2026 Edition

Table of Contents

1. Program Overview
2. Legal Foundation
3. Your Role as GAL
4. The Multidisciplinary Team
5. The CINA Court Process
6. Hearing Types & GAL Responsibilities
7. ICWA & Tribal Inquiry in Maryland
8. Tribal Resources & Contacts
9. Education Rights of Foster Youth
10. Courtroom Practice
11. Local Resources — Baltimore City & County
12. Mental Health Resources
13. Housing & Basic Needs
14. Maryland Statewide Resources
15. Federal Resources
16. Working with Children — Trauma-Informed Practice
17. Court Report Writing Guide

1 · Program Overview

Maryland's Guardian Ad Litem system operates through CASA/Maryland, a statewide umbrella organization coordinating county-level CASA affiliates. The primary child welfare agency is the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS), Social Services Administration (SSA), operating through 24 local departments of social services (one per county and Baltimore City). Maryland's CINA proceedings are governed by Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article (CJP) § 3-801 et seq.

Child Welfare Agency	Maryland DHS — Social Services Administration (SSA)
GAL Umbrella Org	CASA/Maryland (county affiliates)
Primary Governing Code	MD Code, Courts & Jud. Proc. § 3-801 et seq.
Court of Jurisdiction	Circuit Court (Juvenile Division)
GAL Appointment Statute	MD Code, CJP § 3-813
CASA Affiliates in MD	10+ county programs statewide

2 · Legal Foundation

Maryland's dependency framework uses the term 'Child in Need of Assistance' (CINA). Proceedings are governed by the Courts and Judicial Proceedings Article (CJP), Title 3, Subtitle 8, and the Family Law Article (FL), Title 5.

MD Code, CJP § 3-813

Guardian Ad Litem — Appointment & Duties

Authorizes Circuit Court to appoint a GAL for a child in CINA proceedings. The GAL is an officer of the court advocating for the child's best interests with the right to access all records and participate in all hearings.

MD Code, CJP § 3-801

Definitions — Child in Need of Assistance

Defines a CINA as a child who has been abused, neglected, has a developmental disability, or mental disorder, and whose parents are unable or unwilling to provide proper care. This triggers Circuit Court jurisdiction.

MD Code, CJP § 3-819

CINA Adjudicatory & Disposition Hearing

Governs the combined or bifurcated adjudicatory and disposition hearing. The court determines whether the child is a CINA, then enters disposition establishing the case plan and placement.

MD Code, CJP § 3-823

Review Hearings & Permanency Planning

Requires review hearings every 6 months. Permanency planning hearings must occur within 11 months of the child entering out-of-home care.

MD Code, FL § 5-323

Termination of Parental Rights

Governs TPR proceedings. The court must find by clear and convincing evidence that TPR is in the child's best interests and that statutory grounds exist.

MD Code, FL § 5-701 et seq.

Mandatory Reporting

Establishes mandatory reporter obligations and investigation procedures for child abuse and neglect. GALs who learn of unreported abuse may have independent reporting obligations — consult your supervisor.

3 · Your Role as GAL

A Maryland GAL is an officer of the Circuit Court whose role is to independently investigate the child's circumstances and advocate for the child's best interests throughout the CINA proceeding. Maryland courts may appoint both a GAL (best interests advocate) and a child's attorney (who represents expressed wishes) — the roles are distinct.

- **Investigate** — Review DSS case records, school records, medical files, and prior court history. Interview the child, foster parents, biological parents, teachers, therapists, and DSS caseworkers. Visit the current placement. Document everything with statutory right of access under CJP § 3-813.
- **Advocate** — Present the child's best interests through written reports and oral presentations. Challenge DSS when services are not provided, placements are inappropriate, or reunification efforts are inadequate. File motions when necessary.
- **Connect** — Identify and connect the child to appropriate services. Coordinate with DSS, the foster caregiver, schools, and service providers to prevent gaps in care between hearings.
- **Report** — Prepare written court reports before each hearing. File with the court and serve all parties. Attend every hearing and present your findings and recommendations.

4 · The Multidisciplinary Team

Role	Responsibility
DSS Caseworker	Manages the child's case plan and placement. Advocates for the agency's plan — which the GAL independently evaluates.
DSS Attorney (AAG)	Represents Maryland DHS/DSS in court. Presents the agency's legal position — not the child's independent interests.
Parent's Attorney	Appointed counsel for biological parent(s). Advocates for reunification and parental rights, not the child's best interests.
Child's Attorney (if separate)	Represents the child's expressed wishes when separately appointed. Distinct from the GAL who independently determines best interests.
CASA Volunteer (GAL)	You — conducting an independent investigation and reporting the child's best interests to the Circuit Court.
CASA Supervisor	Reviews reports, provides training and support, coordinates with court on program matters. Your first call for questions.
Foster / Kinship Caregiver	Provides day-to-day care. Primary source of information on the child's daily functioning, medical care, and school performance.
Circuit Court Judge	Presides over all CINA hearings, issues all orders. Maryland Circuit Court judges handle full dockets and rely on GAL reports to fill factual gaps.

5 · The CINA Court Process in Maryland

Maryland's Child in Need of Assistance proceedings follow a structured sequence under CJP Title 3, Subtitle 8. The Circuit Court's Juvenile Division handles all CINA matters statewide.

1

Report & Emergency Removal

DSS receives a report of suspected abuse or neglect. If the child faces immediate danger, DSS may take emergency custody and remove the child. DSS must file a CINA petition within 5 days.

2

Shelter Care Hearing

Must be held within 24 hours (or next court day) of removal. Court determines whether continued removal is necessary. This is the earliest stage for GAL appointment.

3

GAL Appointment

Circuit Court appoints GAL under CJP § 3-813. County CASA program assigns volunteer. Promptly review CINA petition, obtain DSS records, and contact the child.

4

Adjudicatory Hearing

Court determines whether the child is a CINA. Must be held within 30 days (in shelter care) or 60 days otherwise. GAL presents written report and evidence.

5

Disposition Hearing

If CINA, court enters disposition order establishing case plan, placement, and required services. GAL advocates for plan addressing child's specific needs.

6

Review Hearings (Every 6 Months)

Court reviews case plan compliance and placement every 6 months under CJP § 3-823. GAL files written report before each review hearing.

7

Permanency Planning Hearing (Within 11 Months)

Within 11 months of out-of-home placement, court holds permanency hearing. GAL advocates for the permanency goal in the child's long-term interests.

8

TPR & Post-Permanency

If reunification is ruled out, DSS may petition for TPR under FL § 5-323. GAL continues advocacy through TPR and supports adoption finalization.

6 · Hearing Types & GAL Responsibilities

Hearing	Timing	GAL Focus
Shelter Care Hearing	Within 24 hrs of removal	Confirm appointment; assess immediate needs; identify safety concerns
Adjudicatory Hearing	30 days (shelter care) / 60 days	Submit report; present evidence on CINA adjudication
Disposition Hearing	Combined with or after adjudication	Recommend services, placement, and case plan elements
Review Hearing	Every 6 months	File report; assess reasonable efforts, well-being, placement
Permanency Planning Hearing	Within 11 months of removal	Advocate for permanency goal in child's long-term interests
TPR Hearing	Per DSS petition	Report on best interests; support or oppose TPR
Post-TPR Review	Every 6 months post-TPR	Monitor adoptive placement; advocate for timely finalization

7 · ICWA & Tribal Inquiry in Maryland

The Indian Child Welfare Act (25 U.S.C. §§ 1901–1963) applies to custody proceedings involving Indian children. Maryland has no federally recognized tribal reservations, but tribal members of many nations reside throughout the state — particularly in Baltimore metro and DC suburbs. ICWA inquiry is mandatory in every CINA case.

Note on State-Recognized Tribes: The Piscataway Conoy Tribe and Piscataway Indian Nation have Maryland state recognition but NOT federal recognition — ICWA does not apply to their members. However, the inquiry should still occur to identify any federal tribal enrollment that may exist separately.

Mandatory ICWA Inquiry Steps:

- ✓ Ask both biological parents and extended family about any Native American or Alaska Native ancestry
- ✓ Document the inquiry in case notes — must appear on the record at the shelter care hearing
- ✓ If any tribal affiliation is indicated, notify DSS immediately for formal tribal contact
- ✓ The tribe — not the family, DSS, or the GAL — determines ICWA eligibility
- ✓ If ICWA applies, placement preferences shift to Indian family/extended family/tribal homes under 25 U.S.C. § 1915
- ✓ Active efforts (not merely reasonable efforts) required to prevent breakup of the Indian family

8 · Tribal Resources & Contacts

Cherokee Nation ICWA Department	*Tahlequah, OK*	icwa@cherokee.org | (918) 453-5000. Largest tribe. Active ICWA unit monitoring out-of-state cases including Maryland.
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians ICWA	*Cherokee, NC*	(828) 359-6450. Members reside in mid-Atlantic. Tribal court jurisdiction may apply to EBCI member children.
Lumbee Tribe of NC — ICWA	*Pembroke, NC (federally recognized)*	(910) 521-7861 | lumbeetribe.com. Significant diaspora community in southern Maryland. Contact for Lumbee ancestry inquiries.
Muscogee (Creek) Nation ICWA	*Okmulgee, OK*	(918) 732-7650. Active ICWA program monitoring east coast cases. Contact when Creek ancestry is indicated.
BIA Eastern Regional Office	*Nashville, TN*	(615) 564-6800 | bia.gov/regional-offices/eastern. Provides ICWA guidance for mid-Atlantic states including Maryland.
NICWA	*National Technical Assistance*	www.nicwa.org | (503) 222-4044. ICWA training and technical assistance for complex cases.

9 · Education Rights of Foster Youth

Education stability is critical for Maryland GALs. Children in foster care change schools at high rates, face disproportionate disciplinary actions, and encounter barriers to special education services across placement changes.

MD Education Code § 7-101.1 / ESSA

School Stability

Every Maryland LEA and DSS must collaborate to keep children in foster care in their school of origin when in best interests. Transportation must be provided even across LEA boundaries.

McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. § 11431)

Homeless Education Rights

Some foster children may qualify for McKinney-Vento: immediate enrollment, records transfer, and transportation. Maryland DOE has McKinney-Vento coordinators in each LEA.

Key Education Advocacy Checklist:

- ✓ Obtain school records and most recent report card at every case review
- ✓ Determine whether the child has an active IEP or 504 Plan — IDEA rights follow the child
- ✓ Every Maryland LEA must have a Foster Care Point of Contact — use this for enrollment disputes
- ✓ Baltimore City Public Schools has a specific Foster Care Liaison program — use this contact for Baltimore cases
- ✓ Confirm whether you are authorized to consent to educational decisions in the court order
- ✓ Report school absences exceeding 10 days in your court report

Extended Foster Care: Maryland operates EFC for youth ages 18–21 under FL § 5-525. Youth remain eligible if enrolled in school, GED, post-secondary education, vocational training, or employed 80+ hours/month. Begin EFC planning discussions no later than age 16.

10 · Courtroom Practice

Maryland Circuit Court CINA proceedings are conducted formally. The judge, attorneys, and GAL are all officers of the court. Preparation and credibility are essential to effective advocacy.

Before the Hearing

- File report and serve all parties at least 5 business days before the hearing
- Review prior order and identify compliance issues, service gaps, placement concerns
- Communicate factual updates (not advocacy positions) with the DSS caseworker
- Prepare the child in age-appropriate terms for the upcoming hearing

During the Hearing

- Address the judge as 'Your Honor'; stand when addressing the court
- Present your report clearly and concisely — Circuit Court judges value organized presentations
- Be prepared to testify as a witness if called — your report may not speak for itself
- State any disagreement with a proposed order specifically on the record

After the Hearing

- Obtain a copy of the signed order — governs everything until the next hearing
- Review for tasks assigned to DSS, the parents, or the GAL
- Communicate the hearing outcome to the child in age-appropriate terms
- Update case notes and begin tracking compliance with the new order

If You Disagree With the Order

- Contact your CASA supervisor immediately
- Document your reasoning thoroughly and specifically before any appeal deadline
- Maryland Circuit Court appeals must be filed within 30 days — act promptly
- Your supervisor and the program's legal advisor will guide the appeal process

11 · Local Resources — Baltimore City & County

Baltimore City CASA	*Baltimore City, MD*	bcasamd.org | (410) 752-5880. CASA program serving Baltimore City Circuit Court CINA proceedings. Maryland's largest CASA affiliate.
Baltimore City DSS — CPS	*Baltimore City, MD*	(410) 361-2235. Child protective services and foster care. CPS hotline: (410) 361-2235 or 1-800-332-6347.
Kennedy Krieger Institute	*Baltimore, MD*	(443) 923-9200 | kennedykrieger.org. Developmental evaluations, neurology, and mental health services for foster care children.
Maryland Legal Aid — Baltimore	*Baltimore City / Statewide*	mdlab.org | (410) 539-5340. Free civil legal services for low-income Marylanders in CINA proceedings.
Johns Hopkins Children's Center	*Baltimore, MD*	(410) 955-5000 | hopkinsmedicine.org. Pediatric hospital with child abuse evaluation team and mental health services.
Dayspring Programs	*Baltimore / Howard County, MD*	(410) 531-3034 | dayspringprograms.org. Licensed therapeutic foster care and family services for DSS-involved children.
Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service	*Baltimore / Statewide*	mvlslaw.org | (410) 547-6537. Pro bono legal services for child welfare-involved families across Maryland.
House of Ruth Maryland	*Baltimore, MD (statewide)*	(410) 889-7884 (24-hr DV hotline) | hruth.org. Domestic violence crisis, shelter, legal services, and counseling.

12 · Mental Health Resources

Maryland Behavioral Health Administration (BHA)	*State Agency — Catonsville, MD*	bha.health.maryland.gov | (410) 402-8300. Manages Maryland's public mental health system and provider directory.
Maryland Core Service Agencies (CSAs)	*Statewide — One Per Jurisdiction*	County-level behavioral health authorities managing public mental health for children in foster care. Contact local CSA for provider referrals.
Kennedy Krieger — Behavioral Psychology	*Baltimore, MD*	(443) 923-9200 | kennedykrieger.org/behavioral-psychology. Trauma-focused mental health services for children with developmental and behavioral needs.
TF-CBT Providers — Maryland Network	*Statewide — BHA Network*	Advocate specifically for TF-CBT-trained providers — a generic 'therapy' referral is insufficient for children with documented trauma histories.
Maryland Crisis / 211 Maryland	*24/7 Statewide*	Dial 211 or 1-800-422-0009 (MD crisis). Mobile crisis teams in many counties. 211maryland.org.
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	*National — Available in Maryland*	Dial or text 988. Available 24/7. Age-appropriate for adolescents. Chat at 988lifeline.org.

13 · Housing & Basic Needs

Extended Foster Care (EFC) Housing Support	*Maryland DSS — Statewide*	Ages 18–21 under FL § 5-525. Supervised independent living with housing subsidies. Advocate for enrollment before age 18.
Youth Empowered Society (YES)	*Baltimore, MD*	(410) 539-9948 | yesmaryland.org. Drop-in and transitional support for homeless youth ages 16–24 in Baltimore.
Maryland Independent Living Program	*Maryland DSS / Statewide*	Life skills, employment support, transitional services for foster youth ages 14–21. Enroll through the DSS caseworker by age 14.
Baltimore City Housing Authority (HABC)	*Baltimore City, MD*	habc.org | (410) 396-3232. Section 8/HCV vouchers with foster care priority for aging-out youth.
SNAP — Maryland DHR	*Maryland DHR — Statewide*	Youth exiting foster care at 18 eligible for SNAP without income requirements for 12 months. myMDTHINK.gov.
WIC — Maryland WIC Program	*Maryland Department of Health*	health.maryland.gov/phpa/WIC | (410) 767-6728. Nutrition for pregnant women, infants, and children under 5 in foster care.

14 · Maryland Statewide Resources

CASA/Maryland	*Statewide Umbrella Organization*	casamd.org | (410) 637-9108. Coordinates Maryland's county-level CASA affiliates and GAL programs.
Maryland DHS — Child Protective Services	*Maryland DHS — Statewide*	dhs.maryland.gov/child-protective-services. CPS hotline: 1-800-332-6347 (24/7). 24 local DSS office directory available.
Maryland Legal Aid Bureau	*Statewide Civil Legal Aid*	mdlab.org | (410) 539-5340. Free civil legal services statewide — offices in Baltimore, Annapolis, Rockville, Hyattsville, Hagerstown, Salisbury, Bel Air, and La Plata.
Maryland Court Improvement Program (CIP)	*Maryland Judiciary*	courts.state.md.us/family/childwelfare. Training, practice guides, and resources for all CINA court participants.
Foster Care Alumni — Maryland	*Peer Support Network*	fostercarealumni.org. Peer mentoring and advocacy for youth aging out of Maryland foster care.
Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence	*Statewide — Annapolis*	mnadv.org | DV hotline: 1-800-MD-HELPS. Statewide DV coalition — relevant in many Maryland CINA cases.

15 · Federal Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway	*U.S. Children's Bureau*	childwelfare.gov. Maryland-specific statutes, GAL practice guides, and training tools. Free and regularly updated.
National CASA / GAL Association	*National Umbrella*	casaforchildren.org. CASA/Maryland is a national affiliate. Training curricula, standards, and volunteer resources available.
NCTSN — National Child Traumatic Stress Network	*HHS / SAMHSA*	nctsn.org. Evidence-based trauma resources and free online training. Includes the Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit.
SAMHSA National Helpline	*SAMHSA*	1-800-662-4357 (24/7, free, confidential). Treatment referral for substance use and mental health. English and Spanish.
HHS Children's Bureau — Region III (Philadelphia)	*ACF Region III*	acf.hhs.gov/cb/regional-offices/region-03. Oversees Title IV-E and IV-B compliance for Maryland and surrounding states.
AFCARS Data — Maryland	*U.S. Children's Bureau*	acf.hhs.gov/cb/data. Maryland foster care and adoption data for systemic advocacy context.

16 · Working with Children — Trauma-Informed Practice

Every child in Maryland's CINA system has experienced trauma. Effective Maryland GALs apply trauma-informed principles in every interaction, building the trust necessary to represent the child's voice and best interests to the Circuit Court.

Safety First — Meet in familiar, safe environments — schools, libraries, foster home when positive. Avoid DSS offices or locations the child associates with stressful events.

Consistency & Reliability — Children who have been failed by adults are exquisitely sensitive to broken commitments. Call when you say you will. Visit when you say you will.

Age-Appropriate Honesty — Never overpromise outcomes. 'I can't promise what the judge will decide, but I will tell the judge exactly what you told me' builds far more trust than false reassurances.

Voice & Agency — Solicit the child's views on placement, school, sibling contact, and relationships. Report them distinctly from your own recommendation — even when the child's preference does not control the outcome.

Cultural Humility — Maryland's foster care population reflects extraordinary diversity — African American, Latino, immigrant, and Native American communities. Advocate for culturally competent services and placements.

Secondary Trauma — CASA volunteers are at significant risk for vicarious traumatization. Attend debriefing sessions, talk with your supervisor. Self-care is essential to sustainable advocacy.

17 · Court Report Writing Guide — Maryland

The court report is the GAL's most important tool in Maryland's Circuit Court. A thorough, well-organized report provides the judge with facts that would not otherwise appear in the record and translates the best-interest recommendation into a clear, actionable advocacy position.

1. **Case Identification**
   Child's name (or initials), case number, Circuit Court jurisdiction, hearing date, GAL name and CASA contact. Date and location of most recent in-person visit.

2. **Sources Reviewed**
   All documents (DSS case plan, school records, medical records, therapy notes, prior orders) and all persons interviewed. Establishes credibility and independence.

3. **Current Placement & Well-Being**
   Current placement, child's adjustment, physical health, emotional state, school performance, and peer/family relationships. Note all changes since last hearing.

4. **Services Status**
   For each ordered service: accessed, provider, frequency, effectiveness? Flag ordered services not delivered — critical for reasonable efforts analysis.

5. **Parental Progress**
   Report compliance factually and objectively. Describe visitation frequency and quality. Distinguish observations from conclusions.

6. **Child's Views**
   Report the child's own words about placement, school, and wishes. Clearly distinguish the child's voice from your independent analysis.

7 **Best-Interest Recommendation**
State your recommendation specifically. 'Enroll in TF-CBT within 30 days through a BHA-certified provider' is actionable. 'Ensure needs are met' is not.

8 **Requested Court Orders**
List specific orders you are requesting. Proposed order language — reviewed with your supervisor — maximizes the chance recommendations are adopted verbatim.

■ **Download the complete MD GAL Volunteer Handbook from the GAL National Database**