



Florida Statewide  
Guardian ad Litem Office



*Alan F. Abramowitz,  
Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM OF RECORD

TO: All Guardian ad Litem Staff and Volunteers

FROM: Alan F. Abramowitz, Executive Director 

RE: Amended Memorandum on Child Visitation

DATE: 6/16/2020

On March 12, 2020, Governor Ron DeSantis announced that he was suspending official state travel and asked state agencies to maximize remote working and telecommuting. Given this direction, the Guardian ad Litem Program decided to authorize the use of alternate forms of visitation in lieu of face to face visitations on March 12, 2020 in order to protect our staff, volunteers, and the children we are appointed to represent. Alternate forms of visitation include but are not limited to: phone calls, video conferencing i.e. Skype, FaceTime, etc., and or applications like Facebook chat, WhatsApp, etc. In addition, face to face visits have continued to occur in situations where it was deemed necessary and determined to be in the best interests of the child in order for the Program to effectively advocate for the child during this time.

In May of 2020, the Guardian ad Litem Program established a Reopen Workgroup which was comprised of staff and volunteers throughout the State of Florida. On May 14, 2020 the Guardian ad Litem Reopen Workgroup met for the first time and created subgroups to focus on: guidelines for the reopening of local offices, best practices and guides for virtual and in person court proceedings, and recommendations on child visitation. The Workgroup provided guidance on resuming face to face visits with the children we represent and established guidelines on how to conduct a face to face visit. (See attached document as a reference.) These recommendations have been reviewed and this Memorandum incorporates their guidelines on essential visits.

Effective June 15, 2020, cases that require a visit based on the below criteria are deemed essential and do not require additional approval by the Director of Operations:

- Children appointed to the Program since March 16, 2020, or who have never had an in-person visitation with a GAL.
- Children whose placement has changed since March 16, 2020, or who have not had an in-person visitation in their new placement, including post-reunification.

- Children who will be the subject of a critical hearing within 30 days.
- Other activities deemed essential by the Circuit Director: Advocacy Teams—CAM, BIA, GAL—should conduct a thorough review of their cases and determine if additional children are in need of a priority in-person visitation. Special consideration should be given to: (1) children who are deemed to have special needs; (2) youth who have experienced a recent, significant, traumatic event or disruption; or (3) youth who have not been satisfactorily visited through virtual means. These cases need to be brought to the Circuit Director for consideration and determination as to whether a face to face in person visit is essential.

If a child meets any of the above criteria, every effort should be made to conduct an in-person visitation in a reasonable period of time by a member of the Guardian ad Litem team. The attached guidelines for an in person visit should be followed in all instances where a face to face visit is deemed essential in an effort to limit the spread of Covid-19. All visits shall be documented in Optima in a timely fashion to ensure the advocacy team has access to the most current information regarding the child and his/her needs. Once a face to face visit has been conducted, the advocacy team will need to determine if face to face contact should continue or if alternate forms of visitation can continue to be implemented while dealing with the current health pandemic for the continued safety of our children, staff and volunteers.

Alternate forms of visitation shall continue to be the preferred method of contact in all other situations unless approved by the Director of Operations. This memorandum will remain in place until further notice. Notification will be provided to staff and volunteers when the preference of face to face contact is reinstated in additional situations.



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Executive Director*

**Guardian ad Litem In-Person Visitation Guidelines**

**Updated June 15, 2020**

**Circuits may authorize in-person visitation beginning June 16, 2020 for certain children.**

Visitation should be conducted in concurrence with local and statewide Guardian ad Litem Program direction and guidance. Guidance on social distancing and other recommendations for resuming in person visitations were derived from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at <https://www.cdc.gov/> and the Governor's Reopen Task Force at <https://www.flgov.com/wp-content/uploads/covid19/Taskforce%20Report.pdf>.

If you are not aware of your counties' emergency orders, please contact your Circuit Director.

If you feel that you are in Vulnerable Population as outlined by the CDC and are concerned with conducting an in person visit on a case that an essential visit has been decided needs to occur, please consult with your Circuit Director regarding any potential alternatives in order to facilitate the visitation.

**Essential Visitation**

In-person visitation of children meeting any of the following criteria is considered essential and every effort should be made to conduct an in-person visitation in a reasonable period of time.

- Children appointed to the Program since March 16, 2020, or who have never had an in-person visitation with a GAL.
- Children whose placement has changed since March 16, 2020, or who have not had an in-person visitation in their new placement, including post-reunification.
- Children who will be the subject of a critical hearing within 30 days.
- Other activities deemed essential by the Circuit Director: Advocacy Teams—CAM, GAL Program Attorney, GAL—should conduct a thorough review of their cases and determine if additional children are in need of a priority in-person visitation. Special consideration should be given to: (1) children who are deemed to have special needs; (2) youth who have experienced a recent, significant, traumatic event or disruption; or

(3) youth who have not been satisfactorily visited through virtual means. These cases need to be brought to the Circuit Director for consideration and determination as to whether a face to face in person visit is essential.

### **In-person Visitation**

In-person visitation—conducted by a volunteer GAL or a staff GAL--may occur at the child's placement using the following practices:

#### **Before the visit:**

- Visitation should be scheduled with the caregiver prior to arriving. No unannounced visitation should be conducted at this time.
- The GAL should explain to the caregiver the visitation practices they will employ and make sure the caregiver is in agreement. This includes social distancing practices, use of masks, and any other precautionary measures if applicable.
- Before conducting a visit, the GAL should ask the caregiver the following questions:
  - Have you or anyone in your home experienced any Covid-related symptoms in the past 14 days to include persistent cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, or gastrointestinal problems including nausea, vomiting or diarrhea?
  - Have you or anyone in your home traveled outside of the state of Florida in the past 14 days?
  - Have you or anyone in your home tested positive for Covid 19 or awaiting results from a test?
  - Have you or anyone in your home been in close proximity to anyone who would be affirmative for any of the above?
- If the answer to any of these questions is affirmative, an in-person visit should not be conducted.
- If the GAL would answer affirmatively to any of these questions, they must not conduct an in-person visit.
- If the caregiver or child needs to be reassured about the safety of the visitation, please go over GAL procedure (attached).

#### **During the visit:**

- In-person visitation should take place outside of the physical home whenever possible. It is not recommended to conduct in-person visitation inside the home unless it is deemed essential. (See rules for in home visitations.)
- Visitation should be limited to the amount of time necessary to conduct essential information-gathering activities. Lengthy interactions that are more social in nature

should be kept to a minimum at this time. GALs should be mindful of outside temperatures and avoid prolonged exposure to heat for themselves and the children.

- GALs must utilize safe social-distancing practices for the duration of the visit. This includes keeping an approximate 6 feet of distance between themselves and the visit participants.
- If a caregiver or child requests the GAL use a mask or gloves, then this request should be accommodated by the visiting team member.

**After the visit:**

- GALs should document their in-person visitations in Optima on the same day. This can assist the GAL and the Program should there ever be an instance where a person involved in the visit later becomes ill or tests positive for Covid 19.

**In-person Visitation at other Locations**

At this time, in-person visitation should not be conducted at any location other than the child's home. Visitation at childcare centers and similar locations should not be conducted unless specifically approved by the Circuit Director. The facility's rules on visitation must be followed if approved.

**In-person Visitation inside a Child's Home**

At this time, in-person visitation should be conducted outside of the home in an open-air environment using safe social-distancing practices (at least 6ft of distance) and taking proper precautions. The Advocacy Team should determine if it is necessary for a GAL to enter the child's home to conduct a visit. If it is necessary to conduct a visit inside a child's home, the GAL should take the following precautions.

- Before entering the home, the GAL should explain to the caregiver that they will practice social distancing (maintain 6ft of distance). GALs should also discuss the use of masks with the caregiver before entering the home. GALs should utilize facial coverings and avoid contact with any individuals or commonly touched physical surfaces (counters, cabinets, refrigerators, doorknobs, etc.). If a caregiver or child requests the GAL use a mask and the GAL is not comfortable or willing to do so, the visitation should not occur inside of the home.
- GALs conducting visits inside of the home should do so for only as long as absolutely necessary to determine the information that was deemed essential.

### **Use of Masks during Visits**

- For in-person visitation conducted, the GAL should explain to the caregiver that they will practice social distancing (at least 6 ft. of distance) prior to the visit. GALs should also discuss the use of masks with the caregiver before the visit. If a caregiver or child requests the GAL use a mask, then this request should be accommodated by the visiting team member.
- GALs may use their own masks, or the facial covering provided by the GALP. Masks should be clean before the in person visit. GALs who do not have a reusable facial cover may use a clean disposable mask instead. GALs who use facial coverings should make all efforts not to touch their faces or any surfaces during the time they are conducting the visit.

### **Before and After the Visit**

Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.

If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

### **What to do if you become symptomatic or test positive for Covid 19**

- If you become symptomatic or test positive for Covid 19, do not conduct an in-person visitation. If you have conducted an in-person visit within the last 14 days, notify your CAM, who will notify your Circuit Director. Your Circuit Director will advise the Advocacy Team as to when and how to make notifications to anyone you may have come in contact with during GAL-sanctioned activities.

### **Child Transportation**

GALP staff and volunteers should generally not transport children at this time. Transportation in exceptional circumstances that serve the child's safety or best interests may be approved by the Circuit Director.

### **Continued Use of Remote Visits**

Circuits are encouraged to continue the use of remote visits as the preferred method of child visitation. If a child does not meet the criteria for essential visits, or if the Advocacy Team

determines that the child can be safely and adequately visited through remote means, in-person visitation is discouraged at this time.

Additionally, children who meet the priority contact criteria in a given month will not necessarily require monthly in-person visitation. Advocacy Teams should determine whether continued in-person visitation is essential for these children on an ongoing basis.

### **Out of Circuit Child Visitation**

Visitation of children with an Out of County (OOC) Co-GAL shall continue remotely. Remote visitation shall be conducted by the advocacy team member who has the closest relationship with the child to ensure that the child remains connected to a significant adult in their life. If it is determined by either the Sending or Receiving Circuit that an in-person visitation is a priority, using the criteria prescribed for general in-person visitation, the circuits shall hold a staffing to determine if and when an in-person visitation is appropriate.

Home circuits should send OOC cases to other circuits as per our OOC procedure. Although the receiving circuit understands they will not necessarily be visiting the child in person, it will give the circuit the opportunity to assign and review the case as per their usual protocol.

Communication between sending and receiving circuits should happen as usual. This will allow a seamless transition when we go back to in-person visitation. Also, this will avoid confusion when our usual procedures are resumed.

### **Travel Submissions**

All travel for face to face visitation should be submitted timely according to our travel guidelines. Prior to submitting travel in STMS (staff) and to the State Office (volunteers), the traveler should email a list of the essential visits that were conducted to their supervisor. A copy of the supervisor's acknowledgment of the visits should be attached to the traveler's travel form. The essential qualifications are outlined in the Memorandum on Visitation dated 6/16/20. Case initials instead of case identifying information should be used when indicating which cases required a visit.