



THE ADVOCATE

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Message from Charles P. Golbert, Cook County Public Guardian

Welcome to our special Veteran's Day issue of *The Advocate*.

The attorneys and interdisciplinary professionals in our office have the privilege of serving many veterans and their families. In the Adult Guardianship Division, more than 40 people under our guardianship are veterans. In the Domestic Relations and Juvenile Divisions, the parents of many of our clients are veterans. This issue highlights how we

advocate for the unique needs of these individuals and their families, including summaries of some of the many cases where our advocacy has made a difference.

Representing children and adults with disabilities is a privilege of the highest order. It is a particular privilege when we are able to assist veterans and their families.

We hope that you enjoy this Veteran's Day issue of *The Advocate*. Wishes for a meaningful Veteran's Day holiday.

OPG Honors Our Veterans

On this Veteran's Day, the Public Guardian's Office is proud to honor the more than 40 men and women under our guardianship whose service extends to every branch of the military, including the National Guard. The stories of these remarkable men and women are humbling and inspiring, including the service histories of Barbara C., Robert G., and Sean K.

Barbara C. is proud of her service in the Army. She received an injury while parachuting during her active service, and as a result, needed the assistance of a guardian. Upon our appointment, our Benefits Department assisted Barbara with her veteran's benefits. As a result, Barbara lives in VA assisted housing on a naval base and participates in VA programs. She is happy to be close to the base where she served.

Robert G. met his late wife, Francine, while both

were serving in the Air Force and stationed in the Philippines. He served two tours of duty, one in Vietnam and one in Korea. After returning to Chicago, Francine and Robert married and continued a life of service, Robert working as a police officer and Francine as an elementary school teacher. They were married for more than 50 years.

Another proud veteran of two tours of duty is Sean K. Having served in both Vietnam and Korea, Sean was planning a career in the military until he was injured and no longer able to serve. After his service, Sean attended Harvard and wrote several books. He also became a well-known artist, sculpting and welding pieces commissioned by collectors nationwide. At age 30, Sean lost his sight, but he continues to create sculpture and other pieces. *(continued on page 2)*

Honoring Our Veterans

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The Public Guardian ensures that our veterans receive all of the benefits available to them including assistance with housing, improved pensions, disability compensation, aid and attendance, and prepaid funerals and burials. Our office serves as fiduciary for our veterans and we closely monitor changes in the law regarding veterans and their benefits.

We gratefully acknowledge all those who served in the armed forces and those who are actively serving in our military now.



Representing Children of Military Families

Attorneys in the Domestic Relations Division represent children in highly contested custody and visitation disputes. We advocate for the child's best interest regarding custody, visitation, child support, removal from the jurisdiction, and other issues.

Representing children whose parents are in the military presents unique challenges. Military families face stressful situations due to the nature of their service, frequent moves due to deployment, and other factors. The issues servicemen and women face can impact their relationships with family members.

We were appointed as child representative for 6-year-old Katie and 4-year-old Anthony, Jr. Their parents, Tony and Lydia, were young when they married after Lydia's basic military training in Chicago. Lydia was then stationed in Virginia, far from the support of friends and family. Both Katie and Anthony, Jr. were born in Virginia.

Like many military families, Tony and Lydia struggled through Lydia's multiple deployments and life on base. Tony had difficulty obtaining employment. There was alleged domestic violence in their relationship, and each alleged that the other abused drugs and alcohol. As their marriage deteriorated, Lydia was psychiatrically hospitalized and child protective services in Virginia became involved with the family. The Virginia court issued an order of protection, granting Tony temporary custody of the chil-

dren.

Tony returned to Chicago with the children and lived with his family, who took on much of the responsibility of caring for Kate and Anthony. Lydia participated in mental health and substance abuse treatment, and returned to Chicago upon her discharge from service. Once back in Chicago, she sought to renew her relationship with the children, after being absent from their lives for more than a year.

The Domestic Relations Court appointed us to represent Kate and Anthony in the child custody proceeding. As the assigned attorney gathered information and the family history, she arranged supervised parenting time between Lydia and the children. The lawyer reviewed records from the Virginia court and social services, met with the family, and learned what additional services would be beneficial as Lydia re-established a relationship with her children.

The lawyer worked closely with the parents and their attorneys to help Lydia transition to unsupervised parenting time with the children, and to ensure that she complied with mental health services provided by the Veterans Administration. We are currently helping the parents negotiate a court allocation judgment addressing Tony and Lydia's responsibilities and parenting time with the children.





Teamwork Against Trafficking

Every year, dozens of children in DCFS care are victims of human trafficking. To address this problem, our office trained a workgroup of attorneys, investigators, social workers, and psychologists to work with community stakeholders to track youth who are at risk and collaborate with other advocates.

Our office trains all staff to look for “red flags” that indicate a trafficking risk. We do this through document review, assessment of statements in court, collateral sources and, of course, communicating with our clients.

Children in the Juvenile Court system are particularly vulnerable to being pulled into the cycle of fraud, force, or coercion that often accompanies human trafficking. The single most effective way to protect a client at risk of being trafficked is to gain their trust and establish a strong rapport.

Recently, our 17-year-old client, A.P., ran away from her residential placement. When she

returned, she reported that she had been coerced into sexual activity with more than one person. A.P. has a history that already raised concerns for being targeted by traffickers. Her assigned attorney and others in our office have developed a strong, trusting relationship with her, making it easy to communicate with this intelligent young woman when she returned to placement. Our team facilitated communication with law enforcement, ensured that a forensic interview took place, and have assisted A.P. with follow up services to help her through this trauma. Most importantly, we remain in regular contact with A.P. and further our relationship with her as her advocates in court and in the community.

When children in DCFS care are sexually exploited, we learn as much as we can about the child’s situation and advocate for a safe placement, protective services, and services designed to mitigate what put the child in that susceptible position in the first place. We have established working relationships with local, state, and Federal law enforcement and are often called to aid in their investigations. Further, we are familiar with the placements and resources that can help us advocate for our clients even if a criminal case never materializes.

Legislative Agendas

Our office is a respected voice for vulnerable children and adults with disabilities in the legislative arena. Our legislative advocacy on behalf of our child clients focuses on three areas: 1) improving the quality of life for youth in the care of DCFS, 2) ensuring that courts making decisions about children have the information, tools, and flexibility to

respond to the individual needs of the children and their families, and 3) ensuring that children are safe. Our legislative advocacy on behalf of adults with disabilities focuses on: 1) ensuring that the adult guardianship system respects the rights and independence of those under (continued on page 4)

Legislative Agendas

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guardianship and fosters best practices for guardians, 2) combatting abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation of the elderly and persons with disabilities, and 3) ensuring that the rights of adult with disabilities are preserved across various segments of the law.

Much of our work is accomplished through collaboration with other advocates. For example, we work closely with the Foster Care Alumni of America – Illinois Chapter (FCAA-IL), because listening to youth voices is critical to successful advocacy on their behalf. We provide support for the FCAA-IL's annual Legislative Shadow Day. The opportunity that day provides for youth in care and former youth in care to personally connect with a legislator is invaluable to the youth, but also makes our job easier, because it gives legislators a new perspective on issues facing youth in care.

More often than not, it is easier to draft a bill and have it signed into law than to have it actually implemented. As a result, we also focus our advocacy on education and implementation.

In 2011 our office joined a coalition of stakeholders to develop legislative solutions to address youth in care who lose sibling relationships when siblings are adopted by different foster parents. This was, and remains, one of the primary concerns of youth who have experienced foster care. Public Act 97-1076 went into effect on August 24, 2012, and requires, among other things, that when siblings are placed separately, DCFS meet with their planned adoptive parents to encourage and assist the families in developing Post Adoption Sibling Contact Agreements.

We represent three sisters – ages 16, 12, and 9 – who live in two different foster homes. The oldest sister is about to be placed in private guardianship

with her foster parent while the younger two will be adopted by their foster parent. Although the law has been in effect for seven years, the staff at the private agency DCFS contracted to oversee the case was unaware of the requirement to conduct a meeting until our attorney informed her of it.

Our attorney participated in the meeting with the families, the agency's director (an adoptive parent), and the assigned caseworker (a former youth in care with first-hand knowledge of the pain of losing sibling contact). Together, the team developed a plan for ongoing sibling contact.

An idea that became a bill and then law, a simple meeting with invested participants, and a lawyer who knew the meeting was required, changed the trajectory of the relationship between these sisters.

In 2015 our advocacy was instrumental in enacting an amendment to the Adult Protective Services Act. Through the Act, the Department on Aging maintains records concerning reports of abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and self-neglect. The amendment provides our office, as well as Public Guardians statewide, additional tools and resources to more quickly protect persons who might be abused, neglected or financially exploited.



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