The Public Guardian serves as the court-appointed attorney and guardian ad litem (GAL) for children in abuse and neglect cases. Most of these children are in the care of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Attorneys in the Juvenile Division aggressively advocate for the rights of children. In several cases, the Public Guardian has successfully sued for money damages for children who were harmed in foster care. Recently, the Public Guardian settled a wrongful death action against a social service agency involving a three-year-old girl who died while in DCFS’s custody when her mentally ill father poured gasoline on her and her six-year-old brother and set them on fire. The brother survived but suffered burns over 40% of his body.

Child victims of abuse often need intensive mental health services to address their past trauma. Far too often, these children are denied essential services. At times, children in DCFS care are (continued on page 3)
Throughout Cook County, as the “Baby Boom” generation ages and the number of elderly residents grows, more seniors are becoming victims of financial exploitation at the hands of people entrusted to provide them care. The Public Guardian protects seniors who were financially exploited before they received the protections of a guardian. In such cases, once appointed the Public Guardian is aggressive in suing the exploiters to recover the money, which is then used to care for the individual. The Public Guardian has recovered more than $50 million stolen from senior citizens in Cook County over the past ten years. Roughly 40% of new cases referred to the Public Guardian include financial exploitation.

According to the United States Census Bureau, the elderly population in America will more than double between now and the year 2050, to 80 million. By that year, as many as 1 in 5 Americans could be elderly. Most of this growth should occur by 2030, when the “baby boom” generation enters their elderly years. The growth in Illinois’ aging population will more than double by 2030 with an expected 57% increase of individuals 60 years of age and older. In Cook County, over 500,000 residents are aged 60 or older, and that population increases every year.

The “oldest old” -- those aged 85 and over -- are the most rapidly growing elderly age group. The oldest old numbered 3 million in 1994, making them 10% of the elderly and just over 1% of the total population. Thanks to the aging baby boom generation, it is expected the oldest old will number 19 million in 2050. That would make them 24% of elderly Americans and 5% of all Americans.

In 2016, the most recent year for which data is publicly available, the Illinois Department on Aging received 8,290 reports of financial exploitation, more than half of the reports of abuse it saw for the entire year.

In December 2017, the Public Guardian sued an Akron, Ohio-based mega-church that coerced an elderly woman with advanced dementia who was living in a hoarded home to hand over her life savings of $340,000. When we became the woman’s guardian, we sued the church to recover the money. The case made headlines around the world. You can read more about this case here.

In September 2018, the Public Guardian was appointed as temporary guardian for Grace Watanabe, a 97-year-old woman with dementia who was forced into a Japanese internment camp during World War II. Almost immediately, the Public Guardian sued workers at a Chicago senior facility where she lived who stole her life savings of $600,000 and moved her to a safe, highly regarded nursing home. For roughly one year, staff at the prior facility cashed checks, made bank withdrawals and transferred money online without her consent. This case received national press coverage. You can read more about Ms. Watanabe’s story here.

According to Acting Public Guardian Charles Golbert, “Financial exploitation is one of the most widespread and rapidly growing problems in our society. The baby boomers are aging so there are a lot of people in this demographic. They have accumulated life savings in their retirement and they have become vulnerable.”

In appointing the Public Guardian as temporary guardian for an elderly gentleman with dementia in a complex financial exploitation case, the judge presiding gave the Public Guardian the highest imaginable compliment: that probate court judges would want the Public Guardian as their own guardian if they ever needed one. Upon appointment, the judge said: “There are older judges who have since retired who have said if anything ever happened to them, they want the Public Guardian to take care of them. They do an amazing job... [The individual under guardianship] is going to be in good hands.”
Protecting Children in Contested Divorce Cases

The Public Guardian’s Domestic Relations Division was initiated in 1988 to provide legal representation for children whose parents are involved in highly contested divorce or parentage matters. These cases are often complex and acrimonious.

Our office was appointed to represent “Vivian,” age fourteen, in a parental case. Vivian has severe mental health issues that required several psychiatric hospitalizations. Her mother had obtained an order of protection on Vivian’s behalf against her father. The Public Guardian’s assigned attorney worked with Vivian’s parents and their attorneys to develop a solid support system where Vivian feels safe and protected while receiving the treatment and services she needs.

Vivian and her parents worked hard to improve their relationships with each other. Vivian is now attending a community college with hopes of attending a four year university once her general education credits are finished. She dreams of being an author and is now writing her first mystery novel.

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Cook County Public Guardian Hosts Chinese Officials

In August 2018, the Public Guardian hosted a delegation of governmental officials and social workers from Shanghai, China visiting Chicago to study elder care and services. The delegation was part of an exchange through the Chicago Sister Cities International social services program. Sean Martin, the Assistant Deputy of the Public Guardian’s Adult Guardianship Division, serves on the official Sister Cities delegate host committee.

“I was greatly impressed that despite our cultural differences and very different systems for delivery of social services, there is great commonality in the passion for providing services for older adults who have a disability,” reflected Martin after the exchange. “We find that we all share the desire to have adults age in place with strong social supports.”

Representatives of the Public Guardian discussed with the delegation guardianship in the United States, best practices, and the innovative programs at the Public Guardian’s Office. Societal challenges regarding aging have no national boundaries, and the Public Guardian’s Office is regarded internationally as a leader in meeting the needs of such vulnerable populations.

For more information, visit us at publicguardian.org