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PUTTING 'FLORIDA BAR PRO BONO MATTERS' INTO ACTION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

[Tallahassee, Florida] - The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program announces its support for the "Pro Bono Matters Act of 2018," newly filed by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina Beach.

The measure, Senate Bill 146 and House Bill 57, would help special-needs children in dependency court by giving more support to pro bono attorneys who want to help them.

Under the bill, the Justice Administrative Commission would provide pro bono attorneys due-process funding for costs associated with the representation.

"This bill is simple and makes good sense," said Rep. Frank White, R-Pensacola and the House sponsor. "The state already pays for due-process costs for special-needs children who are represented by state-funded attorneys on a registry. If we can encourage attorneys to take a case pro bono by paying for due-process costs, the state saves at least \$1,000 per case."

As part of its push to find attorneys to represent special-needs children pro bono, the Guardian ad Litem program is also working with The Florida Bar Foundation, which just launched a new website, FloridaProBonoMatters.org, to match Floridians in need with attorneys who might take their cases on a volunteer basis.

Florida Bar Foundation CEO Bruce Blackwell said both the foundation and the GAL Program will gain by their partnership, with Bean's bill as a catalyst.

"This bill will help the Foundation, through our new website, recruit dedicated attorneys to accept cases to provide holistic representation for children with special needs," Blackwell said. "By removing barriers such as costs associated with handling pro bono cases, volunteer attorneys can focus on providing critical legal services which will benefit not only the youth, but their entire local community."

"Guardian ad Litem's collaboration with The Florida Bar's 'Pro Bono Matters' initiative demonstrate some of the best of Florida's child advocates: a focus on the unique needs of each child and the ability of public-private partnerships to meet those needs," Bean said.

GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz said the collaboration would help his program locate pro bono attorneys for children within the 15-day window that Florida law permits.

"By creating a process to find a pro bono attorney within 15 days, this law will help us find more pro bono attorneys wanting to make a difference in the lives of children," Abramowitz said.

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer visit www.GuardianadLitem.org or call 1-866-341-1GAL.

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