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Paper Prisons: Missouri man continues fight to free his mother from public guardianship

Greg Lee has battled public administrator in Pulaski County to get access to his mom

PULASKI COUNTY, Mo. —

Greg Lee wants to see and free his mom.

Lee believes his mother, Shirley Butler, has remained trapped in Missouri's public guardianship system for more than six years.

Courts have ruled multiple times against his attempts to end his mother's guardianship.

But he won't stop fighting to visit her more often and eventually remove her from the care of a county elected official.

"It's a story that needs to be told," Lee said. "When I hear the word 'guardian,' it makes me cringe."

Public guardians, meanwhile, at the state level, believe their work is vital to Missouri and often delve into extremely complex family situations with very few resources.

Lee's story about his mother is part of a new KMBC 9 investigation called "Paper Prisons," highlighting the difficulties of wards of the state and their families under Missouri's system of public guardianship.

KMBC is investigating ways to systemically improve the care of those under guardianship by highlighting stories of people struggling to navigate a tangled system of legal paperwork, medical records and court orders. KMBC is also seeking answers, perspective and context from those in charge of keeping wards of the state in their care for their recommendations on how to improve the system. Missouri had more **11,000 wards** according to a 2020 **report**. That same report mentioned several **opportunities for improvement**, saying a "lack of state funding and coordination leaves Missouri with a fragmented public guardianship system."

SHIRLEY BUTLER'S GUARDIANSHIP

Butler, 78, has been under public guardianship since Lee and his sister signed paperwork in 2019, asking the Pulaski County public administrator to be a temporary guardian for their mother after Butler's boyfriend fell sick with cancer.

Every Missouri county has a public administrator.

Public administrators in Missouri are mostly elected, sometimes appointed, to serve as public guardians when people cannot care for themselves or lack family support.

Lee was caring for his mother but needed more help, he said.

Lee and his sister, whom courts have found have a strained relationship, signed the guardianship agreement together, asking Pulaski County's public administrator to oversee their mother's estate.

Lee believes asking the public administrator in Pulaski County for help was the biggest mistake of his life.

"I threw my mom in the fire," he said. "I thought I was helping her and all I did was make her life h***, so, I can't stop fighting now."

Under guardianship, Butler became a ward of the state, with the public administrator's office gaining control over her finances, home and life decisions.

This month, a Missouri appeals court just ruled his mother's guardianship is valid after Lee, his sister and the public administrator have gone back and forth for years over its legality.

KMBC 9 Investigates has not heard back from Lee's sister after multiple attempts to reach her.

Lee also alleged that a previous public administrator kept him from seeing his mom.

But a judge ruled the public administrator was "working in her best interests."

A court also denied Lee his plan to move his mom into his home, issuing judgments three times since the original guardianship placement finding that Lee was unable to care for his mother and that the guardianship in place was needed.

One judgment from 2021 also says his conduct when he visited his mom was "upsetting to Ms. Butler and disruptive to other residents and staff members," saying there were 20-30 disruptions during visits.

Lee denies that he caused any disruptions during any visits or that his visits were upsetting to his mother.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SHIRLEY BUTLER'S CARE

Lee has documented his mom's injuries, including multiple falls and a fractured pelvis, while she has remained under guardianship.

He believes Pulaski County's current public administrator, Becky Allen, is not providing proper care. Lee has also complained about the public administrator's handling of his mom's case to various state and federal authorities.

KMBC 9 Investigates recently asked Allen for an interview about Butler's case.

Her attorney sent a statement asserting that a court had ruled the public administrator's office had performed its duties "in an exemplary, professional and efficient manner."

"There have been accusations which perpetuated investigations pertaining to Ms. Butler, from the Department of Health and Senior Services, the Attorney General's Office of the State of Missouri, the Social Security Administration, and the Board of Nursing," said the attorney's statement. "Further, the annual settlements are reviewed and approved by the Court. Each entity has confirmed the performance of duties of the Public Administrator to be appropriate and pursuant to all laws and regulations."

But the attorney's statement left out any answers as to whether Butler needed to remain under guardianship and why Lee has such trouble seeing her.

After multiple written attempts to ask for an interview, KMBC 9 Investigates recently asked Allen questions outside the Pulaski County Courthouse.

She remained silent, declining to comment, and walked away. Later, she turned out the lights and walked out of her office as KMBC 9 Investigates was videotaping the exterior of her office.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS FACE MULTIPLE CHALLENGES ACROSS MISSOURI WHILE CARING FOR PEOPLE IN COMPLEX SITUATIONS

Public administrators across the state of Missouri are often assigned complex guardianship situations with broken family dynamics. Judges appoint them as guardians for people with severe mental and physical health issues. They can have heavy caseloads and staffing in their offices remains challenging.

Leaders with the Missouri Association of Public Administrators, who are not involved in Shirley Butler's case, recently spoke to KMBC 9 Investigates to underscore how important their work is to the public in Missouri. They reiterated that public administrators do not actively seek out guardianship cases and are working to help people get restoration into the community, especially when they are in restrictive environments like nursing homes.

"Public administrators are some of the most caring people that I know," said Cher Caudel, Moniteau County public administrator since 2003 and current MAPA president. "They truly do want to make a difference for the people that they are appointed to, and they do the best that they can with what they have, and a lot of times what we have isn't much."

They also believe more funding and support from the state of Missouri would help their increasing caseloads.

A 2020 [report](#) commissioned for the Missouri Association of Public Administrators highlighted how public administrators often do not have enough resources, "while navigating complex systems to provide care for their wards – while also facing increased pressure from the state and stakeholders to ensure all wards are placed in their least-restrictive alternatives."

Former MAPA President and current Webster County Public Administrator Danielle Boggs said the individuals in her caseload who are not happy about what's going on in their case are vastly outweighed by the individuals who are satisfied with service from her office.

Boggs also said she does not see public guardianship as some sort of power grab from public administrators.

"We're not prowling the streets for people to serve as their guardian," she said. "And I think that's the most common misconception."

Boggs and Caudel also said they work with wards of the state and their families by aiming to help restore people into the community.

"I can't speak for other counties because I don't operate in their courts," Boggs said. "I know restoration, it is not difficult in Webster County."

St. Louis County Public Administrator and MAPA Vice President Tim Weeks echoed that he also works to restore people into the community or into family situations.

"We've had some successful restoration, no doubt about that. But not nearly as many as I'd love to see here," Weeks said. "Unfortunately, it just, it takes a lot of time to get somebody to that point."

Weeks said it is ultimately up to judges and courts on how guardianship cases proceed toward restoration.

All three also said they have seen cases where people's rights are restored, only to return to public guardianship in the future.

They agree more education is needed about the role of guardians and said issues within Missouri's public guardianship system should not be attributed solely to public administrators.

Private guardians, multiple state agencies and courts all have a role to play, they said.

GREG LEE ARRESTED

Butler's guardianship case recently took another turn. Lee was arrested for trespassing after a nursing home worker in Lowry City, Missouri, at Truman Lake Manor called a deputy during his visit to see his mom. Lowry City is more than two hours away from Lee's home. Lee believes his mom is kept far away to discourage his visits.

But he wants to see her.

Lee believes a court order from four years ago gives him the right to see his mom. He tried to explain to the deputy on his August visit, but he ended up with a trip to the St. Clair County jail.

Lee is currently facing two misdemeanor trespassing charges in St. Clair County.

Truman Lake Manor Administrator Tim Corbin declined to comment on Butler's care to KMBC 9 Investigates, citing HIPAA medical privacy laws.

"In them fighting so much to keep me from seeing my mom, they've made it to where everybody's going to know," Lee told KMBC 9 Investigates.

"I won't quit," he said. "I'm not going to stop until I can save at least one person. I hope it's my mom."

Throughout the next year, KMBC will continue to explore the challenges and opportunities for improvement in Missouri's public guardianship system.