

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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## Lake County bar group creates help desk for pro se guardians

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A help desk staffed by Lake County Bar Association volunteer attorneys and paralegals has been established at the courthouse in Waukegan to help clear up the confusion that can come with a pro se litigant's petition to become the guardian of a child and to help foster greater efficiency when those cases reach the courtroom, according to bar association leaders.

The Guardianship Help Desk, which is situated in a jury room adjacent to the 19th Judicial Circuit's probate courtroom in Waukegan, was unveiled in late January by the LCBA and its Wills, Trust, and Probate Committee, said [Elizabeth M. Rochford](#), first vice president of the LCBA who focuses her practice in estate planning, probate law, and real estate law.

"When we recognized this need in Lake County, we saw people struggling through trying to navigate the legal system. These were people already overwhelmed by meeting the needs of a child," Rochford said.

That struggle typically translated into a glut of cases in the probate courtroom, Rochford said.

"From the court's perspective, these pro se petitioners were stepping up, time after time, and they weren't properly prepared," Rochford said. "The judge was having to stop and draft orders, assist with paperwork. It was slowing her court call.

"Obviously, these are people who are in need of this important service, but they didn't have anybody to help them through the process."

Rochford said organizers from Lake County studied Cook County's long-running Guardianship Assistance Desk — a joint project of Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, the Circuit Court of Cook County, and the Chicago Bar Foundation — as a model for their newly launched program.

"They were enormously cooperative with us. They have turned that program into an amazing model," said Rochford.

As of this morning, about 40 volunteers had signed on to the Lake County guardianship assistance program, and that number is growing. Initial interest came from attorneys who handle wills, trusts and probate matters.

"Now, it's expanding and we're getting interest from attorneys throughout the bar association," Rochford said. "People are so eager to participate. They find it really uniquely fulfilling."

The help desk, association leaders said, was created in cooperation with Circuit Judge [Diane E. Winter](#), who presides in the probate courtroom in Waukegan.

In a news release announcing the program, Winter said that from her vantage point, after the Help Desk's first two sessions in operation, the program "noticeably improves the guardians' understanding of the process and comfort in court when they present their situations to me."

LCBA organizers also received the cooperation of the court clerk, whose staff instructs pro se litigants to report to the help desk before their case is presented to the judge. There, Rochford said, volunteers help litigants petitioning the court to become the guardian of a minor in filling out court-required documents.

The volunteers also assist in explaining the process, gathering necessary information, and in writing brief summaries of each file for the judge.

A variety of people may be involved in seeking guardianship of a child, such as a grandparent or other family member. And the situations stemming from the petition for guardianship are also varied, situations in which a parent may be deceased, unwilling or unable to care for the child.

"We sit down and sift through some of the complicating factors and circumstances, to get to the important things, and then we can share that information with the judge," Rochford said.

"Sometimes, these are complicated family situations," Rochford said. "By sitting down and interviewing these people in a non-threatening, non-formal setting, we can get more quickly to the important relevant facts, and we can capsulize them and send them in to the judge with our notes, which helps her to get to the heart of the matter more efficiently."

The Lake County Bar Foundation also has stepped up to help in the association's effort.

"The bar foundation identified ways to help us," Rochford said. "We were preparing our forms with carbon paper. As soon as they heard that, they had a fax machine, copier and scanner delivered."

The newly created Guardianship Help Desk operates each Friday, from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. with about six volunteers — attorneys and non-attorneys — assisting people through both the legal and administrative aspects of the process.

"All the pro se [guardianship] cases come through our desk," Rochford said. "Before they walk into the courtroom, they're prepared with all their paperwork. So when they step up they're ready to go."

The Guardianship Help Desk is the second community outreach program located in the 19th Judicial Circuit to assist citizens. A Foreclosure Help Desk, established last fall, is situated in the courthouse in Park City, said Christopher T. Boadt, executive director of the LCBA.

Lake County attorneys interested in volunteering on the Guardianship Help Desk may call the bar association for more information at (847) 244-3143.

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