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GAL Volunteer Handbook

Montgomery County · Montgomery · 2026 Edition

Montgomery County Juvenile Court

Department of Human Resources (DHR) | Ala. Code § 12-15-101

PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is a practical reference for Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers serving Montgomery County families in juvenile dependency proceedings. It covers the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act (Ala. Code § 12-15-101), the DHR child welfare system, the dependency court process, ICWA considerations for the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, and local resources for Montgomery and Prattville.

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Part I — The Alabama GAL Program

1.1 What Is the Alabama GAL Program?

The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program in Alabama trains and supervises community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the state's juvenile court system. In Alabama, child protection cases are called **dependency proceedings**, governed by the **Alabama Juvenile Justice Act (Ala. Code § 12-15-101 et seq.)**.

The primary child welfare agency is the **Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR)**, specifically its Child Protective Services (CPS) division. When DHR determines that a child has been abused, neglected, or is otherwise dependent, it may file a petition in juvenile court. The court then appoints a GAL volunteer to represent the child's best interests independently of DHR, the parents, and their attorneys.

In Montgomery County, dependency cases are heard in the **Montgomery County Juvenile Court** in Montgomery — the state capital. Montgomery County DHR handles one of the largest caseloads in Alabama.

> **Core Mission**
> You are the independent voice for a child who cannot effectively advocate for themselves in a legal proceeding. Your job is to investigate, report, and advocate — and to keep coming back until the case is closed.

1.2 Program Structure

Alabama's CASA/GAL program is coordinated through the **Alabama CASA Network**, which supports county-level CASA programs statewide. Montgomery County CASA operates under the oversight of Juvenile Court and partners with DHR case workers, the DHR attorney, parents' attorneys, and children's attorneys throughout each case.

Part II — Legal Foundation

2.1 Alabama Juvenile Justice Act

Alabama Code — Title 12, Chapter 15 (Alabama Juvenile Justice Act)

- Ala. Code § 12-15-101 — Short title and legislative findings
- Ala. Code § 12-15-102 — Definitions: dependent child, abused, neglected
- Ala. Code § 12-15-301 — Jurisdiction of juvenile court over dependent children
- Ala. Code § 12-15-304 — Appointment of guardian ad litem; duties; compensation
- Ala. Code § 12-15-310 — Shelter care hearing (within 72 hours of removal)
- Ala. Code § 12-15-311 — Adjudication hearing (within 30 days if child in custody)
- Ala. Code § 12-15-314 — Disposition hearing and case plan
- Ala. Code § 12-15-315 — Periodic review hearings (every 6 months)
- Ala. Code § 12-15-317 — Permanency hearing (within 12 months of removal)
- Ala. Code § 26-14-1 et seq. — Alabama Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act
- Ala. Code § 26-18-7 — Grounds for termination of parental rights

2.2 Federal Law

Federal Law

- CAPTA (42 U.S.C. § 5101) — Requires GAL appointment in all abuse/neglect proceedings
- ASFA (P.L. 105-89) — 12-month permanency timeline; 15/22-month TPR filing requirement
- ICWA (25 U.S.C. § 1901) — Indian Child Welfare Act — critical for Poarch Band of Creek Indians and other tribal members in Alabama
- FFPSA (P.L. 115-123) — Family First Prevention Services Act; limits congregate care
- McKinney-Vento Act — Education rights for homeless and foster youth
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — School stability rights for children in foster care

2.3 Key Definition — Dependent Child

Under Ala. Code § 12-15-102, a "dependent child" is one who is without a parent, guardian, or legal custodian; who has been abandoned; who is in need of care or supervision and whose parent has neglected, refused, or is unable to provide it; whose home situation is injurious to the child's welfare; or who has been abused or neglected. Alabama uses the single term **dependency** for all child protection matters in juvenile court.

Part III — Your Role & Responsibilities

3.1 Statutory Duties (Ala. Code § 12-15-304)

The Alabama Juvenile Justice Act mandates GAL appointment in every abuse/neglect case. Your duties include:

- **Investigate:** Conduct an independent investigation into all facts relevant to the child's best interests.
- **Access Records:** You are entitled to access all records relating to the child — medical, educational, DHR, mental health, law enforcement — without parental consent.
- **Visit the Child:** Meet with the child in the placement setting, including in private without the foster parent or DHR worker present.
- **Attend All Hearings:** Appear at every hearing and present the child's best-interest position to the court.
- **File Reports:** Submit written reports and recommendations to the court before each hearing.
- **Monitor Services:** Track DHR compliance with the case plan, court orders, and service delivery.
- **Advocate for Needs:** Identify and advocate for unmet educational, medical, mental health, and developmental needs.
- **Serve Until Released:** Continue until the court formally releases you at case closure.

3.2 Ethical Obligations

- All case information is strictly confidential.
- Your obligation runs to the child's best interests alone — not to DHR, not to the parents.
- Do not provide legal advice to any party.
- Disclose conflicts of interest immediately to your CASA supervisor.
- Maintain professional boundaries. Do not give money or personal contact information to families.

Part IV — The Dependency Court Process

4.1 Alabama Dependency Timeline

1 — DHR Investigation & Emergency Removal
DHR investigates reports of child abuse or neglect under Ala. Code § 26-14. If a child is in imminent danger, DHR may remove without prior court order. A dependency petition must be filed promptly after removal.

2 — Shelter Care Hearing (within 72 hours)
Held within 72 hours of removal (Ala. Code § 12-15-310). The court reviews the removal, determines appropriate placement, and sets conditions for the child's safety. The GAL is typically appointed at or shortly after this hearing.

3 — Adjudication Hearing (within 30 days if child is in custody)
The court determines whether the child is "dependent" as defined by Ala. Code § 12-15-102 (Ala. Code § 12-15-311). Parents may admit or contest. The GAL submits a report and recommendation.

4 — Disposition Hearing
The court approves the DHR case plan and orders specific services for the parents and child. The permanent goal is established: reunification, adoption, guardianship, or another planned living arrangement. The GAL advocates for the outcome that best serves the child's long-term interests.

5 — Review Hearings (every 6 months)
Ala. Code § 12-15-315 requires periodic review hearings at least every 6 months. The court evaluates case plan progress, service delivery, and the child's current circumstances. The GAL files an updated report.

6 — Permanency Hearing (within 12 months of removal)
Required within 12 months of the removal order under ASFA and Ala. Code § 12-15-317. The court determines the permanent plan. If reunification is not achievable within a reasonable time, the court directs DHR toward adoption, guardianship, or APPLA.

7 — Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)
When reunification is not in the child's best interests and statutory grounds exist (Ala. Code § 26-18-7), DHR files a TPR petition. ASFA requires filing TPR after 15 of 22 months in care absent an exception. The GAL actively participates and advocates for the outcome that best serves the child.

■ Montgomery County Practice Note

Montgomery County Juvenile Court typically expects GAL reports submitted at least 3 business days before the scheduled hearing. Check with your CASA supervisor for the current filing deadline and any court-required formatting.

Part V — Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

■ ICWA Alert — Ask About Tribal Heritage in Every Case

The Poarch Band of Creek Indians (PBCI) is the only federally recognized tribe headquartered in Alabama, located in Atmore (Escambia County). However, members of Cherokee Nation, Choctaw Nation, and other federally recognized tribes also reside throughout Alabama, including in Montgomery County. ICWA applies whenever a child is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe — regardless of where the child lives. Always ask about tribal heritage at the very start of every case.

5.1 Key ICWA Requirements

ICWA Standards (25 U.S.C. § 1901)

- Notice: Tribe and BIA must receive certified-mail notice of any ICWA-covered proceeding.
- Active Efforts: Higher standard than "reasonable efforts" — required to prevent removal and achieve reunification.
- Placement Preferences: (1) extended family; (2) other tribal members; (3) other Indian families — before non-Indian placement.
- Qualified Expert Witness: Required before foster care placement over a parent's objection.
- Tribal Intervention: The tribe may intervene at any time and may petition to transfer to tribal court.
- TPR Standard: Proof beyond a reasonable doubt (vs. clear and convincing evidence in non-ICWA cases).

5.2 Poarch Band of Creek Indians

Poarch Band of Creek Indians — Tribal Social Services (ICWA)

The only federally recognized tribe in Alabama. Headquarters in Atmore, AL. Contact for ICWA notice, tribal eligibility inquiries, and placement referrals for PBCI members in Montgomery County proceedings.

■ (251) 368-9136
■ poarchcreekindians.org

5.3 BIA Eastern Regional Office

BIA Eastern Regional Office

Bureau of Indian Affairs Eastern Region, Nashville, TN. Handles ICWA notice compliance and tribal affiliation inquiries for Alabama cases when the specific tribe is unclear.

■ (615) 564-6500
■ bia.gov/regional-offices/eastern

Part VI — Local & Statewide Resources

6.1 Child Welfare & Child Advocacy

DHR — Montgomery County Department of Human Resources
Primary child welfare agency in Montgomery County. CPS intake, dependency investigations, foster care placements, and case management.
- (334) 293-6900
- dhr.alabama.gov

CASA of Montgomery County
County-level CASA program. Recruits, trains, screens, and supervises GAL volunteers. Your CASA supervisor is your primary point of contact for case guidance and support.
- (334) 954-2272
- casamontgomery.org

The Lighthouse — Child Advocacy Center of Montgomery
Child advocacy center serving Montgomery County. Forensic interviews, medical examinations, and multidisciplinary team (MDT) response for child abuse cases.
- (334) 213-1900
- lighthousecac.org

Children's of Alabama — Montgomery Clinic
Pediatric health services and developmental evaluations for children in Montgomery County. Telehealth and specialty referrals available for foster children needing specialized care.
- (334) 286-3330
- childrensal.org

6.2 Domestic Violence

Family Sunshine Center
Emergency shelter, legal advocacy, counseling, and support services for domestic violence survivors and their children in Montgomery County.
- (334) 263-0218 (24hr crisis line)
- familysunshinecenter.org

Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ACADV)
Statewide DV coalition. Hotline, shelter referrals, and resource coordination throughout Alabama.
- 1-800-650-6522 (24hr)
- acadv.org

6.3 Mental Health

Cahaba Center for Mental Health

Community mental health center serving Montgomery County. Outpatient therapy, psychiatric services, crisis stabilization, and substance use treatment for adults and children.

- (334) 279-7830
- cahabacenter.com

Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority (MAMHA)

Public mental health authority for Montgomery County. Behavioral health services, crisis intervention, and case management for DHR-referred families.

- (334) 279-7830
- mamha.org

SAFY — Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth

Therapeutic foster care, independent living services, and in-home family support for youth with significant behavioral health needs.

- (334) 272-3636
- safy.org

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

24/7 mental health crisis line. Call or text 988 from anywhere in Alabama.

- 988
- 988lifeline.org

6.4 Substance Abuse

Bradford Health Services — Montgomery

Residential and outpatient substance use disorder treatment. Serves adults including parents involved in DHR dependency proceedings.

- (334) 272-3490
- bradfordhealth.com

SAMHSA National Helpline

Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral for substance use disorders.

- 1-800-662-4357
- findtreatment.samhsa.gov

6.5 Housing & Basic Needs

Volunteers of America — Southeast (Montgomery)
Emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive services for homeless individuals and families in Montgomery County.
- (334) 263-5927
- voase.org

Alabama 2-1-1
Primary statewide resource referral for health and human services. Available 24/7 by phone and online. Start here when you need to find services.
- 2-1-1
- 211connects.org

6.6 Education

Montgomery County Public Schools — Foster Care Liaison
Under ESSA, every school district designates a foster care point of contact (FCPOC). Contact MCPS for immediate enrollment, school of origin transportation, and credit transfer for children in foster care.
- (334) 269-3700
- mps.k12.al.us

Alabama Fostering Success Program
Education support for current and former foster youth at Alabama public colleges and universities. Includes tuition assistance, priority enrollment, and campus support services.
- accs.edu/foster-care

6.7 Legal Aid

Legal Services Alabama
Free civil legal services for low-income Alabamians. Covers housing, public benefits, domestic violence, and family law matters in Montgomery County and statewide.
- (334) 264-1471
- legalservicesalabama.org

6.8 National & Federal Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway
Federal clearinghouse on foster care, adoption, and child welfare law.
- childwelfare.gov

NCASAGAL — National CASA/GAL Association

Training resources, advocacy tools, and best practices for volunteers.

■ casaforchildren.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

Evidence-based tools and resources on childhood trauma for child welfare professionals and foster/adoptive caregivers.

■ nctsn.org

Part VII — Working with Children

7.1 Trauma-Informed Principles

Children in Alabama's dependency proceedings have typically experienced significant trauma. A trauma-informed approach will help you build trust and advocate more effectively.

- **Safety First:** Ensure the child feels physically and emotionally safe before asking sensitive questions.
- **Build Rapport First:** Start visits with non-case topics. Children share more with trusted adults.
- **Age-Appropriate Language:** Speak at the child's developmental level. Trauma often affects development.
- **Open-Ended Questions:** "Tell me about your day" produces more reliable information than yes/no questions.
- **Normalize Feelings:** Validate feelings without taking sides in the family conflict.
- **Keep Promises:** Only commit to what you can deliver. Broken promises reinforce existing attachment wounds.

7.2 Monthly Visit Requirement

■ Monthly Contact Requirement

Alabama CASA policy requires GAL volunteers to visit the assigned child at least once per month. Visits must be in person, in the placement setting, and include private time with the child. Document every visit in your contact log.

Annex A — GAL Court Report Template

> **Note**
> This is a general guide. Your CASA supervisor may have a specific format required by Montgomery County Juvenile Court. Always use the court-approved format if one is provided, and submit at least 3 business days before the hearing.

Date: _____

Child(ren): _____ | Case No.: _____

Hearing Type: _____

GAL Name: _____ | Supervisor: _____

I. GAL RECOMMENDATION

Lead with your specific recommendation. Example: "The GAL recommends continuation of the reunification goal and orders DHR to provide in-home parenting support."

_____

II. CONTACTS SINCE LAST HEARING

Dates and locations of child visits; contacts with DHR, parents, foster parents, school, medical providers, and other relevant parties.

_____

III. CHILD'S CURRENT STATUS

Placement stability; physical health; emotional well-being; school performance; sibling contact; parent-child visitation.

_____

IV. CASE PLAN COMPLIANCE

DHR service delivery (ordered vs. provided); parent engagement; barriers.

_____

V. UNMET NEEDS / CONCERNS

List unaddressed needs. Request specific court action if needed.

_____

VI. ICWA STATUS (if applicable)

Tribal affiliations; ICWA notice sent; tribal intervention status; placement preference compliance.

_____

_____ _____

GAL Signature Date

Annex B — Contact Log Template

Maintain a running contact log for every interaction related to your case. This is the foundation of your court report.

Date	Contact Type	Person / Agency	Summary / Action Items