

■ MISSOURI GAL Volunteer Handbook

2026 Edition

Guardian Ad Litem Support Network

GAL National Database · galnationaldatabase.org

RSMo Chapter 211 · Missouri Children's Division · CASA of Missouri

Jackson County · St. Louis County · Statewide Coverage

1. Program Overview

Missouri's Guardian Ad Litem system operates through local CASA programs coordinated under **CASA of Missouri**, as well as court-appointed attorney GALs in circuits without CASA programs. The primary state child welfare agency is the **Missouri Children's Division (CD)**, a division of the Department of Social Services (DSS).

Missouri's juvenile code, **RSMo Chapter 211**, governs all juvenile court proceedings including child abuse and neglect cases. RSMo § 211.462 explicitly authorizes appointment of a GAL to protect the best interests of any child in an abuse or neglect proceeding.

State Child Welfare Agency	Missouri Children's Division (DSS)
GAL Umbrella Organization	CASA of Missouri
Primary Governing Code	RSMo Chapter 211
Court of Jurisdiction	Juvenile Court (Circuit Court Family Division)
GAL Appointment Statute	RSMo § 211.462
CASA Programs in MO	40+ county programs statewide

2. Legal Foundation

Missouri's child welfare framework is grounded in RSMo Chapter 211 (Missouri Juvenile Justice Code) and Chapter 210 (Child Abuse and Neglect). These statutes define the juvenile court's jurisdiction, the GAL's appointment and duties, and the processes for protection, placement, and permanency.

RSMo § 211.462

Guardian Ad Litem — Appointment & Duties

Mandates appointment of a GAL in every abuse and neglect proceeding. The GAL shall advocate for the child's best interests and has the rights of a party including the right to present evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and receive all pleadings and reports.

RSMo § 211.031

Jurisdiction of Juvenile Court

Grants the circuit court's juvenile division jurisdiction over children alleged to be abused, neglected, or in need of care. Defines the court's authority to issue protective orders and make placement determinations.

RSMo § 210.110 et seq.

Missouri Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (CANRA)

Defines abuse and neglect, establishes the mandated reporter framework, and requires CD to investigate all reports within specified timeframes. GALs are mandated reporters.

RSMo § 211.183

Reasonable Efforts & Permanency Planning

Requires courts to make reasonable efforts findings at each hearing. Missouri courts must determine whether CD made reasonable efforts to prevent removal and toward reunification or an alternative permanency goal.

RSMo § 211.447

Termination of Parental Rights

Sets out grounds for TPR including abuse, neglect, abandonment, and failure to rectify. Requires a best-interests finding separate from the grounds finding.

3. Your Role as GAL

A Missouri GAL serves as an independent voice for the child's best interests under RSMo § 211.462. The GAL has party status with full rights of participation — including the right to present evidence, cross-examine witnesses, and receive all court filings.

■ Investigate	■ Advocate
Review all CD records, school records, medical files, prior court history, and therapy notes. Interview the child, foster parents, biological parents, teachers, and CD caseworkers. Conduct placement visits.	Present the child's best interests through written reports and oral advocacy. File motions, present evidence, cross-examine witnesses. Challenge CD when treatment plan implementation is inadequate.
■ Connect	■ Report
Identify and connect the child to needed services: therapy, tutoring, mentoring, and community supports. Coordinate with CD, caregivers, schools, and providers to eliminate service gaps.	Prepare written court reports before each hearing. File and serve on all parties in advance. Attend every hearing and be prepared to speak to your report and respond to questions.

4. The Dependency Court Process

1. Removal & Emergency Placement

CFSD removes child based on immediate danger. Must file petition within 72 hours of removal.

2. Protective Custody Hearing

Held within 3 business days of removal. Court reviews probable cause and placement safety.

3. GAL Appointment

Court appoints GAL under RSMo § 211.462. CASA program assigns volunteer. Review all available records immediately.

4. Adjudication Hearing

Court determines whether child is an abused or neglected child. Must be held within 60 days (in custody).

5. Disposition Hearing

Court enters Dispositional Order establishing case plan, placement, and required services.

6. Review Hearings

Every 6 months. GAL files written report before each review assessing CD's reasonable efforts and child's well-being.

7. Permanency Hearing

Within 12 months of removal. Court approves permanency plan — reunification, adoption, guardianship, or APPLA.

8. TPR & Post-Permanency

If reunification ruled out, CD petitions for TPR under RSMo § 211.447. GAL continues advocacy through adoption finalization.

5. Hearing Types & GAL Responsibilities

Protective Custody Hearing	Within 3 business days	Confirm appointment; assess safety; identify immediate needs
Adjudication	Within 60 days (in custody)	Present evidence; advocate for findings
Disposition	Same as or shortly after adjudication	Recommend services, placement, case plan elements
Review Hearing	Every 6 months	File report; assess reasonable efforts; report on well-being
Permanency Hearing	Within 12 months	Advocate for permanency plan in child's best interests
TPR Hearing	Per CD petition	Present best-interests evidence; report on child's attachment
Post-TPR Review	Every 6 months post-TPR	Monitor adoption progress; advocate for timely finalization

6. ICWA & Tribal Inquiry in Missouri

The Indian Child Welfare Act (25 U.S.C. §§ 1901–1963) applies to any custody proceeding involving a child who is an Indian child. Missouri has no tribal reservations within its borders, but members of the Osage Nation, Eastern Shawnee Tribe, Miami Tribe, and many other nations reside throughout Missouri. ICWA inquiry is mandatory in every dependency case.

Mandatory ICWA Inquiry Checklist:

- Ask both biological parents whether the child may have any Native American or Alaska Native ancestry
 - Document the inquiry in case notes — must appear on the record at the first hearing
 - If tribal affiliation is indicated, notify CD immediately for formal tribal contact
 - The tribe — not the family, CD, or GAL — determines ICWA eligibility and membership
 - If ICWA applies, placement preferences shift to Indian family, extended family, tribal member homes
 - "Active efforts" (not merely "reasonable efforts") must be made to prevent breakup of the Indian family
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7. Education Rights of Foster Youth

Educational stability is one of the highest-impact advocacy areas for Missouri GALs. Foster children change schools at high rates, lose academic credits, and are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary action. Missouri has aligned policies with federal ESSA requirements.

RSMo § 167.018 / ESSA Foster Care Provisions

School Stability for Children in Foster Care

Requires school districts and CD to keep foster children in their school of origin when in their best interests. Transportation must be provided even across district lines.

Key Education Advocacy Points:

- Obtain school records at every case review — academic regression is an early sign of instability
- Ask whether the child has an IEP or 504 Plan — IDEA rights follow the child through placement changes
- Every Missouri school district must have a Foster Care Point of Contact (FCPOC)
- GALs may consent to educational decisions for children in CD custody — verify authority in court order
- Flag chronic absenteeism (more than 10 days) in your court report

Extended Foster Care: Missouri operates EFC under RSMo § 210.565 for youth ages 18–21. Advocate for EFC planning well before a youth's 18th birthday.

8. Courtroom Practice

Missouri juvenile and family courts balance formal legal procedures with collaborative, solution-focused goals. Understanding courtroom expectations will make you a more effective advocate.

Before the Hearing	During the Hearing
• File report 3–5 business days in advance • Review prior order for compliance issues • Contact CD to confirm factual updates • Talk with child about what will happen	• Address judge as 'Your Honor' • Focus on what changed and what child needs • As a party, you may present evidence and cross-examine • State objections clearly and on the record
After the Hearing	If You Disagree With the Order
• Obtain copy of signed order • Review for tasks assigned to CD or parents • Communicate outcome to child in age-appropriate terms • Update case notes; calendar next hearing	• Missouri GALs have standing to appeal adverse orders • Contact CASA supervisor immediately • Document objections before appeal deadline (typically 30 days) • Supervisor and legal advisor guide the appeal process

9. Local Resources — Kansas City Metro (Jackson County)

CASA of Jackson County — (816) 842-2272 | casajacksoncounty.org

Serves Jackson County Family Court. Trains and supervises CASA GAL volunteers.

Missouri Children's Division — Jackson County — (816) 889-2000

Primary CD office for Jackson County child welfare cases.

Cornerstones of Care — (816) 508-3500 | cornerstonesofcare.org

Child-placing agency, foster care, adoption, and behavioral health services.

Kids TLC (The Learning Center) — (816) 753-3433 | kidstlc.org

Therapeutic foster care, residential, and community-based mental health.

Legal Aid of Western Missouri — (816) 474-6750 | lawmo.org

Free civil legal services for low-income residents. Family and child welfare assistance.

Children's Mercy Kansas City — (816) 234-3000 | childrensmercy.org

Leading pediatric hospital — child abuse assessments and mental health evaluations.

10. Mental Health Resources

Missouri Department of Mental Health (DMH) — dmh.mo.gov | 1-800-364-9687

Administers Missouri's public mental health system. Funds CMHCs in every region.

Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) — Find at dmh.mo.gov

Primary public mental health providers for children in foster care statewide.

Missouri Crisis Line — 1-800-811-4760 (24/7)

24/7 statewide crisis line. Mobile crisis teams available in population centers.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — Dial or text 988

Available 24/7. Age-appropriate for adolescents. Spanish-language option available.

Trauma-Focused CBT (TF-CBT) — Request specifically from CD

Evidence-based standard for childhood trauma. Request TF-CBT-trained therapists specifically.

11. Trauma-Informed Practice

Safety First: Meet in comfortable, familiar locations — not CD offices if the child associates them with crisis.

Consistency & Reliability: Keep every commitment — broken promises are especially harmful to children who have been repeatedly let down.

Age-Appropriate Honesty: Don't overpromise outcomes. 'I will tell the judge exactly what you told me' is more trustworthy than vague reassurances.

Voice & Agency: Ask about school, placement, friends. Document the child's views even when they differ from your recommendation.

Cultural Humility: Missouri's foster care population is disproportionately Black and rural. Advocate for culturally competent placements and services.

Secondary Trauma: Attend debriefings, talk with your supervisor. Watch for signs: intrusive thoughts, emotional numbing, or declining engagement.

12. Court Report Writing Guide

The court report is your primary advocacy tool as a Missouri GAL. A well-structured report educates the judge on facts the court record may not reflect.

1. Case Identification

Child's name/initials, case number, court, hearing date, GAL contact. Date of most recent in-person visit.

2. Sources Reviewed

All documents reviewed and all persons interviewed. Demonstrates thoroughness of your investigation.

3. Current Placement & Well-Being

Describe placement, child's adjustment, any changes since last hearing. Address health, school, emotional state.

4. Services Status

Identify each service in case plan and whether initiated/ongoing. Flag services ordered but not delivered.

5. Parental Progress

Objectively describe compliance with the case plan. Factual observations, not opinions. Visitation frequency and quality.

6. Child's Views

What the child told you about placement, school, relationships, and wishes. Use child's own words. Distinguish from your interpretation.

7. Best-Interest Recommendation

State recommendation clearly and specifically. 'Maintain current placement and order TF-CBT within 30 days' is more useful than vague recommendations.

8. Requested Court Orders

List specific orders you are requesting as a party under RSMo § 211.462. Proposed order language reviewed by 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.