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**NEW VOLUNTEER GUARDIANSHIP PROGRAM
TO SERVE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

Bloomington, Indiana – Margaret has suffered a stroke, has cognitive impairment, and is unable to verbally communicate and manage her financial affairs. She currently relies on social security disability payments and has no family or friends capable of assisting her. Who will make decisions about Margaret’s medical care, determine which nursing home she should live in during her recovery, and pay her bills?

Paul’s only surviving parent just died. Paul has Downs Syndrome and has never lived on his own. He relies on Medicaid and a small income from a part-time job. Who will decide which group home Paul should live in, oversee his finances, and ensure that he receives proper medical care?

Guardianships are a useful legal tool to help people who lack the capacity to make decisions for themselves – such as those suffering from dementia, traumatic brain injury, or a developmental disability. In a guardianship proceeding, the court appoints a guardian to manage an incapacitated person’s financial assets or personal affairs. A guardian can help ensure that the protected person lives with security and dignity to the greatest extent possible given their circumstances.

Indiana is one of only a handful of states that does not have a state-supported public system of providing adult guardianship services for the indigent. Instead Indiana has struggled to keep pace with the fast-growing need for adult guardianship services through a loosely organized combination of public agencies, private organizations and volunteer pro bono attorney services. Unfortunately, the demand for no-fee or low-cost adult guardianship services has far outstripped the available resources from this patchwork effort.

Meanwhile incapacitated persons without financial means or personal support from suitable family members have been vulnerable to slipping through the cracks and suffering harm from financial exploitation, medical neglect, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. The watchful eye of a guardian can dramatically reduce these risks through prudent management of finances, timely health care decision-making, the appropriate determination of living arrangements, and other vital oversight to protect an incapacitated person.

In response to this growing crisis, Indiana created an Adult Guardianship Task Force which made recommendations to the legislature for reforms. The legislature then provided additional funding for the Indiana Supreme Court to create and implement a Volunteer Advocate for Seniors or Incapacitated Adults or VASIA program. VASIA volunteers are community members trained and overseen by a volunteer guardianship program. These volunteers are then appointed by a local judge to advocate for incapacitated adults unable to manage their own affairs – a role similar to that performed by a Court-Appointed Special Advocate or CASA in a case involving a child.

The local need for additional volunteer guardian services was clearly identified by participants at an Elder Justice Summit convened this past fall by the Area 10 Agency on Aging.

“We have seen a huge need in our community to expand greater access to guardianship services for vulnerable at-risk people with nowhere else to turn,” explained Monroe County Prosecutor Chris Gaal. The prosecutor’s office oversees the Adult Protective Services program which investigates reports of endangered adults at risk of harm, and will file guardianship petitions in appropriate cases.

“Because the funding opportunity was available through a state grant we knew this was something we could achieve if we put our minds to it,” said Area 10 Executive Director Kerry Conway.

Conway and Gaal worked together to convene an Advisory Board with broad representation including IU Health Bloomington Hospital, Centerstone, Stonebelt, elder-law attorneys, and other local stakeholders. The Advisory Board functions under the umbrella of the Area 10 Agency on Agency.

In order to apply for a VASIA grant from the Office of State Court Administration, the newly formed Advisory Board had to secure an initial commitment of twenty-five percent in

local matching funds – which included an in-kind donation of office space from the Perry Township Trustee. Other matching contributions came from the Monroe County Prosecutor’s Office and the Monroe County Council’s Sophia Travis Community Service Grant Program.

“We are now pleased to announce \$38,500 in state grant funding that we will use to create a volunteer guardianship program that will serve our local community,” declared Conway after securing funds from state government.

“The VASIA program will provide many of our most vulnerable citizens with the volunteer guardians they so desperately need,” said Monroe County Judge Steve Galvin, who helped guide the process. The Monroe County Board of Judges has already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Area 10 Agency on Aging in support of the grant and in anticipation of the project.

To help raise awareness about the new program, the Prosecutor’s Office also produced an informational video to help educate the public about guardianship law. The video features members of the local advisory board explaining topics such as:

- What is guardianship?
- Common situations that may require a guardianship
- The legal process for creating a guardianship
- The rights and duties of the guardian
- Local resources.

A companion fact sheet that summarizes information contained in the video is also available. The video and fact sheet may be viewed on the prosecutor’s office website at www.monroeprosecutor.us and on the Area 10 Agency on Aging website at www.areal0agency.org.

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Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/MWP1eUbzvr0>