



Supreme Court of Florida

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WINGS initiative aims to improve guardianship through collaboration

Groups and individuals with a stake in the protection of Floridians who may need or who are currently under legal guardianship are coming together to seek common solutions and better serve the needs of the state's most vulnerable.

A grant from the American Bar Association's Commission on Law and Aging and the National Center for State Courts made a Working Interdisciplinary Network of Guardianship Stakeholders, or WINGS, possible in Florida, led by Florida's courts.

There are 3.5 million Floridians aged 65 or older. A quarter of the state's population is projected to be aged 65 or older by 2030. Increasingly, Floridians seek help from the State Courts System when they or their loved ones need their interests protected. Guardianship cases for adults have increased steadily, with more than 7,000 cases to establish guardianship filed in the 2015-16 fiscal year. At the same time, these cases have become increasingly complex.

Many state agencies and private organizations target policy and practice issues related to guardianship from their own perspectives and work to advance solutions for specific issues. The WINGS effort aims, instead, to collaboratively map a comprehensive strategy for improved processes and increased effectiveness.

Circuit Judge Jose R. Rodriguez, who works in the Orange County Probate Division on Guardianships and Mental Health cases in the Ninth Judicial Circuit, spoke to those who gathered for an initial WINGS event. He used the Declaration of Independence to encourage attendees.

"Out of the many, we are one. That's what we have here, the many," Judge Rodriguez said. "But we come together as one ... to brainstorm ideas on how to manage the issues we have both with the aging population, called the Silver Tsunami, as well as with the disabled; intellectually, developmentally and acquired."

An initial meeting of stakeholders brought together representatives from Florida courts, state executive agencies, private organizations, and advocacy groups. Representatives from the Department of Elder Affairs, the Department of Children and Families, the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, Disability Rights Florida, the judiciary, and the state court administrator's office, among others, gathered for the initial meeting in Tallahassee.

Among key issues WINGS sets out to address are insuring adequate protections from exploitation, data collection, education about alternatives to guardianship and restoration of rights, and a review of guardianship statutes. The WINGS effort is complementary to the Supreme Court's guardianship workgroup, established in 2016 to improve judicial procedures and better protect vulnerable people – children, adults with developmental and mental health disabilities, and the elderly.

"Florida will be positioned to embrace systems change within the guardianship process, avoid unnecessary guardianships, and better identify ways to address financial exploitation," said Florida State Courts Administrator PK Jameson of the advantages and aims of the WINGS initiative.

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