

Asking tough questions to save a child



When Esther Jacobo became interim secretary of the Department of Children & Families last July, she told her colleagues: "It is important to take a unified and community approach to protecting our children." She also said child-welfare professionals must question each other constantly — "We must question each other's judgment calls, decisions and choices because the lives of children are at stake."

She underscored the challenge of effectively engaging in child-protection work, saying that, "These are complex families and situations and they require sophisticated, deliberate analysis."

Jacobo accurately assessed the intense challenges of child-welfare work. In the wake of news about children who have died because of system-wide failures, it is clear that so much more needs to be done to reach our goals for protecting our most vulnerable young neighbors.

In some of these tragedies there were gross negligence and absolute disregard for agency standards and policies. In many cases, though, the death was mostly the result of a failure to conduct a "deliberate analysis" and to "question each other's judgment calls, decisions and choices."

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Effective and sophisticated case evaluations demand sufficient time and resources to gather critical documentation and to interview children, parents, relatives, service providers, and others. It requires asking difficult questions and challenging assumptions in order to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

In Miami, the Citizen Review Panel Program, operated for 25 years by Foster Care Review, Inc., is empowered by state law to ask the hard questions and methodically assess children's safety, permanency and well-being. The program is a partnership between Foster Care Review's expert staff and almost 100 dedicated, trained community volunteers.

Every year, the Citizen Review Panel Program conducts 400 to 500 live case-review hearings and determines as clearly as possible whether children in foster care are safe and well cared for. Volunteers also determine if all is being done by the child welfare agencies to safely reunify children with their families or secure a 'forever family' through adoption if reunification is no longer possible.

Citizen-panel volunteers bring the eyes, ears and voices of the community into the system by questioning everything and everyone connected with each child reviewed. The panel's five to seven members interview foster parents, case managers, relative caregivers, parents and children. They ask pointed and specific questions and spend nearly an hour per child culling out inconsistencies, discrepancies and issues needing further attention.

In addition the Foster Care Review staff members spend hours reviewing case documents, medical reports, mental-health and school records, providing vital support and expertise to the volunteers. At the conclusion of the review hearing, a report of findings and recommended orders is provided to the judge and the parties, which then become binding court orders.

The Citizen Review Panel process provides thorough, quality information to the judge, the case manager and those in supervisory positions by identifying the most pressing needs and concerns.

The volunteers do not have a caseload or a stake in the outcome of the case.

They conduct that "deliberate, sophisticated analysis" and detail a road map for promoting long-term stability and well-being for each child reviewed.

The Citizen Review Panel Program adds a cost-effective and critical layer of oversight to an overburdened system.

We provide a necessary checks-and-balances approach to fact-finding, and the conclusions we make are valuable tools for judicial decision-making in the most complex foster-care cases.

Many states employ citizen review panels or foster care review boards statewide. This is not the case in Florida. While Florida law permits Citizen Review Panels, they exist only in Miami-Dade and Collier counties.

Obviously there is room for growth of this important community service.

This model should be used to its fullest potential to promote the safety of all of the most vulnerable children throughout our diverse state.

No legislative changes or major resources are required.

All that is necessary is collaboration of each Circuit's dependency court judiciary and child welfare system stakeholders to partner with willing and able members of the community.

The result will be just what Jacobo spoke about with great hope and determination — more eyes on each case identifying unmet needs, asking difficult questions, challenging assumptions in order to keep children safe and well.

With its wealth of experience and expertise, Foster Care Review, Inc. stands ready to support this effort.

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