

ARKANSAS

GAL Volunteer Handbook

Pulaski County · Little Rock · 2026 Edition

Pulaski County Circuit Court — Family Division (Juvenile)
Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) | ACA Title 9

PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is a practical reference for Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers serving Pulaski County families in dependency-neglect proceedings. It covers the Arkansas Juvenile Code (ACA Title 9), the court process, GAL duties, ICWA considerations, and local/statewide resources for Little Rock and Pulaski County.

Part I — The Arkansas GAL Program

1.1 What Is the Arkansas GAL Program?

The Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program in Arkansas trains and supervises community volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the state's court system. In Arkansas, child protection cases are called **dependency-neglect proceedings**, governed by the **Arkansas Juvenile Code (ACA Title 9, Chapter 27)**.

The primary child welfare agency in Arkansas is the **Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS)**, a division of the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS). When DCFS files a dependency-neglect petition and a child is removed from the home, the court appoints a GAL volunteer to represent the child's best interests independently of all other parties — DCFS, the parents, and the attorneys.

In Pulaski County, dependency-neglect cases are heard in the **Pulaski County Circuit Court, Family Division**, located in Little Rock — the state capital and the most populous county in Arkansas. Pulaski County handles one of the highest volumes of dependency-neglect cases in the state.

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

The Arkansas CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) / GAL program is administered through the **Arkansas CASA Association**, which provides training standards, technical assistance, and coordination for county programs across the state. Pulaski County CASA operates under the oversight of the Family Division of Circuit Court and partners with DCFS case managers, the Office of Chief Counsel (OCC) representing DCFS, parents' attorneys, and children's attorneys.

Part II — Legal Foundation

2.1 Governing Statutes — Arkansas Juvenile Code

Arkansas Code Annotated — Title 9 (Family Law), Chapter 27 (Juvenile Code)

- ACA § 9-27-102 — Legislative intent; best interests of the child
- ACA § 9-27-103 — Definitions: abuse, neglect, dependency-neglect
- ACA § 9-27-306 — Petition for dependency-neglect; DCFS obligations
- ACA § 9-27-310 — Probable cause/shelter hearing (within 72 hours)
- ACA § 9-27-316 — Appointment of guardian ad litem; duties; access to records
- ACA § 9-27-325 — Dispositional alternatives
- ACA § 9-27-327 — Adjudication hearing (within 30 days of shelter hearing)
- ACA § 9-27-337 — Review hearings (every 6 months)
- ACA § 9-27-338 — Permanency planning hearing (within 12 months of removal)
- ACA § 9-27-341 — Termination of parental rights (TPR)
- ACA § 12-18-101 et seq. — Child Maltreatment Act (mandatory reporting)

2.2 Federal Law

Federal Law

- CAPTA (42 U.S.C. § 5101) — Requires GAL appointment in all abuse/neglect cases as condition of federal funding
- 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 — applies when child is a member or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe
- FFPSA (P.L. 115-123) — Family First Prevention Services Act; limits use of congregate care placements
- McKinney-Vento Act — Education rights for homeless children and youth, including those in foster care
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) — School stability requirements for children in foster care

2.3 Key Definition — Dependency-Neglect

Under ACA § 9-27-103, a "dependent-neglected juvenile" is a juvenile who is at substantial risk of serious harm due to: (1) abuse, meaning any non-accidental physical injury, sexual abuse, or emotional maltreatment inflicted by a parent, guardian, or custodian; (2) neglect, meaning failure to provide necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care; (3) being without necessary food, clothing, shelter, or medical care; or (4) who is truant, runaway, beyond parental control, or whose parent/guardian is unable or unwilling to provide care. Arkansas uses a single petition type — **dependency-neglect** — for all child protection matters.

Part III — Your Role & Responsibilities

3.1 Statutory Duties (ACA § 9-27-316)

The Arkansas Juvenile Code mandates that a GAL be appointed in every dependency-neglect case. Your statutory duties include:

- **Investigate:** Conduct an independent investigation into all facts and circumstances relevant to the child's best interests.
- **Access Records:** You are entitled to access all records relating to the child, including medical, educational, DCFS, mental health, and law enforcement records without parental consent (ACA § 9-27-316(c)).
- **Meet with the Child:** You must visit the child in the placement setting and in private (without the foster parent or caseworker 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 DCFS compliance with the case plan, court orders, and service delivery to the family.
- **Advocate for Needs:** Identify and advocate for unmet educational, medical, mental health, and developmental needs.
- **Serve Until Released:** Continue service until the court formally releases you at case closure.

3.2 Best Interests Standard

In Arkansas, the GAL advocates for the child's *best interests* — not necessarily the child's expressed wishes, though the expressed wishes of older children carry significant weight and must be reported to the court. The Arkansas Supreme Court has held that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in every dependency-neglect proceeding.

3.3 Ethical Obligations

- All case information is strictly confidential. Do not discuss case details with family, friends, or on social media.
- Your obligation runs to the child's best interests alone — not to DCFS, not to the parents, not to the foster parents.
- Do not provide legal advice to any party. Refer legal questions to the appropriate attorney.
- Disclose conflicts of interest immediately to your CASA supervisor.
- Maintain professional boundaries. Do not give money, gifts, or personal contact information to families or children.
- Do not make promises to the child about outcomes (return home, adoption, etc.) unless you are certain they will occur.

Part IV — The Dependency-Neglect Court Process

4.1 Arkansas Dependency-Neglect Timeline

Arkansas dependency-neglect proceedings follow a structured statutory timeline. The process typically begins with a DCFS investigation and, if a child is removed, moves through a series of mandatory court hearings. As GAL, you attend and participate in each hearing.

1

Emergency Removal & DCFS Investigation

DCFS investigates a report under the Child Maltreatment Act (ACA § 12-18-101). If a child is in imminent danger, DCFS may remove without prior court order. A petition for dependency-neglect must be filed within 5 days of removal.

2

Probable Cause / Shelter Hearing (within 72 hours)

Held within 72 hours of removal (ACA § 9-27-310). The court determines whether probable cause exists to believe the child is dependent-neglected and whether return home is safe. Placement and immediate services are ordered. The GAL is typically appointed at or shortly after this hearing.

3

Adjudication Hearing (within 30 days of shelter hearing)

The court determines whether the child is dependent-neglected as defined by the Juvenile Code (ACA § 9-27-327). Parents may admit or contest. Most cases resolve by consent. If contested, evidence is heard. The GAL submits a report and recommendation.

4

Disposition Hearing (at or within 30 days of adjudication)

The court approves the DCFS case plan and orders specific services. The permanent goal is established (reunification, adoption, guardianship, or APPLA). The GAL advocates for the case plan that best serves the child's long-term interests.

5

Review Hearings (every 6 months)

ACA § 9-27-337 requires review hearings at least every 6 months throughout the life of the case. The court evaluates case plan progress, service delivery, and the child's current circumstances. The GAL files an updated report before each review hearing.

6

Permanency Planning Hearing (within 12 months of removal)

Required within 12 months of the original removal order (ACA § 9-27-338 and ASFA). The court determines the permanent plan. If reunification is not expected within a reasonable time, the court orders DCFS to pursue an alternative permanent placement — typically adoption or guardianship.

7

Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) — ACA § 9-27-341

If the court determines that continuation of parental rights is not in the child's best interests and statutory grounds exist (abandonment, failure to remedy conditions of removal, aggravated circumstances, etc.), parental rights may be terminated. ASFA requires that DCFS file a TPR petition if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months, absent an exception. The GAL actively participates and advocates for the outcome that best serves the child.

4.2 The GAL's Role at Each Hearing

Before every hearing, prepare and submit a written report to the court. Your report should address: (1) contacts with the child, DCFS, parents, and collateral sources since the last hearing; (2) the child's current placement, health, education, and emotional well-being; (3) DCFS compliance with the case plan and court orders; (4) any unmet needs; and (5) a clear, specific recommendation for court action. Lead your report with your recommendation — Arkansas judges appreciate directness and brevity.

■ Pulaski County Practice Note

Pulaski County Family Division 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

Arkansas is home to a significant population of members of federally recognized tribes — including the Cherokee Nation, Choctaw Nation, Quapaw Nation, Osage Nation, and others. ICWA applies whenever a case involves an "Indian child" — defined as an unmarried person under 18 who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe. The child does not need to live on a reservation. Always ask about tribal heritage at the very start of every case.

5.1 Tribes Relevant to Pulaski County

The Quapaw (Ugakhpa, "downstream people") originally inhabited the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers — the heart of what is now Pulaski County. Today, Quapaw Nation is headquartered in Oklahoma. Other tribes with significant membership in Pulaski County and the Little Rock metro area include:

- Cherokee Nation (Tahlequah, OK) — largest U.S. tribe by enrollment; large diaspora population in Arkansas
- United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (Tahlequah, OK)
- Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma — significant member population throughout Arkansas
- Quapaw Nation (Quapaw, OK) — original inhabitants of the Arkansas River valley
- Osage Nation (Pawhuska, OK)
- Chickasaw Nation (Ada, OK)
- Muscogee (Creek) Nation (Okmulgee, OK)
- Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma
- Miami Tribe of Oklahoma

5.2 ICWA Requirements

Key ICWA Requirements

- Notice: The tribe and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) must receive formal written notice (certified mail, return receipt) of any custody/foster care/TPR proceeding involving an Indian child.
- Active Efforts: ICWA requires "active efforts" — a higher standard than "reasonable efforts" — to prevent removal of an Indian child and to reunify the family.
- Placement Preferences: (1) extended family member; (2) other members of the child's tribe; (3) other Indian families — before non-Indian placement is considered.
- Qualified Expert Witness: Required before a court may order foster care placement over a parent's objection in an ICWA case.
- Tribal Intervention: The tribe has the right to intervene in the proceeding at any time and to transfer the case to tribal court.
- Heightened TPR Standard: TPR in ICWA cases requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt (vs. clear and convincing evidence) of serious harm to the child.

5.3 GAL Obligations Under ICWA

- Ask parents, grandparents, and extended family about tribal affiliation and enrollment at your very first contact.
- If there is any indication of Indian heritage, treat the case as ICWA-covered until definitively determined otherwise.
- Confirm that DCFS has sent proper ICWA notice to all potentially applicable tribes and to the BIA.
- Advocate for ICWA-compliant placement preferences unless departure from them is genuinely in the child's best interests.
- If you believe active efforts are not being made, document this and raise it in your report and at the next hearing.

5.4 BIA Eastern Regional Office

BIA Eastern Regional Office

Handles ICWA notice compliance, tribal eligibility inquiries, and coordination for cases in Arkansas. Contact when the tribal affiliation is uncertain or when initial ICWA notice to the BIA is required.

■ (615) 564-6500

■ bia.gov/regional-offices/eastern — Nashville, TN

Part VI — Local & Statewide Resources

6.1 Child Welfare & Child Advocacy

DCFS — Pulaski County Area Office

Division of Children and Family Services, Pulaski County. Primary child welfare agency for dependency-neglect investigations, foster care placements, and case management.

- (501) 682-8772
- humanservices.arkansas.gov/divisions/children-family-services

Arkansas CASA Association

Statewide CASA/GAL program coordinator. Training resources, standards, and program support for Arkansas CASA/GAL volunteers.

- (501) 376-2272
- arkansascasa.org

Harmony Health Clinic — Child Advocacy Center

Child advocacy center serving Pulaski County. Forensic interviews, medical examinations, and multidisciplinary team (MDT) response for child abuse cases.

- (501) 280-0027
- harmonyhealthclinic.org

Arkansas Children's Hospital — Little Rock

Primary pediatric hospital for Pulaski County. SAFE (Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence) nurse program, child life specialists, developmental and behavioral health services. The go-to resource for children needing specialized medical care.

- (501) 364-1100
- archildrens.org

6.2 Domestic Violence

Arkansas Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ACADV)

Statewide DV coalition. 24/7 crisis hotline, shelter referrals, and direct service coordination. Start here when a family needs DV resources statewide.

- 1-800-332-4443 (24hr hotline)
- domesticpeace.com

Safe Places — Pulaski County DV Services

Emergency shelter, legal advocacy, and support services for domestic violence survivors and their children in the Little Rock metro area.

- (501) 758-9860
- safeplacesarkansas.org

6.3 Mental Health

UAMS — Behavioral Health Institute (Little Rock)

University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. Comprehensive behavioral health services including child and adolescent psychiatry, trauma treatment, and crisis stabilization.

■ (501) 686-8000

■ uams.edu/behavioral-health

Youth Home, Inc.

Residential behavioral health treatment and therapeutic foster care for children and adolescents with significant mental health needs. Serves DCS-involved youth in Pulaski County and beyond.

■ (501) 821-5500

■ youthhomeinc.org

LifeQuest of Arkansas

Outpatient behavioral health and substance use treatment for adults and adolescents. Provides DCS-referred services in the Little Rock metro area.

■ (501) 372-5483

■ lifequestofarkansas.com

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

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

■ 988

■ 988lifeline.org

6.4 Substance Abuse

UAMS Psychiatric Research Institute — Addiction Treatment

Evidence-based residential and outpatient substance use disorder treatment. Serves adults, including parents involved in dependency-neglect proceedings.

■ (501) 526-8100

■ uams.edu/pri

SAMHSA National Helpline

Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information for substance use disorders. Available in English and Spanish.

■ 1-800-662-4357

■ findtreatment.samhsa.gov

6.5 Housing & Basic Needs

Our House — Little Rock

Emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive services for homeless individuals and families in Pulaski County. Offers education, job training, childcare, and family stabilization programs.

- (501) 374-7383
- ourhouseshelter.org

Central Arkansas Development Council (CADC)

Community action agency providing emergency utility assistance, housing support, Head Start, and senior services to low-income Pulaski County residents.

- (501) 372-3247
- cadc.net

Arkansas 2-1-1

Primary statewide resource referral line for health and human services. Available 24/7 by phone and online. Start here when you need to find services and don't know where to look.

- 2-1-1
- 211.arkansas.gov

6.6 Education

Little Rock School District — Foster Care Liaison

Every school district must designate a foster care point of contact (FCPOC) under ESSA. Contact the LRSD liaison for immediate enrollment, school of origin transportation, and credit transfer support for foster children.

- (501) 447-1000
- lrzd.org

Arkansas Department of Education — Foster Youth Education

State-level ESSA foster youth coordinator. Guidance on school stability, McKinney-Vento compliance, and educational rights for students in care.

- (501) 682-4475
- dese.ade.arkansas.gov

Arkansas Division of Higher Education — Foster Care Scholarship

Arkansas foster youth who were in DCFS custody at age 16 or older and who enroll in a state-supported institution of higher education may be eligible for tuition waiver assistance. Contact DHS/DCFS Independent Living program for eligibility and documentation.

- (501) 371-2000
- scholarships.adhe.edu

6.7 Legal Aid

Legal Aid of Arkansas

Free civil legal services for low-income Arkansans, including housing, public benefits, domestic violence, and family law matters.

■ (870) 972-9224

■ arlegalaid.org

Center for Arkansas Legal Services

Free legal assistance for low-income residents in central Arkansas. Covers family law, housing, consumer, and civil matters.

■ (501) 376-3423

■ arlegalservices.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)

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

■ nctsn.org

Part VII — Working with Children

7.1 Trauma-Informed Principles

Children in dependency-neglect proceedings have typically experienced significant trauma — abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental substance use, or the trauma of removal itself. Approaching every interaction with a trauma-informed lens will help you build trust and advocate more effectively.

- **Safety First:** Ensure the child feels physically and emotionally safe before asking sensitive questions. Choose neutral, familiar settings when possible.
- **Build Rapport First:** Begin visits with non-case topics. Children share more with trusted adults.
- **Use Age-Appropriate Language:** Speak at the child's developmental level — trauma often affects development.
- **Avoid Leading Questions:** Use open-ended questions. "Tell me about your day" produces more reliable information than yes/no questions.
- **Normalize Feelings:** Children often feel confusion, shame, or conflicted loyalty. Validate feelings without taking sides.
- **Keep Promises:** Only commit to what you can deliver. Broken promises reinforce existing attachment wounds.

7.2 Minimum Contact Requirements

■ Monthly Visit Requirement

Arkansas CASA policy requires GAL volunteers to visit the assigned child at least once per month. Visits must be in person, in the child's placement setting, and include private time with the child (without the foster parent, DCFS worker, or other adults present). Document every visit in your contact log.

7.3 Developmental Considerations

- **Infants & Toddlers (0–3):** Focus on placement quality and caregiver attunement. Observe caregiver-child interactions. Advocate for early intervention evaluations.
- **Preschool (3–5):** Use simple, concrete language. Read emotional state through behavior and play rather than direct questioning.
- **School Age (6–12):** Children can usually articulate preferences. Report their views to the court while advocating for best interests.
- **Adolescents (13–17):** Respect autonomy while maintaining boundaries. Consistency and persistence matter most with teens who have been let down by adults.

Annex A — GAL Court Report Template

Note

This is a general template. Your CASA supervisor may have a specific format required by the Pulaski County Family Division. 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

State your specific recommendation first. Example: "The GAL respectfully recommends that the Court continue the current goal of reunification and order DCFS to provide in-home parenting support services within 30 days."

II. CONTACTS SINCE LAST HEARING

Date(s) and location(s) of visits with the child; contacts with DCFS case manager, parents, foster parents, school, medical providers, and other relevant parties.

III. CHILD'S CURRENT STATUS

Placement stability and adjustment; physical health; behavioral and emotional well-being; school attendance, performance, and behavior; sibling contact; parent-child visitation.

IV. CASE PLAN COMPLIANCE

DCFS service delivery (ordered vs. provided); parent engagement in services (attendance, participation, progress); barriers to compliance; recommended solutions.

V. UNMET NEEDS / CONCERNS

List any needs not being addressed. Request specific court action if needed.

VI. ICWA STATUS (if applicable)

Tribal affiliation(s) identified/pending; ICWA notice sent (date, tribe, BIA); tribal intervention status; ICWA placement preference compliance.

GAL Signature Date _____

Annex B — Contact Log Template

Maintain a running contact log for every interaction related to your case. This log is the foundation of your court report and protects you if your activities are ever questioned.

Date	Contact Type	Person / Agency	Summary / Action Items