

# Foster Care Review Inc.

## **ACTIVITIES & ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Fiscal Year 2012-2013**

**Mission**

**Foster Care Review promotes the safety and well-being of abused and neglected children through volunteer case reviews and advocacy.**

**Vision**

**A child welfare system that protects children and ensures their stability and success.**

## **FOSTER CARE REVIEW, INC.**

For nearly 25 years, Foster Care Review, Inc. (FCR) has safeguarded the well-being of abused and neglected children and youth. To accomplish this, Foster Care Review recruits, trains and supports volunteers who perform statutorily required case reviews of children in foster care by serving monthly on Citizen Review Panels (CRPs). The compassion and experience of its community volunteers coupled with the expertise and dedication of the organization's staff have enabled Foster Care Review to oversee the safety, permanency and welfare of thousands of children in Miami's foster care system.

Foster Care Review, Inc., (FCR) was established in 1989 by a Miami-Dade County United Way committee that recommended using volunteers to ease the burden on Miami's inundated Juvenile Dependency Court (child welfare court). At that time, there were an overwhelming number of children in foster care, with many children missing, languishing in foster care or becoming victims of horrific tragedies. In 1989, the Florida Legislature authorized Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) to perform case reviews of children in foster care. The concept of citizen review – using volunteers as independent monitors of the foster care system – addressed both the need to help the courts with increasing caseloads and to involve communities in the care of foster children. Foster Care Review was incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization responsible for ensuring successful implementation of the reviews.

Through the Citizen Review Panels' recommendations, which become binding court orders, FCR holds foster care agencies accountable, assists judges in making informed decisions about children and families, and recommends judicial actions and social service interventions to enhance the safety and well-being of children and youth in foster care. By aggregating and analyzing data from the reviews, FCR also acts as a resource to stakeholders and as an advocate for system-wide change. In addition to continuing its core program of reviews, FCR is currently using its expertise in the community-based review model and its deep knowledge of system challenges to develop new solutions that will improve the lives of children for years to come.

## **THE CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM**

Foster Care Review's core program is the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Program. In preparation for the case review hearing, Foster Care Review Specialists spend hours reviewing all documents filed with the court, developing an overview of the child's experience in foster care and noting any red flags in the child's case. Prior to the start of each hearing, the CRP's volunteer members review this report and discuss potential issues, questions, and concerns with the Review Specialist. During the hearing, panel members interview case parties and participants – children, foster parents, Guardians ad Litem, and case managers – in order to gain an accurate assessment of the child's needs. This process is moderated by the Review Specialist who ensures that all questions are asked and who provides expertise and guidance to the volunteer panelists as needed.

The CRP members inquire about critical therapeutic, educational, medical, and other service needs for the child and family. They determine whether the case manager is visiting the child every 30 days and making unannounced visits every 90 days as required. The panelists determine whether foster parents are complying with all requirements and treating their foster children as 'normal' children. They evaluate whether older youth are being taught 'independent living skills' and, for those who will turn 18 and 'age out' of the foster care system, the panel requires proof that sufficient pre-planning for the youth's future has occurred. For children who are waiting for an adoptive family, CRP members inquire as to the specific steps being taken to ensure that an appropriate adoptive family is identified and that the adoption is finalized in a timely manner.

At the conclusion of each hearing, the parties are excused, and the CRP members discuss the evidence presented. They then issue findings and recommended court orders that promote the child's safety, physical and mental health, and attainment of a permanent home. The Review Specialists then spend several hours generating a comprehensive report that contains the panel's findings and recommendations. This report is submitted to the judge and, upon judicial approval and signature, the recommendations become binding court orders with which the foster care agencies must comply.

It is through these recommendations that become court orders that the CRP has its greatest impact. For example, when a case manager complies with an order recommended by a panel, a child or youth receives needed tutoring, medical care, counseling, an allowance, and/or a chance to experience normal childhood activities as a result. When a panel recommends more diligent efforts to find a child an adoptive home, that

child is closer to achieving a 'forever family.' Case manager compliance with orders of the CRP ensures that distant relatives are sought out to serve as permanent guardians or adoptive families. Compliance with a Citizen Review Panel's orders may mean that a youth who was at risk of being homeless upon turning 18 is connected with transitional housing and education.

Case review hearings before the Citizen Review Panel typically take place every five to six months, affording the panels an opportunity to review case manager compliance with their orders from previous reviews before the Citizen Review Panel. When urgent issues arise, in addition to recommended orders in the written report, the Review Specialists directly contact the case management agency for resolution or set the case before the Judge if it is a matter requiring judicial decision-making or attention.

### *Referrals to the Citizen Review Panel Program*

A Dependency Court Judge has discretion whether or not to refer a case to the CRP. The CRP may review any child in the dependency court; however, it is uncommon for the judges to refer 'in-home' cases – those cases in which the child was not removed from his parents, but the safety concerns were such that the Department of Children and Families (DCF) felt the family needed to be court-ordered to engage in rehabilitative services.

The juvenile court population has been significantly reduced over the past decade. This is due largely to policies that impacted the number of children actually removed from their parents and brought under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. However, as the population has decreased, the needs of families who are involved with the dependency court are complex and often severe. Unlike a decade ago, now, most families have had a history of DCF involvement and have a multitude of challenges and co-occurring issues such as mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence.

### *Citizen Review Panel Program Data Highlights*

In FY 2013, Foster Care Review conducted 424 case reviews for a total of 252 children and youth. While most of the children were removed from their parents or caregivers, some of the children reviewed remained in the custody of their parents while under the supervision of the juvenile dependency court.

The majority of these children, 126, were 13 through 17 years old at the time they were reviewed. Sixty-five of the children reviewed were birth

Gender	Age Range			Total
	0-5	6-12	13-17+	
female	29	28	56	113
male	36	33	70	139
Total	65	61	126	252

through five years old and 61 children were between six and 12 years old. The overwhelming majority of children – 67% (128 children) – reviewed by CRP were ‘non-Hispanic, black’ – primarily African American – with Hispanics

representing the next largest group - 21% - of children reviewed by the CRP.

During FY 13, the Citizen Review Panel issued a total of 1,444 orders related to improving safety, permanency, and well-being of children in the foster care system. Because the CRP conducts review hearings every five to six months for most children referred, over the course of a 12 month period, a child may be reviewed 1, 2 or 3 times, depending on the date of referral. Notably, 112 of the children referred to the CRP were reviewed two times in FY 13, with 30 reviewed three times. The subsequent reviews allow the CRP to evaluate the agencies’ compliance with orders issued through the CRP. Overall, the agencies complied with approximately 75% of the CRP’s orders in FY 13.

## **NEW PROGRAMS & INITIATIVES**

In FY 13, Foster Care Review developed and implemented several new programs and initiatives designed to ameliorate some of the systemic barriers and issues identified by the Citizen Review Panel Program. Thus, not only are these initiatives derived from the Citizen Review Panel Program, but they are also integrated into the Citizen Review Panel’s review process.

### Teen Health Initiative

Nationally, it is well-established that girls in foster care are two and a half times more likely to become pregnant. They are three and a half times as likely to report having a sexual partner with an STD and young adult women who were ever in foster care are more than 50% more likely to test positive for an STD. These alarming statistics have compelled Our Kids, Miami’s lead Community Based Care agency, along with its community partners, to take action. Our Kids has partnered with Foster Care Review implement key questions of the Pregnancy Prevention Benchcard. The Benchcard was developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. The Benchcard covers topics in the following areas: Relationships, Knowledge,

Motivation and Youth Participation (in their case planning and decision making).

Although intended for use by judges during court proceedings, the child welfare stakeholders in Miami feel strongly that the Benchcard is more appropriate for use during the Citizen Review Panel hearings. Compared to the 10-minute open court hearings, the panel's review hearing is held in a private room with an hour allotted to each child. The volunteers have received training about the Benchcard and the appropriate way to ask sensitive questions. Over the course of four months, 83 children ages of 13 through 17 were reviewed by the Citizen Review Panel. By asking the youth (51 attended their reviews) and the case managers in attendance the Benchcard questions, it is clear that much work needs to be done to ensure that youth have access to information, education and services to promote their sexual and reproductive health. Foster Care Review will continue to collaborate with Our Kids and other system stakeholders on this important initiative.

#### Youth Connections Project

One of the greatest factors impacting the effectiveness of the Citizen Review Panel Program is compliance by the foster care agencies with the orders issued by the judge through the panels. This is especially true for youth who are soon going to age out of the foster care system and need critical documents in order to rent an apartment, apply for a job and seek benefits. In response, FCR has implemented the Youth Connections Project through which a 'peer advocate' connects with youth prior to their CRP hearing and explains the process in order to encourage and facilitate the youth's attendance. Further, the initiative engages volunteers who reach out to case managers to ensure that they are in the process of complying with CRP orders related to: education, reproductive health/pregnancy prevention, service provision, and independent living/transition planning.

#### Pathways to Permanency Project

In an effort to expand the effectiveness of the Citizen Review Panel process, FCR has created a special partnership with three juvenile court divisions that is designed to expedite permanency. In this project, the juvenile court judges are referring almost all cases to the Citizen Review Panel Program for a review 5 months after the date of the first judicial hearing. This is in contrast to the typical referral process that happens approximately 10 months into the child's time in foster care. In addition to an earlier review by the CRP, the judges involved with this project are also scheduling a hearing 45 days after the CRP review to address compliance with all recommended orders by the panels. This has ensured that children and

families are receiving services earlier in the case and allows the judges to make more informed decisions about the child's safety, permanency and well-being much sooner. This 'frontloading' has been shown to improve the timeliness of reunification and helps judges identify earlier in the process when another permanency option should be identified. It also ensures that children are provided services in a more timely fashion.

#### Transitioning Youth with Disabilities Initiative

Over the past year, FCR has developed a program to raise awareness and increase knowledge about the needs of older youth in foster care who have disabilities. Many of these youth will need specialized care for their entire lives; however, when they age out of the foster care system, they have no adult to make critical decisions about their living arrangements, finances and medical care. FCR has trained a core group of volunteers who have become our 'experts' on this topic and a series of questions have been added to the review process to address the youth's need for a plenary guardianship upon turning 18. If a need is identified, the panel makes specific orders to obtain the documentation and follows up with case managers to ensure this is done in a timely manner.

### **FOSTER CARE REVIEW'S VOLUNTEER PROGRAM**

This past FY, Foster Care Review's 85 volunteers donated close to 3000 hours of service to abused and neglected children. Every volunteer who serves on a Citizen Review Panel is required to undergo 24 hours of pre-service training and engage in at least 10 hours of continuing education, which is also provided throughout the year by Foster Care Review. Only volunteers who currently or have in the past participate as a CRP volunteer may serve as volunteers in FCR's special projects and initiatives. During FY 13, FCR held one pre-service training attended by 6 new volunteers. There were also seven 2-hour continuing education programs offered by FCR on a variety of topics. An average of 20 volunteers attended each continuing education training. Over the past year, the CRP Program Manager, Volunteer Program Manager and Executive Director have been working collaboratively to enhance the volunteer training program – from pre-service through the volunteer's first year with the CRP. The goal is to continue to build the knowledge base and skill set of the volunteers in order to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of the CRP review process.



## **FOSTER CARE REVIEW'S COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS & IMPACT**

During the past year, Foster Care Review has worked to further establish our working relationship with Our Kids – the lead community based care agency in Miami. FCR staff and leadership have participated in many of Our Kids' work groups and are working closely with key staff to develop new programs and initiatives. FCR has actively participated in the Community Based Care Alliance and many of its activities, including a strategic planning process to strengthen the impact of the Alliance.

In November 2012, Foster Care Review received the *Outstanding Community Partner Award* at the 7th Annual Regional Child Welfare Conference and was a finalist for the Switchboard of Miami's All Star Award in the category of volunteerism.

Foster Care Review has continued to demonstrate leadership and to serve as a source of information regarding child welfare issues in the news. In July 2012, an Op Ed written by FCR's Executive Director about the sex trafficking of youth in foster care was published in the Miami Herald.