ian Ad Litem Support Network

1. Program Overview

Georgia's Guardian Ad Litem system operates through a network of county-based CASA programs coordinated under the **Georgia CASA Association**, alongside court-appointed attorney advocates in circuits where CASA programs are not yet established. The primary state child welfare agency is the **Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS)**, housed within the Department of Human Services (DHS). In 2013, Georgia enacted a comprehensive overhaul of its juvenile code — **OCGA Title 15-11** — restructuring dependency proceedings and clarifying the GAL role.

Key identifiers: OCGA § 15-11-107 (GAL appointment) | Court of jurisdiction: Juvenile Court / Superior Court Juvenile Division | 30+ county CASA affiliates statewide | Georgia DFCS hotline: 1-855-422-4453.

2. Legal Foundation

OCGA § 15-11-107

Guardian Ad Litem — Appointment & Duties

Authorizes the court to appoint a GAL in any deprivation proceeding. The GAL shall advocate for the best interests of the child, conduct an independent investigation, and make recommendations to the court. The GAL is a full party with standing to participate in all hearings and to appeal court orders.

OCGA § 15-11-200 et seq.

Reasonable Efforts Standard

Requires DFCS to make reasonable efforts to prevent removal and toward reunification after removal. Courts must make reasonable efforts findings at each hearing. GALs independently assess and report on whether reasonable efforts have been made.

OCGA § 15-11-212

Permanency Planning

Requires a permanency plan for every child in DFCS custody identifying a specific permanent placement goal. GALs review and advocate regarding the permanency plan at each review hearing.

OCGA § 49-5-40 et seq.

Child Records Confidentiality / GAL Access

GALs have a statutory right to access all records pertaining to the child including medical, educational, psychological, and DFCS case records. This access is essential to fulfilling the investigation requirement.

3. Your Role as GAL

A Georgia GAL serves as the court's eyes and ears — conducting an independent investigation and advocating for the child's best interests at every stage. Unlike the child's attorney (if appointed), the GAL advocates for what the GAL independently determines to be in the child's best interests, not necessarily what the child directs.

Investigate: Review DFCS records, school records, medical files. Interview the child, foster parents, biological parents, teachers, therapists, and DFCS caseworkers. Visit the current placement.

Advocate: Present the child's best interests in court through reports and oral testimony. File motions when necessary. Challenge DFCS if reunification efforts are inadequate or unsafe.

Connect: Identify and connect the child to services — tutoring, therapy, mentoring, extracurricular activities, and community supports.

Report: Prepare written court reports before each hearing. File with the court and serve on all parties. Attend every hearing and be prepared to testify.

> **Georgia-Specific: GAL Standing as a Party.** Under OCGA § 15-11-107, Georgia GALs are full parties to the deprivation proceeding — not merely advisors. Your written filings, motions, and recommendations carry formal legal weight. You may appeal a court order you believe is contrary to the child's best interests. This broader standing comes with a correspondingly greater responsibility.

4. Dependency Court Process

1	**Removal & Emergency Placement** DFCS removes the child based on an emergency finding. DFCS must file a deprivation petition within 72 hours of removal or release the child.
2	**Preliminary Protective Hearing (PPH)** Must be held within 72 hours of removal. Court determines probable cause and whether the child may safely return home pending adjudication.
3	**GAL Appointment** Court appoints a GAL at or shortly after the PPH under OCGA § 15-11-107. Make initial contact with the child as soon as possible after appointment.
4	**Adjudicatory Hearing** Court determines whether the child is legally "deprived." Held within 10 days (if in custody) or within 60 days. The GAL presents evidence and recommendations.
5	**Dispositional Hearing** If deprivation is found, the court enters a Dispositional Order establishing the case plan, placement, and required services.
6	**Review Hearings (Every 6 Months)** The GAL files a written report before each review hearing, assessing DFCS's reasonable efforts, child's well-being, and progress toward permanency.

7 **Permanency Hearing (Within 12 Months)**
Within 12 months of removal, court must hold a permanency hearing. GAL advocates for the permanency plan that best serves the child's long-term interests.

8 **TPR & Post-Permanency**
If reunification is ruled out, DFCS may petition for TPR. GAL continues to advocate during TPR proceedings and through adoption finalization.

5. ICWA & Tribal Inquiry

No Reservations in Georgia — But ICWA Still Applies. Georgia has no federally recognized tribal nations with reservations within the state. However, significant populations of tribal members from the Cherokee Nation, EBCI, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and other nations reside throughout Georgia. ICWA inquiry is mandatory at the outset of every dependency case without exception.

- ✓ Ask both biological parents and any known extended family members whether the child may have Native American or Alaska Native ancestry
- ✓ Document the inquiry in your case notes — the inquiry itself must appear on the record at the PPH
- ✓ If tribal affiliation is indicated, notify the DFCS caseworker immediately so the tribe can be contacted
- ✓ The tribe — not the family, DFCS, or the GAL — determines ICWA eligibility and tribal membership
- ✓ If ICWA applies, placement preferences shift to Indian family, extended family, tribal member homes, or tribal foster homes (25 U.S.C. § 1915)
- ✓ "Active efforts" (not merely "reasonable efforts") must be made to prevent the breakup of the Indian family

Key tribal contacts: Cherokee Nation ICWA: (918) 453-5000 | EBCI ICWA: (828) 359-6450 | Muscogee (Creek) Nation ICWA: (918) 732-7650 | BIA Southeast Regional: (615) 564-6800

6. Education Rights of Foster Youth

OCGA § 20-2-133 / ESSA Foster Care Provisions

School Stability

Georgia requires every school district and DFCS to keep foster children in their school of origin when in their best interests. Transportation must be provided even across district lines. Request a formal School of Origin determination at the time of every placement change.

- ✓ Obtain school records and most recent report card at every case review
- ✓ Ask whether the child has an active IEP or 504 Plan — IDEA rights follow the child through placement changes
- ✓ Contact the district Foster Care Point of Contact (FCPOC) for enrollment issues

- ✓ GALs may consent to educational decisions for children in DFCS custody when no parent or caregiver has educational rights
- ✓ Extended Foster Care (EFC) is available for ages 18–21 under OCGA § 49-5-281 — advocate early for enrollment
- ✓ Report school absences exceeding 10 cumulative days in your court report

7. Mental Health Resources

Children in foster care experience trauma-related disorders at dramatically elevated rates. GALs play a critical role in ensuring mental health needs are identified, evaluated, and addressed through appropriate services — not just referrals that go unfulfilled.

Georgia DBHDD: dbhdd.georgia.gov | 1-800-715-4225. Manages Georgia's public mental health system.

Community Service Boards (CSBs): 25 regional CSBs statewide. Primary public mental health providers for children in foster care.

CHOA Behavioral Health: Outpatient and intensive outpatient psychiatric services. Strong trauma-informed model. choa.org/behavioral-health

Georgia Crisis & Access Line (GCAL): 1-800-715-4225 (24/7). Mobile crisis teams available for youth in crisis.

988 Lifeline: Dial or text 988. Available 24/7. Age-appropriate for adolescents.

8. Local Resources — Atlanta Metro

CASA of the Atlanta Judicial Circuit: (404) 335-6898 | casaatlanta.org. Serves Fulton County Juvenile Court.

Fulton County DFCS: (404) 206-5700. Main Atlanta DFCS office. One of Georgia's highest-volume offices.

DeKalb County DFCS: (404) 929-7200. Dense urban child welfare district adjacent to Fulton.

Families First Georgia: (404) 853-2800 | familiesfirst.org. Georgia's largest child welfare nonprofit.

Children's Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA): (404) 785-KIDS. Pediatric hospital — medical evals, mental health, abuse assessments.

Atlanta Legal Aid Society: (404) 524-5811 | atlantalegalaid.org. Civil legal services for Atlanta-area residents.

Covenant House Georgia: (404) 589-2274 | covenanthousega.org. Emergency shelter for homeless youth ages 18–24.

Georgia Legal Services Program: (404) 206-5175 | glsp.org. Free civil legal aid statewide.

9. Georgia Statewide Resources

Georgia CASA Association: georgiacasa.org | (404) 525-2272. Coordinates 30+ county CASA programs.

Georgia DFCS Hotline: 1-855-GACHILD (1-855-422-4453). Central intake for child abuse and neglect reports.

Georgia DFCS County Directory: dfcs.georgia.gov. Full county DFCS office directory and case management resources.

Georgia Court Improvement Program (CIP): Supreme Court of Georgia. Training and resources for court personnel in child welfare cases.

Foster Care Alumni of America — GA: fostercarealumni.org. Peer mentoring and advocacy for youth aging out.

georgialegalaid.org: Self-help legal information — guides to juvenile court procedures and child welfare rights.

10. Federal Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway: childwelfare.gov. State statutes, GAL guides, research summaries.

National CASA / GAL Association: casaforchildren.org. Training, standards, and national advocacy.

NCTSN: nctsn.org. Evidence-based trauma resources for child welfare practitioners.

SAMHSA Helpline: 1-800-662-4357 (24/7). Treatment referral for substance use and mental health.

HHS Children's Bureau Region IV: acf.hhs.gov. Southeast regional office headquartered in Atlanta.

11. Trauma-Informed Practice

Every child in Georgia's dependency system has experienced trauma — whether from abuse, neglect, domestic violence, or the trauma of removal itself. Effective GALs apply trauma-informed principles in every interaction.

Safety First: Meet in familiar, safe locations. Never conduct meetings at DFCS offices if the child associates them with stressful events.

Consistency & Reliability: Children failed by adults are exquisitely sensitive to broken promises. If you say you will do something, do it.

Age-Appropriate Honesty: Do not overpromise outcomes. Explain what you can and cannot control. Trustworthy honesty is more valuable than false reassurance.

Voice & Agency: Even very young children have preferences that deserve to be heard. Reflect the child's views in your court report even when they don't control the recommendation.

Cultural Humility: Georgia's foster care population is disproportionately Black and Latino. Approach cultural differences with genuine curiosity, not assumptions.

Secondary Trauma: GAL volunteers risk vicarious traumatization. Attend debriefing sessions. Talk with your supervisor. Recognize signs: intrusive thoughts, emotional numbing, burnout.

12. Court Report Writing Guide

The court report is your primary tool as a Georgia GAL. A well-written report educates the judge on facts the court record may not otherwise reflect and translates your best-interest recommendation into a clear, credible advocacy position.

1. **Case Identification:** Child's name or initials, case number, court, hearing date, GAL name and contact, date of most recent in-person visit.
2. **Sources Reviewed:** List documents reviewed and people interviewed. Demonstrates thoroughness to the court.
3. **Current Placement & Well-Being:** Current placement, child's adjustment, physical health, emotional state, school performance, peer relationships.

4. **Services Status:** Each service in the case plan and whether it has been accessed. Flag services ordered but not provided.
5. **Parental Progress:** Objectively describe parent compliance and visitation. The court needs facts, not opinions.
6. **Child's Views:** Report what the child told you using the child's own words. Distinguish between what the child said and your interpretation.
7. **Best-Interest Recommendation:** State your recommendation clearly and specifically. "Continue current placement and order enrollment in trauma therapy within 30 days" is more actionable than vague language.
8. **Requested Court Orders:** List specific orders you are requesting. Georgia GALs as parties may formally request orders — provide draft proposed language cleared through your supervisor.

This handbook is a reference resource only and does not constitute legal advice. Laws, program structures, agency contacts, and resource availability change frequently. Always verify current information with your supervising GAL staff, attorney advocate, or the relevant agency before relying on it in any legal proceeding. GAL volunteers are officers of the court and should follow their program's official guidance at all times. © 2026 GAL National Database.