



GAL Volunteer Handbook  
2026 Edition

Ohio Revised Code Chapter 2151 · Juvenile Courts  
Ohio CASA/GAL Association · Ohio ODJFS / County PCSAs

GAL Appointment: ORC § 2151.281  
Court of Jurisdiction: Juvenile Court (88 Ohio Counties)  
Ohio Sup. R. 48 — GAL Standards

GAL National Database · [galnationaldatabase.org](https://galnationaldatabase.org)

# 1. Program Overview

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Ohio's Guardian Ad Litem system operates through CASA programs and court-appointed attorney GALs across 88 counties, coordinated under the **Ohio CASA/GAL Association (Ohio CASA)**. Child welfare is administered by **county Public Children Services Agencies (PCSAs)**, with oversight from the **Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS)**.

Ohio's dependency framework is codified in **ORC Chapter 2151** (Juvenile Court Act). Ohio Sup. R. 48 establishes comprehensive GAL conduct and reporting standards — every Ohio GAL must know this rule.

|                              |                                                              |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Child Welfare Agency</b>  | Ohio ODJFS (state oversight) / County PCSAs (88 counties)    |
| <b>GAL Umbrella</b>          | Ohio CASA/GAL Association                                    |
| <b>Governing Code</b>        | Ohio Revised Code Chapter 2151                               |
| <b>GAL Standards</b>         | Ohio Rules of Superintendence Rule 48                        |
| <b>Court of Jurisdiction</b> | Juvenile Court (Court of Common Pleas — each of 88 counties) |
| <b>GAL Appointment</b>       | ORC § 2151.281 — mandatory in abuse/neglect cases            |

# 2. Legal Foundation

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Ohio's dependency framework is anchored in ORC Chapter 2151 (Juvenile Courts). Ohio Sup. R. 48 codifies comprehensive GAL standards — read it before your first case.

## **ORC § 2151.281**

### **Guardian Ad Litem — Appointment & Duties**

Mandates appointment of a GAL in every proceeding involving an alleged abused or neglected child. The GAL must conduct an independent investigation and advocate for the child's best interests. Ohio GALs may be CASA volunteers or attorneys depending on the program model.

## **ORC § 2151.011**

### **Definitions — Abused, Neglected, and Dependent Child**

Defines the three categories of children subject to juvenile court jurisdiction: abused, neglected, and dependent. The applicable category affects procedural timelines and burden of proof — know which your case involves.

## **ORC § 2151.353**

### **Disposition in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Cases**

Authorizes dispositional orders: return home, relative placement, PCSA foster care, or legal custody to a non-parent. GALs advocate for the dispositional order that best serves the child's interests and for services addressing identified needs.

#### **ORC § 2151.419**

##### **Reasonable Efforts — PCSA Finding**

Requires the court to make a reasonable efforts finding at every hearing. GALs must independently assess whether the PCSA made genuine reasonable efforts — not just referrals — and challenge the finding when unsupported by evidence.

#### **ORC § 2151.417**

##### **Periodic Review Hearings**

Requires periodic review hearings every 6 months for children placed out of the home. The PCSA files semiannual summaries. GALs file Sup. R. 48-compliant written reports before each review hearing.

#### **ORC § 2151.414**

##### **Permanent Custody — Grounds and Procedure**

Sets grounds for permanent custody (equivalent to TPR). Standard: clear and convincing evidence that permanent custody is in the child's best interests. GAL testimony and best-interest analysis are often central to this determination.

### **3. Your Role as GAL**

Under ORC § 2151.281 and Ohio Sup. R. 48, the Ohio GAL advocates for what the GAL independently determines to be in the child's best interests — not what the child requests, not what the PCSA proposes, and not what either parent argues.

#### **Ohio Sup. R. 48 — Know This Rule**

Ohio is one of a small number of states that codified comprehensive GAL standards in court rules. Sup. R. 48 establishes minimum qualifications, training requirements, investigation requirements, and report content. Noncompliance can result in removal from the case.

- Investigate: Review all PCSA records, school records, medical files, and prior court history. Interview the child, foster parents, biological parents, teachers, and therapists. Sup. R. 48 requires specific investigation steps.
- Advocate: Present best interests through reports and testimony. File motions when necessary. Challenge the PCSA if reasonable efforts are inadequate.
- Connect: Link the child to services — Ohio has a robust county-level service network. Many services require PCSA referral.
- Report: Prepare Sup. R. 48-compliant written reports before every hearing. Attend every hearing. Distinguish findings from recommendations.

### **4. The Multidisciplinary Team**

Ohio dependency cases involve the county PCSA, the juvenile court, and community providers. Ohio's 88-county structure means significant local variation across the state.

|                                   |                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>PCSA Caseworker</b>            | County child welfare worker managing case plan, placement, and services. Represents the PCSA's position.     |
| <b>PCSA Attorney / Prosecutor</b> | County attorney representing the PCSA in court — does not represent the child.                               |
| <b>Parent's Attorney</b>          | Appointed counsel for biological parents — advocates for parental rights, not child's best interests.        |
| <b>Child's Attorney</b>           | If appointed — client-directed, represents child's expressed wishes. Distinct from GAL's best-interest role. |

|                                    |                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>CASA Volunteer (GAL)</b>        | You — independently investigating and reporting. Ohio Sup. R. 48 governs your conduct.                |
| <b>CASA Supervisor</b>             | Reviews reports for Sup. R. 48 compliance; guides county-specific procedures.                         |
| <b>Foster / Kinship Caregiver</b>  | Day-to-day care provider; critical source of information about child's functioning and well-being.    |
| <b>Juvenile Judge / Magistrate</b> | Ohio courts often use magistrates for day-to-day hearings — know whether your case is before judge or |

## 5. The Dependency Court Process

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Ohio dependency proceedings under ORC Chapter 2151 follow a structured sequence. Ohio's 88 juvenile courts apply local rules with varying practices — verify your county's specific procedures.

|   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | <b>Removal &amp; Emergency Shelter Care</b><br>PCSA removes the child on emergency finding. Complaint must be filed within 72 hours of removal or child is released.                                                                                           |
| 2 | <b>Complaint &amp; Shelter Care Hearing</b><br>PCSA files Complaint (abuse/neglect/dependency). Shelter care hearing within 72 hours of removal. Court determines probable cause and whether to continue shelter care.                                         |
| 3 | <b>GAL Appointment</b><br>Court appoints GAL under ORC § 2151.281. Review the complaint immediately. Make initial contact with the child as soon as possible. Review Sup. R. 48 for required investigation steps.                                              |
| 4 | <b>Adjudicatory Hearing</b><br>Court determines abuse/neglect/dependency. Within 30 days (shelter care) or 60 days otherwise. GAL presents evidence and recommendations on adjudication and placement.                                                         |
| 5 | <b>Dispositional Hearing</b><br>Court enters dispositional order (case plan, placement, services). Must be within 90 days of complaint. GAL advocates for services and placement serving the child's best interests.                                           |
| 6 | <b>Periodic Review (Every 6 Months)</b><br>Court reviews case plan, placement, and progress under ORC § 2151.417. GAL files Sup. R. 48-compliant written report assessing reasonable efforts and child's well-being.                                           |
| 7 | <b>Permanency Hearing (Within 12 Months)</b><br>Court determines permanency plan: reunification, adoption, legal custody, or APPLA. GAL advocates for the plan best serving the child's long-term interests.                                                   |
| 8 | <b>Permanent Custody &amp; Post-Permanency</b><br>If reunification fails, PCSA may move for permanent custody (ORC § 2151.414 — clear and convincing standard). GAL testimony is central. After permanent custody, GAL supports adoption through finalization. |

## 6. Hearing Types & GAL Responsibilities

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| Hearing      | Timing                   | GAL Focus                                              |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Shelter Care | Within 72 hrs of removal | Confirm appointment; assess safety; begin ICWA inquiry |

|                           |                                 |                                                                          |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Adjudicatory              | 30 days (shelter) / 60 days     | Present evidence on abuse/neglect/dependency; address placement          |
| Dispositional             | Within 90 days of complaint     | Recommend services, placement, case plan; ICWA preferences               |
| Periodic Review           | Every 6 months (ORC § 2151.417) | File Sup. R. 48 report; assess reasonable efforts and well-being         |
| Permanency                | Within 12 months of removal     | Advocate for best permanency plan; case plan compliance                  |
| Permanent Custody         | Per PCSA motion                 | Best-interest testimony; clear & convincing standard; child's attachment |
| Post-Perm. Custody Review | Every 6 months post-order       | Monitor adoption progress; advocate for timely finalization              |

## 7. ICWA & Tribal Inquiry in Ohio

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ICWA applies in any custody proceeding involving a child who is an Indian child — a member of, or eligible for membership in, a federally recognized tribe. Ohio has no reservation land, but tribal members reside throughout the state — particularly in Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, and Toledo metro areas.

### No Reservation Land in Ohio — ICWA Still Applies

The Eastern Shawnee Tribe, Shawnee Tribe, Delaware Nation, and Seneca-Cayuga Nation all have historic connections to Ohio and active ICWA departments that monitor Ohio cases. Inquiry is mandatory in every case — not just when ancestry is apparent.

### Mandatory ICWA Inquiry Steps:

- Ask both biological parents and extended family about any Native American or Alaska Native ancestry
- Document the inquiry — it must appear on the record at the shelter care hearing
- If tribal affiliation is indicated, notify the PCSA immediately for certified mail notice to the tribe
- The tribe determines ICWA eligibility — not the family, PCSA, or GAL
- If ICWA applies, placement preferences: Indian extended family → tribal member homes → tribal foster homes (25 U.S.C. § 1915)
- Active efforts (not merely reasonable efforts) must be made to prevent breakup of the Indian family
- Permanent custody of an Indian child requires proof beyond a reasonable doubt (not clear and convincing)

### Ohio-Specific ICWA Considerations:

- Urban Indian populations in Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, and Toledo mean ICWA inquiries may more frequently identify tribal affiliations
- Eastern Shawnee Tribe (OK) and Shawnee Tribe (OK) actively monitor Ohio cases involving their members
- Delaware Nation (OK) and Seneca-Cayuga Nation (OK) have ancestral Ohio connections and active ICWA programs
- Ohio's juvenile code proceedings must comply with all federal ICWA procedural requirements when triggered

## 8. Tribal Resources & Contacts

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|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Eastern Shawnee Tribe of OK — ICWA | Seneca, MO   (918) 666-2435<br>Active ICWA program monitoring Ohio cases involving Eastern Shawnee members                                            |
| Shawnee Tribe — ICWA               | Miami, OK   (918) 542-2441 (enrollment)<br>Distinct from Eastern Shawnee; monitors Ohio cases involving Shawnee Tribe members                         |
| Delaware Nation — ICWA             | Anadarko, OK   (405) 247-2448<br>Ancestral connections to Ohio; active ICWA monitoring of Great Lakes region cases                                    |
| Seneca-Cayuga Nation — ICWA        | Grove, OK   (918) 542-0960<br>Ancestral connections to northwest Ohio (Sandusky region)                                                               |
| BIA Eastern Region / Midwest       | <a href="https://bia.gov/regional-offices/eastern">bia.gov/regional-offices/eastern</a>   ICWA guidance for Ohio courts                               |
| NICWA                              | <a href="https://nicwa.org">nicwa.org</a>   (503) 222-4044<br>Free ICWA training and technical assistance for GALs in states without reservation land |

## 9. Education Rights of Foster Youth

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Ohio's foster care population is among the nation's largest. Children in care change schools at alarming rates. Ohio implements ESSA and McKinney-Vento protections.

#### **ORC § 3313.6410 / ESSA Foster Care Provisions**

##### **School Stability for Children in Foster Care**

Every Ohio school district and PCSA must collaborate to keep foster children in their school of origin. Transportation must be provided across district lines. GALs should advocate for a formal School of Origin determination at every placement change.

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

##### **Homeless Education Rights**

Some foster youth qualify for McKinney-Vento protections: immediate enrollment, records transfer, and transportation. Ohio's McKinney-Vento coordinator is housed within the Ohio Department of Education.

- Obtain school records and report card at every case review
- Confirm active IEP or 504 Plan — IDEA rights follow the child through placement changes
- Contact the Foster Care Point of Contact (FCPOC) in the school district for enrollment or stability issues
- Ohio Dept. of Education maintains a foster care education page with district-level FCPOC contacts
- Confirm whether you are authorized to make educational decisions in the court order
- Report chronic absenteeism (10+ days) in your court report

**Extended Foster Care (Ohio Older Youth Program):** Ages 18–21 under ORC § 5103.23. Must be in school, working, or enrolled in vocational program. Ohio's program is one of the more comprehensive in the Midwest. Advocate for enrollment 6–12 months before age 18.

## 10. Courtroom Practice

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Ohio has 88 separate juvenile courts with significant local variation. Many Ohio courts use magistrates for day-to-day hearings — know whether your case is before a judge or magistrate and the applicable objection timeline.

|                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Before the Hearing</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• File Sup. R. 48-compliant report and serve all parties — check county local rules for specific deadlines</li><li>• Review prior order for compliance issues</li><li>• Contact PCSA caseworker to align on factual updates</li><li>• Talk with child about what will happen at the hearing</li></ul>                                      |
| <b>During the Hearing</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Address judge/magistrate as 'Your Honor'</li><li>• Present your report clearly — heavy dockets favor organized, focused presentations</li><li>• If before a magistrate, note that a subsequent objection period may apply</li><li>• As GAL, you have standing to present evidence, call witnesses, and request specific orders</li></ul> |
| <b>After the Hearing</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obtain copy of signed order or magistrate's decision</li><li>• If a magistrate's decision, check objection period before it becomes final</li><li>• Review for tasks assigned to PCSA, parents, or GAL</li><li>• Communicate outcome to child in age-appropriate terms</li></ul>                                                         |
| <b>If You Disagree</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contact CASA supervisor immediately</li><li>• Objections to magistrate decisions typically due within 14 days in Ohio juvenile court</li><li>• If before a magistrate, object before the decision becomes a final judge's order</li><li>• Appeals of final orders: Ohio App. R. 4 — typically 30 days from final order</li></ul>         |

## 11. Local Resources — Columbus Metro (Franklin County)

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|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Franklin County CASA</b>              | Columbus, OH   (614) 525-3700   <a href="http://casaofcentralohio.org">casaofcentralohio.org</a><br>Serves Franklin County Juvenile Court — Ohio's largest county                   |
| <b>Franklin County Children Services</b> | Columbus, OH   (614) 275-2571   <a href="http://franklincountyohio.gov/children-services">franklincountyohio.gov/children-services</a>                                              |
| <b>Nationwide Children's Hospital</b>    | Columbus, OH   (614) 722-2000   <a href="http://nationwidechildrens.org">nationwidechildrens.org</a><br>Pediatric hospital; child abuse evals, behavioral health, forensic services |
| <b>Huckleberry House</b>                 | Columbus, OH   (614) 294-8097   <a href="http://huckhouse.org">huckhouse.org</a><br>Emergency shelter and transitional housing for youth 10–17 and young adults                     |
| <b>Legal Aid of Central Ohio</b>         | Columbus, OH   (614) 224-8374   <a href="http://lacolaw.org">lacolaw.org</a><br>Free civil legal services for low-income Ohioans in child welfare matters                           |
| <b>Ohio Guidestone</b>                   | Columbus / Statewide   <a href="http://ohioguidestone.org">ohioguidestone.org</a><br>Behavioral health, foster care, residential treatment, and family services                     |
| <b>Columbus Urban League</b>             | Columbus, OH   (614) 257-6300   <a href="http://cul.org">cul.org</a><br>Family stability and advocacy for African American families in Columbus                                     |
| <b>Ohio Legal Help</b>                   | <a href="http://ohiolegalhelp.org">ohiolegalhelp.org</a> — Self-help legal info in multiple languages for families and children                                                     |

## 12. Mental Health Resources

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Ohio has a robust public behavioral health infrastructure through county ADAMHS boards. GALs must ensure mental health needs are addressed — not merely referred and forgotten.

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|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>OhioMHAS</b>                          | mha.ohio.gov   1-800-465-4673<br>Oversees public behavioral health through county ADAMHS boards      |
| <b>County ADAMHS Boards</b>              | One per Ohio county — primary entry point for publicly funded mental health services for children in |
| <b>Trauma-Focused CBT (TF-CBT)</b>       | Request TF-CBT-certified therapists specifically — a general 'therapy' referral is insufficient      |
| <b>OhioRISE</b>                          | Integrated care for youth with complex behavioral health needs in multiple systems, including foster |
| <b>988 Suicide &amp; Crisis Lifeline</b> | Dial or text 988 (24/7) — Ohio also has county-level crisis hotlines through ADAMHS boards           |
| <b>OhioMHAS County Crisis Services</b>   | Contact county ADAMHS board for local crisis response options and mobile crisis teams                |

## 13. Housing & Basic Needs

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|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ohio Older Youth Program (EFC)</b>  | ORC § 5103.23 — ages 18–21; school/work/vocational requirement; one of the more comprehensive pr       |
| <b>Ohio Independent Living Program</b> | Ages 14–21; life skills, employment, housing readiness — enroll through PCSA caseworker                |
| <b>Covenant House Ohio</b>             | (614) 274-6200 — Emergency shelter and transitional housing for youth 18–24 in Columbus                |
| <b>Ohio Housing Finance Agency</b>     | myohiohome.org   (888) 362-6432 — Rental assistance and affordable housing; priority for former foster |
| <b>Medicaid (until age 26)</b>         | Youth exiting Ohio foster care retain Medicaid until age 26 — ensure enrollment before leaving care    |
| <b>WIC — Ohio</b>                      | odh.ohio.gov/wic — Nutrition assistance for children under 5 in foster care                            |

## 14–15. Statewide & Federal Resources

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|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ohio CASA/GAL Association</b>        | ohiocasa.org   (614) 461-2020 — Statewide CASA umbrella organization         |
| <b>Ohio ODJFS — Children's Services</b> | jfs.ohio.gov   Child abuse hotline: 1-855-OH-CHILD (1-855-642-4453)          |
| <b>PCSAO (88 county PCSAs)</b>          | pcsao.org   (614) 753-0099 — Policy advocacy and resources for county PCSAs  |
| <b>Ohio Legal Help</b>                  | ohiolegalhelp.org — Self-help legal info in multiple languages               |
| <b>Ohio Court Improvement Program</b>   | supremecourt.ohio.gov/cip — GAL training, Sup. R. 48 guidance, bench books   |
| <b>Child Welfare Info Gateway</b>       | childwelfare.gov — ORC statutes, GAL practice guides, ICWA resources         |
| <b>National CASA / GAL Assoc.</b>       | casaforchildren.org — National training, standards, and Sup. R. 48 alignment |
| <b>NCTSN</b>                            | nctsn.org — Evidence-based trauma resources for child welfare practitioners  |
| <b>SAMHSA Helpline</b>                  | 1-800-662-4357 (24/7) — Substance use and mental health referrals            |
| <b>HHS Children's Bureau Region V</b>   | acf.hhs.gov — Title IV-E/IV-B oversight for Ohio (Chicago regional office)   |

## 16. Working with Children — Trauma-Informed Practice

Every child in Ohio's dependency system has experienced trauma. Ohio's foster care population is disproportionately Black and brown. Apply trauma-informed principles in every interaction.

|                             |                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Safety First</b>         | Meet in familiar, safe locations — not at the PCSA office if the child associates it with removal.                     |
| <b>Consistency</b>          | Children who have experienced neglect are acutely sensitive to broken promises. Do exactly what you say you            |
| <b>Honest Communication</b> | 'I can't promise what the judge will decide, but I will tell the judge exactly what you told me' is more trustworthy t |
| <b>Voice &amp; Agency</b>   | Ohio Sup. R. 48 requires including the child's views in your court report — ask about school, placement, relation      |
| <b>Cultural Humility</b>    | Ohio's foster care system disproportionately involves Black and Latino children in urban counties. Advocate for        |
| <b>Secondary Trauma</b>     | Attend debriefing sessions. Talk with your supervisor. Recognize the signs of vicarious traumatization: intrusive      |

## 17. Court Report Writing Guide — Ohio Sup. R. 48

Ohio Sup. R. 48 specifies minimum required content for every GAL report. The court report is your primary advocacy tool — it must be factual, thorough, and clearly distinguish findings from recommendations.

|          |                                           |                                                                                                       |
|----------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Case Identification</b>                | Child's name/initials, case number, court, hearing date, GAL contact, date of most recent in-person v |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Sources Reviewed</b>                   | Documents reviewed and people interviewed — demonstrates Sup. R. 48-required investigation and        |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Current Placement &amp; Well-Being</b> | Placement, adjustment, changes since last hearing, health, emotional state, school performance        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Services Status</b>                    | Each case plan service and whether accessed; barriers; ordered-but-unprovided services — critical     |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Parental Progress</b>                  | Objective factual description of case plan compliance and visitation — the court needs facts, not cha |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Child's Views</b>                      | Required by Sup. R. 48 — report child's wishes in their own words; distinguish from GAL's best-inter  |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Best-Interest Recommendation</b>       | Specific, time-bound recommendation with reasoning — 'Enroll in TF-CBT within 30 days' not 'ensur     |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Requested Court Orders</b>             | List specific orders; provide draft language reviewed by CASA supervisor for maximum impact           |

**GAL National Database** · [galnationaldatabase.org](http://galnationaldatabase.org) · This handbook is a reference resource only and does not constitute legal advice. Laws change — always verify current statutes, Sup. R. 48 requirements, and local rules with your CASA program supervisor and the relevant state agency before relying on this information in a legal proceeding.