



Franklin County Probate Judge Robert Montgomery (center) pictured with outgoing Board Member Frank New (right) and incoming Board Member Fred Cloppert (left).

Guardianship Services Board works

Editor's Note: The following article includes excerpts from an article written by Tami Kamin Meyer, an Ohio Attorney and Chair of the Marketing Committee of the American Society of Journalists and Authors.

Upon taking office as Probate Judge in Franklin County, Ohio, Judge Robert Montgomery had a vision to change the guardianship system from an attorney-based guardianship system to one where social services agencies take the lead in protecting the needs of the indigent.

Today, the Franklin County Guardianship Services Board is making that vision reality. A social-services model has been established, which allows social workers and other professionals with specific expertise to assist vulnerable sectors of the population more efficiently than other methods.

Columbus's guardianship system serves a large, diverse population. Judge Montgomery's idea called for two major governmental agencies in Franklin County to join the effort. Those two organizations, the Alcohol, Drug & Mental Health (ADAMH) Board of Franklin County and the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities, serve many county residents who rely on guardianship assistance.

The Judge approached David Royer, the CEO of ADAMH and Jed Morison, Superintendent/CEO of the Board of Developmental Disabilities, to gauge their interest in his idea: a Guardianship Services Board (GSB). The judge believed that if the probate court partnered with those two agencies, wards could be efficiently served by the board if they did not have someone who agreed to act as their guardian.

His vision included licensed social workers, "people who know the ins-and-outs of system," serving as the guardians for those in need. Rather than naming a specific person as the ward's guardian, the head of the GSB, currently Jack R. Kullman, Jr., would be named as guardian. However, the licensed social workers working for the GSB would actually provide the various guardianship needs of its wards.

Establishing a GSB necessitated more than a handshake from the three men. Not only would each of the three organizations need to agree that indigent wards would be best served by a central system of guardianship in the county, but ADAMH and the Board of Developmental Disabilities were asked to pay into the venture, too. Both organizations agreed to contribute \$250,000 annually, with the Franklin County Board of Commissioners pitching in funding, too.

According to Judge Montgomery, an idea requiring the cooperation of governmental agencies might seem foreign elsewhere, but not in Franklin County. "People here tend to work together, not against one another" and that mutual vision made the task of creating the GSB that much easier, the judge says.

Once his partners were in place, the Judge's vision next required a change in state law. With the assistance of Ohio State Senator Jim Hughes, whose constituents are Franklin County residents, legislation was approved in September 2014 that allowed Franklin County to create the GSB.

Judge Montgomery and the GSB have been the recipients of awards and accolades as the program continues on its successful path. For example, this past April, the Columbus Foundation, among the top ten local foundations in the United States, established a program designed to increase services for indigent wards of the Franklin County Probate Court

In turn, the GSB is utilizing those funds to create a volunteer visitor program, pairing volunteers with wards seeking interaction with others. Ohio law permits a probate judge to accept donations to fund the delivery of guardianship services. Other signs of the program's viability are beginning to sprout.

In late August, the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center entered into an agreement with the GSB for its guardianship services. The new partnership means the GSB will provide guardianship services to hospital patients in need of someone to assist them.

"What this really means is that the collaborative model is working and more wards are getting the guardianship assistance they need," says Judge Montgomery, noting his pleasure to work alongside Ohio State's prestigious medical facility. The new arrangement means another \$65,000 annually for the GSB budget.

If imitation is the highest form of flattery, the GSB is the darling of the Ohio probate world. Creating entities to emulate the successes of the GSB has garnered a lot of attention from other probate judges throughout the state, says David A. Hejmanowski, probate judge of Delaware County, Ohio.

"We are trying to get language in the statute to allow counties to create" their own version of Franklin County's GSB, he says. While none of the state's 87 other counties will be forced to participate in a social-services based system of guardianship, Hejmanowski, for one, is very interested in pursuing it for his growing county. "The number of cases is increasing but fewer attorneys are willing to take on these cases," the judge says.

As Baby Boomers start entering a life stage where guardianships can be necessary, but with a limited number of lawyers willing to tackle these matters, an organization like a GSB is imperative, says Hejmanowski. "We need qualified folks to serve as guardians and if we don't have enough lawyers to do it, we need someone safe and appropriate" to fill the gap, he says.

Others in the central Ohio business community lend their time and talents to the GSB, a true indication of the worth of the program. Frank New currently represents the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities (FCBDD) on the Guardianship Services Board. In January, 2018, Frank will step down and be replaced by Fred Cloppert, Attorney and parent of two individuals served by FCBDD.