

**Historical Perspective on Center for
Guardianship Certification**
Formerly National Guardianship Foundation

As compiled by interviews with:

Sally Hurme

Fred Kretz

Susan B. McMahon

Rich Vanderheiden

Rhonda Williams, MG

A survey of National Guardianship Association (NGA) members showed that approximately 90 percent favored a credentialing process. At the time, 1993, there was no government regulation of the industry, and not a lot of conformity within the profession. An early goal was to have a national standard of practice and ethics, so that courts could rest assured that there is a higher level of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by guardians. NGA established the standards, and it was after that that discussions began on the need for a credentialing or certification process.

All who were interviewed agreed that it was recognized from the start that there was a very strong need for the certification process to have an identity separate from the National Guardianship Association, the professional organization, for ethical and legal reasons and to prevent any appearance of a conflict of interest. This led, in 1997, to the formal establishment of the National Guardianship Foundation to oversee the certification process. The standing committee that was appointed by NGA to lead to the Foundation was free standing to maintain the integrity of the credentialing process.

Much work was done in the intervening years to prepare the first exam, as the committee considered not only creating the exam, but also processing rules, regulations and eligibility standards. In Sally Hurme's words, "To write a valid exam, there had to be an understanding of what a guardian needs to know. What core competencies are necessary? What are we certifying them as? How do they demonstrate their knowledge? How do they maintain certification? How do they lose certification?"

Sally Hurme noted, "The certification process is what distinguishes a profession from a trade group." She added that part of the importance of having certification was "to raise the profession in the eyes of all judges, clients, community and peers."

Rhonda Williams added being certified increased prestige for guardians, and helped gain respect for the profession. She noted that questions throughout the process included how to achieve standards, what is the value of being certified, and is there a review process for complaints?

Sally recalls that part of the need for the process grew out of a desire to anticipate where the profession needed to grow, and where the public perceived it needed to be. Various state legislatures were considering mandating certification, and there was a feeling that it would be more appropriate for a foundation to develop the guidelines.

To investigate and work towards making recommendations, a free-standing committee was named, separate from the professional organization. It was this initial committee that worked to develop certification guidelines. There was discussion about both a basic certification and an advanced certification, but the decision was made to undertake the basic certification process first.

Sally said, "These were the questions the committee members were asking: What are we certifying them as? How do they demonstrate their knowledge? How do they maintain certification? How do they lose certification? To write a valid exam there had to be an understanding of what a guardian needs to know – core competencies, and a statistical analysis to validate questions." She said the committee understood that it was necessary to process rules and regulations; just the certification process was more than just passing an exam.

Rhonda recalls, "The certification committee was a committee of chairs. They were to test the water, write applications, rules and regulations. Each committee member worked on a piece."

Both Rhonda and Fred Kretz mentioned the fact that language (definitions and vocabulary) varied from state to state. In addition, part of the difficulty in establishing the process had to do with the "diversity" with

so many backgrounds represented within the profession – estate planners, social workers, etc. Fred noted, “We needed a common set of standards to handle all that diversity.” Rhonda said the vocabulary was “all over the place.”

Fred notes that while different members have different viewpoints on the impetus for establishing the NGF, he attributes the start of the process and the recognition of the need for credentialing to a series of articles written in 1989 by the Associated Press, which detailed failures in the guardianship process, and basically condemned the process.

According to Rhonda, the work of the committee “was remarkable – it went from an idea to a test in 3 ½ years. Everyone who worked on the process was a volunteer.”

Calling the design process, “very educational,” Fred said it assured that guardians have specific knowledge in the areas in which they were tested, adding, “This is a real exam which offers real problems.”

There was a realization from the beginning that it was necessary to offer training as an important part of the process, with members of the examination committee working to including teaching and covering all the generalities. They developed a study guide and course outline for the testing, identified those who could serve as qualified instructors and wrote a training guide for the instructors.

Rich added, “We knew the first test wasn’t perfect, but with state certification going on we knew if we didn’t get the testing out, we might lose the opportunity.” The committee and the Board also agreed that the process would be ongoing, with continual re-evaluation and changing of test content. Sally added, “We are always wanting to make it better.”

Both Fred and Rhonda were effusive in noting the amount of work that the committee accomplished in a brief amount of time. “I was amazed at the amount of work we accomplished – we would work on weekends, just hammering it out,” Fred said.

Dr. Judith Hale analyzed the process from beginning to end, and helped develop a checklist and validate the process; Bradley University, Peoria, IL, was used to do item analysis. It was felt that an external evaluation of the test and the process was vital.

Fred felt the biggest obstacle to the process was the fear of a loss of autonomy on the part of states because there was a great deal of variation from the east coast to the west coast, and no one wanted “to be told what to do.”

Sally added that it was a “fantastic group of people” who worked on the process. “The process was always amiable. There was a huge contribution of volunteer hours.”

Rich Vanderheiden, chair of the original standing committee, recalls with some humor that as Eileen Rousch, Rhonda, Susan, Fred and Doug Kaplan developed questions for the test they “almost killed each other.”

Chairs of the subcommittees of the first committee became members of the first Board of Directors of the Foundation when it was established in 1997. The Board was selected to reflect a balance across the country. When the National Guardianship Foundation was established as a separate legal entity from NGA, it was determined that there should be a Board of Trustees consisting of 8-12 members. The Board is composed of 50 percent members from the NGA Board of Directors; 25 percent from the NGA membership

(excluding the Board); 25 percent appointed by the Foundation Trustees. The NGA president serves as an ex-officio member of the Foundation.

After the NGF was established, the work began toward a process for a Master Guardian Certification. Although the initial survey in 1993 had identified some of the traits of an advanced guardian, it had not provided enough background on the concept of a master guardian. A new survey was designed to elicit a clear description of traits necessary: qualifications, specialized knowledge and skills, experience and areas of expertise. The survey was distributed to 115 people who were familiar with the practice of guardianship.

The results of the survey helped identify what distinguishes a Master Guardian from a Registered Professional Guardian: advanced experience, knowledge, education and skills, all demonstrating an ability to teach, consult, advocate and manage difficult and complex guardianship situations.

The test was developed to test not only knowledge, but also the application of knowledge. It was administered in October, 1999. A Master Reading List was also developed, and made available through NGA as preparation for the test.

In July, 2007, ten years after the establishment of the National Guardianship Foundation, it has officially changed its name to The Center for Guardianship Certification (CGC), with a new logo and tagline, "Promoting Professional Excellence." This change helps to further distinguish CGC from the National Guardianship Association, reflecting the desire from the beginning that the two organizations, while allied, provide different services. CGC can be recognized for its stewardship of the national certification process, being responsible for exam content, scheduling and overseeing the exams, maintaining the de-certification process and providing leadership in every area of certification.

In ten years, it has grown to have more than 1,200 Registered Guardians and 36 Master Guardians across the nation. In addition, CGC has state specific testing in California, Florida, Texas, and Oregon. For more information on this growing organization, please visit www.guardianshipcert.org. It continues to hold discussions in an effort to partner with states in further elevating the guardianship profession.

Summary of activities for establishment of CGC (*formerly* NGA)

1988 – The Wingspread Conference in Racine, Wisconsin discussed challenges within guardianship, and offered a set of landmark recommendations for reform of the nation’s guardianship system.

1990 – Sally Hurme recalls that the first presentation on the concept was done.

1993 – NGA created a survey for general membership with regards to certification for guardians and conservators. 180 responses were received, indicating to the NGA Board a high degree of interest among members. These survey results became the basis for designing the certification process. The Board created a standing committee for certification, with members Richard Vanderheiden (chair), Sally Hurme, Fred Kretz, Susan McMahon, Rhonda Williams, Doug Kaplan, Eileen Rousch.

1994 – The results of the survey were presented to the general membership at its conference in San Diego.

1996, October 1 – The first review course and exam were offered at the NGA conference in Detroit, and 80 people became charter registered guardians.

1997, May 5 – At the Trustees meeting a motion was passed to seek 501 c(3) status for the establishment of a Foundation for certification.

1997, November 13 – Articles of Incorporation for the National Guardianship Foundation were approved in Illinois. It was created to be responsible for the certification process. Signers of the incorporation papers include: Susan B. McMahon, Fred Kretz and Rich Vanderheiden.

1997, December 11 – Rhonda Williams presented to the board a proposed development structure for advanced guardianship certification, soliciting input for the report to be finalized for the January, 1998 meeting. Members who worked on the process Rhonda, Susan McMahon, Fred Kretz and Sally Hurme.

1998, January – Development of an advanced guardianship certification process was begun.

1999, January – The Articles of Incorporation for NGF were filed and published in The Daily Territorial in Arizona (moving them from Illinois, and dissolving the Illinois incorporation)

1999, March – A survey was mailed to 115 people with regards to an advanced guardian designation, and the first part was to identify how a master professional guardian would differ from a registered professional guardian.

1999, October 6 – The first test for Master Guardians was administered in Chicago at the NGA conference.

2001, May 3 – First meeting of National Guardianship Network, including representatives of National College of Probate Judges (NCPJ), National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys (NAELA), National Guardianship Association (NGA), National Guardianship Foundation (NGF), American College of Trust and Estate Counsel (ACTEC), National Center for State Courts (NCSC), ABA-Commission on Legal Problems of the Elderly (ABA-CLPE) and Special Advocates for the Elderly.

2001, April 1 – Notes in Trustee Minutes that the Registered Guardian exam was to be updated by September, 2001. A decertification committee was named, including Rich Vanderheiden, Francine Saccio, Cherie Mollison and Patricia Shillingburg.

2001, August 11 – Rich Vanderheiden suggested a standards committee be developed to address revocation of suspended certifications.

2001, October 21 – A Grievance Committee was named, including Francine Saccio, Patricia Shillingburg, Gary Beagle and Rich Vanderheiden, chair.

2006, January 1- The National Guardianship Foundation moved headquarters to Harrisburg, PA and hires a separate management company than NGA.

2007, July 1- The National Guardianship Foundation changed its name to the Center for Guardianship Certification. The organization also developed a new logo and tagline, “Promoting Professional Excellence.” The reason for this change was to distinguish the organization from the National Guardianship Association, since the purpose of the two organizations is quite different.

Additional timeline notes per interviews:

- Discussions began in third or fourth quarter of 1993 on the development of a concept paper. Richard Vanderheiden was named chair of a standing committee to study a process for credentialing
- Rich has a memo from November 2, 1993, following up on a meeting on October 18, 1993 in Wooster, Ohio with information on data gathering, options for funding, amount of funding needed to proceed
- Rich created a detailed memo, dated Jan 12, 1994, with a project summary, and why a certification process was necessary. He identified 20 reasons, including professional growth, need for a professional identity, need for service delivery standards, need for continued education and tracking, goals, objectives, and others.
- In 1994, the committee met on a quarterly basis
- 1995 – project languished while they looked for funding
- May 16, 1995 - a strategic planning session was held
- Throughout 1996 there was “frenzied work, “and in the second quarter of 1996, Management Plus was hired as administrator.
- In late August/early September the committee met in Tucson to develop the test