What Good Looks Like

The practices of a guardian ad litem done well.

Every paper in this series before this one has described a structure: what Georgia's guardian ad litem (GAL) system lacks — a public registry of who serves, a training floor, an oversight home. This paper describes a practice. The standard for good GAL work is not a mystery and it is not this project's invention. It is written down — in Georgia's own court rule, in the published rules of other states, and in the national practice guidelines of the profession itself. And it is met, every week, by GALs whose names this project will never know, in cases this project will never see. This paper names the practices that distinguish that work, ties each one to the published source that states it, and argues the point the whole series has been building toward: reform does not mean inventing a standard. It means making the existing standard universal, visible, and checkable — so that good practice stops depending on individual character alone.

What this paper is — and is not

This is a systems paper from a grassroots project, written anonymously by design. It names no individual — in praise any more than in criticism — describes no family's case. Every practice described is tied to a statute, a court rule, or a published guideline listed in the Sources, each opened and read by the project. Where a national guideline is written for a neighboring role — a custody evaluator, a lawyer for a child — the paper says so and uses it only for the principle that transfers. The standing frame of this project applies in full: the problem this series documents is rogue practice and missing oversight, not the GAL role itself. Good GALs exist. This paper is about what they do.

1 · Why a paper about good practice

A parent meeting a GAL for the first time usually has no way to tell good work from poor work. The role is unfamiliar, the rule that governs it is little known, and the appointment order rarely explains what the family should expect. That information gap harms everyone in the case. It harms the parent, who cannot recognize a departure from the standard while there is still time to raise it. It harms the court, which receives reports of very different depth under the same title. And it harms the conscientious GAL, whose careful work is indistinguishable — on any public record Georgia keeps — from careless work done under the same title.

The remedy begins with stating the standard plainly. Georgia's Uniform Superior Court Rule 24.9, which governs GALs in custody cases, is more specific than most parents are ever told. It defines the role ("represent the best interests of the child"; the GAL "holds a position of trust" and "must exercise due diligence"), grants the investigation its tools, prescribes the written report's contents, limits ex parte communication with the court, and conditions fees on an application the parties can be heard on. Other states' published rules go further in the same directions. The national guidelines — the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts' 2022 *Guidelines for Parenting Plan Evaluations* and the American Bar Association's *Standards of Practice for Lawyers Representing Children in Custody Cases* — state the working principles: objectivity, transparency, multiple sources, disclosed limits, one role at a time. What follows is those documents, organized the way a family actually experiences a GAL's work.

2 · The investigation: see it, read it, check it

Both homes, actually seen. The appointment itself gives a Georgia GAL "the right to examine any residence wherein any person seeking custody or visitation rights proposes to house the minor child" (Rule 24.9(4)). Good practice spends that access evenly: each proposed home visited, the child observed in each household, daily life — sleeping, eating, homework, comfort — seen where it happens rather than reconstructed from one side's account. Ohio's Rule 48 states the same duty as a minimum responsibility: observe the child with each parent or custodian, and visit the child at the residence or proposed residence. Indiana's 2025 Guidelines make in-person contact with the child mandatory, not customary. Symmetry is not a favor a GAL does one parent; it is how an investigation earns the name.

The people around the child, interviewed. Rule 24.9(4) entitles the GAL to participate in all proceedings concerning the child and to inspect the records the rule reaches. Ohio's minimum list names the collateral circle expressly: the parties, others with relevant knowledge, school personnel, medical and mental-health providers, and child-protection workers. Good practice works that circle rather than sampling it — and follows up when a source contradicts another, instead of reporting the first account received.

The records, actually read. The rule gives the GAL access to court records in any jurisdiction, agency and DFCS records, and — on release or court order — school, medical, mental-health, and financial records (Rule 24.9(4)–(5)). The AFCC's guidelines for the neighboring evaluator role state the method principle: conclusions rest on multiple, diverse methods and multiple sources, gathered in a methodologically balanced way — no single narrative, including a parent's, carries the report by itself. A good GAL's file shows pleadings read, records obtained, and gaps pursued or explained.

Diligence, in the rule's own word. Rule 24.9(3) requires "due diligence in the performance of his/her duties." In practice that means the investigation is finished before the recommendation is formed, deadlines in the appointment order are met, and new information arriving late is incorporated or its exclusion explained — not that the report was written first and the file assembled around it.

3 · The child's voice: carried honestly, judged independently

The hardest duty in the role is built into it. A GAL represents the child's **best interests**, which are not always the child's stated wishes. Good practice refuses to collapse the two in either direction — the child is neither a mascot for the GAL's conclusion nor a silent file in their own case.

Meet the child, in a way the child can use. Ohio's rule requires interviewing the child, when age and developmentally appropriate, with no parent or custodian present, and ascertaining the child's wishes and concerns. The ABA standards require the lawyer for a child to meet the child and adapt all communication to the child's age, development, culture, and language — explaining the process in terms the child can understand, and asking non-suggestive questions. The setting matters: a child interviewed in a parent's hallway has not been interviewed in any sense that protects what the child says.

Report the wishes as the child's — and the judgment as the GAL's. Ohio's rule requires a GAL who becomes aware that the recommendation differs from the child's wishes to notify the court in writing. That single requirement is the honest-carrying principle in rule form: the child's views enter the record in the child's own terms, and where the GAL's independent judgment parts from them, the parting is visible and the reasons are stated. A child who was heard can recognize themselves in the report, even when the outcome is not what they asked for. Children remember whether they were heard long after they forget the outcome.

Watch for the pressures on the voice. The ABA commentary cautions that a child's stated views may vary over time or reflect fear, intimidation, or manipulation, and directs the lawyer to understand the child's needs and wishes in full context. Good practice holds both truths at once: the child's words are evidence to be carried faithfully, and evidence to be weighed — never a script to be repeated and never a voice to be discarded because it is inconvenient.

In dependency cases, Georgia's statute builds a related protection directly: O.C.G.A. § 15-11-104 provides for the child to have both a GAL for best interests and, where the roles would diverge, an attorney for the child's expressed interests — and Georgia's Court of Appeals has described a court separating the roles and appointing separate GALs when a recommendation and an older child's stated desire came into potential conflict (*In the Interest of A.A.*, A26A0324 (2026), as summarized in this project's legislation reference). Two voices, honestly separated, is a structure Georgia already knows.

4 · Neutrality and conflicts: one role, openly held

Independence — including its appearance. Ohio's rule requires the GAL to "maintain independence, objectivity and fairness as well as the appearance of fairness" in dealings with parties and professionals, in and out of the courtroom. The AFCC's guiding principles state the same value for evaluators: work that is "independent, impartial, free of material conflicts of interest, fact-based, methodologically balanced, and culturally informed." A good GAL's even-handedness is visible in the file: comparable time and comparable skepticism for both households.

No ex parte merits communication with the court. Rule 24.9(8)(f) bars ex parte communication with the court except in an emergency concerning the child's welfare, or on consent — and requires that an emergency be disclosed to the parties immediately, with a hearing available. Ohio's rule states the same bar in terms. Good practice treats the exception as the rule states it: emergencies only, disclosed at once, never a channel for argument.

One role at a time — and conflicts disclosed or declined. Georgia's rule makes the custody GAL the court's witness: the GAL testifies to the investigation and recommendation and "shall not be allowed to question witnesses or present argument, absent exceptional circumstances and upon express approval of the Court" (Rule 24.9(7)). The ABA standards are blunt about dual roles for lawyers: a lawyer for a child should not play any other role in the case, and should accept an appointment only with a full understanding of its terms — declining it, or asking the court to clarify or change terms that conflict with the lawyer's duties. The AFCC guidelines likewise require avoiding multiple relationships and disclosing potential conflicts of interest or role conflicts. Ohio's rule requires the GAL to avoid any actual or apparent conflict arising from relationships or activities connected to the case. In dependency cases, § 15-11-104 builds the same protection structurally, separating the GAL role from the child's-attorney role where the two would conflict. The good-practice form is simple: say what the role is, hold only that role, disclose anything that touches it, and step aside when the conflict is real.

Respect for the family's diversity. Rule 24.9(3) directs the GAL to be "respectful of, and… educated concerning, cultural and economic diversity" relevant to assessing the child's interests, and Rule 24.9(2) lists recognition of that diversity among the training subjects. Good practice treats a family's culture, faith, language, and economics as context to understand — never as evidence in themselves.

5 · The report: shows its sources, separates fact from judgment, arrives in time

Contents the rule already prescribes. Rule 24.9(6)(a): the report "shall summarize the GAL's investigation, including identifying all sources the GAL contacted or relied upon," and "shall offer recommendations… and the reasons supporting those recommendations." A report built to that text lets any reader — judge, parent, reviewer — see who was talked to, what was observed, what was relayed by someone else, and why the recommendation follows. That is the single most consequential practice in this paper, because a report that shows its working can be weighed, answered, and credited; a report that asserts cannot.

Fact, observation, relay, and opinion — labeled as what they are. The AFCC guidelines require evaluators to articulate the bases for opinions expressed, to present information and opinions distinctly, and to state the adequacy of the data and the limitations on the opinions it supports. Transferred to the GAL's report, the discipline is: firsthand observation stated as observation; second-hand accounts attributed to their source; inference marked as inference; and the recommendation's reasoning laid out so a reader can follow it — and test it. Where information could not be obtained, the report says so, rather than filling the gap silently.

Served on all parties, in time to matter. Rule 24.9(6) directs the report to the parties or their counsel and to the court, and Rule 24.9(8)(b) requires a GAL who files motions or pleadings to "promptly serve all parties." Ohio's rule fixes the timing in days: the report is filed and shared with all parties at least seven days before the hearing. A report that arrives too late to be answered has not been served in any sense that serves the court. And the rule's own limit keeps the report in proportion: the recommendations "are not a substitute for the court's independent discretion and judgment" (Rule 24.9(6)) — a good GAL writes an input the court can test, and testifies to it, rather than a verdict the court is asked to ratify.

Corrections on the record. Investigations surface errors — a wrong date, a misattributed statement, a record received after filing. Good practice corrects them the way the report was made: in writing, to all parties and the court, promptly. A corrected report is not a weakened one; it is the visible proof that the standard is accuracy rather than advocacy.

6 · Money and time: proportionate, itemized, moving toward resolution

Fees on application, with a hearing. Rule 24.9(8)(g) places the amount and apportionment of fees in the court's discretion, and provides that fee requests "shall be considered, upon application properly served upon the parties and after an opportunity to be heard." Connecticut's 2014 reforms added mandatory fee disclosure and periodic court review of GAL work and fees, and Washington's registry system gives the parties each listed GAL's hourly rate in advance, with the background record. The practices converge: the rate is known early, the bill is itemized to the work actually done, extraordinary expense is approved in advance (as Rule 24.9(8)(g) itself provides for extensive travel), and the total stays proportionate to the questions the court actually asked.

Time spent where it resolves. A GAL's hours are a family's money and a child's waiting. Good practice spends them on the investigation the court ordered — interviews, records, observation, the report — and uses the role's settlement-facing duties as the rule frames them: notice of and participation in proceedings, the right to be heard on a proposed settlement before the court approves it (Rule 24.9(8)(c)–(d)), and work that narrows the dispute where narrowing serves the child. The measure of the billing is whether the case is closer to a durable answer because the GAL was in it.

7 · Communication: the role explained at the start, the GAL reachable throughout

Explain the role — to the child and to both parents — at the beginning. The ABA standards make explaining the role an express duty for the best-interests attorney, and require informing the

child about the proceedings and the lawyer's responsibilities in developmentally appropriate terms. The AFCC guidelines require written information to the parties about the process and a review of policies and procedures at the outset. Transferred to GAL practice: at the first contact, the family hears what the GAL is and is not — not a parent's advocate, not the child's lawyer in the client-directed sense, not the judge — what the investigation will involve, how information given to the GAL may be used, and how the GAL can be reached. Most distrust of GALs is born in that first silence; most of it is preventable there.

Reachable, even-handedly. Good practice returns communications from both sides on comparable terms, keeps appointments, gives notice of proceedings as the rule contemplates, and tells the parties promptly when something material changes — a deadline moving, a record arriving, an emergency raised with the court under Rule 24.9(8)(f). None of this requires a rule. All of it is visible in the file when it happens, and conspicuous when it does not.

8 · Training and humility: qualified for this case, current, and within the role's limits

Trained in what the rule lists. Rule 24.9(2) names the subjects: domestic-relations law and procedure, the best-interests standard, courtroom procedure, the GAL's role and ethics, recognizing a child's best interests, investigation methods, cultural and economic diversity, child development, interviewing and communicating with children, family dynamics, domestic violence and substance abuse, recognizing child abuse, and available services. Georgia's rule sets the topics but no statewide minimum hours and no continuing education; the circuits provide or approve the training. Other systems set the floor in numbers — Ohio: pre-service training and annual continuing education to stay qualified for appointment; Indiana (2025): 12 hours initially and 6 hours a year, with background checks, inside a statewide registry; Connecticut: completion of the Practice Book training as the condition of appearing on the published list at all; Georgia's own dependency side: state-approved pre-appointment training for attorney GALs under § 15-11-104(f), and supervised CASA volunteers who complete a full pre-service curriculum and continuing education every year. Good practice does not wait for a floor to be set: the GAL takes the training the subjects require, repeats it, and can say what it was.

Competence for this case — or a declination. The ABA standards direct a lawyer to accept an appointment only with a full understanding of the issues and functions, and the AFCC treats the work as a specialization requiring case-specific competence. A case turning on an infant's attachment, a teenager's stated preference, domestic violence, or a child's medical complexity asks different things of the investigator. Good practice matches the appointment to the competence — and where it does not match, says so at the start, when the court can still appoint differently, rather than at the hearing.

Knows the limits, and states them. The AFCC guidelines require articulation of limitations and recognition of the scope of the appointment; Rule 24.9 itself respects scope — confidential records of a party are available only on that party's release or court order (Rule 24.9(5)), and the report is the court's input, not its decision. A good GAL works inside the appointment order, asks the court when a step exceeds it, and tells the court plainly when a question cannot responsibly be answered on the information available. Humility, in this role, is not modesty. It is accuracy about what an investigation can and cannot establish — and it is what makes the rest of the report believable.

9 · What these practices make possible

Read together, the practices above describe a role a family can understand, a court can test, and a system can stand behind. They are also — this is the bridge to everything else this project publishes — exactly the practices a structure can verify. A registry (Paper No. 5) makes the trained,

background-checked, currently qualified GAL findable, and makes "who serves" a public fact rather than a rumor. A training floor makes Section 8's subjects a condition of appointment rather than a hope. An oversight home — Indiana's complaint review under its Guidelines, Utah's Oversight Committee and its dedicated Complaints rule (effective June 22, 2026), Ohio's complaint file kept in the GAL's own record, Washington's grievance procedures with consequences that travel between counties — gives Sections 2 through 7 somewhere to be checked against, by someone other than the judge who made the appointment.

None of that diminishes the GALs who already work this way. It does the opposite. Today, a conscientious Georgia GAL's good work leaves no public trace a parent, a legislator, or the GAL herself or himself can point to: no registry entry showing current training, no published standard the report can be measured against, no count in which good outcomes register. The structure this project asks for is how good practice stops depending on individual character — and how the people who practice it well finally get the one thing the current system cannot give them: a record that says so.

Appendix · A parent's checklist: signs your GAL is doing the job well

A positive counterpart to this project's *Parent's Guide*. No single item proves anything; the pattern is the point. Each item is drawn from the sections above.

- The GAL explained the role at the start — what they are, what they are not, what the investigation involves, and how to reach them. (§7)
- Your home was visited, and so was the other proposed home; the child was observed in each. (§2)
- The child was met with, more than once if the case ran long, in a setting where the child could speak freely. (§3)
- Teachers, doctors, counselors, or others who know the child were contacted — not only the people one side suggested. (§2)
- Records were requested and read; you were told what was being reviewed. (§2)
- Both parents received comparable time, comparable questions, and comparable follow-up. (§4)
- The GAL's questions tested both sides' accounts, including the account of the parent the recommendation eventually favored. (§§2, 4)
- Anything the GAL raised with the court outside a hearing was disclosed to both sides. (§4)
- The child's own views appear in the report in the child's terms — and if the recommendation differs from them, the report says so and gives reasons. (§3)
- The report names its sources, separates what the GAL saw from what others said, and gives reasons for each recommendation. (§5)
- The report reached both sides in time to read and answer it before the hearing. (§5)
- When something in the report was wrong, the correction came in writing, to everyone. (§5)
- The rate was known early; bills were itemized; the total fits the work the court ordered. (§6)
- Calls and messages from both sides were returned on comparable terms. (§7)
- The GAL could say what training they had completed for this work — and stayed within the appointment's scope, asking the court when a step went beyond it. (§8)

If you have seen this pattern — as a parent or as a professional — the project's anonymous surveys exist to count it. Good work, counted, is evidence too.

Help build the record

The Georgia GAL Accountability Project is a grassroots effort to document how guardians ad litem work across Georgia — and to press for a system that is accountable and fair.

Two kinds of help matter most right now:

- **Answer a survey.** The project runs separate anonymous surveys for parents who have had a GAL in a Georgia case and for professionals who work alongside GALs. Surveys carry no phone number and ask for no child's name or case details. The surveys ask for good experiences as well as bad — this paper is the reason why.
- **Share an experience — through the anonymous surveys.** Experiences reach this project only through its anonymous surveys, which ask for no name, no email address, and nothing that identifies a child. The project does not accept accounts by email. Patterns are the point; no single story is published as fact on its own.

Contact: georgiagalreform@gmail.com

Project email only. This paper was published anonymously by the project; no individual is named as its author, and no family's case is described in it.

A note on method — and on limits

The Georgia material is Uniform Superior Court Rule 24.9, read in full in the Supreme Court of Georgia's April 11, 2005 adopting order as posted by the Court, and O.C.G.A. § 15-11-104 as described in this project's Georgia GAL Training and Legislation Reference; no amendment to Rule 24.9 was found in the project's November 2026 sweep, and the rule's current text should be confirmed before reliance. The Ohio material is Rules of Superintendence Rule 48 as summarized in this project's Paper No. 2 and Paper No. 5 from the Supreme Court of Ohio's published rule, and in the federal Child Welfare Information Gateway's Ohio summary of Rule 48.03. The Indiana, Utah, Washington, and Connecticut items are from the project's November 2026 legislation sweep of official sources, and Papers No. 2 and 5. The AFCC material is the *Guidelines for Parenting Plan Evaluations in Family Law Cases* (approved May 11, 2022), read directly: its guiding principles and values, its scope and enforcement statements, and its section structure. Those guidelines are written for parenting-plan evaluators — a neighboring, court-appointed neutral role — not for GALs; this paper uses them only for principles the document itself frames as general to neutral court-appointed work (objectivity, transparency, multiple methods, role clarity, stated limitations), and says so wherever the transfer matters. The ABA material is the Family Law Section's *Standards of Practice for Lawyers Representing Children in Custody Cases* (2003), read directly; the ABA standards deliberately do not use the term "guardian ad litem" and address lawyers acting as a child's attorney or best-interests attorney, so they are used here only for the duties that transfer to any court-appointed representative of a child's interests — explaining the role, meeting the child appropriately, independence, single-role discipline, and accepting only appointments one is qualified and able to perform. No AFCC guideline written specifically for guardians ad litem was located and read for this paper; if one is identified, a future revision will take it up on its own text. No claim is made about the practice of any individual GAL, in Georgia or anywhere else: this paper describes published standards and the practices they define, and the project's surveys — not this paper — are where experience, good and bad, is recorded.

Sources

• Georgia Uniform Superior Court Rule 24.9, "Appointment, Qualification and Role of a Guardian Ad Litem" — Supreme Court of Georgia adopting order, April 11, 2005 (full text read): gasupreme.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/un_sup_ru_24_9and25_E.pdf

• O.C.G.A. § 15-11-104 (GAL and CASA appointment in dependency; dual appointment; OCA training under subsection (f); removal under subsection (h)) — as set out in the project's Georgia GAL Training and Legislation Reference (project files, November 4–5, 2026).

• *In the Interest of A.A.*, A26A0324 (Ga. Ct. App. Apr. 24, 2026) — the GAL-conflict handling described in Section 3, as summarized from the full opinion in the project's legislation reference.

• Supreme Court of Ohio, Rules of Superintendence, Rule 48 (GAL responsibilities under 48.03, report timing, public list under 48.07(A)) — as read for Papers No. 2 and No. 5 (project files); U.S. Children's Bureau, Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Representation of Children in Child Abuse and Neglect Proceedings — Ohio" (Rule 48.03 duties summary): childwelfare.gov

• Indiana Supreme Court, *Guardian Ad Litem Guidelines for Civil Family Law Cases* (order, Cause No. 24S-MS-1, Oct. 17, 2024; effective Jan. 1, 2025) — eligibility, background checks, 12 hours initial + 6 hours annual training, mandatory in-person contact with the child, statewide registry, complaint review: in.gov/courts/iocs/gal/

• Utah Code of Judicial Administration Rules 4-906 to 4-906.03, including Rule 4-906.03 (Complaints) (effective June 22, 2026), and Utah HB 372 (2026) (GAL Oversight Committee) — project's November 2026 legislation sweep, official sources: le.utah.gov; legacy.utcourts.gov

• Washington RCW 26.12.177 and the Title 26 GAL registry framework (rotational registry, three names with background record including hourly rate, training before appointment as amended by HB 1620 (2025)) — project's November 2026 legislation sweep: law.justia.com/codes/washington/title-26/chapter-26-12/section-26-12-177/

• Connecticut Practice Book §§ 25-62 and 25-62A (training as the condition of the published GAL/AMC list), Public Act 14-3 (code of conduct, fee disclosure, periodic review, Standing Committee complaint process) — as read for Papers No. 2 and No. 5 (project files).

• Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, *Guidelines for Parenting Plan Evaluations in Family Law Cases* (approved by the AFCC Board of Directors, May 11, 2022) — guiding principles and values; Sections 3 (multiple relationships and role conflicts), 4 (communication; written information to the parties; ex parte communications), 5 (record-keeping), 6 (data gathering; multiple methods; methodological balance), 11 (presentation of data; articulation of bases, adequacy, and limitations): afccnet.org, Resource Center / Practice Guidelines.

• American Bar Association, Family Law Section, *Standards of Practice for Lawyers Representing Children in Custody Cases* (approved by the Family Law Section Council, May 2, 2003) — Part III duties of all lawyers for children (accepting appointment, single role, independence, meeting with the child, pretrial investigation) and Part V (best-interests attorney: explaining role, investigations, advocating best interests): americanbar.org

• Project papers and research files, November 4–5, 2026: Paper No. 2, *How Other States Do It*; Paper No. 5, *The Public's Professionals*; Paper No. 6, *The Law That Wasn't*; Georgia GAL Training and Legislation Reference; Content Bank for New Audiences (items B-10, B-11, B-12) — Georgia GAL Accountability Project files.

© November 2026 Georgia GAL Accountability Project. Share freely with attribution to the project. This paper is general information about a court system, not legal advice about any case.

Georgia GAL Accountability Project — georgiagalreform@gmail.com