

Guardian ad litem boosters hope for significant funding increase

BY ELAINE DE VALLE

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Rilya Wilson's whereabouts might not be a huge question mark today if she had an independent guardian ad litem, say child advocates and some state legislators behind a proposal to nearly double the program's funding.

"The probability is that this would not have happened in the first place," said Leoncio de la Peña, a volunteer who raises money for the program in Miami-Dade County. "What is certain — 100 percent without a doubt — is that this would have been discovered 15 months ago, and that would have made a difference in finding the child."

Joni Goodman, executive director of Miami-Dade's Guardian Ad Litem program, agreed: "I don't know that a guardian ad litem would have prevented her from being taken, but ... we would have known about it right away."

On Monday, state legislators will consider a proposal to add about \$7.5 million to the \$9 million in guardian ad litem program funding statewide, providing for more volunteers and lawyers for the 15,000 children in the state's supervisory care.

"This would be a significant

increase," Goodman said. "It may not be what we need to get to 100 percent, but it's definitely not just a Band-Aid."

GOVERNOR'S PANEL

Also on Monday, Goodman will present an overview of the program to members of a panel appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush to investigate the Department of Children & Families in Miami-Dade.

Rilya was under the supervision of the DCF when she seemingly vanished from the West Kendall home of the two women entrusted by the state to care for her. Those women have said a woman claiming to be a DCF worker took away Rilya 16 months ago.

DCF administrators say they have no record of such a visit.

The agency might never have learned of Rilya's disappearance had her caseworker, Deborah Muskelly, not resigned when confronted with an audit accusing her of falsifying records in another case.

The DCF found out Rilya was gone when her case was assigned to another counselor.

NOT ENOUGH MONEY

Although no one could say on Saturday precisely why Rilya was not assigned a guardian ad litem, despite a state law

that requires every child in DCF custody to have one, finances are likely to blame. There is not enough money to go around, Goodman said.

According to Marta Diaz, who works in the Miami-Dade program, coverage has improved since Rilya entered the system shortly after she was born in 1996. Today, guardians are assigned to about 65 percent of Miami-Dade children in state care, compared with 35 percent or 40 percent a few years ago, she said. Last year, the program represented 4,850 children.

The program in Miami-Dade — run out of a trailer at the Juvenile Justice Center — is much better off than other programs or the statewide average, which is 50 percent, Goodman and Diaz say. That is because a third of its resources come from a fundraising arm called Voices for Children Foundation, Diaz said.

STRATEGY DISCUSSED

The nonprofit group was formed 16 years ago by guardians "who saw the need to bridge the gap in funding," Executive Director Nestor Rodríguez said. He and the foundation's board of trustees met Saturday to discuss ways to capitalize on the outrage



GOODMAN



RODRIGUEZ

caused by the Rilya Wilson case.

Apparently, people have been more willing to help in the wake of Rilya's case. Goodman says her office has been deluged with calls, 11 in one day, from people who want to become guardians. The ringing "hasn't stopped" at Voices for Children, Rodríguez said.

Volunteer guardians, who do not have to be attorneys, are not paid.

But the program — which has a staff of about 50, including lawyers and experienced guardians who work with bigger caseloads — needs funding for its operation and to train new volunteers.

After clearing a criminal background check, a volunteer must go through a 30-hour course to learn the laws and the system, Diaz said. The course is given once a month during daytime and evening hours "so that working people can also become volunteers."

To volunteer to be a guardian, call 305-638-6861. To make a tax-deductible contribution to the Miami-Dade Guardian Ad Litem program, send a check to Voices for Children Foundation at 1500 NW 12th Ave., Suite 1117, Miami, FL 33136.