

[Back to regular view](#) [Print this page](#)

Volunteers help smooth the path of legal process

[Comments](#)

March 2, 2010

By [BETH KRAMER](#) ekramer@stmedianetwork.com

Like many of the people who cycle through probate court in Lake County, Annette Gonzales of Park City could not afford an attorney to tackle her guardianship case. Gonzales took custody of her niece when the girl was in kindergarten. Four years after taking her niece in, the girl's mother suddenly wanted to reclaim custody, Gonzales said.

Calling the legal process "scary," Gonzales said she feared that the court would favor her niece's biological mother. Luckily for her, she had the new Guardianship Help Desk to help her handle her case.

"They are showing me that they are 100 percent for the child, and that's all that matters to me. They took care of my niece," Gonzales said.

Members of the Lake County Bar Association donated a copier that doubles as a fax machine during Friday's help desk hours. It was the second day the Guardianship Help Desk was open at the Lake County Courthouse.

More than 40 children and families have been helped so far, said Liz Rochford, an attorney who helped organize and launch the help desk.

"It's to help assist these people going through the process and making the court process more efficient," Rochford said.

Staffed by volunteer bar association attorneys and paralegal student volunteers from the College of Lake County, assistance is provided for people petitioning the court for guardianship of a minor child. The free service is for people establishing a legal relationship with a child not their own to make decisions about the child's education, health and welfare, Rochford said.

The help desk is not for people addressing guardianship of the disabled or issues of estate, Rochford said.

Circuit Judge Diane Winter, who presides over Probate Court, said many people coming into her courtroom often had incomplete or incorrectly completed paperwork, forcing the judge to assist with the paperwork.

"This was all very time-consuming for me to get these cases into court. I was only able to hear a few cases in a few hours. Now we can serve more litigates," Winter said.

She said the help desk makes the system more efficient. Rochford said many people were frustrated with the system and previously had to come to court multiple times due to paperwork issues.

The help desk was in planning for about a year and involved cooperation by many, including county clerks and administrators, the bar association, the sheriff's office and College of Lake County students, Winter and Rochford said.

Paralegal assistants from the college received special training last fall so they work on the help desk, said Gayle Miller, CLC's department chair of paralegal studies.

Nearly 30 students signed up, and about 20 attorneys have registered to supervise, Miller said. Because paralegals are not qualified to offer legal advice, Miller said there is always a supervising attorney at the help desk.

"Our courts in Lake County are getting busier and busier. There was a need, and if that need continues, it will become a permanent fixture," Miller said.

Guardianship Help Desk