

Stark County Court Angel Program

AMY RESTORICK ROBERTS

AMY J. DAILY



COURT ANGEL

A Stark County Probate Court Volunteer Program

Research Brief | October 2018

What is the Court Angel Program?

The Stark County Probate Court Angel Program is the first volunteer-based monitoring program by a probate court in Ohio. Initially started in 1995, the program seeks to confirm the well-being of persons under guardianship (legally referred to as wards) in both the community and residential facilities, and to ensure that guardians are receiving adequate support and referrals to additional resources to help them fulfill their role. The program aims to protect wards from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

The Court Angel program utilizes volunteers, named Court Angels, as an innovative approach to monitor the well-being of the more than 1,800 persons under guardianship in Stark County. As identified by both volunteers and key community stakeholders, volunteers are ideal for visiting wards because of the probate court's limited resources relative to the size of the guardianship caseload. The ability to visit all wards on a more frequent basis may prevent maltreatment, facilitate early intervention, and connect guardians with more resources.

Stark County is willing to share this program model and resources to implement it with other counties who may be interested in starting a Court Angel Program. This brief report highlights findings from an evaluation of the program conducted in the summer of 2018 through interviews with twenty Court Angels, the program staff, and a group of key stakeholders, in addition to a review of court data and program documents.

*“IF I CAN BRING
ONE LITTLE THING
TO THE TABLE BY
VISITING, I FEEL
LIKE I HAVE HELPED
SOMEBODY.”*

COURT ANGELS AND STAFF
COMPLETED

**More Than
1,900**

VISITS

THE TYPICAL
COURT ANGEL
VOLUNTEER IS A
WOMAN AROUND
AGE 60 WHO HAS
COMPLETED 14
VISITS.

Who are the People Involved?

Court Angels are individuals who are over the age of 18 and completed an application and background check process. All Court Angels also attend an initial training and are invited to quarterly meetings to receive continuing education. The Court Angels are responsible for completing visits with guardians and wards, and return their assessments to the program staff. The typical Court Angel is a women (though about one-third of all Court Angels are men) around the age 60, who has completed 14 visits.

At the time of this evaluation, the Court Angel Program staff was composed of three individuals who work closely as a team to maintain the internal operations of the program. The Director oversees all aspects of the program and internally tracks progress of the program goals. This position also reviews completed visit reports to identify if there is need for professional intervention in any cases after the Court Angel visit. The Recruiter leads outreach efforts by talking to groups and civic organizations to educate others about the Court Angel Program and elder mistreatment. The Recruiter also works closely with other program staff to update information on case summaries, visit wards and guardians, and support the program’s volunteer training and retention efforts. A third, part-time position is the Deputy Clerk who 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 to ensure that wards are seen more frequently.

Additional staff involved in the program include the Judge, the Court Investigator, and the Bailiff. The Judge actively promotes the program and uses her authority to resolve situations of potential abuse and neglect. The Court Investigator and Bailiff are involved on an as-needed basis to follow up on the cases of potential abuse or neglect.

Table 1. Process Description for Court Angel Program

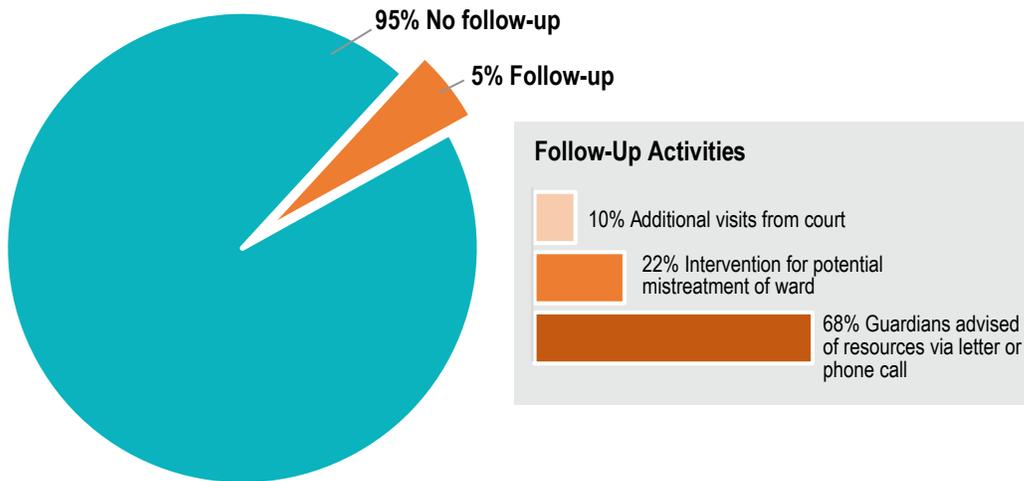
<i>Case Review</i>	Case summaries are prepared by the program staff that include pertinent information about the ward and guardian. High intensity cases are screened out and designated for a visit by professional staff. In the cases deemed appropriate for volunteers, the guardian is informed via phone and mail that a visit is upcoming.
<i>Case Selection</i>	The volunteer reviews the available cases, selects one or more cases, and documents their selected cases in the log book. The volunteer then makes plans to visit the ward and/or guardian.
<i>Visit, Documentation, Recommendations</i>	The volunteer makes a visit and completes a reporting form based on their assessment of the ward and the guardianship arrangement. The volunteer documents recommendations for the court indicating if additional follow up is needed.
<i>Program Staff Review</i>	Program staff review all reporting forms and decide if additional follow up is needed based on the documentation and recommendations of the volunteers.
<i>Court Follow-Up</i>	When a case is determined to require additionally follow up, the case is sent to the Judge. The Judge decides an appropriate course of action such as making a phone call to the guardian, providing a resource referral, or sending out professional staff to assess the case.

Findings

Outcomes of Court Angel Visits

The majority of visits confirmed the well-being of the ward. Of the 1,953 visits completed, approximately 100 required follow-up by the court. This involved resource referral (68 cases), initiating intervention in situations of potential maltreatment (22 cases), and sending professionals to assess the situation (10 cases).

Figure 1. Percentage of Court Angel Visits Requiring Follow-Up



Motivations for Becoming a Court Angel

As volunteers are necessary for the program to function, it is important to understand the Court Angels' motivations for volunteering. Many stated that they wanted to help the community and the people in their community. More uniquely, Court Angels described their involvement as a way to "pay it forward," to help others avoid difficulties they have personally experienced, to be an advocate, to help vulnerable and isolated groups, and to learn more about guardianship.

Value of the Court Angel Program

The Court Angels described many aspects of the value of the Court Angel Program. They mentioned that the program functions well as the "eyes and ears" of the court to provide checks and balances of protecting wards from maltreatment. Many also mentioned the importance of having a direct link to the Judge so that any and all issues that arise can be attended to immediately. Some Court Angels described the program as a critical step in the process of addressing minor challenges in order to prevent situations of maltreatment. Similarly, the focus group members commented on how the program opts for a positive rather than punitive approach to monitoring guardianships. A few volunteers and a volunteer guardian expressed that guardians enjoy the visits because they appreciate the support from the court and that their work is appreciated.

Rewards Associated with the Court Angel Program

The program has been rewarding to the wards, guardians, and volunteers. One volunteer said, "It's too bad a lot of other people in the community don't get to see what we get to see." in regards to witnessing the dedication and devotion of the guardians. Other Court Angels described that many guardians and wards are grateful for their help so they are not

alone in the guardianship process and that the Probate Court is there to be a resource for them. A few volunteers described scenarios where they were able to intervene to help the guardian improve the care of the ward: “If I can bring one little thing to the table by visiting, I feel like I have helped somebody.”

Advice for Other Counties

Interviews with program staff provided four main suggestions for other counties who may want to consider starting a Court Angel Program:

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 and county funding may be available for pilot programs.
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. 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 and local universities, press releases to newspapers, and radio interviews.

Acknowledgements

This brief was supported, in part, by a grant (No. 90EJIG0001) from the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Grantees carrying out projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Therefore, points of view or opinions do not necessarily represent official ACL or DHHS policy.



To download the full report, scan the QR code with your mobile device or go to: <http://bit.ly/2DEen9w>



MIAMI UNIVERSITY

SCRIPPS GERONTOLOGY CENTER

An Ohio Center of Excellence

100 Bishop Circle, Upham Hall 396, Oxford, OH 45056
ScrippsAging.org | Scripps@MiamiOH.edu | 513.529.2914

Miami University is an equal opportunity educational institution and employer.