



News Release

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For immediate release:
Jan. 30, 2013

Judiciary Launches Volunteer Guardianship Monitoring Program Attorneys, Accountants, Retired Professionals, Students and Others Called to Help

New Jersey Chief Justice Stuart Rabner today announced a call to volunteers to monitor the well-being of the state's most vulnerable citizens, the elderly and disabled who rely on legal guardians to manage their financial and health-related decisions. The volunteers will be the foundation of a novel and significant initiative.

"The Guardianship Monitoring Program is a volunteer initiative that grows out of the need to ensure that friends, neighbors and family members who are incapacitated are treated with the dignity and integrity they deserve," Chief Justice Rabner said.

"Census data and health care experts tell us that the population of elderly and disabled Americans will grow dramatically in coming years. We must take steps now to meet the increased need for protection with an enhanced level of oversight of legal guardians," he added.

Every legal guardian in New Jersey is appointed by the court and is responsible for making decisions on behalf of an incapacitated person about personal and medical care, meals, transportation, and even where the person lives. Guardians take control of the person's assets, manage budgets, pay debts, and make all financial and investment decisions.

Legal guardians can be family members, friends, attorneys and others. They not only manage the affairs of people they assist, but also must report annually on the financial status and the general well-being of the individual in their charge. Written reports are filed each year with the county surrogate.

The annual reports are designed to provide the courts with key information on the quality of financial management. Volunteers will work directly in county surrogates' offices to review guardian files and the annual reports.

In recent months, county surrogates and court administrators have met to discuss the program. "We greatly appreciate the cooperation of the county surrogates in this initiative," Rabner noted.

"Experience has shown us that although most legal guardians are caring and responsible individuals, that is not always the case. Unfortunately, some guardians have exploited the very people they promised to help. Because government resources are simply not adequate to provide the level of detailed review that each annual report deserves, we are enlisting volunteers to join the Guardianship Monitoring Program and help out," Rabner said.

The Judiciary has developed a new statewide database to track all guardianships and ensure that reviews will be conducted in a timely and thorough manner. Until now, the review of annual reports has varied from county to county, and some reviews were minimal. As part of the Guardianship Monitoring Program, with the help of volunteers the new computer program will record every court-ordered legal guardianship and track the monitoring of each case.

Recent cases in New Jersey illustrate the risks to incapacitated persons when reports are not carefully examined. In one case, an attorney-guardian stole \$2.6 million from 56 clients. In another, a minister-guardian stole more than \$200,000 from 19 clients. Another lawyer is under indictment for allegedly stealing \$800,000 from 60 clients.

In addition to the computer system, the Judiciary is hiring additional professional level staff members to work on and coordinate the project. These staff members will have overall responsibility for the implementation and administration of the program.

Volunteers will receive detailed training from court staff on how to read and analyze the guardians' annual reports and how to gather data for the new computer system. With the new database, missing or incomplete reports will be easier to identify. Volunteer monitors will flag inconsistent or incomplete financial information, which will be reported to judges, and possibly prosecutors, for appropriate action.

The program, which is expected to be statewide by November 2013, will begin in three counties – Hunterdon, Passaic and Mercer. Volunteers in other counties will be kept informed about the start of the program in their counties. Information about the program and how to volunteer can be obtained on the Judiciary's website, njcourts.com, by calling toll-free 855-406-1262, or by emailing [njguardianship.mailbox.@judiciary.state.nj.us](mailto:njguardianship.mailbox@judiciary.state.nj.us).

Rabner credited Judge Margaret McVeigh, presiding judge for General Equity of the Passaic Vicinage, Kevin Wolfe, assistant director, Civil Practice Division, Kristi Robinson, Civil Practice liaison, Jack McCarthy, director, Information Technology Office, Siva Appavoo, project manager, and Mark Talbot, lead business analyst, for their leadership on this initiative.

“We need a host of volunteers to help ensure that individuals who cannot take care of themselves are not taken advantage of by others. Please step forward to help us achieve that noble aim,” Chief Justice Rabner said.

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He said that the courts were looking for volunteers who knew how to analyze simple financial reports, but that training would be provided by the state's judiciary branch.

The program has begun in three counties, and is expected to be statewide by November. Court officials said only Delaware and Utah had similar statewide monitoring.