAL Program could instead benefit from these more expansive contributions that volunteers themselves reported valuing highly in their work. One such possibility is an initiative that establishes deep and ongoing volunteer mentoring or advising relationships to support children and families in the child protection system. Another possibility is a volunteer initiative to bring individuals' interest in the child protection system into an advocacy role that encourages improvements to the system overall.

The research team also noted several areas that warranted additional recommendations, based on information that emerged through the course of the study. These additional recommendations suggest further opportunities to continue improving the GAL Program's overall effectiveness, regardless of the status of volunteers. The additional recommendations address:

- Expectations and systems for accountability
- Data systems and practices
- Support for program staff
- Role clarity within and outside the program
- Internal and external communications

Background

About the Guardian ad Litem Program

Minnesota’s Guardian ad Litem Board (GAL Board) governs a statewide program to administer a statewide, independent Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program to advocate for the best interests of children, minor parents, and incompetent adults in Juvenile and Family Court. A GAL advocates for the interests and needs of a child when a court is making decisions about their future, typically by making independent investigations and recommendations to the court related to a child and the important people in their life. The work of the Guardian ad Litem Program is executed by teams operating in each of the state’s ten judicial districts.

There are ten judicial districts in Minnesota; see Appendix B for a map illustrating the boundaries of each district. In most judicial districts, all Guardians ad Litem are paid employees of the program. The Fourth Judicial District (Hennepin County) and, to a lesser extent, the Second Judicial District (Ramsey County) have historically used a mix of both paid employees and volunteer GALs. In the past, both districts have also used independent contractors as Guardians ad Litem, though neither currently does so.

Previous studies

Operational assessment (2017)

In its 2017 operational assessment and legal analysis of Minnesota’s GAL Program, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC)¹ offered a series of recommendations about how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the program. Among other methods, the NCSC research team reviewed the structure of Guardian ad Litem programs in other states, finding that Minnesota was unique in the use of both employees and volunteers within a state-administered program. One of the NCSC recommendations was to “explore moving towards a universal employee model and away from the extensive use of volunteers.” The authors of the 2017 report discussed this recommendation (Sydow and Taylor 2017, 25) as follows:

While the NCSC project team noted some strengths of the volunteer model in the Second and Fourth Districts, the overwhelming majority of evidence suggests that a full-employee model would be more efficient, effective, and ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of the Minnesota GAL program. A universal employee model would promote opportunities for individuals interested in a professional career by further professionalizing the role of GAL, streamline expectations and roles for GALs operating in each district, and promote consistent practice across the state. The GAL Board should explore working with districts relying on large numbers of volunteers to create

¹ The National Center for State Courts is an independent organization with the mission to improve the administration of justice in state courts. Among other services, they provide research and consulting in the areas of court management and performance. For more information about NCSC, see <https://www.ncsc.org/about-us>.

opportunities for volunteers to increase public awareness and education about the needs of children in child protection cases. If the GAL Board chooses to explore this further, a cost-benefit analysis of the volunteer versus employee model is recommended.

In light of the NCSC's recommendations, since 2017 the GAL Board has worked with leadership in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts to meet the demand for services through additional professional staff. While the volunteer program has not formally ended, volunteer recruitment has been paused and the use of volunteer personnel has decreased through attrition. Table 1 below compares the use of volunteer GALs noted in the 2017 NCSC report (20) with the number of volunteers reported to MAD during the present study.

Table 1. Number of volunteer Guardians ad Litem over time

District	January 2017	March 2023
Second District	123	5
Fourth District	255	48 ²
All other districts	6	0
Statewide total	384	53

Evaluation by Office of the Legislative Auditor (2018)

In April 2017, the Legislative Audit Commission³ directed the Office of the Legislative Auditor⁴ (OLA) to evaluate the GAL Program in Minnesota. The OLA's work examined four components of the program: GAL role and services, demand for services, selection and training, and program oversight. The OLA did not evaluate Minnesota's GAL model of employee and volunteer GALs as part of its scope of work. At the time of the OLA evaluation, volunteers comprised approximately 60 percent of the state's Guardians ad Litem; 97 percent of all volunteer GALs worked in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts (Office of the Legislative Auditor 2018, 7).

The OLA's report, issued in March 2018, included detailed evaluation findings and seventeen recommendations, with two directed specifically to the Minnesota Legislature and the remaining fifteen to the GAL Board.

Among the OLA's findings were "some confusion about the Guardian ad Litem's role," and that there were "few standards guiding the work of Guardians ad Litem, which has inhibited the [GAL] Board's ability to monitor whether Guardians consistently provide quality services across the state" (29). Examples cited by OLA included:

- It was unclear whether GALs consistently performed all investigative activities required by state law.
- With no standards regarding the frequency that GALs should contact children, the number of visits GALs made to children varied widely, and the length of visits also varied.

² Per correspondence with Fourth District staff, the program expected a further sixteen volunteer GALs to exit the program at the completion of their currently assigned cases. If those volunteers separate from the program, thirty-two will remain in the Fourth District and thirty-seven statewide.

³ For more information about the Legislative Audit Commission, see <https://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/lac.htm>.

⁴ For more information about the Office of the Legislative Auditor, see <https://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/>.

- A lack of clarity as to expected level of detail in required written reports
- Various reporting deficiencies: incomplete required written reports; insufficient attribution of data sources and evidence in reports; low rate of on-time submittal of reports to the court; differing understandings of reporting requirements; and repeated instances of GALs presenting verbal updates in court instead of written reports
- Varying standards for performance reviews between employee and volunteer GALs
- In one instance where a standard was in place—minimum training requirements that met or exceeded best practice standards for volunteer GALs—OLA noted that the GAL Board “has not ensured all Guardians ad Litem comply with these requirements.”

Describing a recommendation that the GAL Board should adopt clear performance standards, OLA noted:

“As every case is different, we understand the need for guardians to have flexibility in the work they do. However, we believe the Board can devise policies outlining minimum standards that will not hinder guardians’ ability to use their discretion on a case-by-case basis. Work standards for guardians are an important accountability tool for the Board, GAL district managers, and the public, and we think that more clearly defined standards will improve guardians’ ability to effectively represent children’s best interests in a more consistent manner statewide.” (p. 47)

Other recommendations the OLA directed specifically to the GAL Board included:

- Implement a system for managers to evaluate how well GALs collect and summarize evidence used in their investigations.
- Develop and implement guidelines for appropriate caseloads for GALs.
- Track progress toward goals for a diverse, culturally competent workforce.
- Ensure all GALs comply with the Board’s training policies.
- Implement consistent evaluation of volunteer GALs.
- Establish training and continuing education requirements for district managers and coordinators.

The OLA published additional updates in January 2019 and February 2020 that documented changes implemented since the publication of the March 2018 report as well as actions still needed. In the January 2019 memo, the OLA noted that the GAL Board has made improvements related to oversight, including internal tracking, calendaring, and case management systems. The February 2020 memo reiterated this progress and that the Board had furthermore determined appropriate caseloads and increased supervision of GAL work “in an effort to ensure children receive consistent advocacy” (1). The February 2020 memo also noted that the Minnesota Legislature had appropriated significant additional funding to comply with federal and state requirements, which had resulted in over forty new staff hires and few cases on waitlists.

The present study

Given the context of these two prior reports—and in light of subsequent changes to the program and discussions about its future—GAL Program leadership sought to perform due diligence about whether or not to formally end the volunteer program. They asked Management Analysis and Development (MAD)⁵ to analyze the relative costs and effectiveness of paid employee and volunteer GALs in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts. Unless noted elsewhere, analysis in this study focuses on those two districts, and excludes the remaining eight judicial districts where volunteer GALs do not currently serve.

Methodology

Research approach and methods

To understand the two staffing models of the GAL Program, MAD adopted a cost-effectiveness analysis approach. Cost-effectiveness analysis is different from a related and better-known approach called cost-benefit analysis.⁶

Because the GAL Program is already fully implemented, and the GAL Board operates from an assumption that the program overall has substantial benefits to Minnesotans, a cost-effectiveness analysis that compares the two staffing models was the more appropriate fit to their questions about the volunteer program.

Broadly, cost-effectiveness analysis gathers and organizes data in three areas:

- The costs of two interventions that seek to achieve similar results (in this case, the volunteer and paid employee staffing models)
- The effectiveness of those two interventions at achieving the intended results
- A comparison of the relative costs and relative benefits of the two interventions

⁵ MAD is the State of Minnesota's in-house, fee for service management consulting practice. Independent research and analysis are among MAD's core services. For more information, see mn.gov/mmb/mad.

⁶ In program evaluation or policy research, a cost-benefit analysis approach is typically used to determine whether to implement a program or intervention. This type of analysis determines whether the costs of the intervention are greater than, comparable to, or less than the value (often, the monetary value) of benefits likely to result from the intervention.

Research questions

In the case of the GAL Board, MAD's cost-effectiveness analysis sought to answer three overarching questions:

1. Are either the volunteer or paid-personnel staffing models substantially more (or less) costly?
2. Are either of the staffing models substantially more (or less) effective?
3. On a per-case basis, is either staffing model substantially more costly *relative to its effectiveness*?

Determining the scope of the analysis

With those overarching questions in mind, defining a shared understanding of "effectiveness" was a crucial first step in the analysis process. A small group of key stakeholders (GAL Program leadership and three representatives from CASA Minnesota) met to determine the scope of the analysis early in March 2023. MAD facilitated a discussion with this group to identify and describe the most important factors to understanding the effectiveness of a GAL's work and the relevant cost drivers for the two staffing models.

MAD identified a set of more detailed questions in four main research areas based on the discussion in the initial scoping meeting. The research areas and questions included:

Outcomes and experiences for children and families⁷

- What are the outcomes (e.g., permanency status or final case status) for children and families served by GALs?
- How consistent is a GAL's presence in a child's or family's life?
- How do other parties to GAL cases perceive and understand the quality of GALs' work, including their understanding of a family's circumstances or a child's needs?
- What types and frequency of activities do GALs perform?
- To what extent are GALs culturally concordant with the children they serve? How do GALs perceive and value having a shared background or culture? How do they perceive and value having other common life experiences with the children or families they serve?

GAL competency

- To what extent do GALs fulfill program requirements?
- How well do GALs understand their role and responsibilities, as distinct from other officers of the court or participants in a case?
- How effectively do GALs demonstrate necessary skills?
- How do GALs perceive the influence of their own lived experience on their competencies or effectiveness as a GAL?
- What is the rate of GAL turnover? What are the drivers of GAL turnover?

⁷ Data were not collected directly from or about children and families in order to protect their privacy. These research questions were addressed through interviews and administrative data as discussed above.

- How effective are GAL recruitment, screening, and onboarding?
- How effective are GAL supervision and case consultation?

GAL accountability

- To whom are GALs accountable for their work?
- What are the mechanisms by which GALs are held accountable, and how effective are those mechanisms?
- To what extent and in what ways is the GAL Program overall accountable to external stakeholders, such as officers of the court, county child protection workers, children or families, or the community at large?

Program costs

- What are the overall compensation costs for employee GALs, volunteer GALs, and the coordinators needed to supervise them?
- What are the per-unit costs of staffing a case with an employee or volunteer GAL, including both compensation and additional expenses (such as supervisory time, training, and technology)?
- How long do employee and volunteer GALs tend to stay in their positions? How do the costs of turnover, including recruiting and onboarding new personnel, affect both program costs and effectiveness in the respective staffing models?

Data collection methods

Qualitative data collection: interviews

To address these questions, MAD conducted both primary data collection and secondary data analysis. Primary data was collected via a series of group and individual interviews with stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives on the GAL Program in the Fourth Judicial District and Second Judicial District. Interviewees included:

- Current and former paid employee GALs (interviewees were selected at random from staff lists provided by the GAL Program)
- Current and former volunteer GALs (current volunteer interviewees were selected at random, former volunteers recommended by CASA⁸ Minnesota)
- All GAL coordinators and managers in the two districts
- Representatives from CASA Minnesota and statewide and national experts on GAL programs (interviewees recommended by CASA Minnesota)

⁸ CASA is an acronym for “Court Appointed Special Advocate.” These advocates are generally trained volunteers, while a Guardian ad Litem may be a trained volunteer, an attorney, or a contractor or employee. Both GALs and CASAs are appointed by juvenile court judges in the states where they are used. CASA Minnesota is the state affiliate of the national Court Appointed Special Advocates Association; Both organizations support and promote the use of CASA volunteers.

- Officers of the court from the Fourth Judicial District, including both judges and attorneys who represent various parties in GAL cases (participants in the Children’s Justice Initiative in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts were invited to be interviewed by the coordinators of that program; those who opted in were interviewed)

Interview notes were analyzed independently by two researchers to identify emergent themes in the data related to GAL effectiveness. The resulting themes are identified and discussed in the Findings section below. Qualitative data add richness to a study regardless of the precise number of times a topic is mentioned; indeed, it can be valuable for surfacing uncommon but potentially important ideas. For this reason, this report generally discusses the relative frequency of comments in general terms such as “many,” “some,” “a few,” or “one.”

Illustrative passages from interviews appear throughout the report to support various findings. Because the interviews were not recorded and transcribed, these passages quote from researchers’ notes. While some capture interviewees’ exact words, others use somewhat condensed phrasing.

Quantitative data analysis: existing administrative data

The researchers reviewed existing data and documents to gain additional insight into the program. Many of these materials pertained to program costs (such as salary ranges and documentation of program expenses or budgets). Other materials helped to further define or contextualize GAL effectiveness (such as policy guidance or documentation of GAL training requirements).

Due to a number of program changes over the years, MAD and GAL Program leaders determined that a relatively short look-back period for existing data was appropriate as it would have the greatest likelihood of reflecting current and future program conditions. For that reason, MAD generally limited review of existing data to materials from the three most recent state fiscal years (i.e., records dating from July 1, 2020, or later). Administrative data related to different research questions had different degrees of granularity and availability. In general, quantitative analysis in this report is limited to data about the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts rather than the statewide Guardian ad Litem Program. The scope and detail of the data are noted as part of the discussion of findings related to that data.

It is also important to note that cases which are subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) or the Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA)—and the Guardians ad Litem who handle those cases—are excluded from the analyses in this report. In recent years the GAL Program has organized a special unit of employee Guardians who work on ICWA cases statewide, outside the regular structures of the state’s judicial districts. While some ICWA Guardians work on cases in the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts, they are organized and managed differently. As discussed above, the research team opted to omit ICWA cases and Guardians from this district-specific analysis for consistency in reflecting current and future program conditions.

For this study, the research team made use of 23 distinct quantitative data sets to address different aspects of Guardians’ effectiveness and program costs. Prior to analysis, researchers used the following steps to prepare each data set:

- Drafting of a data analysis plan
- Validation of raw data to ensure necessary fields were available

- Filtering data to focus on the scope of the study (i.e., the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts, within the lookback period, regarding employee and volunteer GALs, and with non-ICWA cases)
- Deriving additional variables necessary for analysis (e.g., state fiscal year)
- Appending or combining data sets as needed (e.g., continuing education completion for current and former GALs)
- Documentation of missing or incomplete values

After this data validation process, the research team began data analysis. The scope of the analysis was limited to descriptive rather than inferential statistics—that is, the findings of this report focus on documenting the total, average, proportion, or rate of various conditions in the GAL Program. The report does not identify potential correlations, relationships, or predictive values for any aspect of the program.

Findings

Indicators of Guardian ad Litem effectiveness

Stakeholder interviews and secondary data analysis explored some of the types of evidence that could indicate an individual GAL's effectiveness. Some of these indicators are quantitative measures of performance, while others rely on formal or informal observations of an individual's work.

In each of the following sections, a brief discussion of the study findings in general is followed by description of what differences, if any, arose between paid employees and volunteers.

Key performance indicators

The GAL Board uses three quantitative measures as key performance indicators (KPIs) for Guardians. These measures are intended to reflect GALs' completion of required tasks. They were instituted relatively recently, as part of a suite of program oversight enhancements implemented following recommendations by the Office of the Legislative Auditor in 2018.

Due to the nature of child protection cases and the high degree of variation from case to case, quantitative measures of work quality are difficult to institute (Lawson and Berrick 2013). In general—and understandably—the personnel interviewed for this study found these KPIs to be valuable but incomplete measures of their performance.

Child contacts

The first of three key performance indicators for GALs is the documentation of child contacts. A child contact is a visit with the child or children for whom the GAL will advocate in court. The GAL Program's performance expectation is that each Guardian will visit each child in their caseload at least once per calendar month.

Data about child contacts comes from four sources, each of which offer a different lens on child contact data:

- The results of monthly performance monitoring about whether GALs visited each child face-to-face at least one time
- Documentation of child contacts specifically in the program's case management system, which shows the child contacts a GAL is expected to document
- Related information from a different database where GALs document a wider range of case activities, which shows the proportion of GALs' time spent on child contacts
- Data about child contacts from a database of case outcomes and child permanency status, which includes a count of all child contacts over the entire duration of a case

Data on KPI monitoring includes records from the Fourth and Second Judicial Districts, and is organized by *calendar year* (not fiscal year) 2020, 2021, and 2022. Data about child contacts includes records from the Fourth Judicial District in a lookback period from July 2020 through June 2023 (i.e., state fiscal years 2021, 2022, and 2023). Data about case activities overall includes entries from open cases in the Fourth Judicial District and

Second Judicial District from July 2020 through December 2022 (i.e., state fiscal years 2021, 2022, plus the first half of 2023). And data about contacts over the life of the case comes from the Fourth District only, for all records of open and closed cases; while a few cases began ten or more years ago, roughly 60 percent began in the past five years.

Note that activities and contacts are entered by Guardians. Anecdotally, GAL Program leaders and CASA Minnesota stakeholders suggested volunteers may be less consistent at documenting their case activities. Since the consistency with which either employees or volunteers document their case contacts is unclear, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Key performance indicator monitoring

Child contact data organized according to the program's key performance indicator illustrates how well Guardians perform according to the program's stated work expectations. These findings discuss how many times, on average, GALs missed monthly face-to-face contacts⁹ with the children in their caseloads. Note that, because cases begin and end mid-year, this KPI data includes only the months when a GAL would have been expected to visit a child (i.e., when a case was active).

In calendar years 2020, 2021, and 2022, both employees and volunteers missed the majority of their expected monthly visits across their entire caseloads. However, both employees and volunteers also improved their performance over time. On average, volunteers made about 12% more of their expected visits than employees in 2020 and about 11% more in 2021. Performance was almost identical in 2022.

Table 2. Missed monthly contacts per year (percent of all expected visits)

Personnel	2020	2021	2022
Employee GAL	83.10	78.63	56.87
Volunteer GAL	71.04	67.74	57.63
Overall	79.08	74.65	57.12

Next, consider the number of missed monthly contacts a GAL was expected to have with any given child. This result was calculated by dividing the total number of missed contacts per year for employees and for volunteers by the total number of children in the caseloads of each group. For reference, volunteers handled cases in this lookback period for, on average, four children in a given year. The average number of children that employees worked with increased from about 32 in 2020 to 41 in 2021 and 43 in 2022.

⁹ Many child contacts, particularly in 2020 and 2021, were not face-to-face contacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, Guardians made many contacts online or by telephone. The next data set discussed in this section incorporates both face-to-face and other forms of child contact.

Table 3. Average number of missed monthly contacts per child

Personnel	2020	2021	2022
Employee GAL	4.93	4.47	2.96
Volunteer GAL	4.01	4.16	4.30
Overall	4.61	4.36	3.29

On average, volunteers' performance did not change from year to year; they missed slightly more than four contacts per child throughout the lookback period. Employees missed almost five contacts per child in 2020; that number improved to just under three missed contacts per child in 2022.

Child contacts documented as part of case management

Child contact data from the GAL Program's case management system provides a longitudinal picture of child contacts, rather than the month-to-month snapshot of the KPI described above. The findings presented here describe the average number of contacts a GAL makes with an individual child in a one-year period.

Across all GALs, the average number of annual contacts per child was about 5.6 in 2021 and slightly more than 6 in 2022 and 2023. Volunteers made an average of 0.3 more contacts per year in 2021, 0.6 per year in 2022, and 0.3 per year in 2023. Entries where the Guardian's status was unknown—likely including program coordinators handling individual cases and both employee and volunteer GALs who have since separated from the program—had the fewest average contacts per child in each year.

Table 4. Average number of contacts per child

Averages	2021	2022	2023
Employees (n=168,665 entries)	5.50	5.95	6.09
Volunteers (n=4,063 entries)	5.83	6.54	6.43
Status unknown (n=36,507 entries)	5.10	4.73	3.58
All personnel	5.63	6.22	6.26

This data set also distinguishes between face-to-face child contacts and other contacts, such as telephone or online communication. For face-to-face interactions, the average annual number of contacts per child was about 2.7 in 2021, 3.7 in 2022, and 4 in 2023. Volunteers made an average of one more face-to-face contact in 2021, while employees made an average of 0.3 more contacts in 2022 and the two groups had identical averages in 2023.

Most child contacts in this data set also have an associated time entry for the duration of the contact in minutes.¹⁰ On average, the child contacts reported in the lookback period lasted slightly more than 45 minutes.

¹⁰ However, about 15 percent of the entries either lacked a time entry or listed the time as zero minutes. Blank time entries were excluded from the analysis of visit duration, while those with entries of zero minutes were included.

Volunteers had somewhat longer average contact times in 2021 (12 minutes longer), 2022 and 2023 (6 minutes in each year).

Table 5. Average length of child contacts (in minutes)

Averages	2021	2022	2023
Employees	41.45	46.46	45.68
Volunteers	53.83	52.87	51.49
Status unknown	43.54	52.44	48.23
All personnel	42.26	47.56	45.92

Looking only at reported face-to-face visits, the average contact time was slightly longer: about 50 minutes. Again, volunteers had somewhat longer contact times in 2021 (10 minutes), 2022 (7 minutes) and 2023 (9 minutes).

Note that this data set also included a field for written notes about a client contact. Roughly 5 percent of face-to-face visits included words or phrases (such as “zoom,” “facetime,” or “text”) suggesting that the visit may not have been face-to-face. Similarly, about 15 percent of the entries had notes with words or phrases (such as “travel” or “drive”). In those cases, it is unclear if a Guardian included travel time as part of the reported duration of the contact.

Documented activities associated with child contacts

Among the various activities a GAL documents in the course of their work, five activity types are connected to child contacts: foster visits, home visits, observation contacts, school visits, and other contacts. In the program’s case management system, documenting one of these activities prompts a required child contact entry. However, entries are associated with a case (which may include multiple children from the same family), rather than with individual children.

This data set provides another lens on child contacts by capturing the proportion of GALs’ time that is spent on child contact activities. Volunteers spend slightly more of their total documented time on those five activities than employees (6 percent more than employees in 2022 and 9 percent more in 2023).

Considering the duration of contact activities, individual instances of the five activities noted above are reported as lasting, on average, one hour and forty minutes in 2022 and one hour and fifty minutes in the first half of 2023.¹¹ In 2021, volunteers spent an average of fifteen minutes more than employees per contact. Employees spent more time than volunteers per contact in 2022 (ten minutes) and in 2023 (26 minutes).

¹¹ Note the substantial differences in the average duration of contacts between data about child contacts and data about contact-related activities. These differences may be driven by a number of factors: GAL activities that may include contacts with multiple children in a single time period, differences in accounting for travel time associated with a contact or activity, or inconsistencies in data entry practices.

Child contact totals associated with case outcome data

Like the child contact data discussed above, an extract from the GAL Program's database on child permanency status provides an overall picture of contacts between Guardians and individual children over the entire life of a case. The findings presented here describe the total number of contacts a GAL makes with an individual child for the duration of their 4th District Juvenile Court case, regardless of the length of the case.

Because of the long duration of some cases, this data set extends beyond the lookback period used elsewhere in this study. Database entries with missing start dates for GAL involvement, or those with data entry errors such that end dates are recorded earlier than start dates, are included in the calculation of average contacts but excluded from calculation of the average length of case. Finally, average per-child, per-case totals have also been annualized to make comparisons that account for cases of varying lengths.

Table 6. Average total child contacts for duration of case

Averages (n=11,715)	Employees	Volunteers	All personnel¹²
Average contacts per child, life of case	15.11	17.84	16.92
Average length of case (in days)	336.89	504.31	393.99
Annualized: contacts per child, per case, per year	16.37	12.91	15.67

Table 6 shows that while volunteers make about 2.7 more contacts over the life of a case on average, volunteers' cases tend to last far longer than those assigned to employees. (Anecdotally, GAL Program leadership suggested that many volunteers request or are assigned State Ward cases, which tend to last longer than other cases and result more frequently in adoption than reunification.) After controlling for the length of cases, employees make an average of 3.5 more visits per child, per case, per year.

Hearing attendance

Another performance expectation for GALs is attendance at all scheduled hearings for the children in their caseload. Table 7 shows the attendance rates in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts for the past three fiscal years, including year-to-date attendance rates for the first three quarters of fiscal year 2023 (July 2022 to March 2023). During this time, volunteers were responsible for about 23 percent of all hearings, and paid employees for about 67 percent of all hearings. Coordinators were assigned cases in the remaining 10 percent of hearings.

¹² In addition to employee and volunteer Guardians, this data set also includes roughly 1,500 child entries for which a case was assigned to a coordinator or manager or for which no advocate work status appears in the database. Data about per-child, per-case contacts from those individuals is included in this column along with children represented by employee and volunteer Guardians ad Litem.

Table 7. Hearing attendance by Guardians ad Litem (percent of hearings)

Personnel	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023 (Q1–Q3)
Employee GAL	81.35	94.10	91.18
Volunteer GAL	86.17	93.41	94.26
Coordinator	77.94	89.15	85.58
All personnel	82.18	93.40	91.18

Volunteers and paid employee GALs attended hearings at similar rates in 2022. Volunteers attended at somewhat higher rates than paid employees in fiscal year 2021 (at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic) and slightly more often in the first part of 2023. Coordinators, whose role in theory focuses on supervision rather than managing a caseload, had the lowest rates of hearing attendance in this period. Across all personnel, review hearings have been the least-attended of all hearing types: overall attendance rates have ranged from 76 to 90 percent across three fiscal years.

Report submission

The third and final KPI for GALs addresses the timely submission of case reports to the court. These reports detail a GAL’s investigation, conclusions, and recommendations. They are required to submit reports related to later stages of a case, but not for any pre-adjudication activities. One coordinator noted that more reports are required of GALs now in the Fourth Judicial District than in previous years.

Note that this dataset also raises some data quality concerns, due to the adoption of a new reporting system and some GALs’ struggles to adopt it. A field where GALs can explain the reasons for not submitting reports is populated with many comments such as “I did submit but the system will not confirm,” or “submitted outside the reporting system.” Because MAD cannot verify the accuracy of these comments, the analysis here focuses solely on successful report submissions.

Table 8 shows the rates of timely report completion in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts for the past three fiscal years, including the first three quarters of fiscal year 2023. The completion data captures three conditions: reports submitted on time, reports submitted but not timely, and reports not submitted. During this time, volunteers were responsible for about 23 percent of all case reports, and paid employees for about 67 percent. Coordinators were assigned the remaining 10 percent of cases.

Table 8. Timely report completion by Guardians ad Litem (percent of hearings)

Personnel	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023 (Q1–Q3)
Employee GAL	53.05	67.58	64.07
Volunteer GAL	64.09	62.40	62.92
Coordinator	28.65	33.43	12.98
Total	53.49	62.63	58.91

Overall, GALs submitted late reports roughly 20 percent of the time and did not submit reports at all roughly 20 percent of the time across these three fiscal years. Volunteers submitted timely reports consistently across the

three fiscal years; their rate was higher than paid employees in 2021, but somewhat lower in 2022 and 2023. As with hearing attendance, coordinators had the lowest rates of timely report submission in each year and overall.

The GAL Program tracks reporting for five hearing types for which GAL reports are required: adoption hearings, intermediate disposition hearings, permanency progress review hearings, review hearings, and post-permanency review hearings. Reports for review hearings have been the least likely to be submitted on a timely basis (ranging from 45 to 51 percent) and the most likely to not be submitted at all (39 to 46 percent) in the three fiscal years reviewed. For intermediate disposition hearings, which are the most common type in each year, 33 percent of reports were not submitted in 2021. That rate decreased to 24 percent in both 2022 and 2023. Whether timely or late, reports for adoption or post-permanency review hearings are the most likely to be submitted by GALs overall (90 percent and 82 percent in 2023, respectively). These rates have improved over time.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

In the most recent three fiscal years, volunteer GALs have been more consistent in their performance than employees when considering hearing attendance and report completion, though sometimes employees' performance is stronger than volunteers'. On both measures, volunteers had stronger performance than employees in 2021. In the current fiscal year to date, volunteers are somewhat more likely to attend hearings and somewhat less likely to submit timely reports.

The overall similarity between rates of hearing attendance and report submission belies one concern some interviewees raised. They expressed worry that volunteers were not as adept at "paperwork" or technology; a few even suggested that report submission difficulties may have been used as an excuse to push volunteers out of service. The comparability of these performance measures, along with other findings elsewhere in this report about the reasons GALs leave the program, suggests otherwise.

When considering child contacts, however, differences begin to appear. In the interviews for this study, individuals familiar with the volunteer program often spoke at length about the time volunteers are able to devote to spending time with the children they serve—often suggesting a favorable comparison to less-intensive contacts among employees. Quantitative data suggest more complex conditions:

- From key performance indicator monitoring, volunteers missed somewhat fewer monthly contacts than employees in 2020 and 2021. However, employees' performance improved more substantially during the lookback period, and both groups missed a similar proportion—nearly 60 percent—of monthly contacts in 2022. Analysis of this KPI on an average per-child basis shows similar results: consistent levels of performance from volunteers across three years, while employees' performance was weaker in 2020 and improved to be stronger than volunteers in 2022.
- From child contact data in the program's case management system, volunteers make slightly more visits per child—less than one per year—than employees and have spent an average of 6-12 minutes longer per visit over the past three fiscal years.
- From activity tracking data, volunteers have spent slightly more of their total work time than employees with children in each visit: about nine percent more in 2023, or about 8.2 volunteer hours in the first half of the year. But according to this data set, while volunteers spent more time on average for each

contact in 2021 (15 minutes), employees spent more time in 2022 (ten minutes) and 2023 (26 minutes) in visits that averaged about 1 hour and 40 minutes across the entire lookback period.

- Looking at the entire length of cases from case permanency data, volunteers have made an average of 2.7 more visits per child, per case than employees. However, volunteer cases averaged 17 months in length while employee cases averaged 11 months. After controlling for case length, employees instead make about 3.5 more visits per child, per case, per year.

While volunteers slightly outperform employees in most respects regarding child contacts, program data do not support some interviewees' beliefs that volunteers devote far more time to contacts with individual children.

Observational signs of GAL performance

In addition to the KPIs discussed above, coordinators in particular spoke at some length about the ways they observe a GAL's performance and work quality in real time through their supervisory relationships. These observations help round out their understanding of an individual's effectiveness in the role and become part of a supervisor's overall impression of staff performance.

The area both GALs and coordinators noted most often for these observations was simply their direct interactions together, particularly in one-on-one case consultation meetings. In those settings, a coordinator gains insight into not only how a GAL is working a case, but also their approach and understanding of the work. For example, one coordinator described informally assessing GALs during case consultation by asking about their follow-up questions, or about parents' strengths and the barriers they face. One "can tell [by] how Guardians respond to questions like that what their biases and abilities are." If a GAL cannot answer those questions, they "may be dangerous out there" and need additional support to develop their practice.

A somewhat more tangible area for observing GAL performance is in the review of reports before submission to the courts. Coordinators mainly talked about this as a strategy for monitoring and supporting the development of new GALs, especially within their first six months. They described reviewing reports as a way to gain insight into the strength of a GAL's written communication and use of evidence to support their recommendations. Some also noted that reports offered them a window into the strength and completeness of a GAL's investigative skills—reports that draw on a limited number of sources may suggest less thorough information gathering.

Several officers of the court echoed these views on reporting and communication in their interviews. One judge noted the value of a robust report, and lamented that GALs were not writing more reports for more hearings. Another noted report writing as a weakness for GALs, and the belief that lately "more of them than not [are] not in a position to make recommendations" as evidenced by reports that contain little information on which to base conclusions.

Finally, observations of GAL work in group settings, such as in court or in larger meetings and training sessions, afford opportunities to understand their work performance. One attorney described how he can easily tell if a GAL has not had much training or experience on court protocol based on how they testify, and can just as easily tell if the GAL is a strong investigator and advocate based on how they collaborate with him. One coordinator echoed this in an interview, describing their observations of GAL performance in court and through other means:

“[In] EPC hearings...I see how they are able to interact with others, what kind of information they are acquiring, if they are being thorough in reaching out to all stakeholders such as doctors, teachers, [or] social workers. [And in] their meetings with me, where I see their verbal skills, analytical skills.”

Another coordinator interviewee noted that in the past, volunteer onboarding training was considered a part of the screening process and recruits who were not a good fit for the program were asked to leave.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

Interviewees generally reported that employees and volunteers demonstrate their performance comparably in the areas described above. Coordinator interviewees noted a number of ways in which volunteers are somewhat less likely to meet expectations in their work—but most were quick to note that such issues happen relatively rarely. These challenging areas for volunteers included somewhat more difficulty committing to meetings, trainings, or consistent casework, and taking more time to fully learn the work of a GAL, compared with employees working a full-time caseload. The most commonly noted challenge was volunteers’ somewhat greater difficulty learning and understanding the role of the GAL: maintaining appropriate behavior, boundaries, and expectations for oneself and the other stakeholders or parties to a case.

In general, officers of the court did not (or could not) distinguish between volunteers or employees among the GALs they work with. Instead, they reported being able to easily distinguish more or less experienced or effective GALs, and attributed variation in the skills GALs demonstrate to either their tenure in the role or individual strengths or goals.

Similarly, both current and former volunteers attributed their skill development in part to their life and professional experiences—often, but not always, relating this breadth of experience to their age.

Skill development and application

MAD asked current GALs, coordinators and managers, and officers of the court about the critical skills needed to be an effective GAL. The interviewees generated an extensive and complex list of ideas that included technical or practical skills, “softer” skills or mindsets, and more. They collectively named about forty distinct skills in some of the more extensive comments shared for this study.

Many of the skills or competencies named in the interviews can be described in broader categories, including:

- Investigation skills (such as interviewing, perseverance, critical thinking, and awareness of the systems and conditions that may impact a child’s or family’ life)
- Communication skills (including both written and verbal skills, listening, and advocacy)
- Relational skills (such as compassion, transparency, openness to others’ perspectives, cultural agility, collaboration, and confidence in adversarial situations)

Additional skills were noted less frequently or fall outside the categories listed above. They included some practical skills—such as time management—as well as more underlying mindsets or approaches such as integrity and maturity. Several individuals distinguished the importance of sound judgment when interpreting and

weighing the credibility of information from the equally great need to *refrain* from judging people or their circumstances. Mentions of case management skills were notable for their absence, with only one mention among many interviewees who supervise, work with, or are themselves GALs managing full-time caseloads.

When asked a follow-up question about the extent to which GALs possess the various skills they had just named, interviewees' responses were generally affirmative.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

Overall, interviewees described similar skill sets as important to GAL effectiveness. Coordinators noted some skills weaknesses among GALs, attributed differences in skills primarily to the amount of case experience a GAL has, and expressed their own responsibility as supervisors for creating learning opportunities. Some were confident in their assessment that all GALs have their own strengths and weaknesses. One coordinator described two ends of a spectrum of challenges among GALs regardless of their employee or volunteer status: those with long tenures in the program who are less open or struggle to connect with children, and those who are new to the role and still learning.

One coordinator noted two areas where volunteers sometimes struggle more than employees: their relative inexperience in court and difficulty building relationships with family members (i.e., not only with children). Volunteers' overall inexperience was the most commonly noted difference in terms of skill development or demonstration.

Case assignments and activity measures

Guardian caseloads

To understand caseloads for this study, the GAL Program provided snapshots of Fourth Judicial District employee and volunteer caseloads on two random dates in two prior fiscal years: one in February 2021 and one in April 2022. Using case counts at a single point in time allows for more straightforward comparison and calculation, although it may not capture the day-to-day variation of cases opening and closing.

In the Fourth Judicial District in April 2022, the average employee caseload (n=29) was 22.38 cases; the average volunteer caseload (n=82) was 1.66 cases. In the Fourth Judicial District in February 2021, the average employee caseload (n=27) was 31.96 cases; the average volunteer caseload (n=134) was 3.13 cases.

Between the two snapshot dates, on January 1, 2022, the GAL Program changed its case management database to simplify case numbers. Prior to this date, the Fourth Judicial District GAL Program used Hennepin County case file numbers to track their work. Because a single child or family may have multiple court proceedings about child protection or related matters, some GALs managed multiple open cases related to a single family. Beginning in 2022, the GAL Program assigned a single case number for its own work, and linked multiple Hennepin County case files to a single record.

Table 9. Average caseload comparison, 2021 and 2022

GAL status	February 2021 (GAL case number)	April 2022 (GAL case number)	April 2022 (Henn. Co. case file)
Volunteer	3.13	1.66	2.50
Employee	31.96	22.38	35.90

This change to case numbers created a seemingly artificial decrease in GALs' average caseloads. Indeed, a calculation of average caseloads based on Hennepin County case file numbers in April 2022 shows a somewhat higher average caseload for both employees (35.90) and volunteers (2.50). This additional analysis also shows that between February 2021 and April 2022, the number of Hennepin County case files handled by volunteers decreased slightly. Data about volunteer tenure indicates that seventy-four volunteer GALs departed the program in the same time period. Those two changes together resulted in an average increase to employee caseloads of roughly four Hennepin County case files.

For the greatest consistency between available data and current or future practice, MAD used the April 2022 snapshot data about caseloads to understand how many cases the average GAL currently handles. These statistics are also used in the cost analysis below to determine average per-case program costs.

Case reassignments

In addition to overall caseload size, GAL Program leaders and stakeholders wondered if case re-assignments (that is, the transfer of responsibility for a case from one GAL to another) had any influence on Guardian effectiveness. To understand this question, researchers reviewed current or prior cases (as of spring 2023) serving a total of 6,705 children in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts. Reassignments are noted based on the life of an individual case. Children who return to the child protection system under subsequent cases may be assigned different Guardians.

Table 10. Changes to child assignments

Re-assignment status	Number of children	% of all employee children	% of all volunteer children
Managed by one employee, no re-assignment	6,336	95.91%	-
Managed by one volunteer, no re-assignment	95	-	97.94%
Managed by a Coordinator, no re-assignment	29	0.43%	-
Re-assigned among 2 or more employees	241	3.65%	-
Re-assigned among 2 or more volunteers	2	-	2.06%
Re-assigned between employees and volunteers	2	-	-

This data set differs from some others in this study, in that it tracks reassignments of individual children, rather than overall cases. A single case file may, and often does, include multiple children. The data also has an important limitation: the GAL Program's case management system does not retain records of previous re-assignments, so only the most recent changes are captured in the data.

However, not only have the overwhelming majority of cases in this data not been reassigned, but differences between employees and volunteers are small, with 2.1 percent of volunteer cases reassigned and 3.7 percent of all employee cases reassigned.

Activity types

GALs are expected to document their activities and the time they spend on those activities. While one subset of activity types—those that pertain to child contacts—serves as a key performance indicator for GALs, the other activities show a more holistic picture of how individuals use their time. Based on program data from the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts from July 2020 through December 2022, employees either complete more case activities, track them more consistently, or both.

In FY 2021, on average employees reported seven times as many activities per case as volunteers (104 versus 15). This gap narrowed but persisted in the first half of FY 2023, when on average employees reported 141 activities per case to volunteers' report of 51. When non-case activities are excluded, the gap continues to persist: among case activities only in FY 2023, employees reported 122 activities per case and volunteers reported 49.

Returning to a more holistic view of reported activities, employees reported more activities per case in every activity category.

It is important to note that these activities are calculated on a per-case basis rather than a per-child basis—employees are more likely to manage cases that involve more than one child in a family, so the number of activities per child may be more similar between the two groups. However, employees may also create some efficiencies through practices such as visiting multiple children under a single home visit entry.

Next, consider how Guardians use their work time overall, in aggregate. Volunteers report a greater share of their overall work time on case activities; they have spent roughly 2–8 percent more time in their working year on various case activities, such as child contacts and hearings, compared with employees. Since volunteers work comparatively fewer hours per year, this greater share of their time is relatively small: it was equivalent to about 8.2 hours per volunteer in the first half of 2023, for example. In part, the difference in overall time use may be because more of employees' time (roughly 15–20 percent per year) is reported in areas such as leave, holidays, or other non-case activities.

A greater share of work time does not necessarily translate into more time per activity. In FY 2021 and FY 2022, volunteers' activity entries tended to be similar in duration or slightly longer than employee entries—though none differed by more than fifteen minutes per entry, on average. However, in FY 2023, employees reported spending an average of twenty to forty minutes more per entry on foster visits, school visits, home visits, parent contacts, other case contacts, and other casework.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

Paid employees and volunteers rightly have very different caseload expectations. The Guardian ad Litem Program does not consider caseload size to be a measure of a GAL's effectiveness, since it is driven in large part

by demand for Guardian ad Litem services. However, it does have cost implications related to the per-case expenses needed to train, manage, and support personnel.

GALs who carry caseloads far above recommended levels could potentially see a negative impact on their effectiveness; interviewees reported that this was more often the case in the past, particularly for employees. GAL Program leadership report that the current average employee caseload is within the program's own targets, and average volunteer caseloads are consistent with a recommendation in the National CASA/GAL Association for Children's 2020 Standards for Local CASA/GAL Programs in Publicly Administered Programs (56) that volunteers be assigned no more than two cases concurrently.

In terms of the activities GALs spend their time completing, volunteers spend slightly more of their overall time on some case activities. Employees either complete or report many more case activities than volunteers; in the most recent fiscal year they have reported longer average activities in several categories.

Completion of training

All GALs begin their tenure with forty hours of required training. Regardless of paid or volunteer status, new GALs receive the same initial information and orientation to their work. This baseline expectation suggests that there are few opportunities to deviate from the requirement—and consequently few opportunities for differences between paid employees and volunteers to exist or to be observed. However, comparisons between various interviewees' descriptions of the initial training suggest substantial differences in how it has been delivered from year to year. Those differences are discussed later in this report as a potential contributor to GAL effectiveness.

After their initial year of service, GALs are also required to complete fifteen hours of continuing education annually. Among the fifteen hours, three hours must be related to diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. This analysis does not address the requirement for diversity, equity, an inclusion training because courses are not consistently categorized this way in the program's training records. These requirements are established under the GAL Board's non-statutory Program Requirements and Guidelines document.¹³ Some continuing education offerings are provided by the GAL Program itself. Others are provided by external vendors in a contract with the GAL Board. Still other offerings are identified and pursued by GALs themselves; in these cases, an individual proposes an opportunity and it is reviewed and must be approved by the district GAL manager in order to qualify for continuing education credit.

In the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts, the research team analyzed data about continuing education from July 2020 through May 2023. Both active employee GALs and active volunteer GALs had comparable compliance rates with this requirement in FY 2021, at 66.7 percent and 64 percent, respectively. While both groups improved in the succeeding two fiscal years, employee GALs achieved nearly perfect compliance, at 100 percent in FY 2022 and 97 percent in FY 2023. For active volunteer GALs, compliance rates were 74 percent and 78 percent over the same period. Inactive GALs (those who departed the program during the study period) demonstrated very low compliance with the training requirement, regardless of employee or volunteer status.

¹³ This document is available online at <https://mn.gov/guardian-ad-litem/program-info/program-requirements.jsp>.

It is also possible that volunteers who were “inactive” in other ways—such as those who planned to leave the program but who had not yet resigned, or those not currently working a case—contributed to the lower compliance rates among active volunteer GALs noted above.

Some interviewees, particularly former volunteers and some supervisory staff, described challenging experiences with continuing education requirements. Their comments suggest that abruptly heightened attention to continuing education compliance during the study period felt jarring to some GALs and contributed to a negative experience with the program. The stricter expectation that all GALs fulfill annual training and continuing education requirements was a response to certain findings and recommendations in OLA’s 2018 report. However, it is not clear whether program leaders consistently explained this rationale for the change to GALs. This change, coupled with shifts to new technology software, the arrival of several new coordinators, and changing supervisors, were all mentioned as challenges by volunteer GALs in interviews for this study. Some interviewees described feeling unsupported amid so many changes, and felt they had too little encouragement from leadership to continue with the program. This situation is discussed in more depth below, as an additional consideration for overall program effectiveness.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

As a group, active employee GALs have moved toward near perfect compliance with requirements for continuing education hours during the look-back period. Volunteers’ rates of compliance have improved during the same period, but more than one in five of the individuals active in FY 2023 was not in compliance with the requirement.

Time and tenure

Interviewees discussed the time GALs spend on their cases in two very different ways. These two different understandings seem to be important factors in how program stakeholders think about the value of employee and volunteer Guardians.

On one hand, coordinators in particular noted the overall time necessary for a new GAL to learn and become effective at their work. In these cases, time was described in terms of dosage, and the amount of casework hours a GAL puts in. Some interviewees saw working a relatively large number of cases as critical for the kind of experiential learning that translates to overall success in the role. As one coordinator—who had previously been a volunteer GAL—put it:

“I think it can be difficult to get the hang of things when you only have 1–2 cases, you’re not in the work in the same way, or learning things as much. We had some phenomenal volunteers in the past, who worked as hard as paid staff. But it takes years to get into the work, understand the relationship building. You need to know the work to understand everything to make sound recommendations.”

This belief suggests a comparative disadvantage for volunteers in building experience, as they typically carry only one or two cases at a time.

Another way interviewees discussed the importance of time for GAL effectiveness was to consider the possibility of deep, long-term engagement with a child in the GAL’s caseload. These comments were particularly common among volunteer GALs and stakeholders from the Minnesota and National Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) organizations.¹⁴ Their discussion focused on the benefits of a GAL developing a trusting relationship with a child or their family over a long period of time—some noted examples of ongoing engagements all the way into a child’s young adulthood. Several of these interviewees also suggested that a volunteer GAL specifically had more time to devote to any one case because they carry fewer cases.

“[It is] invaluable to have someone outside the system dig a little deeper, especially without a huge caseload. Staff can be great but have large caseloads.... Volunteers are passionately committed to finding the solution for one family, one child.... The fact that a volunteer can spend enough time to intimately get to know the situation is priceless.”

Setting aside perceptions about how GALs leverage their time and tenure to be effective, the data about Guardians’ length of service is more straightforward and similar. Among active employee GALs in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts at the time of this study, the median length of service is 2.09 years. (Anecdotally, this relatively short tenure comes during a period of particularly high turnover and is a shorter length of service than that seen in other districts around the state.) While data about former volunteers’ length of service is discussed immediately below, data about *current* GALs (i.e., those who have not left the program) was available only for employees and not for volunteers.

Volunteers who left the program in FY 2021 had a median tenure of about three years, eight months; those who left in FY 2022 had a median tenure of four years, ten months. Paid employee GALs who left in 2021 had a median tenure of about three years, six months; those who left in 2022 had a median tenure of about four years. Some volunteers and employees left the program after long tenures in both years, leading to somewhat higher average (mean) tenure for both groups—and differences between employees and volunteers remained small, with the average tenures no more than six months apart.

Table 11. Tenure comparison, years of service at separation 2021–2022

GAL tenure	FY 2021	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2022
	Employee (n=13)	Volunteer (n=48)	Employee (n=9)	Volunteer (n=50)
Median length of service, in years	3.47	3.71	3.99	4.85

In discussions about the preliminary findings of this study, program leadership expressed confidence that employee length of service would continue to increase in the future: a recent legislative appropriation will allow the GAL Program to increase staff salaries at a time when many departing staff cite low pay as their reason for leaving. On the other hand, CASA Minnesota representatives suggested that any reliance on paid employees in the current tight labor market posed a challenge.

¹⁴ For more information about Minnesota CASA for Children, see <https://casamn.org/>. For mor information about the National CASA/GAL Association for Children, see <https://nationalcasagal.org/>.

Differences between paid employees and volunteers

The ways program stakeholders think about time and tenure suggest that employees may feel they have a direct path to effectiveness in their role due to their full-time caseloads, while volunteers believe they are effective because they have opportunities for deeper engagement with any one case. Data about length of service, combined with data discussed elsewhere in this report about time completing various case activities, suggests that while volunteers may have opportunities for longer-term or deeper engagement, they do not necessarily achieve that level of engagement.

When considering GALs who have left the program, the median length of service was similar among those volunteers and employees who departed in FY 2021. Departing volunteers in FY 2022 had a median length of service roughly ten months longer than employees' in the same period. The small difference between tenures of recently separated employee and volunteer GALs belies the argument that volunteers are better positioned to offer ongoing, years-long relationships with the children they serve. It remains possible that volunteers can cultivate stronger connections with a child due to greater time and flexibility spent on each case.

As noted elsewhere, data about active volunteers in these two areas may be inconsistent, so it is difficult to make definitive claims about volunteer GALs' deeper engagement with children or families. However, if volunteers do indeed engage differently than employees but do not document their work, that possibility also poses a different and important programmatic risk in terms of monitoring volunteer behavior.

Contributors to Guardian ad Litem effectiveness

Another set of findings captures not the measures of individual performance, but descriptions of various factors interviewees perceived as affecting GALs' work and their ability to be successful. These contributing factors are not used by the GAL Board as direct indicators of effectiveness. However, they were described consistently in interviews as things that shape a GAL's effectiveness, whether as supportive or limiting factors. The persistence of these factors as themes throughout the study also suggests that they merit consideration.

As in previous sections, each topic here begins with a brief discussion of the study findings in general. A summary of how interviewees discussed these factors specifically for paid employees and volunteers—if they did so—follows.

The GAL role itself

The Guardian ad Litem role is clearly defined in Minnesota. For example, Minnesota Statutes chapter 518, section 165 outlines the circumstances under which a Guardian is to be appointed and their responsibilities in cases of marriage dissolution.¹⁵ Minnesota Statutes chapter 260C, section 163 discusses a Guardian ad Litem's appointment and duties in the context of juvenile safety cases.¹⁶ Within these defined responsibilities, GALs have relatively broad latitude to carry out their work. In other words, *what* a GAL does (and does not do) is very specific; *how* they do the work, within required standards, depends on the GAL and how they choose to tailor their approaches based on circumstances of individual cases. This independence in approach was highly valued among GAL interviewees, and particularly highlighted by volunteers.

An independent approach parallels an intentionally independent role as a party to child protection cases. In nearly every interview conducted for this project, participants highlighted that the GAL's role is unique as the only presence in the court system who is solely focused on the child or children, investigating and advocating for their best interests. In doing so, GALs provide unique and highly relevant information to the court that centers a child's needs and informs recommendations on issues of the child's current and future well-being. The GAL's required duties include investigation and information gathering, writing reports and documentation, and participating in court hearings.

Guardians operate in a complex and dynamic system with many moving parts and changing participants. As one GAL noted, *"we need equal parts heart and head."* Many interviewees noted that given turnover among other individuals engaged on a case—attorneys, social workers, and even judges—the GAL may be the only adult who remains a constant presence from the start to the end of a case.

Current employee GALs spoke more specifically about measurable standards and performance metrics for their work. Several also said that they prepare or prepared reports and recommendations with the expectation that they are supported by evidence, including observations and information gathering. Current and former volunteer GALs expressed a preference for a more holistic approach to performance around reporting. Several

¹⁵ See <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/518.165>.

¹⁶ See <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/260C.163>.

expressed dissatisfaction with the GAL Program's emphasis on process measurement (e.g., how many reports do GALs write, do those reports contain specific content, are they submitted on time) over greater attention to outcomes for children and families. Some volunteer GALs also highlighted that they believe a crucial part of their role is to, as one put it, "shine a light" on the child protection system and bring their learnings about the system back to their own families and communities.

Several interviewees spoke about how strict adherence to the stated boundaries of the role isn't always practiced by GALs. The rationale for this deviation tended to be a practical response to meeting a child's unmet need (e.g., connecting a child to a resource that is in the social worker's realm of responsibility). Some interviewees noted that volunteer GALs have been known to offer gifts and goods to children and families (a violation of program policy), while this did not appear to be an issue among employee GALs.

One interview participant characterized it as follows:

"[The] instinct of GALs is to help and to support. Some volunteer GALs are very wealthy and want to give to the "have nots" and don't feel they need to follow the rules. However, it can confuse things when GALs do things outside of our defined responsibilities—as an example, if a GAL gives a child or their family a lift to the grocery store and then pays for their groceries—it's changing the role of the GAL from the person who is advocating for the child to a family helper buying them things. It's confusing to the families and the child, even if it's well intentioned."

When asked if this has been an issue with employee GALs, the interviewee noted when it occurs it is mostly if not entirely with volunteers due to two key factors:

"Salaries for paid staff aren't enough that they can afford to be buying things for clients. Also, paid staff have larger caseloads—20–30 families—so it then would become a question of how do you buy stuff for one and not others. Volunteer GALs typically have 1–2 cases at a time. If they're wealthy, it's not a money question."

Time and tenure

As discussed above, both the time a GAL spends working cases and their tenure may influence their effectiveness in the role. Time and tenure can shape a GAL's success in several ways.

The complexity of the work requires a steep learning curve. Some stakeholders believe paid employees have an advantage in learning and mastering the GAL role because of their full-time caseload, which affords a greater exposure to cases in a comparatively shorter period of time than volunteers.

Other stakeholders believe volunteers' lower caseloads allow them to invest more time into each case, giving their attention and energy into a smaller number of families. These interviewees asserted that children benefit from a volunteer's ability to focus on only one or two cases at a time. The available data about child contacts and other case activities instead suggests that while volunteers spend a somewhat greater share of their time in contact with children, they make roughly comparable numbers of visits per child per year and each visit is only a few minutes longer on average than employees' child contacts. Moreover, on an annualized basis, *employees* make somewhat more child contacts over the life of a case. While it is possible that activity tracking data for

volunteers is incomplete, the aggregate picture across the lookback period for this study does not bear out some interviewees' assumptions about volunteers' greater time commitments to individual children.

The tenures of recently separated employees and volunteers were relatively similar, so comparisons across the two staffing models are limited. However, both very short or very long tenures could shape an individual's effectiveness. Very new personnel may not yet fully understand or feel confident in the role; those with very long tenures may experience burnout or frustration with the system.

Life experiences

Current and former GALs and program staff interviewees all mentioned frequently that a GAL's lived experiences play an important role in their effectiveness.

Many described how direct personal experience with poverty, family conflicts, substance abuse, and mental health issues—either experienced by a GAL themselves or in their immediate family—allow them to approach their role with a deeper sense of understanding and empathy. Some also noted that practical understanding of the systems and service to address these adverse experiences also help GALs make more concrete and tailored recommendations about a child's needs. However, several interviewees emphasized that this lived experience comes with a caveat: GALs need to bring strong self-awareness and clear boundaries to their work, and to have already worked through their own issues and struggles. A GAL who has not done that work may encounter situations in a case that evoke their own past struggles; that experience not only makes their professional role more difficult, it can also re-traumatize the GAL and contribute to burnout.

A few interviewees spoke about life experiences from a different perspective: that a stable home life, free of adverse experiences, insulates a GAL from secondary trauma and allows them to advise families and form trusting relationships. As one interviewee noted:

"I think it helped me that I had a stable family life... [and] I was very fortunate to have a wonderful family of origin, it helped me understand importance of knowing and having relationship with both parents. [It] shaped my strong belief that everyone should have this, know both parents, have some sort of relationship there."

More generally, nearly all interviewees discussed the importance of a breadth of lived experiences to success in the GAL role. They expressed beliefs that regardless of the specifics of an individual's experiences, a lifetime of exposure to diverse people, places, and situations create an openness to different perspectives and practices that is crucial to a GAL's ability to think critically, but not judgmentally, about the facts of a child's case. Employee GALs tended to discuss this openness in general terms about life experiences in diverse communities, or direct experience with adverse experiences as described above. While volunteer GALs talked about life experience in these same ways, some also attributed their sense of openness to age and maturity. A few volunteers talked about travel contributing to their openness.

Cultural concordance

Cultural concordance concerns the extent to which a GAL shares various elements of their identity with those of the children they advocate for as well as the child's broader family and community systems. The idea of cultural or race concordance comes from medical research as described, for example, by Meghani and others (2004, 2):

“The hypothesis [undergirding] race-concordance research is that racial/ethnic disparities in health may be ameliorated as a result of increased mutual respect, trust, communication, and satisfaction, which may exist more in race-concordant patient–provider relationships. Thus, the notion of concordance within healthcare embodies the idea of a therapeutic alliance between patients and providers. The strength of such an alliance lies in the respect for patients’ agenda and the creation of openness in patient–provider relationship, so that both patients and providers can proceed to mutually agreed upon goals.”

Though research results are mixed, there is a growing belief among many public sector workers and policymakers that greater attention to racial and cultural concordance in care systems and services is critical to successfully address long-standing racial inequities in quality of services and outcomes for families.

Most interviewees in this study expressed that racial and cultural concordance is important to a GAL's effectiveness, but not the only quality needed for effectiveness. Some interviewees described the need as critical while others discussed it as beneficial though challenging to implement in terms of recruitment and retention in the GAL Program. Most also quickly noted a belief that a host of other life experiences or skills served as a proxy for—or were even more important than—shared identities. In particular, interviewees emphasized the importance of learned skills in cultural agility and cultural competence. One officer of the court noted that there is value in having diverse program staff overall for this reason, even if individual GALs are not culturally concordant with the children or families they serve.

The following observation captured sentiments heard from various group and individual interviews with current and former staff:

“I think it can help. Because one thing I’ve noticed and my clients have verbalized is how nice it would be to have someone come to their home that looks like them. [I] also have been asked by clients, “why can’t I have a Black Guardian?” in instances when there isn’t that shared background. It helps smooth the way, helps built trust and can be a game changer—it can be a game changer but isn’t in every instance. I’ve also had staff who have [...] done very well with our clients who are from different racial or economic backgrounds than they have. I think it boils down to communication, how sincerely someone wants others to succeed and to do better. That they bring a genuine concern and desire to bring positive impact.”

Interviewees generally agreed that the GAL Program has improved recruitment of racially diverse employees in recent years, although opportunities to improve still exist:

“In the 4th district, we’ve come a long way. We’ve diversified our staff—2 Hmong speakers, several Spanish speakers. We’re in a really good place in our office and can continue to improve. We take culture, identity and relationship building very seriously in making assignments of cases.

And sometimes if a case is assigned and there is a better fit with the background another GAL can bring, we collaborate to make adjustments.”

Individuals with insights into past volunteer recruitment noted two persistent factors that inhibit recruitment specifically of volunteers who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC): they believe racial disparities in household income and wealth¹⁷ mean that comparatively few BIPOC individuals may have the financial security to offer their unpaid time and labor. And among those who have the financial ability to volunteer, one interviewee noted that BIPOC volunteers tended to be leaders who seek many ways to serve their community, but whose time and energy were already spread too thin in other types of service to sustain involvement in the GAL Program.

Effective supervision

Coordinators are the primary supervisors of both employee and volunteer GALs at the district level. They combine skills as a coach, subject matter expert, advisor, teacher, and performance evaluator to provide GALs with the support and knowledge required to successfully fulfill their duties and meet required performance standards.

In the years preceding the study period, coordinators were consistently assigned to cases themselves in addition to their supervisory duties to address a backlog of unassigned cases. People from a variety of past and current roles discussed in interviews that this was not a sustainable model for coordinators or the program. With increased hiring helping address case demands, coordinators take on case management duties only in rare instances. The Fourth Judicial District also adjusted its coordinator rosters to group all active volunteers with one coordinator, based on the belief that volunteers and employees have somewhat different supervisory needs.

Interviewees routinely noted that coordinators provide essential value as sounding boards and coaches to GALs of all experience levels. As clearer expectations for GAL performance standards have been developed and implemented in recent years, some interviewees—particularly volunteer GALs—have reacted negatively to the change. One wondered whether coordinators value checking boxes to demonstrate task completion more than they value the quality of work performed.

Some GALs view coordinators solely as a resource or troubleshooters on an as-needed basis and some view them as traditional supervisors who provide feedback on performance and approach to cases and other general guidance. Some volunteer GALs expressed frustration with disruption from continuous reshuffling of coordinators and hiring of new coordinators in past years, and that coordinators in the more recent past tended to be more critical of their work than those from ten or more years ago.

One coordinator who is not new to the role spoke to this sentiment in an interview, but looked optimistically to the future by noting that:

“There have been lots of changes in supervision over the years, [and] lots of unassigned cases assigned to coordinators for awhile. This is the best position I’ve ever seen coordinators in to do

¹⁷ For discussion of the racial wealth gap in the United States see, for example, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2022/how-the-racial-wealth-gap-has-evolved-and-why-it-persists>.

a good job of supervising in [many] years. It feels good to help, finally [due to] having more employees who can take more cases [which] means no unassigned cases to manage.”

Peer learning and engagement among GALs

GAL interviewees spoke about learning as a continual process. As GALs develop experience and expertise, opportunities to learn both through continuing education curriculum and from each other and program leaders continue for the entirety of a GAL’s tenure. Several interviewees also spoke to the value of mentors—experienced GALs who are paired with new teammates—as an opportunity to gain knowledge and wisdom from longer term colleagues.

Nearly all GALs and coordinators interviewed mentioned the challenges of shifting to almost entirely remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts on opportunities to interact both formally and informally with each other and with other partners in the courts system such as attorneys and judges. As one former GAL noted:

“You learn the job best from your peers, others who do the job. I’m not talking about happy hours or mini golf. I’m talking about opportunities to be together in the workplace. Maybe that doesn’t happen anymore, but it’s important.”

Both program staff and volunteer GALs noted that previous “brown bag” lunch sessions with these partners were among some of the most valuable learning opportunities to them and lamented that there have not been any virtual gatherings to take their place. One of the coordinators interviewed observed there is a lack of participation by volunteers in some learning opportunities, and uncertainty about whether this is due to a communication breakdown or insufficient interest:

“At our team meetings, we have a community leader or provider come in and share info about resources. Staff attend these meetings, but volunteers don’t. I would guess the volunteer coordinator relays some of that info back to her volunteers, but [I’m] not sure. I do not believe that volunteers are excluded or unwelcome from these meetings, I just never see them there and think there would be benefit to them getting this information first hand.”

Onboarding and required training

Pre-COVID-19 onboarding, which included in-person trainings and informational sessions with officers of the court and other justice partners, were remembered favorably by both former and current personnel. The most positive aspects of those trainings seemed to be direct engagement with peers, other program staff, and outside stakeholders. Sessions that combined employees and volunteers in the same training were also noted as positive experiences.

Two significant changes—a new required video-based curriculum developed by the state GAL Program for use by all districts and a shift to remote training necessitated by COVID-19—were both seen as negative developments. Interviewees noted that the training modules are “a big information dump” with “outdated videos” that fail to generate engagement. They expressed a desire for more opportunities to learn together with peers, such as group viewings of the required training curriculum followed by discussion or invited panelists.

Several also acknowledged that “there is SO much to know in the GAL role [and] onboarding is a huge task. It’s impossible not to miss some things and be able to anticipate everything at the start.”

Accountability perceptions and mechanisms

The research team asked every interviewee to reflect on accountability in the GAL Program. Specifically, all participants were asked these two interview questions:

- *To whom are GALs accountable for their work? How can you tell?*
- *What are GALs accountable for, and how are they held accountable?*

In general, interviewee responses suggested some confusion in distinguishing accountability mechanisms or relationships from GAL’s feelings of responsibility about their work or stakeholders’ opportunities for feedback about GAL performance.

Current and former GALs and external stakeholders tended to give multiple answers, with “the courts” and judges mentioned most frequently. Current and former employee GALs also mentioned the child or children to whom a GAL is assigned, as well as coordinators and program management. Responses from current and former volunteer GALs named various external stakeholders (judges, children, families, and community); however, no responses from those groups mentioned coordinators or GAL program leadership. Officers of the court most frequently expressed uncertainty, while some mentioned themselves (i.e., judges or other officers of the court) and program management. Coordinators and managers also named multiple different accountability relationships for GALs, but they were more likely to note a GAL’s accountability to their supervisors and the program.

When asked about the mechanisms that ensure GAL’s are accountable for their work, both coordinators and GALs mentioned the program’s KPIs. (While some were frustrated about the narrowness of these measures, they also acknowledged the difficulty of creating outcome-focused performance measures that can be attributed directly to a GAL’s work.) One interviewee mentioned the informal but immediate performance assessment of judges’ requests or comments in court. Others suggested that accountability was primarily an intrinsic process to the GALs themselves.

Current GALs—both employees and volunteers—expressed a desire for more input and insight from coordinators and from judges about their performance. Several coordinators described feeling that volunteers are not held accountable to the GAL Program, or are treated differently from employees in this regard. One interviewee among current volunteers shared a desire for the same accountability mechanisms among volunteers as there are for employee GALs.

Overall, responses about accountability demonstrated a degree of confusion and uncertainty. This may be in part due to recent changes in program structure, supervisory staffing, protocols for assigning cases, and performance expectations for GALs.

The research team believes such uncertainty about how and to whom GALs are held accountable for their work suggests a risk that supervisors and program leaders lack the tools they need to ensure effective performance

among GALs who do not meet program expectations. These risks are heightened in working with volunteers, who do not have a formal, contractual employer/employee relationship to the program.¹⁸

For example, one former volunteer GAL recalled being recruited and onboarded during a time when the program had many unassigned cases: they noted “it was easier than I thought it would be” to become a GAL. A coordinator described being told (in a similar time of high demand for service) to keep all volunteers engaged regardless of performance because “we needed the bodies.” While the GAL Program is not currently experiencing that kind of staffing pressure, the research team wonders if limited accountability for volunteers could leave the program vulnerable to accepting poor performance from volunteers in the future.

¹⁸ Interviewees with long tenures in the program noted the same challenges and risks around limited accountability among contractors in the past.

Cost analysis

To understand GALs' effectiveness in terms of the costs of the two staffing models, this study considered both direct expenses on personnel and a selection of indirect costs for supporting individual GALs in their work.

Some of the costs discussed here are fixed—that is, the GAL Program would incur the expense regardless of how many employee or volunteer GALs served the program. Conference speaker fees, for example, would not vary. Other costs are variable depending on the number of individuals participating. Conference food and lodging costs, for example, would be variable costs. Data about expenses were not sufficiently granular to identify all fixed or variable program expenses related to GALs, so they are considered together here.

Direct and supervisory compensation costs

Employee GALs in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts receive a median annual salary of \$48,274.56 (or \$23.21 per hour). The GAL Board's current labor agreement with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) includes a 2.5 percent cost of living salary increase but does not provide for year-over-year step increases to employee salaries or hiring new staff above the minimum of the GAL salary range (AFSCME Labor Agreement 2021). Barring changes to the GAL Program's annual appropriation, salary costs in future years are expected to remain relatively stable over time.

Volunteers are, by definition, not paid a salary.

In addition to direct compensation, both employee and volunteer GALs require supervision by coordinators in the program. The median annual salary of coordinators in the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts is \$59,508. A per-GAL proportion of coordinators' time (exclusive of other non-supervisory duties for which data is unavailable) totals \$2,680.54 per GAL for both employees and volunteers.¹⁹

Other operating expenses

In addition to staff compensation costs, this analysis includes expenses directly related to individual GALs and their work. These include expenses related to training, technology, and staff attorney consultation time.

Training

Analysis of training costs included financial data on statewide expenses for external training in a twelve-month period from April 2022 through March 2023. The analysis does not include staff time to develop, administer, or manage internal trainings; GAL Program staff do not track their time for these activities and were unable to estimate it. During the year reviewed, the GAL Program invested roughly \$241,200 in external trainings that

¹⁹ This calculation uses salary data from FY2023; for consistency with per-person and per-case analyses later in the report, the number of personnel is drawn from the most recent snapshot of GAL caseloads, discussed above on page 24, which is from the Fourth District in April of 2022.

were available to GALs. About 60 percent of the expenses—about \$145,300—were for the program’s Statewide Training Institute.

Some of the other expenses represent trainings either required for or available to all personnel in the program, while others represent paid professional development for smaller groups of staff (e.g., conference registrations). Some external trainings included in the statewide expenses were intended for or only available to other personnel, such as coordinators or managers; those training costs and registrations are excluded from this analysis.

To determine an average per-person training cost, MAD performed two calculations:

- The individual share of training expenses for activities open to (or required of) all GALs, regardless of employee or volunteer status. This calculation divides total expenses for such trainings by the total number of actual or potential registrants.
- The individual share of training expenses for activities in which only a few GALs participated. This calculation divides expenses by registrants in the same way.

Table 12 illustrates these calculations, showing overall and per-person costs for external training.

Table 12. Average of external training costs per GAL, fourth quarter FY 2022 through third quarter FY 2023

Cost area	Registrants	Expenses	Percent applied to per-person cost	Average cost per registrant
Trainings required or open to all staff	281	\$188,919	100%	\$672.31
GAL registrations for conferences or other paid trainings	29	\$52,242	10.3%	\$1,801.46
Total costs	-	\$241,161	-	\$858.23

The second per-person calculation combines with the first in proportion to the number of registrants for such trainings—that is, since only 29 of 281 personnel participated in those trainings, only 10.3 percent of the additional expenses are included in the overall per-person average. The average per-person training cost for employees is \$858.23 per year.

Based on comparison of the financial data to the continuing education data discussed above, no volunteer GALs participated in the latter type of paid external training during the look-back period. For that reason, the average per-person training cost for volunteers is \$672.31 per year.

The per-person cost for volunteer GALs is about 78 percent of the employee cost.

Information technology

The GAL Program incurs information-technology-related expenses for hardware used by employees, software licenses, and contracts for support. With few exceptions, these expenses are limited to paid employees because of a policy of the State Court Administrator’s Office that non-employees remain separate from state court

information technology (IT) systems. Volunteer Guardians use their own personal devices (such as laptops) to complete their work for the GAL Program.²⁰

Costs in this area were estimated using a combination of current contracts for service with information technology vendors and budget estimates from the GAL Program’s Chief Information Officer. Estimated technology expenses are included in Table 13 below.

Table 13. Average of technology costs per GAL, FY 2023

Technology expense	Total annual cost	Cost per employee (n=257)	Cost per volunteer (n=37)
Software licenses (MS Office)	\$73,800	\$285	\$15
Antivirus and security	\$15,047.35	\$58.55	\$0
Hardware purchases (estimated 90 per year)	\$100,000	\$1,111.11	\$0
Hardware maintenance and support	\$83,525	\$325	\$0
Case management system support	\$35,280	\$137.28	\$0
Total costs	\$307,652.35	\$1,916.94	\$15

The per-person costs for employee GALs total slightly more than \$1,900. The per-person costs for volunteers total \$15, or about 0.8 percent of the employee cost.

Attorney consultation

In most cases, this analysis excludes the cost of staff time for other personnel supporting GALs’ work. For example, all information technology support issues for volunteer GALs are handled by GAL Program staff because they are ineligible for other support under the State Court Administrator’s Office policies. One notable exception is the time spent by GAL Program staff attorneys in consultation with GALs: because they document each consultation, records exist that allow for an estimation of their time (and its corresponding financial cost).

In the data provided about attorney consultations in a date range that roughly corresponds to FY 2023 to date (mid-June 2022 through April 2023), roughly three hundred cases statewide had a total of 923 attorney consultations.

In the Second and Fourth Judicial Districts, 37 employees consulted 527 times on 146 cases. They consulted a further 59 times on cases that are unnamed in consultation records. The two districts’ 37 volunteers consulted 132 times on 29 cases, and a further 12 times on unnamed cases. Note that, much like other data related to case outcomes, the relative frequency of attorney consultations indicates the varying complexities of different cases, but it does not necessarily reflect the performance of individual GALs.

²⁰ Anecdotally, this use of personal technology by volunteers may also require IT support from program staff since support is available from the State Court Administrator’s office for employees but not volunteers. However, GAL Program staff and the research team were unable to quantify staff time for IT support.

Since GAL Program records do not document the duration of each attorney consultation, it is impossible to know if any variation in time affects total attorney time (and associated costs) related to employees and volunteers. Absent that information, this study estimates an average consultation time of thirty minutes for the purposes of cost calculation. The median hourly salary for GAL Board staff attorneys is \$44.33.

Using this estimate, employee GALs' 586 attorney consultations represented 293 hours of staff attorney time, or an estimate of \$12,988.69 per year and \$351.05 per GAL.

Volunteer GALs' 144 attorney consultations similarly represented an estimated 72 hours of staff attorney time, or \$3,191.76 per year and \$86.26 per GAL.

The per-person cost for volunteer GALs is about 24.6 percent of the employee cost.

Additional costs

All programs have other indirect costs—such as organizational overhead, or the cost of staff time in supporting colleagues or recruiting and onboarding new personnel. Because of challenges in quantifying these costs and in distinguishing costs related to employees and volunteers, they are excluded from this analysis.

Unit costs per person

To understand the overall program costs per GAL, the costs named above were combined to create an overall per-person cost for both employees and volunteers. The look-back periods and number of personnel included varied somewhat by dataset. Table 14 below shows the per-person cost calculation for each item individually, followed by a total cost calculation.

Table 14. Average program costs per GAL, from multiple sources 2022–2023

Cost area	Per employee unit cost	Per volunteer unit cost
GAL compensation	\$48,274.56	\$0
Supervisory time (proportion of coordinator compensation)	\$2,680.54	\$2,680.54
External training	\$858.23	\$672.31
Technology	\$1,916.94	\$15
Attorney consultation	\$351.05	\$86.26
Total costs	\$54,081.32	\$3,454.11

The per-person costs for employee GALs total slightly more than \$54,000. The per-person costs for volunteers total slightly less than \$3,500, or about 6.4 percent of the employee cost.

Unit costs per case

In order to understand costs at a more granular and comparable level, this study uses average caseloads to derive per-case program expenses from the per-person averages for employees and volunteers. To facilitate this analysis, the GAL Program provided snapshots of Fourth Judicial District employee and volunteer caseloads on two random dates in two prior fiscal years. The per-case cost analysis is based on the most recent caseload snapshot, from April 2022, because the data is most consistent with how cases and caseloads are currently tracked in the program.

More information about caseload calculations appears above on page 19.

In the Fourth Judicial District in April 2022, the average employee caseload (n=29) was 22.38 cases. The average volunteer caseload (n=82) was 1.66 cases. Table 15 below shows per-case costs; values were calculated by dividing the per-person costs from Table 14 above by the respective average caseloads.

Table 15. Average of program costs per case, from multiple sources 2022-2023

Cost area	Per-case unit cost: employees	Per-case unit cost: volunteers
GAL compensation	\$2,157.04	\$0
Supervisory time (proportion of coordinator compensation)	\$119.77	\$1,614.78
External training	\$38.35	\$405.01
Technology	\$85.65	\$9.04
Attorney consultation	\$15.69	\$51.96
Total costs	\$2,416.50	\$2,079.36

The per-case costs for employee GALs total slightly more than \$2,400. The per-person costs for volunteers total slightly less than \$2,100, or about 86 percent of the employee cost.

Other considerations for program effectiveness

Some of the factors that interviewees described as driving program effectiveness overall were not directly related to individual GAL performance or characteristics. Regardless of how the GAL role is staffed, attending to these factors may strengthen the program overall.

Communication and change management from program leaders

GAL leadership at both the state and district level reported that they have adopted a vision and action plan for improving and professionalizing the program over the past several years. This work has been:

- Driven by learning about the program's own operations
- Informed by standards and practices adopted in other states and promulgated nationally
- Responsive to both internal pressure (as with the challenge of unassigned cases in prior years) and external pressure (as with recommendations put forth by OLA)

However, personnel sometimes seemed unaware of the program vision, the strategies for achieving it, and the factors underlying program changes. Comments from those who lacked such awareness in interviews suggest they may only have seen abrupt changes, not the reasons behind those changes.

- *"Two years ago, [the program] changed how reports are done—sent a video we were supposed to watch to learn how, but video had an expiration date so you couldn't go back and watch it later if we had questions. New system was not compatible with Macintosh computers. Initial system was web-based, had sections/boxes we filled out. Then when new program rolled out, it was a word doc and did not have all the same previous fields, formatting was off."*
- *"It felt like supervision was only there when something went wrong, when there was a criticism. Annual trainings at Mystic Lake—[this] stopped during COVID. I didn't get my continuing ed requirements done last year—I couldn't believe it. I belong to a bunch of professional organizations, do a ton of reading. A lot of changes to requirements, without much explanation or support."*

The less closely connected an interviewee was to program decision-making and ongoing communications, the more concern they expressed about recent changes. For example, some former volunteers described technology and reporting changes in the context of feeling pushed out of the program. Some judges and attorneys expressed ambivalence to recent changes to Fourth Judicial District staff leadership and new processes and expectations they have and are implementing. However, none mentioned the NCSC or OLA reports and recommendations or changed state standards, which are guiding many of the changes.

As an example, a judge who was interviewed expressed concern that they "used to get reports for almost every hearing," and now it is "not frequent." However, a coordinator in their own interview with us explained as follows:

"Social workers write reports for everything, which confuses stakeholders who expect one from [a] GAL at every stage. [A] GAL does not write reports at 'pre-adjudication' stages because [they are] not required then. These are program policies that mesh with statutory requirements on

post-adjudicatory reporting. Hennepin County was a holdout on aligning to state standards until about two years ago—the biggest change was [GALs] used to stop reporting when permanency petition was filed, but now continue under the CHIPS file. So now, courts get more GAL reports than before.”

These differences suggest that external stakeholders are not sufficiently apprised of changes to standards and requirements. Additional communication between the GAL Program and court partners would have immediate and ongoing positive impact.

These comments, while relatively infrequent, may indicate another potential lever on program effectiveness. While improved internal communication and change management may not directly impact a GAL’s individual performance—regardless of employee or volunteer status—it may have substantial effects on GAL satisfaction, retention, and the prevention of burnout. Particularly in an organization where short tenures are common and staff express demand for more connection and communication opportunities, regular updates (and reminders) about the GAL Board’s overall strategy and decision-making could help staff at all levels cultivate more institutional memory about why they are asked to do their work in particular ways.

Effective supervision is critical

Without exception, interviewees described the critical importance of supervision when asked about how coordinators supervise GAL. Past and current GALs tended to focus on the coordinator’s role as advisor, coach, and sounding board for consulting on cases. For most of these interviewees, coordinators were described as sources of support and learning, rather than solely a supervisor who tracks performance indicators and compliance with other requirements of the role. Those who praised beloved current or past coordinators did so noted their availability for GALs and the way they create a workplace culture for peer connection and learning.

When coordinators spoke about their own role, some comments echoed the GAL focus on support and learning. However, and perhaps understandably, their understanding of the role ranged more widely than those tasks. They emphasized their overall responsibility for onboarding—including training and coaching, but also tasks like job shadowing, court observation, facilitating peer mentoring, and reviewing reports. A few also talked about their role in attending to GALs’ KPIs, monitoring performance, and communicating (or translating, as one put it) information back and forth between district or statewide management and individual GALs.

Current and past coordinators themselves also mentioned that their own availability and capacity shaped their effectiveness in the role—and their ability to do the important work of supporting GALs in being effective, too. As one coordinator put it:

“Part of why I like the role I’m in now as a coordinator is that I get to coach GALs and I really like this. We have many new GALs and many seasoned GALs. Both need a sounding board, a supportive resource/coach, someone to help distinguish boundaries. This is the type of job that has a learning curve—[you] need 18–24 months to learn it well, gain a solid understanding of how cases work, [and] how to approach working with families. This learning curve requires GALs to really commit to learning, being open, sticking with a family.”

Interviewees discussed several factors that can limit a coordinator's capacity to supervise their teams. A significant one is whether a coordinator is carrying their own caseload (i.e., managing cases on top of supervising GALs). Another factor is the total cases managed by the coordinator's team: when GAL caseloads are high, and/or a coordinator manages a large number of individuals, interviewees noted the difficulty of staying informed and consulting on the details of a very large number of cases. One former coordinator who was interviewed remarked on having such a large supervisory caseload several years ago that it "makes [people's] head spin," and noted it was impossible to maintain the familiarity needed to support GALs on so many cases.

In recent years, unassigned cases have decreased, so fewer cases fall to coordinators; individual GAL caseloads have decreased by some measures and held steady or increased slightly by other measures. According to correspondence with GAL Program staff, as of fall 2022 employee GALs carried an average of thirty cases and fifty-five children. In May 2023, these numbers had dropped to an average of twenty cases and thirty-four children.²¹ With those two factors relatively well controlled, the GAL Board and individual districts should continue to ensure coordinators have a reasonable supervisory span—that is, no one coordinator should be responsible for managing too many GALs. Several coordinators interviewed also noted that it can be difficult to balance competing time demands between essential trainings and workshops outside the office, their in-office workloads, and the need to be accessible to the GALs they supervise. They said this difficulty may be particularly pressing for some new coordinators who are fulfilling training and onboarding requirements at the outset of their new duties, and emphasized the importance of ensuring coordinators have sufficient work time to fully succeed in each area of their role.

Coordinator interviewees who have managed both employee and volunteer GALs mentioned the unique considerations they bring to managing volunteers. These comments do not necessarily reflect GALs' effectiveness or performance, but they do speak to an additional set of skills, practices, and approaches for managing volunteers that are distinct from supervising employees. For example:

- *"We work harder with volunteers to ensure they know what they're doing, maintain boundaries (e.g., not providing gifts or other direct support to family). Staff have clearer boundaries about what lane they need to stay in [and] have access to us all day long for ongoing support or questions. Volunteers may not have (or feel they don't have) the same access to answers because not in the office, don't have peers to consult with, etc. Volunteers don't see us as often or have as many informal opportunities to connect and consult."*
- *"We had very thorough process (for screening volunteers). We explicitly said if you are coming with stuff that you haven't processed, this is not the volunteer role for you. We had volunteers share their perspectives and experiences about the volunteer role. It's different than a HR process for a staffing position. It's very important to have a very frank conversation with prospective volunteers about the role."*

²¹ Note that these caseload numbers are similar to, but not exactly the same as, the caseload analysis discussed in this report on pages 24 and 25. The research team did not consider the number of children per case for this study due to privacy considerations about the identities of children or family members.

Challenges to recruiting and retaining diverse GALs

In discussions about other topics, several interviewees commented about the practice of recruiting and retaining diverse GALs and especially BIPOC individuals. Such comments happened most often during questions about GAL recruitment or onboarding and about the importance of cultural concordance between a GAL and the children and families they serve. Comments about those two topics appear elsewhere in this report.

Recruitment challenges

Some coordinators began by noting the challenge of recruiting paid employees to the GAL role due to the combination of in-demand skills, challenging work, and relatively low pay. Interviewees generally agreed that the GAL Program has improved recruitment of racially diverse employees in recent years. However, as one pointed out, BIPOC candidates who are well qualified to serve as a GAL may also be likely to seek a better-paying position elsewhere since many employers are actively recruiting diverse staff. One officer of the court extended this idea to volunteers, noting that the GAL role is not one they would take on as a volunteer under any circumstances due to the volume of work and risk of secondary trauma.

By definition, pay does not factor into volunteer recruitment. Interviewees expressed a related set of challenges in recruiting racially diverse volunteers, though. GAL coordinators and managers with insight into past volunteer recruitment noted two factors that inhibit recruitment of BIPOC volunteers:

- Overall disparities in household income and wealth between white and BIPOC Minnesotans mean that comparatively few BIPOC individuals may have the financial security to offer their unpaid time and labor.
- In the past, some BIPOC individuals the program recruited to serve as volunteers were unable to fulfill the time and scheduling commitments of the role. One interviewee attributed this to the program recruiting “the people who say yes to everything”—that is, community leaders who wanted to participate in the program and increase representation of BIPOC communities among Guardians, but whose time and energy were already spread too thin in other types of service.

To paraphrase one program staff member, volunteer recruitment involves asking community members—and in some cases, those with few resources to spare in terms of time or finances—to invest in the GAL Program without the program in turn compensating them for their time or expertise. One interviewee described how past recruitment of diverse volunteers was very robust and time-intensive, but volunteers often left the program within a few months due to competing time or financial commitments.

Past, present, and future recruitment strategies

Coordinators mentioned some current and past recruitment strategies and outcomes in their interviews. The primary sentiment in these discussions was the time and effort put into diverse recruitment, and particularly volunteer recruitment. Broadly speaking, interviewees felt that the program’s pool of employee GALs is slowly becoming more diverse in terms of race.

The strongest sentiment about recruitment of BIPOC GALs was the difficulty of doing so. Some also noted the need to attend to retention, without necessarily expecting long tenures from every new GAL: in a complex role

with high potential for secondary trauma, they expect some attrition early on as GALs come to fully understand the role and whether it is a good fit for them.

There was little discussion of new potential recruitment strategies among program personnel, though one interviewee noted:

“We’ve talked about how to better reach candidates we want to get from different ethnic and cultural communities, maybe develop contacts at [the University of Minnesota]. They have a program to develop a resource list [of] ‘community connectors’ from diverse ethnic and cultural communities who could help recruit and get word of open positions out to prospective applicants.”

Program staff also talked about recruitment of employees and volunteers from a variety of different backgrounds, regardless of racial identity. One noted that these backgrounds include personal or professional experiences relevant to child protection.

It is theoretically possible that a robust pool of volunteer GALs could serve as a pipeline or hiring pool into service as an employee GAL. Indeed, several interviewees who are employee Guardians, coordinators, or managers followed this path into employment with the program. However, none of the individuals interviewed for the study named this possibility as a benefit of the volunteer program or discussed it as a past or future recruitment strategy.

The most robust discussion of volunteer recruitment happened among interviewees representing CASA Minnesota, National CASA, and other external perspectives. They noted potential strategies such as:

- Working with barber shops and beauty shops
- Speaking about the GAL role at community meetings, such as parent-teacher associations
- Borrowing recruitment strategies from corporations who are also working to hire diverse staff
- Recruiting volunteers from corporations
- Ensuring the program overall has diverse staff, so potential GALs are “seeing people involved who look like them”
- Considering the socio-economic diversity of potential GALs as well
- Developing trusting relationships between the program and community members to support GAL learning and cultural agility, as is already in progress with ICWA Guardians

Reasons GALs leave the program

Coordinators, managers, and former GALs were asked in interviews about the main reasons people stop serving as a GAL.

Some coordinators and managers noted that burnout has been a common reason for all GALs to leave the program. They said fewer GALs also tend to leave due to poor fit to the role or struggles with the mental and emotional toll of the work. More tenured GALs sometimes leave due to the increasing complexity and difficulty of their cases or frustrations with the program or child protection system.

These interviewees also said employee GALs tend to leave the program for other roles with higher pay and lower stress. Less frequently, these interviewees described GALs who go on to other careers or education, and the perception that advancement opportunities are limited within the program. Some noted that the role can

require large time commitments and levels of stress, with some employees leaving to find better work-life balance elsewhere. One mentioned employees' frustration with the child protection system, and another reported hearing some concerns about safety.

Former employee GALs themselves noted low pay and a desire for work-life balance in interviews. They also mentioned that recent turnover among coordinators left them feeling unsupported in their work. One GAL who left the program many years ago recalled increased attention to avoiding conflict and minimizing negative public attention—while they acknowledged this may have been an attempt to insulate individual GALs from backlash about difficult cases, it was unwelcome in their personal perspective.

When discussing volunteer GALs who have left the program, coordinators and managers said GALs most often have conflicting obligations—whether professional, personal, family, or due to another volunteer commitment. One interviewee noted that sometimes volunteers leave to pursue other volunteer activities; another mentioned GALs retiring from both their professional and volunteer roles. Some noted that the volume of work or difficulty of a case are sometimes reasons for departure, though this is rare. Points of conflict or frustration also emerged from these interviews several times—coordinators and managers alluded to incidents when volunteers:

- Had “different expectations about their availability” than program staff
- Had trouble working with other stakeholders
- Struggled with program changes or increased expectations and accountability

One interviewee noted that, very rarely, volunteers “just disappear” from the program. Another mentioned reports of a volunteer receiving conflicting guidance from coordinators.

Interviews with former volunteer GALs themselves surfaced frustrations with the GAL Program as a reason for departure. One noted the volume and pace of changing expectations, and another discussed how several years ago volunteers were asked to leave because their reports were of poor quality or not completed correctly. An interviewee described poor treatment, noting conflict with and lack of support from a former coordinator. In the COVID-19 era, challenges with doing the work of a GAL remotely and without in-person meetings or peer support also emerged as factors in leaving the program. And as other interviewees also mentioned, some volunteers talked about leaving the program due to lack of time, the emotional toll of the work, or frustration with the child protection system.

Notes about volunteer GALs' reasons for separating from the program are also documented in program records. These notes—the reasons volunteers report to their coordinators, or that coordinators document in the absence of volunteers' stated reasons—also contribute to the overall picture about volunteer departures. For this report, documentation for most of the ninety-eight separations in fiscal years 2021 and 2022 were analyzed by coding the notes into categories. Comparable data is not available for employees.

Table 16. Volunteers' reasons for separation, as reported to coordinators 2021–2022

Reasons for separation	Number of separations
Personal or professional obligations	25
Performance issue	23
Moved out of district	8
Retirement	8
Other personal reasons (e.g., illness)	7
New role in child protection (e.g., foster parent)	3
Frustration with the GAL Program or child protection system	3
Other or unknown	21
Total	98

Many of the reasons for separation in this dataset are consistent with comments from interviewees. In particular, volunteers' obligations outside the program are the most frequent reasons reported. GAL performance issues are present in the dataset and are much more prevalent than interviewee comments would suggest. Frustrations with the program are present in the dataset, but they are not as prevalent as interviewee comments would suggest.

Discussion

In this study, the research team set out to compare the relative costs and effectiveness of volunteer and employee Guardians ad Litem. In some cost-effectiveness analyses, a simple quantitative calculation can be used to compare two different program or staffing models. That is not the case here. Many of the impacts of a GAL's work, signs of their effectiveness in the role, and conditions that affect their success are difficult or impossible to quantify, so the weighing of costs and effectiveness must take a more holistic approach.

Cost comparison

The cost analysis remains relatively straightforward. Volunteer GALs generate fewer expenses than do full-time or part-time employees. The difference is very large—roughly \$50,000 per year—on a per-person basis. Due to the difference in caseloads between volunteer and employee GALs, the per-case costs of the two types of personnel are narrower, but volunteers are still less costly on average.

Effectiveness: commonalities

As part of understanding GAL effectiveness, without exception interviewees spoke about topics that illustrated the overall effectiveness of GALs. They discussed the importance of GALs' work; the importance and complexity of the role; the valuable skills and experiences GALs bring to bear; and the positive impacts they have in court, for children and their families, and in the wider community. It is clear that, taken together as a group, GALs are highly effective and make positive contributions through their work.

In addition to those program-wide strengths, one important purpose of this study was to seek out differences between employees and volunteers to attempt comparisons between the two staffing models.

In many specific areas of the analysis, GALs continued to show comparable effectiveness. Other times, the differences within a measure or contributing factor suggested either mixed effects or differences related to something other than employee or volunteer status (such as personal lived experience or time in the role). In these areas GALs had similar performance as demonstrated through program data, or similar effectiveness or conditions as perceived and described by interviewees:

- Key performance indicators related to hearing attendance and report submission, and some aspects of the performance regarding child contacts
- Possession and demonstration of skills critical for the work of a GAL
- Proportion of time spent on case activities and average duration of some case activities, including child contacts
- Tenure in the GAL Program
- Skill and practice development through onboarding and initial training
- Quality of reporting and contributions in court
- Experiences of effective (or ineffective) supervision and opportunities for peer learning
- Awareness of accountability relationships and mechanisms within the program

Effectiveness: differences

The overall picture from GAL Program administrative data is of roughly comparable effectiveness in many, but not all, areas. Because of program constraints or the nature of volunteer service, employees inherently had advantages over volunteer GALs in some areas—such as their access to state IT infrastructure and support, or the benefits of experiential learning through onboarding to the program with a full-time caseload. And movement by the GAL Program to shift to a more consistent, professional workforce at the recommendation of the Office of the Legislative Auditor—and how those changes were communicated to GALs—may have changed volunteers' level of engagement with the program.

Where differences in performance emerged, most favored employees. The analysis of program and interview data suggests greater effectiveness (or stronger contributions to effectiveness) for employees than volunteers in terms of:

- The child contacts key performance indicator: the average number of contacts per child (annualized) over the life of a case
- Observed strengths and weaknesses in understanding and fulfilling the GAL role (either by not completing required activities, or through engaging in prohibited activities or activities that are the responsibility of other parties to a case)
- Compliance with continuing education requirements
- Cultural concordance between GALs and children or families²²

Conversely, volunteers had somewhat stronger performance in some aspects of the third GAL key performance indicator: the number of missed monthly contacts with children, the number and duration of child contacts per year, and the overall proportion of time spent on child contacts.

Concerns about accountability arose across the GAL Program but have different implications for the two groups. While the same challenges with accountability exist between employee and volunteer GALs, the lack of accountability mechanism awareness and availability for volunteers poses a greater risk to the program overall. There are fewer consequences available for the program to help correct volunteers' poor performance when it occurs. Moreover, reliance on volunteers in past periods of high demand for service created incentives to retain ineffective volunteers even when their performance could not be improved, amplifying potential risks for the program.

²² While this is not a condition that an individual GAL can develop or change in oneself, interviewees suggested that the GAL Program has been more effective at recruiting diverse employees than in past recruitment of diverse volunteers. This condition could change if volunteer recruitment were to restart with new strategies in place.

Potential limitations of the study

All research studies have limitations. A limitation is a way of thinking about the boundaries beyond which the researcher or reader cannot confidently interpret or draw conclusions from data.

The completeness of this analysis may be limited by several factors. Challenges with the availability of quantitative data, predicting future conditions or performance, and attending to subtle contextual differences may all affect how this report's findings translate into practice. However, several research strategies have mitigated these limitations. An emphasis on systematically collected qualitative data introduced the voices of program stakeholders directly into the study. A focus on the most robust and complete quantitative data, with careful attention to potential issues of quality or completeness, also strengthened the analysis.

For a more robust discussion of potential limitations, see Appendix A below.

Recommendations

The goals of this study were to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis and, if warranted by the research findings, make recommendations about the future of volunteers in the Guardian ad Litem Program.

In addition to that question, the research team made several additional observations for which recommendations to the GAL Program are warranted.

One overall impression from this study is that Guardians seem to highly value their independence and heterogeneity of approach—a sentiment that begins, but does not end, in the independence of their investigative and reporting duties. However, in an era of striving for greater operational consistency that independent spirit can also create tension. The recommendations here may provide some avenues for the GAL Program to balance the flexibility of GALs' work with a need for consistency in performance, policy, and practice.

The following sections briefly discuss each recommendation in turn.

Recommendation 1: Volunteers in the Guardian ad Litem Program

Discontinue the use of volunteers as Guardians ad Litem

Volunteer GALs afford some cost savings for the program. In the past they were critical in meeting the program's demand for service, especially in the Fourth Judicial District. While they bring passion and attention to their work, and perform comparably to employees in many respects, volunteers are slightly less effective on some measures of performance and pose more substantial risks than employees in terms of limited mechanisms to ensure their accountability to the program. The GAL Program's risk exposure is further heightened in terms of information security, as volunteers are not permitted to use Judicial Branch information technology systems. The program instead relies on volunteers' ability to keep their own personal devices secure and ensure their case data is protected.

While all Guardians have the independence to complete tasks as they see fit, the Guardian ad Litem Program must be able to ensure that personnel work within the boundaries of their role as defined in statute and program policy. While all Guardians are subject to supervision, training, and coaching, more tools are available to improve and ensure employee performance.

Indeed, as noted in some of the data limitations of this study, even ensuring compliance with performance management strategies (such as tracking their case activities) may be more difficult and inconsistent among volunteers than employees. One of the few formal mechanisms available to hold volunteers accountable is to "invite them to be successful someplace else," as one coordinator put it.

For these reasons, this report recommends the Guardian ad Litem Board discontinue the use of volunteers in their current capacity as Guardians ad Litem.

Benefit from volunteers' strengths in other roles

Volunteer GALs report bringing important benefits to individual children or families, the child protection system, and their communities. However, those benefits reach beyond the intended role of the Guardian ad Litem. Instead of relying on volunteers to stay within the prescribed role of the Guardian ad Litem, the program should consider developing other ways to benefit from volunteers' passion, time, and expertise in the ways many interviewees for this study believe they currently add the greatest value. A more expansive and flexible volunteer program could allow current or former GALs to have a deeper impact on individual families or a wider impact on the child protection system overall.

- To make the best use of volunteers' desire for ongoing connection and care for children, volunteers could shift focus to a more expansive role in mentorship or support for the children (and entire families) in juvenile court or family court. Such a role would create space for relationships that extend beyond the life of a court case, and it could also permit a wider range of direct supports that are not currently allowed within the GAL role.
- To make the best use of volunteers' broad and deep subject matter expertise in child protection, child development, and related fields, volunteers could also shift focus to a number of advocacy roles.
 - Some could bring the voice of concerned and well-informed citizens into discussions about policy, reform, and resources for the child protection system.
 - Others could bring insights about how the system currently works and the needs of children and families into greater community awareness, shedding light on the system and spurring wider advocacy to improve the child protection system.
 - Still others could become, or encourage others to become, philanthropic champions for children in need.

These potential roles could be structured and managed in several different ways. Determining where and how to benefit from volunteers in a non-GAL role was beyond the scope of this study, but considerations may include:

- Continued partnership between the GAL Program and CASA Minnesota (or a different organization) to connect volunteers with children and families involved in child protection cases who would benefit from additional support.
- Divorcing volunteer activities from GAL Program activities altogether, while remaining in arms-length collaboration with the entities who do manage volunteers. (This step may be especially important if volunteers take on public policy advocacy positions that directly address the GAL Program or other justice partners.)
- Note that, given the scope of its regular responsibilities, the GAL Program itself likely *would not* be able to train and manage the day-to-day work of volunteers who are not serving as GALs. Partnership of some type with other organizations would be critical to making such a change.

Considerations for implementing new volunteer roles

As with any programmatic change, the research team recommends a thoughtful planning process for implementing new volunteer roles.

If attrition of current volunteers from the GAL role continues at the same pace as in recent years, the GAL Program can expect 6 to 12 months of volunteers' participation in their current role. The previous position of a coordinator focused solely on volunteers was vacant at the time of this report. Statewide and district leadership should critically consider how best to supervise and support the remaining volunteers in the short to medium term—for example, by having existing coordinators absorb volunteers into their supervisory load or by temporarily hiring a dedicated coordinator.

In the longer term, the Guardian ad Litem Program will need to hire additional employees to absorb volunteers' current caseloads. Based on the findings from this study, approximately 2 full-time positions could accommodate that change. This additional staffing need can likely be incorporated into the program's overall staffing plan. These staffing changes will also have budget impacts in terms of both direct and indirect costs.

If CASA Minnesota continues or expands its role with volunteers as a result of this report, that organization (or other, similarly situated organizations) may need to either develop new program areas or expand the scale of current activities to meet the demand for volunteer participation.

As they begin to look to the future, the GAL Program and CASA Minnesota should engage in planning, either together or separately, about what volunteer role(s) to move forward and how to implement them. This planning should include:

- Articulation of the purpose and goals of volunteer services
- The scope of volunteer duties and work expectations
- The strategies necessary for the organization(s) to support volunteers in that role
- The budgetary implications of volunteers' new service (and, for the GAL Program, the budget impact of moving to an all-employee model)
- Other program implementation planning as needed

Finally, the GAL Program in particular may find that additional planning time or resources are necessary to adopt any of the other recommendations in this report.

Recommendation 2: Create expectations and systems for accountability

Uncertainty about GALs' accountability for their work—for both volunteers and employees—was consistent across all program stakeholder interviews. This uncertainty creates barriers to feedback, performance monitoring, and improvement for individual GALs. Lack of awareness, combined with relatively few mechanisms for GAL accountability, also introduces an element of risk into the program itself. Recommendations to strengthen accountability in the GAL Program include:

- Make explicit discussions of accountability a part of GAL training. This information should include not only to whom GALs are accountable, but also how and why. Information about accountability outside the program, as with appointment by judges or the responsibility to honor the needs of children and the strengths of families, should be delineated from program responsibilities.

- Systematize the use of existing accountability mechanisms to better identify future issues at a program level. This process may include more robust and consistent logging of informal complaints, or greater promotion and accessibility of the program’s formal complaint process. Regular review and monitoring of GAL performance data should also be part of a well-defined and clearly communicated performance evaluation process. This is particularly valuable to ensure all personnel and stakeholders understand how current identified KPIs or potential future outcome-related performance measures are connected to GAL accountability to the program.
- Critically consider outcome-related performance measures for GALs. While it may be impossible to attribute a child’s overall wellbeing to a Guardian’s work, other measures may be possible. For example, consider outcomes related to the effectiveness of GAL advocacy (such as the court’s adoption of recommendations) or the effectiveness of GAL investigation and facilitation (such as a child’s referral to appropriate support resources).
- Incorporate the voices of other justice partners into the program’s accountability structures for GALs. Example strategies may include periodic surveying of judges, social workers, or other parties. This feedback—which, on its own, is insufficient to serve as an accountability mechanism—could then be incorporated into the program’s performance evaluation process for Guardians. The GAL Program could also make more general invitations for justice partners to provide feedback about the program overall rather than about individuals.
- Finally, if volunteers remain engaged in the program as GALs, continue to ensure that they are held to the same expectations, using the same accountability mechanisms, as employees. While volunteers have generally performed very effectively as GALs, there have historically been few or no formal routes to ensure they are accountable to the program. In fact, some interviewees made specific reference to times in the past when the program needed volunteers more than volunteers needed to stay with the program. This dynamic is antithetical to holding personnel accountable and posed substantial risk to the program’s reputation and the quality of service provided to children and families.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen data systems and practices

More strategic, robust, and structured data systems would bolster a number of the other recommendations listed here. Better systematizing how both administrative data and stakeholder input are gathered and used could both streamline processes and support monitoring for broader patterns or trends across the program.

- First, build capacity: support a culture shift in how data is collected and used at both the individual and program levels. The suggestions below can be implemented more smoothly if preceded by work to shift how program staff think about data. Personnel at every level, from individual contributors to statewide leadership, could be encouraged to form stronger habits of making decisions and taking action based on high-quality data that pertains to their work. This would also require the development of related data literacy skills (if not already present) and new habits to reflect on one’s work and to explain and contextualize one’s reasons for a course of action. GAL Program leaders can both champion and model these new habits.
- Measure to manage: ensure that strategic goals and other critical needs drive data system development. The GAL Program has spent several years responding to external calls for expanded data collection and

particular uses for that data. Now, as the program continues to mature, leaders have an opportunity to consider their strategic goals—and, crucially, how to measure progress toward those goals.

- **Measure what matters:** ensure that data is of sufficient focus, quality, and granularity for program use. Data systems that require personnel or other stakeholders to input information should be tailored to specific uses, such as individual or overall performance management. As the GAL Program's data systems continue to develop, leaders should ensure they have the data they need in order to answer the questions they care about.
 - For example: GALs are required to complete three hours of diversity, equity, and inclusion-related training each year. The course completion database does not capture these details systematically so staff compliance must be manually verified by coordinators; a potentially simple database change to add a field could help ensure compliance and save supervisor time.
 - In another example, this study grappled with limitations of the GAL Program's key performance indicator data. Some of those limitations were driven by uncertainty about whether GALs routinely and comprehensively documented their time and activities. The GAL Program can improve the quality and usability of program data by working to ensure its completeness. Some data may benefit from automatically generated fields, such as completion or submission time stamps. Others may benefit from improving staff capacity and buy-in—and program expectations—of those tasked with generating the data. In particular, consistent guidance on how to describe GAL activities, time use, and continuing education could streamline the use of these data sets for understanding performance.
- **Make meaning together:** ensure the collection, interpretation, and use of data are accessible and routine at all levels. This strategy depends upon the habits, skills, practices, and high-quality data discussed above. To learn from and act strategically on data, the GAL Program could also benefit from ensuring time and access for personnel to use data—within considerations for privacy and confidentiality. Access to the data that pertains to one's work, and an organization-wide expectation that decisions are informed by data, can create mutually reinforcing benefits to both data systems and program performance. Example practices could include:
 - A Guardian who wishes to improve the efficiency of their non-case work time has access to data on their own tracked activities
 - The details of continuing education coursework inform coordinators in planning for professional development plans among their staff
 - District managers or statewide leaders present GAL Program personnel with data about a strategic priority and invite them to help interpret it or suggest ways to improve

Recommendation 4: Support program staff

Interviewees' comments suggest that some of the most important factors to ensuring GAL effectiveness regardless of employee or volunteer status are the quality of onboarding, the nature and availability of ongoing supervision, and opportunities for peer learning and connection between GALs. The GAL Program should commit to the continued strength and improvement of these aspects of the program in order to ensure continued high performance among GALs. In particular:

- Revisit pandemic-era changes to the program’s initial onboarding training to increase participant engagement. Multiple interviewees noted that video or online modules did not compare favorably to prior in-person sessions. Panels representing justice partners outside the program were noted as particularly valuable and engaging. Even if all districts use a consistent, statewide training curriculum, hybrid presentation formats (such as group viewing and discussion) could address some concerns.
- In a similar vein, GALs spoke in interviews about the importance of opportunities for peer interaction. Several noted that time spent at the Fourth Judicial District GAL office remains minimal, and they expressed a desire for both in-person meetings or trainings and more informal connection among peers. Volunteer GALs in particular remarked on missing these connections; if the GAL Program continues to use volunteers in any capacity in the future, building in time and space for their own peer interactions will increase their satisfaction and could support their learning.

At the supervisory level, a handful of additional supports from the program could ensure that coordinators are well equipped to manage GALs. Based on this study, such supports could include:

- A mix of coordinators and GALs spoke in interviews about the need for communication or translation between statewide or district leadership and individual contributors. In particular, during a time of continued changes and relatively new expectations, internal communications could better equip coordinators with information about not only what is expected to happen, but also why and how a change will unfold.
- Continue the current staffing practices that allow coordinators to spend all or most of their time on managing and supporting staff. One important lesson from prior years, when coordinators needed to carry caseloads in addition to their supervisory duties, is that GALs’ development, consultation opportunities, and sense of belonging or connection all suffered when coordinators were pressed for time.

Recommendation 5: Ensure role clarity at all levels

If the GAL Program opts to discontinue or rethink the use of volunteers in child protection cases, it will be important to maintain ongoing communication with all program stakeholders about their roles and actions moving forward.

At an organizational level, the program will need to work with CASA Minnesota and/or other partners to develop a strategy and goals for new volunteer roles. They will also need to reach consensus about who will be responsible for recruiting, training, and managing volunteers. As part of creating a strategy and management plan, the organizations will also need to develop new, clear volunteer position descriptions, policies, and other supporting infrastructure—all to design a cohesive program that complements but is distinct from GALs’ casework and role.

On an individual level, GALs also need to understand their own role and the roles of other justice partners and stakeholders in their work. This understanding may come about through training, consultation, or other means. While it is important information in the program’s current configuration, it will become especially important if the role of volunteers changes.

Recommendation 6: Improve communication, internally and externally

Greater clarity and awareness about the GAL Program and about individual roles and responsibilities would benefit a wide range of program stakeholders. Several findings from this study indirectly suggest gaps in communication that could, if addressed, improve program performance overall and—perhaps to a lesser extent—GAL effectiveness specifically. They may also serve to strengthen relationships between the GAL Program and other entities. Communication opportunities may include:

- Better communication from program leadership to Guardians and coordinators about the expectations of Guardians' work. In particular, more consistently emphasize not only what is expected but why and how the expectation could or should be met.
- Better communication both internally and externally about the drivers of the GAL Program's organizational change in recent years. In particular, highlight the findings of NCSC and OLA reports that have prompted program changes in recent years, to ensure stakeholders do not mistakenly attribute them to capricious (or malicious) individual actors. With some stakeholder groups, discussion about changes to the overall paradigm of child protection in recent decades (as one GAL program leader put it, away from a punitive or policing-type engagement to one focused on goals of family reunification) may also apply.
- Better communication externally about the role and responsibilities of a Guardian ad Litem. Such communication could help insure continued or improved relationships between GALs and justice partners, parents, and families. It could also help inform justice partners and policy makers about the day-to-day work of the program. Internally, this communication could help support improved staff recruitment and retention.
- Better communication about the GAL Program's policies and requirements at the organizational level. For example, during interviews for this study some officers of the court seemed to have an outdated or incomplete understanding of the program's expectations of GALs. This led one to express disappointment at GALs' perceived inability to submit reports for hearings where no reports are expected or required by the program.
- Better communication about the GAL Program's role as one part of the larger child protection system. In discussing preliminary findings for this report, key stakeholders repeatedly noted concerns—such as trust or transparency in the system and child outcomes across the lifespan—in which the GAL Program plays a role, but cannot act alone (or ensure positive results when acting alone).

Strengthening lines of communications among all program stakeholders could improve their satisfaction with the program and provide avenues for them to offer constructive input on GAL performance.

Appendix A: Discussion of study limitations

Data quality and availability

GAL Board is in the midst of a multi-year process of developing more robust data systems. This study benefited from the existence of the tools currently in use, and also faced the limitations of those systems. While these limitations do not necessarily represent weaknesses in the data itself and were not widespread, they each arose to a small extent:

- Potentially incomplete data (e.g., entries of case activities that may be incomplete)
- Derived or combined datasets (e.g., the combination of two separate reports on continuing education for active and inactive GALs, and subsequent missing values)²³
- Unverifiable data (e.g., GALs' reasons for report non-submission that cannot be confirmed)
- Changes to data collection approaches over time (e.g., changes to the program's caseload count approach in 2022)
- Data not collected (e.g., information about reasons for employee departures)

Accounting for recent and future program changes

The GAL Program has adopted many substantial changes in just a few years: new technology and performance monitoring systems, new approaches to training and recruitment, large shifts in how the program is staffed through increased hiring and volunteer attrition, and even brand-new ways of working driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The volume and speed of changes to the program, and the world, have been striking. If that pace of change continues, it is difficult to predict what the characteristics of the program or individual GALs will be in the future. MAD worked to account for the speed of recent change by using a relatively short look-back period for the analysis and attempting to understand the drivers behind various program changes.

Differences between Second and Fourth Judicial Districts

The presence of more volunteers in the Fourth Judicial District, compared with the Second Judicial District, resulted in different depths of analysis. A larger pool of both interviewees and quantitative data afforded more information and greater engagement in the Fourth Judicial District and resulted in more information about that

²³ In the training completion data provided to MAD, approximately ninety-four entries did not include documentation of a completion date. The undated entries all represented external trainings in which volunteer GALs (nineteen entries) and employee GALs (seventy-five entries) participated during the analysis period. Because the date of completion indicates timely completion of CEUs by a GAL, MAD removed the undated entries from their analysis. The removed training entries represent 1.06 percent of the full training completion data for Fourth Judicial District employee and volunteer GALs.

district in the report. It is possible that differences between the two districts—such as different management styles, volume of cases, or expectations from officers of the court—could lead to slightly different conclusions about the Second Judicial District than those reported here. However, the statewide nature of GAL Program administration and consistency in expectations of the GAL role mean that both the understanding of GAL effectiveness and the factors that drive program costs translate across districts.

Variation between sources

At times, different stakeholders have reported different observations. Some interviewee observations or beliefs even seem to be at odds with program data. For example:

- Former volunteer GALs reported leaving the GAL Program due to frustration much more often than the program's own separations data would suggest
- Several officers of the court spoke about GAL responsibilities or actions in ways that suggested they were not aware of the workings of the GAL Program
- Complementary but somewhat different accounts of past efforts in GAL recruitment

As with other limitations, this variation does not necessarily suggest poor-quality data. Instead, it may indicate situations or issues that have multiple causes, individuals who have their own distinct perspectives, or stakeholders who may have an incomplete view of a situation.

This is not uncommon in mixed-methods research. Such variation points to areas of nuance and differing perspectives. It can feel challenging because incorporating multiple interpretations precludes fully embracing any one perspective.

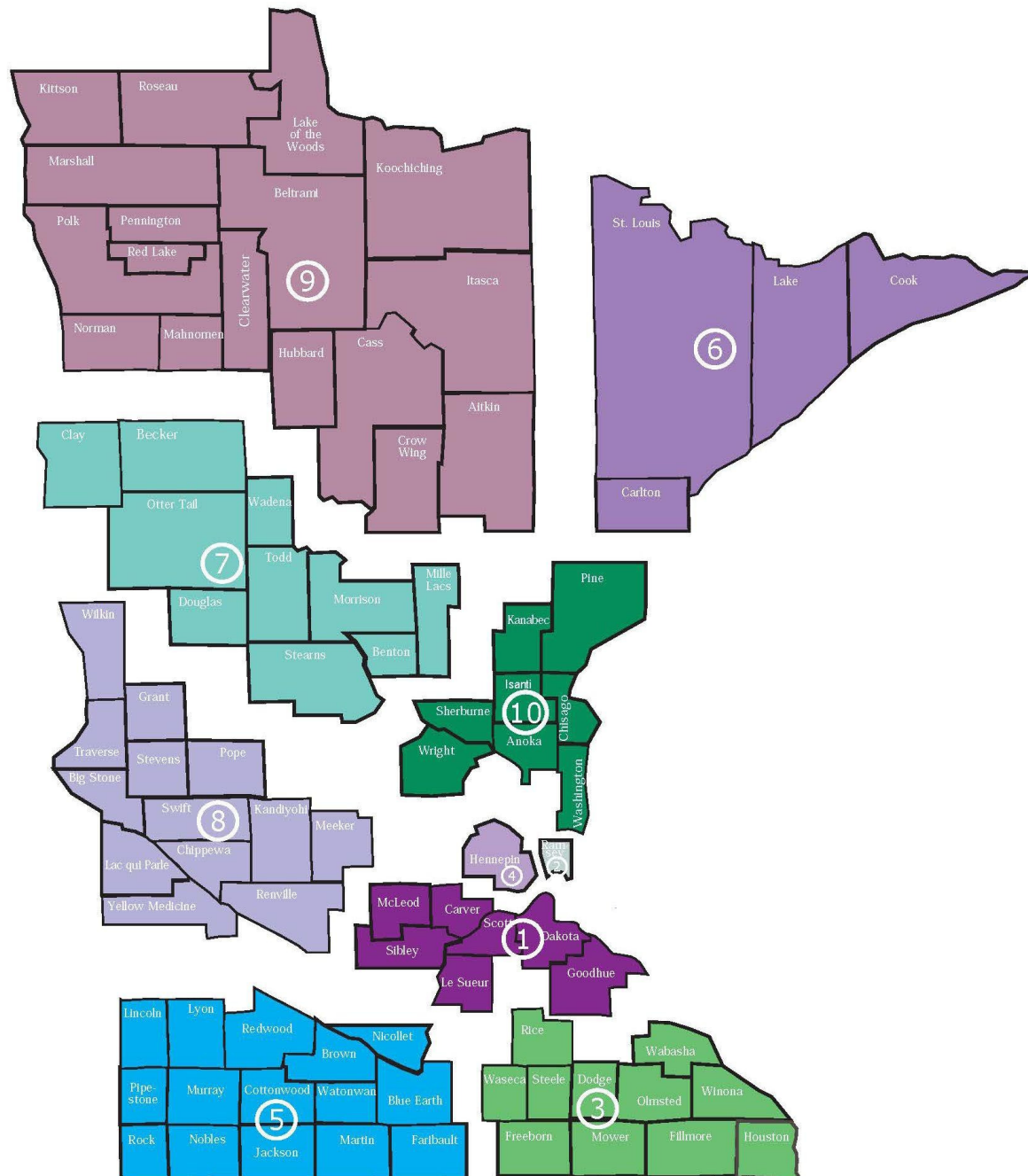
The research team welcomed these challenges to the process of interpretation by inviting multiple stakeholder perspectives into the study and incorporating multiple types and sources of data into the analysis process. In social science research, this approach is called triangulation. Sometimes it can validate a finding from one source by corroborating it with another; other times, different findings between sources invite more reflection or information gathering.

Appendix B: Minnesota Judicial Districts

This map illustrates Minnesota's ten judicial districts. This study focused on employees and volunteers in two of the ten districts:

- The Fourth Judicial District, which shares the boundaries of Hennepin County
- The Second Judicial District, which shares the boundaries of Ramsey County

Figure 1. Minnesota's Judicial Districts



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