The Missing Ledger

Georgia's Guardian ad Litem Accountability Gap

Ask a simple question — Who serves as a guardian ad litem in Georgia, how much are they paid, and what happens when a parent complains? — and the state cannot answer it. Not because the answer is hidden in one office. Because, for custody cases, no one keeps the ledger at all.

A guardian ad litem (GAL) is appointed by a court to investigate a family and recommend what is in a child's best interest in a custody case. The recommendation can shape where a child lives, when a parent sees that child, and what a family must do next. It is one of the most consequential roles in family court — and in Georgia it operates without a registry, without a published pay rule for custody cases, and without any public count of complaints or discipline.

This paper makes one narrow, documented point: the first accountability problem is a records problem. Georgia does not need to guess whether its GAL system is working. It needs to start counting.

What this paper is — and is not

This is a systems paper from a grassroots project, written anonymously by design. It names no family, describes no individual case, and accuses no individual GAL of misconduct. Every factual claim is tied to a rule, a statute, or a published source listed in the Sources. Where the public record does not exist, the paper says so — that absence is the finding.

The gap in one page

- **Who is eligible to serve — No list.** Each judge appoints at discretion under Uniform Superior Court Rule 24.9. No statewide registry or panel.
- **Who was appointed, and how often — Not counted.** No published roster or appointment count anywhere in the state.
- **What the work pays — No rate, no cap.** Rule 24.9(8)(g) leaves the amount and the split between parents entirely to the judge.
- **What training is required — No floor in the rule.** No license, degree, or minimum hours in Rule 24.9; training is whatever the circuit provides or approves.
- **Complaints and outcomes — No count.** No GAL-specific intake body and no published complaint or discipline statistics.
- **Whether the same few people get most appointments — Unknowable.** Nobody keeps the list from which concentration could be measured.

1 · Appointment without a registry

Rule 24.9(1) gives the appointing superior court judge discretion to appoint any person as a GAL, so long as that person "has been trained as a GAL or is otherwise familiar with the role," and allows selection "through an intermediary." The rule creates no registry, no panel, and no published list.

The Georgia Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) tells prospective GALs to contact the chief judge's staff or the clerk in their circuit to ask about training — a description that matches how appointments actually work: inside chambers, circuit by circuit, with nothing published for parents, researchers, or legislators to check.

Targeted searches of Georgia courts' public websites in November 2026 found judge directories and program pages, but no GAL roster, panel list, or appointment list. That is a negative search result, not proof that no internal list exists somewhere. It is proof of something almost as important: a parent cannot find out, from any public source, who Georgia's GALs are.

The only published scale figures are for the institutional channels around the private-appointment system:

- **Statewide CASA picture:** published FY2025 figures report 2,660 volunteers serving 8,167 children, covering 48.9% of children in foster care — a reminder that even the organized volunteer system reaches only about half the children it exists for.

None of those figures answers the custody question. How many private GALs serve in Georgia custody cases? What share of the local family-law bar do they represent? Does a small group receive most appointments? From published sources, none of that is calculable — anywhere in the state.

When a newspaper counted in the Augusta circuit in 2013, it found three guardians holding 63% of 255 custody-expert cases in ten months. Concentration like that is only visible when someone counts. In Georgia, no one is assigned to count.

One recent law counts a small piece of the picture. SB 401 (2024) requires collection of GAL appointment dates in dependency foster-care cases, with a county-organized report to the General Assembly. No public copy of that report has been located, and custody cases — the subject of this paper — are not in it.

2 · What the published record shows — and what it cannot

Where Georgia's GAL arrangements can be read at all, they are read in fragments — a published local policy here, a published contract there — because no statewide record exists to read instead.

One Georgia circuit has published its price. The Tallapoosa Circuit's published standing order and indigent-attorney compensation policy expressly covers an attorney appointed "as a guardian ad litem to a child," with a $75-per-hour in-court rate schedule and voucher rules — proof that a Georgia circuit can publish a GAL rate when it chooses to.

And published county board minutes in Georgia record a Juvenile Court "Guardian Ad Litem / Attorney Contract" paying one attorney $44,135 per year (Whitfield County Board of Commissioners minutes, January 12, 2026). Some Georgia courts' GAL arrangements are published in documents like these. Most are not — and no source publishes them together.

Read together, the fragments do not show wrongdoing. They show local arrangements kept in different forms — a published policy, a published contract, salaried offices, volunteers — with no common ledger above them. A statewide total built from records like these would be a guess wearing a spreadsheet's clothes.

3 · Money without a published price

Georgia runs two different pay systems under one title, and only one of them is visible.

In Superior Court custody cases, the parents pay. Rule 24.9(8)(g) states: "It shall be within the Court's discretion to determine the amount of fees awarded to the GAL, and how payment of the fees shall be apportioned between the parties." The rule sets no hourly rate, no cap, and no billing schedule — and it gives the GAL authority to bring a contempt action to recover court-ordered fees. The only "rates" in public view are law-firm marketing pages, which disagree with each other, variously claiming Georgia GAL fees begin around $200, $300–$400, or $350 or more per hour. Marketing copy is not a fee

schedule, and this paper does not present it as one.

In Juvenile Court dependency cases, the county pays. Under O.C.G.A. § 15-11-36(a)(4), "reasonable compensation for a guardian ad litem" is a charge on county funds, with possible reimbursement from a parent who is financially able to pay. In practice, that work is done in many places by salaried child-advocacy attorneys and by unpaid CASA volunteers, not by hourly-billing private appointees.

No study was found that proves hourly GAL billing causes anyone to prolong a case, and this paper does not claim it does. What the record does support is simpler: a parent ordered to pay for a GAL in a Georgia custody case is entitled, under the rule, to no published rate, no cap, and no standard statement of what the work should cost. Kentucky legislative testimony shows where uncounted systems can lead — about 22 attorneys statewide grossed over $70,000 from GAL fees in a year, and one received nearly $150,000, against an average of about $650 per case. Georgia cannot say whether anything similar happens here, because Georgia does not total the figures.

4 · Complaints that leave no count

A parent who believes a GAL in a custody case acted improperly has, by the Office of the Child Advocate's own guidance, three doors:

- the judge who appointed the GAL — who is also the only person who can remove that GAL;
- the State Bar of Georgia — for attorney GALs only, although Superior Court GAL service does not itself require Bar membership; or
- the CASA program — for CASA volunteers only.

There is no intake office, no investigation standard, and no ombudsman for custody cases. Georgia's Child Advocate covers children in the DFCS system; a child in a private custody dispute has no equivalent.

Even the doors that exist keep no public tally. No published Georgia decision was found disciplining an attorney for conduct as a GAL. Bar grievances are confidential, dismissed grievances are destroyed after a year, and public discipline is published by lawyer name only, with no field identifying the GAL role — so a GAL-related sanction, if one occurred, could not be recognized as one from the public record. No rule requires an appointing judge to check a GAL's Bar record, and nothing in the rule disqualifies a disciplined attorney from appointment.

The liability shield belongs in the same entry, stated as the Code states it. The shield is longstanding: O.C.G.A. § 19-9-3(a)(7) has long provided that neither a custody evaluator nor a GAL is subject to civil liability for an act or failure to act in the role unless it was in bad faith. In 2025, House Bill 253 ("Ethan's Law") would have restated that sentence; the bill stalled and died without enactment, as this project's Paper No. 6 sets out. Protection stands in the Code, where it has stood for years, while oversight — who serves, who complains, what happens — remains unaddressed and uncounted.

The training floor belongs in the same entry. Rule 24.9 requires no law license, no degree, and no minimum training hours. In dependency cases, by contrast, CASA volunteers work under supervision with pre-service training and continuing education — performing the same kinds of tasks (home visits, interviews, records) that custody GALs perform without that structure. The difference is design, not necessity.

5 · Three states that keep a ledger

Three states each keep a piece of the ledger Georgia is missing — on paper, where parents and legislators can read it.

• **Minnesota.** Structure: an independent State GAL Board (Minn. Stat. § 480.35); GALs are salaried Board employees, plus volunteers. Pay, published: FY 2026–27 biennial budget $51.24 million; starting GAL pay about $23.12/hour in January 2025 testimony. Counts, published: required, not yet located.

• **Washington.** Structure: county rotational registries; courts must give parties three names with background information, including the hourly rate; each party may strike one. Pay, published: county-pay examples of $75/hour, capped at 30 hours (Spokane, San Juan); private rates reported up to $300/hour. Counts, published: only via journalism.

• **Connecticut.** Structure: a published eligible list for family-court GALs, a standing committee, a complaint form, and written removal procedures. Pay, published: state-paid work advertised for FY 2027 at a flat $831 per assignment plus $109/hour. Counts, published: none found.

• **Georgia.** Structure: judge-by-judge appointment under Rule 24.9 — no registry, board, or list. Pay: custody, no rate or cap in the rule; dependency, county funds under § 15-11-36(a)(4). Counts: none.

Each model also carries a warning, and an honest paper should print it.

Minnesota is the only system found whose statute requires its annual report to state the numbers of complaints, investigations, and complaints resulting in discipline, split by paid staff and volunteers. The mandate is real — but the project's researchers could not locate the report containing the actual numbers through public search. A duty to publish that no one can find is only half a ledger.

Washington has real numbers only because a newsroom asked for them. InvestigateWest's records requests found 31 grievances filed in 2024–25 across the six highest-appointment counties; 4 were found to have merit; 1 resulted in registry removal — which a judge then reversed. The state Administrative Office of the Courts said it had not been notified of any registry removals in the previous five years. GALs were appointed in more than 7,100 Washington family-law cases since 2020. A registry, alone, disciplines rarely.

Connecticut publishes who is eligible and how removal works, but no complaint or removal statistics were found, and its removal ground is narrow — a finding that the person presents an imminent risk of significant harm.

The lesson is not that counting fixes everything. It is that counting is where fixing starts: who serves, with what training, at what price, under whose oversight are prevention questions, and none of them can be answered from a blank page.

The discipline picture, side by side. Washington grievances, 2024–25 (six counties): 31 filed; 4 found to have merit; 1 resulting in registry removal — reversed. Source: InvestigateWest, "WA courts rarely discipline guardians ad litem," March 23, 2026, from county records requests. Georgia has no equivalent figure to place beside these — not a higher one, not a lower one. None.

6 · Five entries for Georgia's ledger

The project proposes five changes. None requires guessing at anyone's motives, and each can be checked, once adopted, from the very records it creates.

1. **A statewide registry.** A public list of who is eligible to serve as a GAL in each circuit, with qualifications and training shown — the Washington and Connecticut mechanics, adopted rather than reinvented. 2. **Published pay rules.** A rate, a cap, or a stated local schedule for custody GALs, disclosed to the parties in the appointment order itself, as Washington registries already require. The Tallapoosa Circuit's published $75-per-hour policy shows a Georgia circuit can do this today. 3. **An**

intake office that is not the appointing judge. An ombudsman-style office where a parent can report what a GAL did and have it logged, investigated to a stated standard, and counted — whether or not it is upheld. 4. **Guaranteed party access.** No custody decision should rest on a GAL report a party has not been permitted to see. Georgia appellate law already recognizes the underlying principle; the guarantee needs to be in the rule, not only in an appeal. 5. **Annual public counts.** Appointments per GAL, complaints, investigations, and outcomes, published every year on the Minnesota model — with the report itself easy to find, so the duty to publish is a duty in fact.

Alongside those five, the project holds a structural concern it states plainly: in Georgia today, a practicing attorney may serve as GAL in the same county — and before the same judges — where that attorney represents paying clients. No rule addresses that overlap. A registry would make it visible; a conflict-of-interest rule would address it directly.

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.
- **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

Research findings were compiled November 4–5, 2026 from the rules, statutes, court pages, published local policies, and reporting listed below, each opened and read by the project. Public-web research has limits the project states rather than papers over: an unpublished internal list, if one exists, would not have been found; confidential discipline, by design, cannot be assessed from public sources; and no published source assembles the statewide picture this paper describes as missing. Conclusions will be updated as the published record develops — and corrected, in public, when a source contradicts them.

Sources

- Georgia Uniform Superior Court Rule 24.9 (appointment, role, fees, removal): gasupreme.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/un_sup_ru_24_9and25_E.pdf
- Georgia Office of the Child Advocate, Frequently Asked Questions (training, complaints): oca.georgia.gov/frequently-asked-questions
- O.C.G.A. §§ 15-11-36 (juvenile expenses charged to county) and 15-11-104 (dependency GAL appointment; CASA).
- O.C.G.A. § 19-9-3(a)(7) (bad-faith civil-liability provision; longstanding — see Paper No. 6 on HB 253, which was not enacted).

• Project research reports, November 4–5, 2026 — Georgia GAL Accountability Project files.

• Tallapoosa Circuit Juvenile Court, Standing Order and Indigent Attorney Compensation Policy (2023) — published policy; $75-per-hour schedule covering an attorney appointed "as a guardian ad litem to a child."

• Whitfield County Board of Commissioners minutes, January 12, 2026 (GAL/Attorney Contract, $44,135/year).

• Minn. Stat. § 480.35 (State GAL Board; annual-report contents): revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/480.35 · Minnesota GAL Board budget and complaint pages: mn.gov/guardian-ad-litem

• Washington: RCW 26.12.177 (registries; hourly-rate disclosure); Spokane County GAL Policies ($75/hour, 30-hour cap); InvestigateWest, "WA courts rarely discipline guardians ad litem," March 23, 2026: investigatewest.org

• Connecticut: Public Defender Services FY 2027 assigned-counsel rates ($831 flat + $109/hour); Judicial Branch GAL/AMC eligible list and removal procedures: jud.ct.gov

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Georgia GAL Accountability Project — georgiagalreform@gmail.com