



Stark County Court Angel Program: An Evaluation Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Stark County Probate Court Angel Program is a monitoring program to confirm the well-being of wards and ensure that guardians are receiving the support they need. The program cares for some of the most vulnerable members of the community by visiting persons under guardianship (legally referred to as wards) to make sure they are free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Initially started in 1995, the Court Angel Program is the first monitoring program in Ohio.

From interviews with Court Angels, program staff, and a group of key stakeholders, information was gathered to complete this evaluation report of the Court Angel Program. This report presents five main sections: 1) the Court Angel Program description, 2) a summary of program data collected by the court, 3) findings from interviews with Court Angels to increase understanding of their experience and share their feedback on the program, 4) findings from a focus group comprised of community stakeholders, and 5) recommendations provided for other courts as they consider starting a Court Angel volunteer visiting program.

Information collected by the Probate Court is presented to share indicators of program success, measured through the number of activities completed to increase Court Angel recruitment and community outreach; train and support Court Angels; and the impact of the program (e.g., the number of visits completed within the last year). From October 1, 2016 to September 28, 2018, the Probate Court trained 84 volunteers and during that time period the Court Angel program completed 1,953 visits with wards and their guardians. Each visit consists of communication between the court, ward and guardian. The Probate Court provided information and/or resources to the guardians and wards during each visit.

A randomly selected group of 20 Court Angels were interviewed to describe their experiences in the program and provide program feedback. Court Angels feel as they are making a difference. Court Angels value the flexibility of the program, which allows them to select cases in certain locations and settings (community setting vs. nursing home) and complete visits at their own pace. In addition, they described a variety of rewarding experiences including enjoying personal interaction with wards, being impressed with the quality of care provided by guardians, and feeling appreciated by court staff. All of the Court Angels viewed the program as meaningful and beneficial for the community. They see themselves as being the “eyes and ears” of the court and feel that providing monitoring and additional support to wards and guardians is a worthwhile endeavor.

Finally, the report shares findings from a focus group comprised of key community stakeholders convened to brainstorm ideas around how to sustain the program through stable

funding and other resources necessary to ensure its success. These stakeholders agree that the Court Angel Program provides a unique and valuable service to the community and strengthens the ability of the court to provide oversight to ensure that wards are free of abuse and neglect and guardians are better supported. They also believed that the program is more effective because it is part of the court system. At the same time, the Court Angel visit provides a more objective view of the well-being of the ward and the relationship between the guardian and the ward. Community stakeholders believe that the program sends a powerful message that the court does care about a population that may feel forgotten. In terms of sustainability, stakeholders expressed the importance of continuing efforts to bolster support by making the community more aware of the program, pursuing diverse funding sources, and involving Court Angels in additional responsibilities to support the program (e.g., public speaking, assistance with training new Court Angels).

Stark County is willing to share this program model with other counties who may be interested in starting a Court Angel Program. Utilizing Court Angels is an innovative approach to monitor the well-being of persons under guardianship on a more frequent basis, which may prevent maltreatment, facilitate early intervention, and connect guardians with more resources. In addition to the information found within the report, program staff are committed to sharing resources such as the training manual, policies, and procedures to help other counties get started with replicating or modifying the Court Angel Program.

This report compiles information from interviews with Court Angels, program staff, and a group of key stakeholders, as well as court data and program documents to evaluate the Stark County Probate Court Angels program. During the summer of 2018, researchers from Miami University reviewed documents and conducted key informant interviews to learn about the program and its functions. Court Angels and program staff were interviewed, and a focus group was conducted with community stakeholders to understand the issues related to program sustainability. Recommendations from research participants are presented.

This report presents the evaluation findings in five main sections: 1) the Court Angel Program description, 2) a summary of program data collected by the court, 3) findings from interviews with Court Angels to increase understanding of their experience and share their feedback on the program, 4) findings from a focus group comprised of community stakeholders, and 5) recommendations provided for Stark County and other courts as they consider starting a Court Angel volunteer visiting program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Stark County Probate Court Angel Program is a monitoring program that confirms the well-being of wards (legal term for persons under guardianship) and ensure that guardians are receiving the support they need. The program cares for some of the most vulnerable members of the community by visiting wards to make sure they are free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Initially started in 1995, the Court Angel Program is the first guardianship monitoring program in Ohio. Although the program was discontinued in the late 1990s, it was reinstated by Judge Dixie Park after she became the Probate Judge in 2005.

A dramatic increase in Stark County's guardianship caseload has occurred in recent years, with the caseload now totaling more than 1,800. This increase has necessitated a focus on increasing capacity to complete monitoring visits on an annual basis. In this way, the Court Angel Program may deter situations of abuse and neglect, if guardians and other caregivers are aware of the fact that a visit will take place. Annual visits to the home of the ward allow for early intervention and, if necessary, can connect guardians to more resources.

WHO CAN BECOME A COURT ANGEL?

Individuals are eligible to become a Court Angel if they are over the age of 18, complete the application, provide personal references, pass the criminal background check, and complete an interview about their interests in volunteering for the program. All Court Angels are also required to complete an initial training, and are invited to quarterly meetings to receive continuing education. Court Angels are asked to volunteer for a minimum of one year.

HOW DOES THE COURT ANGEL PROGRAM WORK?

The Court Angel Program includes five major steps: 1) case review, 2) case selection, 3) visits, documentation, and recommendations, 4) program staff review, and 5) Court follow-up. Details about the activities that occur within each step were provided by program staff and are summarized below.

Step 1: Case review

After a Court Angel has completed the training process, the court provides the Court Angel with a selection of ward files to review, which are organized by zip code. Each file includes the Statement of Expert Evaluation, which explains the reason for the guardianship, the most recent guardian's report, and a case summary. Case summaries contain information about the wards and guardians, such as home address, whether the ward lives with the guardian, contact information, and notes to facilitate conversation around particular interests (e.g., favorite sports teams or hobbies) or instructions to avoid certain topics. In the process of preparing case summaries, program staff screen high intensity cases and determine that some wards should be visited by professional staff, in an effort to protect Court Angels from more complicated cases. The case summary also shares whether the ward is non-verbal, and if so, if methods to facilitate communication are known (e.g., a tablet, a guardian or family member who could help to interpret). After a case summary is prepared, the court sends a letter to inform the guardian of the upcoming visit, makes a phone call to the guardian, and issues a judgment entry appointing a visitor.

Step 2: Case selection

After reviewing the information provided by the court, the Court Angel selects the cases he or she would like to visit, completes a form to document which cases have been accepted, and makes plans to visit the ward. To plan the visit, the Court Angel coordinates with the guardian.

Step 3: Visit, documentation, and recommendations

The Court Angel completes the visit and fills out the reporting form. The reporting form is an eight-page document that includes questions about how the guardian helps the ward and an overall assessment of the ward including their physical and emotional health, intellectual functioning, living situation, and relationship with the guardian. Court Angels visit or call the guardian to fill out the portion of the reporting form related to the guardian. If the ward lives in the same house with the guardian, the Court Angels are instructed to speak privately with the ward, if possible.

The first page of the reporting form describes a variety of actions the Court Angel could recommend for court follow-up on the situation of concern, such as a call to the guardian to share information about additional resources or a repeat visit to the ward. If the Court Angel does not believe any actions are necessary, then "no further action required" is indicated on the reporting

form. The Court Angel returns all of the paperwork to the court's main office in Canton or to one of its satellite offices in Alliance or Massillon. The first page of the reporting form is docketed and added to court records.

Step 4: Program staff review

Program staff review the reporting form to identify potential problems and to determine if the Court Angel recommended follow-up by the court. The information provided by the Court Angel explains their observations about the ward and the relationship between the guardian and the ward. One of the open-ended sections also provides space for the Court Angel to write out anything else he or she believes would be useful for the court to know. Based on the information provided, program staff determine whether further follow up is required.

Step 5: Court follow-up

Program staff initiate the process for court follow-up after reviewing the reporting form and, if necessary, contacting the Court Angel. When abuse or neglect of the ward is a concern, program staff contact the Court Angel to get more information, pull the case file and make a note, and send the information to the Judge. The Judge then reviews the information. The Judge may instruct the Bailiff or Court Investigator to visit the ward, make any necessary orders to ensure the safety of the ward and/or schedule a hearing to address the issue as quickly as possible.

The Court Angel Program makes purposeful efforts to support a positive Court Angel experience. For example, there is strong emphasis placed on safety. Court Angels are instructed to only visit wards in neighborhoods or locations where they feel safe. Program staff are involved in screening cases, so visits are not assigned to Court Angels that would potentially be unsafe due to a ward's history of behavior or when a guardian informs a staff member that the visit should not be completed by a Court Angel (those visits are completed by program or other court staff). The fact that Court Angels are able to review and choose from several ward cases provides an added layer of security because it allows them to opt out of scenarios which make them uncomfortable. Program staff strive to create a welcoming environment where Court Angels can talk to them about any questions or concerns they have. Court Angels may also follow up with program staff on any cases where abuse or neglect was suspected. Efforts are made to minimize the level of frustration involved with guardians who may not respond promptly to the Court Angel's request for a visit. If Court Angels have difficulty reaching guardians, they are instructed to bring those cases back and the visits are completed by program or other court staff.

COURT ANGEL PROGRAM STAFF

The major aspects of implementing the program involve the internal process of identifying the wards who need a monitoring visit and preparing the paperwork associated with it, along with recruiting, training, and supporting Court Angels. In order to accomplish this, two full-time

positions and one part-time position maintain the day-to-day operations of the Court Angel Program, the Court Angel Director, the Recruiter, and the Deputy Clerk, respectively. It is important to note that these three roles work together closely as a team. Their level of staffing coincides with the current size of the growing guardianship caseload, though the same program on a smaller scale was originally staffed as part of the former Court Investigator's responsibilities.

The staff positions dedicated exclusively to the Court Angel Program are described in more detail below through summarizing information provided by interviews with staff. These staff positions allow for differentiated roles in the process of recruiting, training, and retaining Court Angels, although it is clear that the three roles function as a close team. Additional court staff involved in the program include the Judge, the Court Investigator, and the Bailiff. The Judge actively promotes the program, seeks resources to support it, and uses her authority to resolve situations of potential abuse and neglect. Furthermore, the Court Investigator and Bailiff are involved on an as-needed basis to follow up on cases of potential abuse or neglect.

Court Angel Director

The responsibilities of this position include overall management of the Court Angel Program. This includes managing the process of recruiting, training, and retaining Court Angels to achieve program goals.

In terms of recruitment, the Court Angel Director is involved in community outreach activities. This includes giving presentations to community groups and universities to recruit students for service learning, field work, or internships with the program, and speaking at networking events to increase awareness of the program and the issue of elder abuse and neglect. Reviewing Court Angel applications, processing background checks, and interviewing people who have applied to be Court Angels fall under the responsibilities of the Director. She also communicates with applicants to provide contact information, share background check results, and schedule or remind applicants of the time and date of their training.

Both the initial and ongoing Court Angel training is coordinated by the Director. The Director supports Court Angels by providing ongoing support, answering questions from volunteers, arranging opportunities for volunteers to shadow staff or other more experienced Court Angels on visits, and coordinating activities for quarterly meetings (e.g., arranging for speakers, etc.) Additionally, the Director is responsible for internally tracking indicators of program impact (such as the number of visits completed) and ensuring that Court Angels receive information about the program's impact at quarterly meetings.

The Court Angel Director also manages documentation. She approves the prepared case summaries and reviews all the reporting forms completed by the Court Angels. The Director identifies any conflicts between the Court Angel's assessment and his or her recommendation for

follow-up. In this process, the Director pursues the appropriate steps to follow up on the case (e.g., a phone call to the guardian).

Recruiter

The main area of responsibility for this position is leading Court Angel recruitment efforts. However, the Recruiter also works closely with other program staff to update information on case summaries, file paperwork on completed visits, and support the program's training and retention efforts. The Recruiter leads outreach efforts by presenting to groups and civic organizations to educate others about the Court Angel Program and elder mistreatment. Examples of organizations the Recruiter visits include local churches, and non-profit and civic organizations such as YMCA, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Women's Club, and the Stark Senior Network. The Recruiter customizes information to share with various constituencies about the Court Angel Program and the issue of abuse and neglect of adults.

The Recruiter supports Court Angels through providing coverage of the main office, sharing experiences with new Court Angels in the initial training, and traveling to the court's two satellite offices in Massillon and Alliance. The Recruiter holds informal check-ins with Court Angels when they are in the office to ask how things are going with their visits. This approach fosters open communication between Court Angels and staff in case any concerns arise. At times, the Recruiter may complete follow-up visits and invite new Court Angels to shadow visits.

The Recruiter also reviews the case summaries prepared by the Deputy Clerk and calls guardians to verify that the information is correct. This process is helpful in confirming current addresses and changes in condition that the court should be aware of prior to determining whether a visit should be completed by a Court Angel or a professional staff member.

Deputy Clerk

This part-time role is a recent addition to the program. The Deputy Clerk prepares case summaries and manages a master list of wards and guardians to visit. The Deputy Clerk uses the court's electronic system to track information and prioritize visits based on date of last visit. By reviewing the list, program staff can ensure that wards are seen more frequently.

FINDINGS

This section highlights program data collected and tracked internally by the court over a two year period as well as feedback provided by Court Angels and community stakeholders in the summer of 2018. First, we share information that the Court Angel Program maintains, which is summarized from the internal documentation of the indicators of program activities (e.g., the number of visits completed and Court Angel recommendations for follow-up). Next, Court Angels who participated in telephone interviews share their motivations for becoming involved in the Court Angel Program, feedback regarding training, the rewards and positive experiences associated with volunteering, their views on the value of the program, and recommendations for enhancing the Court Angel experience. Finally, community stakeholders who participated in a focus group share their views on the sustainability of the program and its value to the community.

PROGRAM DATA COLLECTED BY STARK COUNTY PROBATE COURT

In the fall of 2016, the Stark County Probate Court received a two-year grant to expand and evaluate the Court Angel Program. Through this grant, the Court Angel Director and Recruiter staff positions were created and media outreach efforts were conducted to increase the number of program volunteers. According to program records, the Probate Court trained 84 new Court Angels from October 1, 2016 to September 28, 2018. In this timeframe, Court Angels and program staff completed a total of 1,953 visits.

The Probate Court maintains a list of active Court Angel cases, tracks the recommendations for follow-up and ensures that problems are addressed in an expedient fashion. Most Court Angel cases require no follow-up, as court staff screens out high intensity cases. Of the nearly two thousand visits that were completed by Court Angels during the two-year grant period, less than 100 required follow-up by court staff in terms of phone calls, visits, or hearings. In 22 visits, Court Angels indicated potential maltreatment of the ward, and in 10 additional visits, volunteers recommended that Court staff follow-up with the ward. More often, the follow-up activities involved court staff advising guardians of resources through phone calls or sending a letter, which occurred in 68 visits.

From October 1, 2016 until September 28, 2018, court staff provided 73 presentations for community and civic organizations. The court hosted five quarterly meetings, including an appreciation luncheon for volunteers. On average, approximately 20 volunteers attended each of these events.

In the summer of 2018, court records indicated that 77 Court Angels were actively involved in the Court Angel Program. From the descriptive information collected by the court, the typical Court Angel is a woman (though about one-third of all Court Angels are men) around the age of 60, who has completed 14 visits.

FEEDBACK FROM COURT ANGELS

Feedback from Court Angels was collected through one-time telephone interviews with researchers during the summer of 2018. Court Angels were randomly selected to facilitate the inclusion of a variety of participants with diverse backgrounds in regards to gender, age, length of involvement in the program, and number of visits. Researchers drew a total of 49 de-identified participant numbers out of a hat three times to recruit an adequate sample of 20 participants. These individuals were contacted by program staff and invited to participate in an interview. In total, 21 Court Angels expressed initial interest. After speaking with the researchers, one participant declined to be interviewed and the other 20 completed the informed consent process and were interviewed.

The final sample for telephone interviews included seven men (35%) and 13 women (65%). The average age of participants was about 67 years old and ranged from 40 to 77 years. The number of visits completed by participants ranged from 1 to 79 visits, with an average of approximately 21 visits. Their responses to questions about their experiences as a Court Angel and program feedback are summarized below.

How did current Court Angels hear about the program?

Many of the Court Angels learned about the program through media campaigns that raised awareness of the Court Angel Program through targeted messages on radio stations, the newspaper, websites that promote volunteerism (e.g., www.volunteermatch.com), and social media (e.g., Facebook).

“The way I got into it was I kept hearing repeated requests in the media, I think on the local radio station, WHBC or something like that. Between that and the newspaper, they kept going after trying to get Court Angels, and that’s sort of how I got into it.”

“I saw the notice in a newspaper and I thought it sounded like something that was very interesting and obviously there was a need for it... I just thought it was something that would be worthwhile. So I decided to look into it.”

“I have had a calling to help elderly people, and compassion is part of my nature. So when I had seen the article in the paper, I thought, “Well it’s something I might enjoy and might be able to do well at.””

Others mentioned that they originally heard about the Court Angel Program through a speaker who visited their group. One woman learned about the program through a speaker at a meeting for nurses and she explained that the talk resulted in several new Court Angels.

In addition, one Court Angel got involved after browsing for information on an unrelated topic on the Stark County Court website. Some of the other respondents also commented on how they appreciated being able to get information about the Court Angel Program and the application online.

What motivated current Court Angels to get involved?

Court Angels described two primary motivations for becoming involved as Court Angels, desire to help and interest in learning about guardianship.

Desire to help

Current Court Angels explained that they initially got involved because they wanted to help people and help the community. Many were motivated to give back to the community by making sure that wards are being cared for appropriately. One Court Angel described it as his way to “pay it forward,” while another expressed an interest in helping vulnerable groups who may be socially isolated, *“Besides, I like helping people anyway. There are old people out there that don’t have families. Nobody comes and visits them...”* Another Court Angel expressed the importance of individuals being able to remain in their communities,

“Well, I just think it’s important for people to live in community and to, you know, if I have the capacity to kind of look in on people and see that they’re okay, I just feel like that’s a helpful thing to do. And, so I’m glad to have the ability and opportunity.”

Some of the Court Angels described that they were uniquely drawn to respond to the need for Court Angels because of their own personal or family history with taking care of others (e.g., having a child with a developmental disability, caring for an aging parent). Some recalled difficult situations in their own lives, and wanted to help others avoid some of the difficulties they experienced.

“I have a child, well an adult now, with special needs. And so, I have always had a Court Angel come to my house and I thought it would just be a neat way to kind of help some other parents. And, it’s really hard to find resources and stuff like that once the person is out of school. At least it was hard for me to find it. So once I found out, I thought if I could help someone else going through that, it would easier for them.”

“I took care of my mother with Alzheimer’s for a good three years. Anyway, she moved in with us, and then it ended up that with daytime and night time help, caregivers and myself and my husband just couldn’t do it and ended up placing her at a nursing home. She was in a nursing home a few times previous to that because of a couple falls and hip fractures and that. I have a lot of familiarity with nursing homes from personal experience.”

The Court Angel role was also attractive to people who saw themselves as an advocate for others. Many described their willingness to speak up on behalf of others and take action to raise awareness of issues.

“After I saw a lot of people where my mom was placed and experiences at four different places, I know that somebody needs to be an advocate for them. A lot of them can't speak for themselves. There is certainly good and bad out there, and there are definitely no perfect places. No matter how hard you try to find the perfect place for a family member, there are tradeoffs, and there is no perfect place, so you can just do what you can do. So, this is still a way for me to see what's out there and keeping my eye on some people who can't speak for themselves.”

“My experiences have helped me become a strong advocate for a population that may not be well understood. Here we see all this funding getting cut, and it's like... that's ridiculous! You know... the Board of Developmental Disabilities in Stark County, I've just seen their funding get whittled away, and that's ridiculous. You know that's ridiculous for us not to support them. So I'm more verbal, much more verbal, about it.”

Interest in Learning about guardianship

Most Court Angels described not being aware of the needs of wards and guardians, the number of wards in Stark County, the potential issues of abuse and neglect that could occur under adult guardianship, or how the court system works. Some described an interest in learning more about the “system” through their personal involvement with the court.

“I wanted to see the world of, even I saw it a little bit, of the guardianship of the ward and the Probate Court relationship. And so, I was just curious about how that part works.”

“So I want to see if the Probate Court system in this community was actually doing what they should do for these people. So, after a year and a half, I can say... probably, you know, to a large extent. It does work. I think a big part of it is because of the visit. For the most part, people are on their best behavior, but you can tell by talking to the guardian and the wards if they're capable, and you get a sense or a feel that things are going good. And I think that that's the most important part about the role that we play with Court Angels, is that we use all of our senses then come up with a decision that it's going good and there is no major problem.”

Court Angel Training

Overview of initial training

Court Angels are provided with initial training to prepare them for visiting wards and ongoing training to support them in their continued service to the court. The initial training is a one-time training that takes place in the Stark County Office Building in a conference room, from 9:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. In order to accommodate additional volunteers, video training is also available. All individuals who are interested in volunteering for the program must complete the initial training before they can become Court Angels. The two objectives for the initial training are: 1) to review policies and procedures for volunteering as a Court Angel, and 2) to answer any questions Court Angels have related to the Court Angel Program.

At the beginning of the session, the Court Angels are given a training manual, literature from several organizations, a brochure on elder abuse and neglect, and a small promotional item with the Court Angel logo. Within the manual, Court Angels find a variety of information such as the job description of a Court Angel, an explanation of guardianship including common problems that arise, confidentiality and conflict of interest, and the types of wards and living arrangements they are likely to encounter. An overview of the steps to complete the visit, definitions and indicators of abuse and neglect, and visit tips are also shared. The manual contains a glossary of common medical terms, telephone numbers for program staff, and community resources. A copy of a sample case summary and the reporting form is also provided, and everyone is encouraged to read the manual in its entirety. In addition to reviewing the contents of the manual, new Court Angels watch a video of Judge Park providing background information on guardianship and listen to speakers from organizations that may serve wards and their families such as the Stark County Developmental Disability Board, long-term care ombudsman, and professional guardians. In the initial training, Court Angels are provided lunch, a tour of the Court Angel Program office area, and are personally greeted and thanked for their service by the Judge.

Additionally, Court Angels are instructed how to complete the home visit assessment using the reporting form and are given many opportunities to ask questions. The Court Angels are encouraged to talk to program staff about any concerns they may have after a visit. If Court Angels have concerns about potential abuse or neglect during a visit after business hours or on a weekend, they are instructed to call 911 or Adult Protective Services (APS). If Court Angels have concerns about care issues with the paid caregivers of wards, they are advised to discuss what they have observed with the guardian first.

Initial training feedback

Interviews with Court Angels revealed that the initial training was good and prepared them for the role. Highlights of the feedback Court Angels provided about their experiences with the initial training and illustrative quotes are presented below.

Training explained role well

Court Angels explained that the initial training effectively set expectations for the role. They appreciated the overview of the entire process of guardianship and the clear description of the Court Angel Program. This allowed the volunteers to gain a clear understanding of their role and about why the Court Angel Program is important.

“I went into it blind, not really knowing what this was all about. And it was something that I wanted to pursue. And of course, I had no idea what their expectations were for us. If they told us where to go, if we had any choices involved, what kind of reports were going to have to be writing, where the accountability really was in this whole thing with us to the court, and all of that. So, yeah she laid that out very well.”

“Because I think sometimes, we just need to know the process. How do we fill this out? Where do we go to fill this out? Where do I turn it in at? Some of those I know that it might seem nitty gritty but, you know, it just makes you feel more comfortable... So, that’s very helpful. I thought they were very helpful to that.”

“During the initial training, they wanted to let you know how important you were to the whole system and how they valued us Court Angels. And that feels good to know that you’re considered very valuable to the whole process.”

Training manual is helpful

Court Angels liked receiving a training manual that presented a lot of information in the initial training, but also served as an ongoing resource. One Court Angel said, *“The training manual tells you everything you need to know.”* Another thought that the manual is *“right on target”* with providing a lot of information and that staff was helpful in walking through its contents step by step in the training. Additionally, many mentioned feeling more prepared because they have the training manual as a reference tool.

Training complemented Court Angel’s background

Some of the Court Angels explained that the training was at the right level because of their professional backgrounds, which allowed them to draw from their experiences and training in fields such as social work, nursing, and medicine. These individuals mentioned that the training was good, however, they already had an idea about how they would complete an interview or the home visit based on past experiences. One Court Angel explained that if it were not for her medical background, she may not have felt as comfortable with doing an initial visit in a home by herself.

Option to complete first visit with staff

During the initial training, program staff offer to accompany new Court Angels on visits to allow the new Court Angel the opportunity to learn from another volunteer who has more experience with visiting and completing the reporting form.

The majority of Court Angels did not opt to go on a visit with a staff member, although, several noted that it would have been a good idea to do so. No specific barriers were mentioned to explain why the first visit was not completed with a staff member. Only one of the Court Angels interviewed completed her first home visit with another person. In this case, the visit was with another Court Angel, and the new Court Angel mostly listened and observed. After that point, the new Court Angel felt more comfortable with completing visits independently.

Some felt it was not necessary due to their past experiences with home visiting, while others felt comfortable with giving it a try on their own and learning as they go, knowing that Court Angel staff are available to answer questions or provide assistance if needed.

“But, you know, you just kind of jump in. And for me, I just went ahead and did it, and I figured I’ll learn from my mistakes. And the very first one could not have been a more loving family. They were just awesome. By the time I’d left, I’d seen all the family albums, seen family pictures, and got a number of hugs, and I thought ‘Well, this isn’t so bad.’ Then, when I got home, I realized a couple of things I’d forgotten. You know, I just called them and people were awesome about it. I told them, you know, they’d have to bear with me, that I was a little new at this, and I need a little more information, and it was fine. And, so, of course, the second one went easier, and the third visit went easier... and you just kind of learn from that.”

SUGGESTIONS FROM COURT ANGELS REGARDING INITIAL TRAINING

Based on the interviews with Court Angels, the following suggestions are offered to provide feedback about the program and share advice with other counties seeking to create an initial volunteer training:

- 1. Include a more hands-on approach to the training with roleplays to practice asking the interview questions and completing the reporting form.** A Court Angel explained, *“I think they covered many areas, but as you know, teaching somebody how to do something, and actually doing it, are two different things.”* By meeting a guardian and ward in the training, or viewing a film of a Court Angel interview, the new Court Angels could gain a deeper understanding of what the experience is like for the guardians and wards, and how to conduct themselves on a visit.

- 2. Integrate a more in-depth description of the three main types of visits Court Angels will complete (i.e., visit to a home in the community, a group home, and a nursing home) and the characteristics of the wards who are likely to live in these environments.** Court Angels seemed to have fairly consistent experiences within each setting, thus this sort of review could be helpful in allowing Court Angels to be more informed about which types of cases they would like to accept within these different settings. For example, in the nursing home setting, outline all of the steps involved with arriving and completing the reporting form including which staff members they need to speak to and whether the guardian should provide information over the phone in advance or during the visit. While some enjoyed visiting wards in a variety of settings, others like to focus on one. One of the Court Angels said, *“I’m pretty much sticking to nursing homes.”* Any other details that might help with scheduling visits or knowing what to expect would also be helpful. One Court Angel explained that she learned that developmentally delayed wards who participate in a workshop during the day may not be available to meet with the Court Angel until the evening.
- 3. Providing more opportunities for new volunteers to network with more experienced volunteers to encourage opportunities for mentorship.** One of the Court Angels suggested inviting more experienced Court Angels to speak to the new group, or gather stories from current Court Angels about what they experience (e.g., what to do when the entire family shows up at the visit, lots of pets are in the home, etc.) to help prepare new Court Angels. The more experienced Court Angel may talk through the entire process of calling a guardian and setting a positive tone for the visit, or demonstrate all of the steps involved. And, it may be ideal for a new Court Angel to shadow or observe another Court Angel who has completed 50 or more visits.
- 4. Require, or strongly emphasize, shadowing a visit after the initial training.** Even though most of the Court Angels did not go on the optional visit with another person, some felt that a shadowing visit with a staff member or another Court Angel who has completed many visits would benefit the individual and the program. Courts seeking to replicate the Court Angel program are encouraged to require new volunteers to shadow court staff or more experienced volunteers during their first visit.
- 5. Ensure that new volunteers understand they will see a lot of mentally and physically disabled people and are informed about what to expect when visiting.** Courts can offer advice to volunteers about how to become more comfortable working with diverse populations.
- 6. Make sure that volunteers understand that there are different types of guardians and that not all the guardians are family members.**

7. **For some volunteers who are not as familiar with the concept of confidentiality, it would be helpful to explain how they should keep the case file information confidential after picking it up and that the case can be discussed with court staff openly without violating confidentiality.** The information provided in the case summaries is gathered from the Court's public records. After the Court Angel completes the reporting form, it may be helpful to share some guidelines about how to ensure the privacy of the information collected.
8. **Reduce or streamline the amount of information in the training manual.** Information may be easier to find by adding section dividers and reviewing what each section entails.

Overview of ongoing training

Court Angels are provided ongoing training through quarterly meetings, an annual appreciation luncheon, and yearly seminars. Speakers provide relevant information on elder abuse, social security, community resources, Medicaid, and any additional topics which may provide beneficial education for the wards and guardians. Court Angels are able to interact with community specialists, such as bankers and elder law attorneys, who can provide insight and alert Court Angels to risk-inherent situations.

Ongoing training feedback

Court Angel feedback was again very positive regarding the ongoing training that occurs during the quarterly meetings. They said, *"The speakers are great! Very relevant!"* The Court Angels are grateful for the effort that goes into planning the additional training to make them feel more comfortable talking to wards and guardians about their needs. In addition to feeling that training on certain topics is helpful, Court Angels like to learn more about resources available in their community and appreciate being able to obtain the contact information of someone they have met to be able to reach out to them directly in the future if needed. Court Angels highly recommend the ongoing training to continue to build the skills of Court Angels, perhaps through speakers as well as learning from one another. One suggested an advanced training on an annual basis designed for people who have completed many visits.

Learning about community resources and other agencies

Court Angels appreciated being able to meet individuals who represented different agencies in the county that may serve wards and guardians. The speakers were able to bring topics such as abuse and neglect or dementia and Alzheimer's to the forefront. They illustrated some of the different situations that Court Angels may be involved with and what kinds of services may be provided to improve the situation.

“There were several agencies that deal with the Probate Court that they brought in that I wasn’t aware existed.”

“I just think being made more aware of how many different organizations there are that are involved in the court system and in helping these various individuals. Things that I had no idea about, and like about some of these acronyms.”

Time for Questions & Answers and Sharing Experiences

Along with an appreciation for the content covered in the quarterly meetings, Court Angels really enjoyed having plenty of time for questions and found it helpful to learn from others who share their experiences. One Court Angel explained,

“In each training, they generally have a Q & A, or they have a staff person or a particular Court Angel share some information about a case or just some general guides, and that’s the most helpful part of the quarterly meeting.”

Networking/community building

Many also spoke about the importance of talking to other Court Angels to know more about what everyone is doing and experiencing in the program. The quarterly meetings were also viewed as a way to develop camaraderie among Court Angels and to learn about what others are encountering in the visits. Some would like to get together with other Court Angels, just to discuss among themselves some of their experiences.

“For the continuing ed., was good to kind of reconnect with the people that were there also. So it’s kind of like networking and sharing information from each other that I liked.”

SUGGESTIONS FROM COURT ANGELS REGARDING ONGOING TRAINING

Based on the interviews with Court Angels, ongoing training on the following topics is highly valued:

- 1. Safety.** Court Angels appreciate that cases are screened to protect them from walking into an unsafe situation, the expertise from staff to complete more complicated visits in potentially more dangerous areas, and the program’s emphasis on “safety first.” The Judge specifically instructs Court Angels to only perform visits in safe locations. Yet, Court Angels also expressed some concern around safety when visiting in someone’s home.

“You just don’t know what you’re getting into. And you know, once you’re in there and that door shuts, you’re in there with a family, you don’t know that family, and you don’t know the dynamics. They’ve said to us before, ‘If you have

any concerns, don't go in...: ' or, 'Just make an excuse to leave and call us, and they'll send the Bailiff.' But, you know, once you're in there, you're there."

"But you know, it's a little scary going into homes especially by yourself. Especially in this day and age, you just don't know what you're walking into. You're hoping and praying that because you've chosen a better part of town maybe or something..."

Courts replicating the Court Angel program should consider training volunteers to notify a friend or family member when the volunteer is out visiting. She said, *"It's almost like it would be nice if it's logged when we go places from a security standpoint."* Perhaps talking through suggestions to help volunteers plan out in advance how to get out of certain situations and informing others when the visit is taking place may be helpful security precautions. Volunteers should be reminded to ask in advance of the visit, *"Are there any precautions I should take when I visit this ward?"*

2. **Skills for home visiting.** Volunteers may benefit from learning about practical ways to negotiate different situations they may encounter in the home such as how to decline sitting or food, deciding what is safe to sit on, how to avoid uncomfortable/annoying environmental situations like cigarette smoke or pets, and having hand sanitizer or extra clothes in their car.
3. **Skills for gathering information when the ward is non-verbal or difficult to communicate with.** Court Angels mentioned that a training on how to build a positive working relationship with guardians and wards who may not be engaged in the process or have a disability that affects communication would be helpful. One Court Angel explained,

"But, when I'm in the nursing home with somebody that's non-verbal, or some of the other intellectual disabilities that I run into, it makes me feel a little bit bad that the guardians are answering those questions in front of the ward. You know, because you really don't know how much the ward understands, and when you're talking about them like that, and they don't really give you any directives on how to handle any of that. Wards may understand more than what you think. You certainly don't want to be hurtful, and have them take that as something that's negative that you don't want it to be."

Another Court Angel described how she developed a method to ask wards who had difficulty with communication about what they were eating by bringing items with her - plastic toys of fruit and other food items - to ask the ward about the kinds of food he or she likes to eat. Additionally, Court Angels reported being able to successfully modify the

questions on the reporting form, by rephrasing questions, so that people with diminished capacity have a better chance of understanding and responding to the questions with yes or no answers.

4. Skills in deciphering the truthfulness of the guardians, wards, and caregivers.

Court Angels are trained to make observations regarding the interactions between the guardian and the ward and alert the court to any negative relationships. Court Angels are trained to attempt to speak privately with the ward, if possible, to avoid any undue influence from a guardian. Courts seeking to replicate the Court Angel program are encouraged to similarly train volunteers. However, volunteers recognized that the responses provided by some wards may not be completely forthright.

A Court Angel explained, *“I wonder whether these people are really being truthful. And so, I’m kind of having to work hard at my intuition and what I’m seeing to kind of bring it all together...”* Several Court Angels wanted to know about how they could be better prepared to determine whether the guardian is actually doing a good job. For instance, one Court Angel said that the ward he visited *“had been coached quite well, with exactly what to say.”* And, a different Court Angel described how the ward who is cared for by a family caregiver may be reluctant to say anything negative about his or her guardian. He said,

“Well, you know, honestly wards probably aren’t going to tell me if they’re not happy with their guardians, because they’re relying on them to provide care for them. They really didn’t have the opportunity, or maybe they just didn’t have the courage to tell me that they’re unhappy with the guardian, especially if it is their family member, you know, that they live with.”

- 5. More medical training targeting the conditions of the ward.** Court Angels wanted to know more about medical aspects of care, like diagnoses and prescriptions, as well as the legal aspects regarding the health of the ward (e.g., what to do when the ward is severely obese). They felt that specialized education based on where the Court Angel visits would be helpful.

Positive aspects of being a Court Angel

Current Court Angels were asked, *“What do you like about being a Court Angel?”* From their responses, it is clear that the Court Angels feel as if they are making a difference in the lives of wards and guardians, and they explain a variety of reasons why their involvement in the program is personally rewarding. Court Angels also very much like the ability to be flexible with their

involvement in the program, so they can complete the activities at a convenient time within their other responsibilities.

Making a difference

Court Angels clearly understood their responsibilities, and felt as though their work is a meaningful and necessary part of ensuring that wards receive proper care.

“I guess just the fact that I can be of help to some people. I guess it’s just the thought of being able to help people.”

“Well I think these wards have to be treated fairly and humanely and all this kind of stuff and getting good care. I think that in the majority of cases they are, but maybe some they’re not. You want to make sure that those that are not being well cared for can be cared for.”

Many Court Angels believe that they are making a difference because they see how the visits benefit both the wards and the guardians. Court Angels see themselves as caring helpers who can offer support to guardians while also ensuring the quality of life of the wards. One Court Angel said, *“It’s surprising how many of the people are appreciative of the fact that we are doing this.”* The quotes below illustrate how the Court Angel visit communicates a message that the court cares about supporting both the wards and the guardians.

“Most people realize that I’m not there as a spy or to jeopardize the guardianship. I am not there to do anything other than ‘Do you need anything that the court can do?’ ‘Is the environment a good environment?’ ‘Are you having issues that through an agency or whatever, we can give you additional help?’”

“It’s nice to have somebody go out and say... you are not forgotten from a Probate Court standpoint. That we’re there, and you know, like anything else, if you’re alone out there fighting the problems of the world and there’s a knock at your door and somebody says... Hey, can I help? Is there anything I can do?”

In addition, some of the Court Angels shared that the Court Angel role was attractive because it allowed them to utilize specialized skills and knowledge. Many explained that they felt more comfortable with the Court Angel role because they had relevant background experiences interacting with a range of people in fields such as teaching, medical/nursing, working for the county, and safety. In fact, some had professional experiences with completing assessments, home visits, or going to nursing homes. Others had specialized skills, such as knowing American Sign Language, which connected the Court Angels with the deaf community.

Many of the Court Angels viewed their volunteer work as a meaningful activity in retirement. One Court Angel described how she felt as if there was never enough time to volunteer while she was working full-time, but in retirement, there was an opportunity to get involved and give back to the community. For some individuals, the Court Angel Program provided a means for them to stay connected to an aspect of work they loved such as interacting with patients and taking care of people.

“I retired last [month], and the day after I retired, I started with Court Angels. You know how when you’re used to being very, very, busy and very fast pace in the medical field? And then, when it comes to a screeching halt, I really did miss patient care and interaction. I don’t have any siblings, and all my grandchildren are out of state, and it was like, ‘What am I going to do?’ Like I said, the training was the very next day after I retired. All my friends thought that I was crazy.”

Flexibility

Most of the Court Angels were also attracted to the volunteer opportunity due to the flexible nature of the program. While the program does ask for a year commitment, the Court Angels enjoyed being able to choose their own cases, which allows them to select the setting and location, as well as a population, they would like to visit. Based on their preferences, some Court Angels select cases in certain neighborhoods close to their homes or specific urban or rural locations, while others opt to visit multiple wards in the same nursing home.

In addition, Court Angels liked being able to decide their own pace in completing visits and setting up visits for a convenient day and time. Court Angels acknowledged that it is good to allow for flexibility in the pacing of visits due to other responsibilities and interests, to accommodate travel (e.g., going to Florida in the winter), bad weather, health problems, or other situations that might require more time or energy. Many Court Angels commented on their appreciation for the ability to set their own schedule in making appointments.

“You know, we want to give them as much as we can, but we all have a life.”

“I am flexible. I can take three cases a week. I can take four and I can choose my own hours and go whenever I want to.”

Rewarding experiences

The Court Angels described a large range of positive aspects of the program that are fulfilling and rewarding. These rewarding experiences include: the benefits gained through personally interacting with guardians and wards, being impressed with the quality of care provided, and feeling appreciated by court staff.

Personal interaction with guardians and wards

Court Angels are drawn to the chance to meet new people and get to know guardians and wards. They enjoy visiting people and look forward to the visits. One Court Angel described being welcomed in homes and feels that everyone involved has a good experience. A number of the Court Angels described how the program provides a way for them to meet people they would not ordinarily meet, and to go to new areas of their community that they may not have visited before. Several Court Angels mentioned their own sense of satisfaction through being “*a listening ear.*”

“I think probably the best thing is the nice people that I’ve met. Really, really, great people. When you think of some of the things that they are dealing with, it’s just amazing.”

For Court Angels who have themselves experienced guardianship or caregiving for a loved one with special needs, connecting with others in similar situations is highly valued and mutually beneficial. A Court Angel explained that as a parent of a child with special needs,

“It’s as beneficial for me as it is for the other parents I have met, because sometimes they have information that is useful for my situation with my [adult child]. I try to have whatever information I can pass on to the next person. So, it’s nice to know that I’m not the only person in that situation. (You know, when you have someone with special needs....) It’s fulfilling for myself as well.”

Impressed by quality of care provided

Court Angels expressed a deep appreciation for guardians who have dedicated their lives to caring for others. Court Angels described how many guardians have a lot of compassion for the ward and are taking good care of him or her. They described guardians as being “*very loving, very open, and very caring about their wards.*” In the illustrative quotes below, one Court Angel recommends that everyone should go on visits to see the lengths guardians have gone to provide care, and the others describe the high level of devotion and support witnessed.

“It’s too bad a lot of other people in the community don’t get to see what we get to see, because some of these the guardians are going through some great hardships and they’re just... You know and you think, my, how can a person put up with this? You know, their whole life, they’ve been doing this. It’s amazing what they do. Really, it is.”

“Mostly, I have to say that my visits to families, I have been extremely impressed with the quality of care that our people give, particularly family members. And, the burden primarily falls on women. ... I have mostly seen that people are remarkably caring people, they take care of family, day in and day out. ... Actually, I find it kind of inspirational when you see people that are so devoted to being a caregiver.”

“You get to see things that you’re amazed at. First, of the guardian who has supported them, but also the pride, that that individual ward has of their accomplishments, even though they may be limited.”

The Court Angels also shared their stories of the lengths some guardians go to support the independence and high quality of life of individuals in their care. Some described the personal sacrifices made by individuals to care for others. For instance, one guardian told her husband that she has the training and the heart to care for several wards and has devoted herself to it ever since. In another situation, where a woman adopted a severely disabled child and became his guardian, a Court Angel said, *“You know, it’s just amazing. There are people out there like this that would go that far to adopt the child and take care of them. It is just mind boggling.”*

Feeling appreciated by court staff

In addition to the positive aspects of the visits, Court Angels feel as if they make an important contribution which is appreciated by court staff. Court Angels described how the staff does a good job of expressing gratitude for the work done and providing helpful support. One Court Angel mentioned that every time she picks up cases, she is thanked by staff. Another said, *“I think Judge Park has done a really good job of trying to promote it and also to make us feel valuable and that she cares about what we’re doing, and that we feel a valuable part of it.”* Many echoed these remarks through comments about how they feel their work is acknowledged and appreciated at quarterly meetings. Court Angels highly also value the other more tangible rewards that some have received, such as the luncheon in honor of the Court Angels and gift items in recognition of their service (pins and a file for completing a large number of visits).

Value of the Court Angel Program

Court Angels consistently stated that the program is doing a lot of good for the community, especially when there are a lot of needs, as indicated by the number of wards in the county and the aging population. Because Court Angels take the time to visit, they feel that they provide an important service to show the wards and guardians that they are not a forgotten population. They describe the Court Angel Program as an integral part of helping the court ensure the well-being of the wards and provide more support to the guardians through being another set of eyes on the situation.

Being the “eyes and ears” of the court

Court Angels expressed the value of the program through their work being an extension of the court’s ability to provide oversight to wards and guardians. Some mentioned being concerned about cases they read about in the newspaper that described how some wards were subjected to bad living situations or financial abuse. There was also widespread agreement that the Court Angel

Program is a valuable program to provide some checks and balances in the process of protecting wards from abuse and neglect. Court Angels often mentioned that the court would not have enough paid staff to check in on all of the wards in the county.

“I think it is important in the rare instances where you get someone who’s living at home - or I guess even living in a nursing home - if they are being neglected. Cause you hear those kind of stories all the time. And, it’s really hard to know until you actually go out and do a physical visit. For the people who are dedicated to their family member, whoever it is, taking care of them or helping them in whatever way, it is kind of a pain to schedule a visit with a Court Angel from the parent’s perspective. But, it is important because even if you go on 50 visits and you see one person that’s in question, it makes a huge difference, because no one should be left in a dirty bed, or not being taken care of, or whatever. So you know if someone is not, someone has to be held accountable and the person deserves the best care that is out there.”

“You’ve just got to be sure that the ward’s being taken care of in the best way possible. I’m just out there kind of being the eyes for the Judge. I always tell the wards that can understand, and I always inform the guardians that the Judge has a lot of people she’s responsible for. She can’t possibly see them all. And so, we have been trained by her to be her eyes and her ears. So that’s what our job is, out there helping her out to do that.”

Some of the Court Angels also discussed how important it is for them to have a direct link to the Judge. Many described the advantages of how the program is designed, with the Judge having authority in guardianship and the program structure in place to respond to situations and make changes, if necessary.

“You have a court Judge that’s interested in knowing about if something needs mandated and she had deputized people. We have resources and can get a hold of her immediately in the situation, if we need.”

Support to wards and guardians

The Court Angel Program fills a need or gap in the community because it is important to reach out to guardians and wards who find themselves in situations they may not have expected to be in. Through a new set of eyes to assess the situation, Court Angels may be able to identify ways individuals can be connected with additional resources that could help the guardian. In some instances, Court Angels feel as if they are supporting the guardian by listening and checking in to make sure that the guardian is also doing well. Court Angels value the case summary provided to them about the ward because it gives them an idea of what to expect during the visit and comfortable conversation topics to help build rapport with a ward who may be hesitant to talk to a stranger. In addition to identifying major problems, some of the Court Angels view the program

as a critical step in the process of addressing minor challenges in order to prevent situations of abuse and neglect.

“I think that this is a way to connect with the community and to let them know that we, you know, that that court system really cares about its wards. And I get that sense. I really do get that sense. I met the Judge and she has been present at some of the orientations and the lawyer [the Court Angel Director], I mean, they’re very responsive and they really are looking out for the wards’ needs and I think the guardians have a great sense of appreciation of that.”

“I try to be relaxed and try to let them know the courts are not always a bad thing. I think as a society we can hear court, it’s because there is, you know, someone’s in trouble, or someone is being taken away. The courts, I think in general, have a negative stigma. So, I go to the house and try to be a friendly person and a helpful person, and say ‘Hey, you know, the court does want to help you.’ I mean the judicial system, although it’s crooked in a lot of ways, sometimes it is really a good thing. We want to be there to help you, to make sure that your loved one is been taken care of, and if there is anything you need, feel free to call the court, at least this Probate Court. And the whole Probate Court system is kind of there to help these people, if they do need help. So you know, I think if it’s presented by the Court Angel in the right way, I feel like I leave most of these homes and the person has a better feeling about the court. We are taking notes about their position, but you know, we’re really there to help you. So, just feel free. Here’s my number. Here’s the court’s number. Depending on how it’s presented, I think it’s very beneficial.”

“If I can bring one little thing to the table by visiting, I feel like I have helped somebody. You know, things can snowball and get into bad situations.”

Support from staff and the court

Court Angels shared many compliments regarding the program staff. They viewed program staff as essential to the training and support of Court Angels, and a necessary structure to support the program’s successful implementation. The majority of the Court Angels interviewed talked about how supportive the staff are - offering to help in any way they can, being available to answer any questions, and giving new Court Angels the chance to shadow a visit.

“Staff did a great job of answering questions and making Court Angels comfortable with making home visits,”

“I mean, when I left, I felt like there was someone that if I had a question or wasn’t quite sure, I could call the court and ask them, they were very helpful.”

One Court Angel simply said, *“They’re really very, very helpful.”* Another expressed how much they liked the staff, *“I think the world of the program staff. They are really nice people.”* Others mentioned that they always feel appreciated by program staff.

One of the valuable aspects that program staff provide is an initial screening of the cases, to identify if the case would be appropriate for a Court Angel or a professional staff member. The Court Angels appreciate being offered *“the easy ones”* and protected from the more complicated cases that need to be managed by a professional. Many felt as if they could go to the court with any questions or to ask for advice. One Court Angel said,

“The Court Angel Director has been awesome. Because if I come home from one visit and I’m perplexed about it, or I just don’t have a good feeling about it, I’ll call her and say ‘How do you want me to handle this?’ And she’s given me some direction on it, because what I feel would be the right thing to do and maybe what they want me to do may not be the same. So I always let them direct that.”

Several mentioned that they were confident that program staff, including the Judge, are very responsive, act upon the information provided by the Court Angels, and have been strong supports when they encountered situations of potential abuse and neglect. While not frequent, some Court Angels have observed problematic situations from time to time. For example, a Court Angel observed a nursing home worker yelling at the ward, telling him to *“sit down and shut up,”* while another Court Angel found the ward he was going to visit lying naked on the bathroom floor. In other situations, through listening to guardians, Court Angels became aware of their concerns (e.g., if the guardian is an older mother, who will take care of her daughter if she becomes unable to do so?). And, Court Angels described situations when some wards expressed they want a new guardian. In these cases the staff have been able to support the Court Angels and engage in any necessary follow-up.

SUGGESTIONS FROM VOLUNTEERS TO ENSURE COURT SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM

- 1. Continue to ensure responsiveness and support of program staff.** Many comments reflected the idea that program staff are very attuned to any concerns that Court Angels present and are happy to be of service. Court Angels rely on staff to take care of situations that they have concerns about. Retaining good staff members allows Court Angels to develop strong relationships over time, and goes a long way in terms of retaining volunteers. Appropriate staffing levels ensure that there is no delay in processing volunteer applications. And, many Court Angels highly value being able to talk through what to do in different situations (e.g., guardian would not let them inside the home, how to interpret what they observed when the ward had diminished capacity or they feel that something about the family dynamics is “off”). Court Angels may also feel more comfortable with providing suggestions to improve the experience of visiting (e.g., visit the same wards each

year, coordinate visits with multiple members of the same living environment) when they feel as if they know staff well and can talk openly with them.

- 2. Educate Court Angels on what happens after they bring issues to the attention of program staff.** Although volunteers were instructed in training about being able to follow-up with the court's website or by asking a staff member about a case, Court Angels reported some ambiguity with whether or not they could ask about how things were resolved for specific cases. Most people were curious about how things turned out. However, some Court Angels felt it would not be appropriate to ask. For example,

"I look at myself as my piece of the puzzle, to go see them, to write this report, do the best I can in my evaluation, and to pass it on. And that's where it stops for me. As a Court Angel, I don't really think it's probably appropriate for me to ask, you know, what happened with it. I don't know. I'm not sure. I mean personally, yes, I do think about them and wonder about them sometimes. But, you know, I don't want to ask when I can't really change anything and I don't want it to come across as just being nosy about what's happening to people..."

One of the Court Angels felt that if she knew more about what steps were taken to resolve difficult situations, she would be better prepared and know what to look for and think about for future visits. She elaborated,

"I haven't had many situations, but to get back with the person that has made the recommendation and let them know what the result was. Because that way, the person could see... Well, did I make the right judgement here or not? Sometimes the answers would tell them. You know what I'm saying? At least give the person a heads up on what did happen. You know, it's always nice to get an answer back. You know, just to kind of check in about whether you were right about whether they found something out or whether some changes were needed."

For the volunteers, this information would also affirm that they are actually making a difference and promote volunteer retention. Courts seeking to replicate the Court Angel program are encouraged to repeatedly highlight ways to follow-up on cases.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STARK COUNTY AND OTHER COUNTIES SEEKING TO REPLICATE THE COURT ANGEL PROGRAM

Court Angels also provided specific feedback that could be used to affirm some of the existing activities of the Court Angel Program or enhance similar programs in the future.

- 1. Revise the reporting form.** Some Court Angels view the reporting form as very long and comprehensive, and made many suggestions to streamline and simplify the form. One said,

“People have said, you know, sometimes it feels impossible to go through that whole form, especially with someone who you’re not sure they understand what you’re saying, or if they’re if they’re really engaged in the process or not.”

Court Angels suggested re-designing the reporting form to reduce the number of questions, focus on the most important questions, eliminate questions that are repetitive, present questions in a way that they do not have to be interpreted or rephrased by Court Angels, organize questions so that all questions asked of a guardian or ward are listed in a row, and have court staff auto-fill all of the information that does not change from one year to the next (e.g., the reason for the guardianship). The hope is that by streamlining the form, Court Angels may be able to complete more visits and not spend as much time on paperwork. Court Angels explained that the form is much too long. One said,

“When I’m interviewing the guardians... there are a couple of things I kind of skip over. Cause it’s like, gosh, I just ask them that, they are just wording it a little bit different, but it’s a little bit repetitive. Some of the information, they don’t tell you how they want to do it.”

In some sections, Court Angels were not sure about who to ask the questions to in the “Visit with the ward” section. Other Court Angels highly recommend adjusting the form so that the questions target communication at the level of the ward and present the most important answers through a more conversational approach, such as *“How are you really doing?”* One part of this is adjusting language and response options. For example, one Court Angel said,

“So the first question on the question for the ward that I was alluding to a little bit ago is the ward ‘satisfied’ with the living situation. They not know what the word ‘satisfied’ means. One of the moms said, ‘Are you satisfied with the living situation?’ I mean, not satisfied, but happy, with the living situation? Sometimes there are communication issues with people that have diminished capacity, and

their speech patterns are pretty much limited. Limited vocabulary, on other words, yes or no answers.”

Another Court Angel echoed this idea, and suggested focusing on the questions on p. 8, line 50 of the reporting form. He said,

“If you go to the page, it’s page 8, the last page, that’s kind of the heart at what you’re getting at when you are talking to a ward, with the questions in line 50, when it says ‘Is the ward satisfied with the living situation, the care, with the caregiver..?’ And this is a question that I think is kind of strange to be asking somebody with diminished capacity, but: ‘Does the ward feel the guardianship still needed?’ Sometimes the ward does not understand guardianship, per se. ‘Is the ward satisfied with the guardian?’ Those to me is what you’re looking for, as far as the care, and the relationship between the ward and the guardian and the caregivers.”

- 2. Give Court Angels a suggested deadline for the cases to be returned.** While the flexibility is appreciated, one Court Angel explained that it would be helpful to understand when the cases should be completed after they are picked up. She said,

“I think the court should say you know if you’re going to get these cases once you get the paperwork try to complete them within two weeks’ time. I think that should be said. Not because we are children just because you know it’s human nature. Some of us procrastinate, and some of us definitely need a little kick in the butt.”

- 3. Feedback regarding the name of the program.** Court Angels provided mixed feedback regarding how they felt about the program’s name and being a “Court Angel.” Some really like the program name. For example, one woman said,

“Well, I like it. I think that this makes you feel good - that you’re a Court Angel. You’re not just called a volunteer for these people, you’re called a ‘Court Angel.’ When it’s in the newspaper, I don’t know if you’ve seen the ads or not, but there’s always angel wings and what people think when they see angel wings. You’d think kindness, helpfulness, guidance.”

On the other hand, one man explained that he would rather describe himself as a volunteer of the Probate Court than an angel. He said,

“This is very minor, but in my mind, the connotation of the Court Angel is a little strange. I don’t know how they came up with that designation for the volunteers. As a male, uh, calling yourself an Angel is a little bit strange I think. When I make phone calls to the people, the guardians, to try to set up an appointment, I just introduce myself as a volunteer of the Probate Court. I don’t refer to myself a Court Angel. If you look in the paper and see Court Angel, if you are male they may say, ‘well, you know, that sounds,’ whatever you want to say, you know, it’s not very masculine, or not something I want to be identified with. I think that might not be very enticing for a male to want to volunteer for that.”

A possible solution is to encourage Court Angels to refer to themselves as “volunteers” if they are uncomfortable with the name of the program.

- 4. Continue to educate community agencies, group homes, and nursing homes about the program.** Court Angels have visited some group homes and nursing homes where the staff member they were speaking with had never heard about the program before and were reluctant to cooperate with providing information. In a situation described by one Court Angel, she communicated with court staff, who sent a letter to the group home to provide more documentation about the purpose of the program and the visit. Courts replicating the Court Angel program are encouraged to provide community education and training regarding their program.
- 5. Recruit more Court Angels who can communicate with a range of wards and guardians.** Court Angels suggested attempting to recruit more people who speak a foreign language, know American Sign Language, or can draw from their personal experiences to communicate with wards.
- 6. Raise awareness of the program and recruit new members through getting an endorsement from a well-known figure in the community or a famous person.**
- 7. Be sure to explain all of the benefits or perks of volunteering for the program.** Even though it was explained as part of the program, some Court Angels were not sure about whether the program offered mileage reimbursement, or if they would be eligible to write-off mileage on their taxes to offset the cost of driving. Since the Court Angels are driving to many different locations, many spoke about the cost of gas, especially among retirees on a fixed income. Court Angels appreciate ways to defray the expenses of being a volunteer.

- 8. Involve Court Angels in recruitment activities.** Court Angels see that staff are “trying real hard” and see opportunities to help. Other ways the court could utilize strengths of the Court Angels include: supporting the program through sharing their expertise in marketing, communications, program management/strategic planning, and tracking program impact through quantitative or qualitative outcomes. Some would welcome opportunities to help with training, staffing tables, and working with groups for recruiting purposes. One Court Angel said, *“I’d love to go out and speak at different clubs, or support booths for senior expos and community events.”*

FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In July 2018, the Judge invited 10 key stakeholders to participate in a focus group and to share their thoughts on how to address two main questions: 1) What value does the program bring to the community? and 2) How can the program be sustained in the future? The focus group was facilitated by a researcher from Miami University and audio-recorded. The group was comprised of a current Court Angel, volunteer and professional guardians, and representatives from community organizations that provide services to support wards, such as the Stark County Board of Developmental Disabilities. A summary of participants’ responses to the two main questions is provided here.

What value does the program bring to the community?

Participants indicated that the Court Angel Program provides a unique and valuable service to the community. The stakeholders are aware of the large number of wards that the county is currently overseeing, and due to the fact that the numbers will increase in Stark County as the population ages, it is important to continue and grow the program to respond to community needs. However, it was brought up that many people do not realize that adults are under guardianship, not just children.

There was widespread agreement that the wards and guardians should be checked up on occasionally to ensure the ward is receiving good care. The service the Court Angels provide by being another set of eyes for the court is highly valued. Everyone also felt it would require too many resources to hire enough paid staff to complete all of the visits, and thus utilizing Court Angels is an innovative way to make up the gap and to ensure that everyone under guardianship receives a visit.

One of the niche areas this program addresses is home visits in the community – a critical area as more people with functional and cognitive limitations are receiving home and community-based services in the community rather than living in institutional environments like nursing homes. The Court Angel Program facilitates a way for Court Angels to go out to the community

to meet wards in their homes, where they do not have the same kind of surveillance that facilities and group homes provide.

The program also provides an objective view of the care of the ward and a new perspective to facilitate problem-solving around issues that the ward or guardian may be experiencing. One of the participants described the value of having a fresh set of eyes to assess a situation. At times, participants explained that guardians can “get into a rut” and do not realize there are other alternatives or that a situation is not the norm, or not typical. The Court Angel Program helps to address these types of challenges by suggesting more minor changes before higher levels of stress and other factors may contribute to a situation of abuse or neglect.

The perception of the Court Angel Program by the community is that the court cares about and wants to offer support to both the wards and the guardians. One of the other valuable aspects of the program is that it is viewed as a support to guardians. The reputation of the program in the community is that it has more of a positive approach than a punitive approach to monitoring guardianships. In fact, a professional guardian mentioned that she always looks forward to the Court Angel visits because she finds them so helpful. And, a volunteer guardian expressed that the Court Angel visit lets her know that she is doing well fulfilling the role, and that the work she is doing is appreciated.

How can the program be sustained in the future?

A lot of discussion occurred regarding structure and funding of the program. Everyone agreed that the Court Angel Program should remain within the court due to the potential conflict of interest if others provided the service, and all of the advantages of being directly connected to the Probate Court’s resources and authority. Furthermore, everyone agreed that the program should be run by paid, professional staff because of all that is required of the job.

Key informants suggested continuing with efforts to bolster support by making the community more aware of the program. When people become aware of the need the program fills, they will help to support it. And, the average person in Stark County may not have heard about guardianship or understand the difference between being a guardian and a Court Angel. Narratives of the success of the program should be used to create greater awareness in the community. One of the participants explained that perhaps this issue does not rise to the top in terms of awareness by the community because the Court Angel Program has been so effective with preventing severe cases of maltreatment. Essentially, the community may be experiencing the benefits of the program without even knowing it is there.

In terms of funding, participants identified possible grant funding sources, such as United Way, foundations located in Stark County, and donor-advised funds. Several suggested a strategy to solicit funds from a philanthropist in the community who may make a personal donation to help

the program. When it was asked whether the court would be able to engage in fundraising, one of the participants responded that it may be possible for the program to be funded if the donations go to a flow-through entity, such as the Board of Developmental Disabilities or a non-profit organization.

As another recommendation to ensure the program's sustainability, several key stakeholders suggested a cost-effective strategy to plan for the expansion of the program by engaging Court Angels in other aspects of the program. They recommended using Court Angels or "quasi-volunteers" who are paid a small stipend to fill in gaps or support existing staff to complete office tasks, as well as having people who could be called upon to assist with training and recruiting on a consistent basis.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report suggests that the Court Angel Program makes a positive contribution to the community. Program staff are happy to share resources about how to replicate or modify the structure of the program within other counties. Interviews with program staff provided four main suggestions for other counties who may want to consider starting a Court Angel Program, summarized below:

PROGRAM STAFF ADVICE FOR OTHER COUNTIES

1. A volunteer-based monitoring program can be set up fairly easily and Stark County is willing to share materials to help other counties get started. A template of this program can be shared with other counties to replicate or modify (e.g., training manual, handbook for director, how to prepare case summaries, etc.).
2. Give thought as to who should be in charge of the program. The leadership of the program must be enthusiastic about the concept of a monitoring program.
3. Adequate funding is required to address needs in the community to better monitor wards. Grant opportunities may be available for pilot programs, as well as county funding.
4. Get the word out. Programs can send out press releases, speak on radio shows, and make presentations. A program will need training materials, volunteer incentives, and takeaways to help people remember the program. In Stark County, grant funding has been very helpful in terms of increasing staffing and paying for advertising. And, Court Angels with skills in marketing or administrative support may be willing to offer their expertise to grow the program. Judge Park has promoted awareness of the program through speaking engagements in the community at rotary clubs and service groups, universities (e.g.,

Malone College, Walsh University, Kent State Branch, Stark State), press releases to newspapers, and radio interviews.

In closing, the Court Angel Program successfully provides an additional layer of court oversight to some of the most vulnerable citizens of Stark County, Ohio. The program ensures the safety of wards through court monitoring and through the provision of additional resources and information to guardians and wards. In the past two years, the Stark County Probate Court has been able to perform nearly two thousand visits while also providing substantive education to the Stark County community.