

FLORIDA FOSTER CARE REVIEW



Facilitate | Advocate | Innovate | Evaluate



2013-2014 Annual Report of the Citizen Review Panel Program

MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A quarter century ago, a United Way Committee determined to ease the burden on Miami's inundated Juvenile Dependency Court developed the blueprint for Florida Foster Care Review (FFCR). Subsequent legislative action paved the way for citizen review panels. Since then, FFCR's Citizen Review Panel Program has conducted case review hearings to oversee the safety and well-being of thousands of abused and neglected children. Throughout the years, our dedicated staff and volunteers have taken the time to understand each child's story and to ensure that his or her physical, emotional and educational needs are met. Whether connecting a child with tutoring, medical care, counseling, transitional housing, or simply with the chance to experience normal childhood activities, the work of Florida Foster Care Review has not only improved the lives of abused and neglected children—in some cases it has even saved them.

The problems facing youth in foster care have grown increasingly complex. Recognizing the depth of these challenges, we are implementing new strategies to expand our impact on the lives of the children and youth we serve. Building on our core values and extensive history as a key partner in Miami's child welfare system, FFCR diligently pursues a vision of a child welfare system that protects vulnerable children, ensures their stability and promotes future success:

- Florida Foster Care Review **facilitates** comprehensive, thorough, individualized case review hearings while also infusing our Citizen Review Panel Program with best practices, quality training and intensive support. To expand the impact of our panel process, we will ignite the use of citizen-led panels across the state by providing critical expertise, technical assistance and infrastructure to other communities.
- Florida Foster Care Review harnesses the power of its redesigned, upgraded database and uses data collected by our panels to **evaluate** systemic barriers and to identify transformative opportunities.
- Florida Foster Care Review joins forces with our volunteers, supporters and community partners to **advocate** for policy and practice changes that make a real difference in the lives of children.
- Florida Foster Care Review develops and implements **innovative** and creative approaches to filling the gaps and areas of greatest need experienced by the children we serve.

Underwriting our past, present and future efforts are our dedicated volunteers, board and staff members; individual donors and corporate, foundation and governmental funders; community stakeholders and providers; and, most critically, our Chief Judge and Juvenile Court Judges and General Magistrates. Their unwavering support, time and resources have made the past 25 years a success. They have helped bring us to this pivotal moment in our organization's history and we are grateful for the tremendous foundation that they have laid. Now, as always, our community's most vulnerable children are depending on all of us to jointly weave the narrative of their future. Together, we can ensure that their stories are filled with success and happiness. We are honored to be part of this effort.



Candice L. Maze, JD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Barriers to Permanency, Safety & Well-Being

Florida Foster Care Review was created in 1989 to develop and operate the 11th Judicial Circuit's Citizen Review Panel Program. Cases are referred to the program at the discretion of the dependency court judges; each case is reviewed every five (5) to six (6) months by a panel of trained volunteers. Supported by expert staff, our 70 volunteers conduct 12 days of Citizen Review Panel hearings each month. The panels examine all aspects of the child's experience in the child welfare system and make recommendations that, upon judicial signature, become binding court orders.

In FY 13-14 (July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014), Florida Foster Care Review's Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Program conducted 462 case reviews for a total of 311 children and youth, or approximately 12% of the average number of children in the dependency court system during that time period. The CRP review process resulted in the issuance of 1,774 orders related to improving the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Miami-Dade's dependency court system. Our panels also had the opportunity to determine agency compliance with 1,040 orders issued during earlier reviews.

Florida Statute 39.702 and 11th Judicial Circuit Administrative Order 14-08 require the organization administering the CRP Program to submit a report to the Circuit Judge detailing the barriers to permanency for children in foster care. To accomplish this, FFCR operates an extensive database that collects data about each child we serve. The aggregate data presented in this report is derived from this database and underscores a number of challenging issues that impact permanency and other outcomes for children in foster care. As FY 13-14 came to a conclusion, many of these issues were amplified by the 38% increase in children entering the already overburdened child welfare system. The primary barriers to children's permanency, safety and well-being identified this year are as follows:

BARRIER: *The quality of child welfare case management, supervision and overall support to case managers continues to be inconsistent.* While training has been improved and has become more standardized, case managers often are not aware of or fulfilling the various requirements of their role and are frequently overwhelmed by the number of tasks that they are expected to complete on behalf of the family. The actual requirements of the case manager job need to be re-evaluated. Supervisors should be able to both emotionally and practically support their case managers and to provide critical expertise. Specialized experts within each organization should be available as a hands-on resource to case managers to assist with meaningful referrals to effective services.

BARRIER: *The poor retention of case managers and CLS attorneys has impacted the consistency, support and oversight of the children, parents and foster families involved with each child.*

Foster parents and parents report confusion about what is happening in the case and lack basic information about the process. Often, CRP review hearings are unable to go forward because the case manager just received the case and is not prepared or the case manager just left the agency and no one is able to present the case. During FY 13-14, 57% of the 212 reviews had to be rescheduled. These case continuances, or 're-sets,' were due to factors related to staffing: failure of the case manager to appear (57), failure by the case management agency to prepare and/or file the required Judicial Review & Social Service Report (JRSSR) (41) and failure of a Children's Legal Services (CLS) attorney to appear (22). The lack of continuity affects the quality and effectiveness of case management and decision-making, which, in turn, can impact the permanency and well-being of children.

BARRIER: *Permanency for youth (13- to 17-year-olds) in foster care is not consistently pursued.* Too many youth are given a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA). Little or no real effort is made to identify either permanent families or life-long, permanent connections with a positive adult.

BARRIER: *Life skills assessment, planning and training are not being consistently implemented in foster homes and youth/young adults are inadequately prepared for independence when they exit care.* Changes to the law in January 2014 removed the requirement for the agency to provide life skills planning and training, placing this responsibility instead on the foster parents. Although the CRP inquires about whether this is occurring, the provision of life skills training and development is not being systematically monitored.

BARRIER: *Unplanned pregnancy and STIs often derail positive and permanent outcomes for youth.* Our young people in foster care are at greater risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancy. Not only is this a critical health issue, but teen parents also face a slew of risk factors, especially when they lack adequate stability and support. Further, children of young parents often become involved with the dependency system, further perpetuating the cycle of abuse and child welfare system involvement. Progress has been made in this area. However, each agency should have a designated and well-trained Healthy Teen Coordinator. Youth in foster care should continue to have access to evidence-based sexual health education and information, as well as to contraception.

BARRIER: *Even though the new Extended Foster Care law went into effect on January 1, 2014, as of July 1, 2014, no rules have been issued, resulting in a lack of clarity about the role of the agency and court in these cases as well as the relationship between the young adult and the*

case manager. While the Extended Foster Care option is a critical safety net for youth who age out of foster care, there are also concerns that because youth can go into this program at 18 years old, the urgency of finding true permanency for youth in foster care may be further diminished.

BARRIER: *Children and youth in foster care continue to struggle in school and are unprepared to pursue post-secondary education or vocational training.* The largest category of orders made by the Citizen Review Panel relates to children's educational needs. Often children wait too long for tutoring services and do not receive the support and counseling they need to prepare for the next steps in their education or training. Since educational plans are no longer required by statute and case managers have more pressing priorities, it does not appear that any true career planning is taking place. OurKids is to be commended for instituting an Educational Specialist position and a partnership with the public school system; however, this concept needs to be dramatically expanded, even during this time of limited resources. The failure to succeed in school often translates into poor life outcomes, both in the short-term and long-term. The child welfare system must step in when parents are not able to do so.

BARRIER: *The lack of participation in the dependency court process by foster parents, youth and young adults keeps critical information out of the decision-making process.* When these parties appear in court or at their CRP reviews, the information and input provided enhances the understanding of the case for all involved, including the participants. It also brings an essential perspective to the table, allowing for a more in-depth review and exploration of permanency options. Additionally, self-advocacy empowers youth to take ownership of some of the challenges they are facing and to seek support and help. FFCR has invested substantial time and resources in reaching out to youth and foster parents to educate them about the CRP process and make the hearings accessible. Nonetheless, FFCR's efforts have met with limited success. Options such as closed circuit TV or alternative hearing times and days need to be explored and more effective engagement pursued.

While these barriers are significant and pervasive, efforts at the system level and organizational level are underway to attack some of the underlying issues. Although FFCR is a critical monitor of the child welfare system, we are also committed to being part of the solution. We continue to work collaboratively with system stakeholders to identify and implement strategies that will ultimately improve the lives of the children and families we collectively serve. This report also discusses the efforts being made by FFCR to contribute to breaking down barriers and improving outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

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FLORIDA FOSTER CARE REVIEW

Promoting positive outcomes for abused and neglected children since 1989

Florida Foster Care Review (FFCR) promotes the safety, well-being and long-term success of abused and neglected children through comprehensive volunteer-driven case reviews and system-level advocacy. FFCR originated in the Foster Care Action Project, a Miami-Dade United Way committee formed in 1988 to research ways to ease the burden on Miami's inundated Juvenile Dependency (child welfare) Court. The committee recommended using trained volunteers to conduct the judicial reviews required every six (6) months to ensure the provision of necessary services for children in foster care. Less than a year later, in 1989, the Florida Legislature authorized citizen review panels to perform case reviews and FFCR was incorporated as an independent nonprofit tasked with ensuring successful implementation. 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.

Through the panels' recommendations, which become binding court orders, FFCR 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.

FFCR also acts as a resource and change advocate, hosting public education efforts such as forums and taskforces for child welfare stakeholders and implementing enhancements to the Citizen Review Panel Program that directly address pressing concerns.

In FY 13-14, FFCR continued to receive generous support from the Florida Legislature via the Florida Justice Administrative Commission, as well as from the Department of Children and Families, Miami-Dade County, The United Way of Miami-Dade, the Safe Passage grants program and GLBT Community Projects Fund of The Miami Foundation, the Paul Palank Memorial Foundation, the William J. and Isobel G. Clarke Foundation, the Braman Family 2011 Charitable Foundation, Bank of America Foundation and private individuals.

THE CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM

At the core of Florida Foster Care Review's work is the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Program. A brief description of the CRP process and its results demonstrates how the CRP provides both a critical service and a strong foundation for developing new solutions to the many challenges facing children and youth in foster care.

Florida law requires a judicial review of the cases of children in foster care at least once every six (6) months to assess whether or not each child is safe and receiving necessary services, and to ensure that the child's case is progressing toward permanency. In Miami-Dade, the Juvenile Court partners with FFCR by referring cases to the CRP to ensure that children receive a thorough review. FFCR's staff and volunteers, who are trained specifically in these types of hearings and have extensive subject-matter expertise, invest hours in the preparation, hearing, and follow-up process for each child's case.

In preparation for a CRP review hearing, FFCR Review Specialists examine court documents, develop a detailed synopsis of the child's experience in foster care and note any red flags. Prior to each hearing, the CRP's volunteer members study 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 accurately assess the child's needs. The CRP members inquire about critical therapeutic, educational, medical and other service needs for the child and family. The Review Specialist moderates the process and provides expertise and guidance to the volunteer panelists.

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. After the hearing, the Review Specialists generate a comprehensive report containing the panel's findings, recommendations and critical facts. This report is submitted to the judge and, upon judicial signature, the recommendations become binding court orders with which foster care agencies must comply. Examples of services that a child might receive as a result of a case manager's compliance with an order include tutoring, medical care, counseling, a chance to experience normal childhood activities and/or connections to transitional housing. Thus, through these court orders, the CRP makes a significant, concrete impact on the individual lives of children and youth in foster care.

This year, FFCR expanded its CRP process to include specialized reviews for 18- to 21-year-olds who opt for extended foster care under the new Florida law that went into effect on January 1, 2014. The CRP began to review the first Extended Foster Care cases in May and June 2014. The

CRP also substantially increased the number of children reviewed who had case plan goals of reunification. Consequently, this increased the number of parents' attorneys who were required to attend CRP hearings and created a host of complicated logistical issues that we continue to work to resolve.

As part of the CRP process, FFCR's Review Specialists also operate a comprehensive database to track individual and aggregate data about the children reviewed. The database feeds into the Findings and Recommendations Report submitted to the judge on each case we review. FFCR also uses this data to highlight systemic problems and to advocate for a system that is more responsive to the needs of children and youth. This report details the data collected during the 462 review hearings held by FFCR's Citizen Review Panel Program in FY 13-14.

ALANA'S STORY

Like so many of the children whose cases FFCR reviews, Alana came into care under tragic circumstances. Alana's older sister physically abused her while their mother was hospitalized. The sister, claiming that Alana was ungovernable, declared that she no longer wanted to care for her. Alana entered care, and her mother died soon after. Sadly, Alana's sister failed to participate in therapy services to work through the issues that had brought Alana into care in the first place.

During a Citizen Review Panel (CRP) hearing in early 2014, Alana revealed that she had a substance abuse problem and wanted help. The panel recommended that Alana be referred to substance abuse treatment.

At the next review five months later, Alana reported that she was referred for treatment and that the treatment had saved her life.

She said it helped her understand how using drugs would not allow her to achieve her dreams. Alana reported that she was taking classes to try to graduate on time, and that she was performing better in school.

CHILDREN & YOUTH REVIEWED

In FY 13-14, the Citizen Review Panel (CRP) conducted 462 reviews of 311 children. This was a nine percent (9%) increase in the number of reviews and a 23% increase in the number of children reviewed compared to FY 12-13. One hundred eighty-three (183) children were reviewed one (1) time during the year, while 105 were reviewed two (2) times and 23 were reviewed three (3) times. There were 995 scheduled reviews, which is a significant increase from the 650 reviews scheduled during the previous year. However, while the number of referrals went up, so did the number of reviews removed from the CRP calendar. Ninety-two (92) reviews were not heard because the children involved with those reviews reached permanency before the review date, 209 reviews were placed back before the division judge or general magistrate and 20 reviews came off the calendar because the child aged out, the case was dismissed or jurisdiction was transferred prior to the CRP review hearing.

The reviews were fairly evenly distributed among the full case management agencies. [Note: His House Children's Home is a smaller agency and their contract was cancelled during this fiscal year. OurKids oversees the 18- to 21-year-olds.] However, the vast majority of the children were from Division 08 with whom the CRP engaged in a special project, described more fully later in this report, to increase the number of referrals of cases early in the dependency court process.

Children Reviewed by Agency and Judicial Division							
AGENCY	001	002	003	008	009	Total	%
Center for Family & Child Enrichment	1	19	21	29	19	89	28%
CHARLEE Program	3	19	17	36	5	80	26%
Children's Home Society	6	1	5	51	11	74	24%
Family Resource Center	7	10	4	14	7	42	13%
His House Children's Home	1	9	1	8	2	21	7%
OurKids (only 18+)	0	5	0	0	0	0	2%
TOTAL	18	63	48	138	44	311	100%
	6%	20%	15%	44%	14%	100%	

The CRP reviews children zero (0) to 18 years old, plus some 18+ young adults in extended foster care. In FY 13-14, the CRP reviewed 142 girls and 169 boys. The largest group of children reviewed were between 13 and 17 years old (132); 82 were zero (0) to five (5) years old and 90 were six (6) to 12 years old. The children reviewed by the CRP were primarily non-Hispanic black children (61%) and Hispanic white children (33%). The majority of the children reviewed were U.S. citizens.

	0-5	6-12	13-17	18+	Total
Girls	34	39	65	4	142
Boys	48	51	67	3	169
Total	82	90	132	7	311

Safety, Permanency & Well-Being

Safety

The majority of the 311 children reviewed were brought into the dependency court system because of neglect (37%) or risk of harm (36%). Fifteen percent (15%) of the children reviewed were physically abused and five percent (5%) were sexually abused. Seven percent (7%) were abandoned.

While a child is under the jurisdiction of the court and the care of the 'state,' case managers are expected to conduct a home visit at least once every 30 days and to pay an unannounced visit to the home every 90 days. Not only do these home visits provide an opportunity for the case manager to determine whether there are additional supports that need to be in place, but they also afford the case manager a chance to speak privately with the child and to discuss whether he or she is being well-cared-for and, most importantly, kept safe. A child's placement may be deemed inappropriate or unsafe for a number of reasons. For example, this might occur if foster parents do not provide the child with access to food or if they lock the child out of the house. In some instances, foster parents do not speak the same language or are from a diametrically different culture, further isolating the child. Some foster parents do not ensure that the child gets to appointments and school. In yet other cases, foster parents treat their foster children as 'boarders' instead of part of a family. The CRP attempts to uncover these issues by asking direct and specific questions of case managers, caregivers and, when appropriate, children and youth.

At each hearing, CRP panelists ask every case manager and caregiver in attendance whether these required visits are taking place within the prescribed timeframe. The panel then makes findings regarding the appropriateness and safety of the placement. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the children reviewed were determined to be both safe and appropriately placed. While many, if not most, foster parents do a good job caring for their foster children, in one percent (1%) of the cases, the child was considered to be safe, but not appropriately placed and in six percent (6%) of the cases the child was determined to be neither safe nor appropriately placed.

These designations were assigned for one or more of the following reasons: the child's safety could not be assured, the placement was not a step towards permanency and/or the child had mental health needs that were not being met in the foster home. In six percent (6%) of the total cases reviewed, the panel was unable to make this critical determination due to insufficient information and/or documentation regarding the child's safety. When there are concerns about a child's safety or the appropriateness of the placement or if there is insufficient evidence to make a decision about safety and appropriateness, the case is set immediately before the court for urgent judicial intervention and/or escalated immediately to the child welfare agency.

Permanency

The Permanency Goals for children in the dependency court system include

- Reunification/Maintain and Strengthen Placement (if living with parent)
- Adoption
- Permanent Guardianship
- Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA)
- Permanent Placement with a Fit and Willing Relative

In January 1, 2014, a law went into effect allowing youth to stay in foster care until age 21 (22 if disabled). The law also allows former foster children to reenter care in certain circumstances. A handful of youth reviewed were in this category. The CRP will continue reviewing their cases while they are in Extended Foster Care. We anticipate an increase in such reviews next year.

The large number of cases with the goal of reunification is the result of FFCR's concerted effort to obtain case referrals earlier in the dependency process. The law requires that 12 months from the time of removal, the judge either makes the decision

Permanency Plans for the 311 Children Reviewed		Total
Reunification/Maintain and Strengthen Placement		153
Adoption		83
Permanent Guardianship		16
Permanent Placement with a Fit & Willing Relative		0
Extended Foster Care/Extended Jurisdiction		5
Another Planned Perm Living Arrangement (APPLA)		54
Total		311

to reunify the child with his/her parent(s) or designates a new permanency plan. By having a panel review the provision of services and compliance with these services, barriers to success can be identified earlier and/or parents who are not engaged or on track can be more quickly identified.

Length of Stay in Years					
Age range	<1	1-2	3-4	5+	Total
0-5	36	33	11	2	82
6-12	36	36	12	6	90
13-17	17	35	24	56	132
18+	2	1	2	2	7
Total	91	105	49	66	310

Twenty-two (22) children reviewed by the CRP during FY 13-14 reached permanency during that time period. Twelve (12) were adopted and 10 were reunified. However, children are still spending too long in the foster care system. This is especially true for children who are legally free for adoption. Parental rights have been

terminated, but no adoptive family has been identified.

About one-third (105) of the children reviewed by the CRP have been under the jurisdiction of the dependency court between one (1) and two (2) years. The table below demonstrates the length of stay in care by permanency plan. It is notable that 38% of the children who have been in care between one (1) and two (2) years are waiting to be reunified with their parents. Forty-five (45) of the 54 youth with a case plan goal of APPLA have been in care longer than three (3) years and, unless significant

Permanency Plan	Length of Stay (in years)				Total
	<1	1-2	3-4	5+	
Reunification/Maintain & Strengthen	79	62	7	5	153
Adoption	6	29	24	24	83
Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement	2	7	14	31	54
Extended Foster Care/Extended Jurisdiction	2	1	1	1	5
Permanent Guardianship	2	6	3	5	16
Total	91	105	49	66	311

efforts are made to identify permanent families and/or supportive adults who will be committed to them for the long-term, these youth will likely age out and face the many risks and challenges of living without a safety net. Further, 24 of the 83 children with the goal of adoption have been in care for more than three (3) years and an additional 24 have been in care for five (5) or more years. It is critical that adoptive families be identified for children earlier and more aggressively so that they do not languish as 'legal orphans' only to age out of foster care. The extensive use of APPLA as a permanency plan continues to be of concern.

Well-Being

A critical role of the CRP is to ensure that children who are under the jurisdiction of the court have their physical, emotional and educational needs met. The panels ask a series of questions designed to elicit detailed information and documentation regarding medical and psychological well-being.

All children under the court's jurisdiction are required to receive regular medical, dental and vision

	Yes	No	N/A	Case Manager Could Not Report
Physical	301	10	0	0
Dental	274	23	13	1
Vision	248	56	3	4

exams (frequency varies based on type of exam and the child's age). This is an area of strength in the system of care.

Although most children reviewed received the required exams, a breakdown sometimes occurs when additional services or follow up is required. When panelists review reports from healthcare professionals provided at or prior to the hearing, they evaluate not only whether the appointments have taken place, but also whether the service providers' recommendations are followed by the caregivers and/or case managers.

In the education arena, the CRP requires the submission of reports detailing each child's academic performance and inquires about special educational needs and services. The largest category of orders made by the panel relates to children's educational needs.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDED ORDERS

After a thorough and extensive hearing and review of each case, the panel deliberates and determines whether reasonable efforts are being made by the agency/DCF to achieve permanency and whether the parties (primarily the agency) are in compliance with previous orders issued through the CRP. The panel also issues a number of recommended orders regarding the child's specific needs as identified during the review. The true power of the CRP process is in these findings and recommendations, which become binding and enforceable orders when adopted by the court. In FY 13-14, the Citizen Review Panels collectively made 1,774 orders to improve the well-being, safety and permanency of children involved with dependency court. The majority of the orders issued relate to 1) providing documentation to substantiate the information provided (often critical to the follow-up hearing), 2) the emotional needs of the child, 3) the educational needs of the child, 4) independent living services and 5) permanency for children who are waiting to be adopted.

Every five (5) months when the panel reviews the case again, the members assess compliance with orders issued through the CRP. During FY 13-14, the CRP assessed compliance with 1,040 orders previously issued by the panel. Of these orders, 756 orders were complied with and 247 were not complied with (37 orders were no longer applicable). The 73% compliance rate is consistent with previous years.

Order Type	0-5	6-12	13-17+	Total
Documentation as to parent	21	8	14	43
Documentation of Individualized Education Plan	2	11	8	21
Documentation of referrals	9	9	20	38
Documentation of Home Visit Reports	9	14	12	35
Documentation (other)	3	7	15	25
Documentation of birth certificates/SS card/ID	2	3	24	29
Documentation of medical reports	35	30	65	130
Documentation of children's mental health reports	15	38	63	116
Documentation of school records	6	20	48	74
Delinquency	0	3	32	35
Dental health services for the child	11	33	55	99
Developmental services	20	1	3	24
Educational needs of the child	3	50	135	188
Emotional or mental health (MH) services for the parents	12	5	4	21
Emotional/MH services for the child	7	11	35	53
Emotional/MH services for the child	4	7	9	20
Extracurricular activities	0	16	25	41
Teen health	0	0	40	40
Independent living services	0	2	154	156
Other	1	2	23	26
Permanency plan related to adoption	26	35	40	101
Physical health & medical services (child)	5	8	13	26
Placement appropriateness	6	8	28	42
Plenary guardianship	0	0	19	19
Post-18 placement preparation	0	0	21	21
Psychotropic meds	0	3	9	12
Reunification efforts	2	8	5	15
Role model/mentor for the child	0	4	15	19
School placement stabilization	0	8	12	20
Vision health services for the child	4	20	36	60
Visitation arrangements for parents and/or siblings	11	17	22	51

PROCEDURAL ISSUES

Pre-filing of the JRSSRs

*JRSSRs are not filed in cases of young adults in Extended Foster Care.

Seventy-two (72) hours in advance of the Judicial Review Hearing, whether conducted by the CRP or the judge, the case management agency is required to file a Judicial Review & Social Services Report (JRSSR). The pre-filing of the JRSSR is essential to fully preparing for the review hearing. On average, only 63% of the reviews before the CRP had a pre-filed JRSSR. The table to the right describes how frequently the JRSSR was pre-filed by each case management agency. This is an area in need of improvement.

Agency	Number of Reviews	Number of JRSSRs Pre-filed	%
Center for Family & Child Enrichment	132	91	69%
CHARLEE Program	125	64	51%
Children's Home Society	102	70	69%
Family Resource Center	61	45	74%
His House Children's Home	37	20	54%
TOTAL	457*	290	63%

Participation in CRP Reviews

Attendance at CRP Review Hearings	
Attorney for DCF/Case Management	462
Attorney for Child	38
Attorney for Father	16
Attorney for Mother	34
Case Manager Representative	15
Case Manager	461
Child/Youth	126
Foster Parent	48
Guardian ad Litem (lay)	192
Guardian ad Litem Attorney	27
Other	62
Father	49
Mother	78
Pre-Adoptive	9
Relative	14
Sibling	2
Case Manager Supervisor	2
Total	1635

For each case being reviewed, it is critical that as many case parties and participants as possible attend the CRP hearing. However, with hearings before the judges and General Magistrates occurring simultaneous with the CRP hearings and given the sudden influx of new cases, the CRP team has had to work diligently with other system stakeholders to ensure all parties are represented and those who wish to participate are able to do so. FFCR has implemented policies and initiatives in an effort to increase accessibility and attendance at review hearings. The calendar has been adjusted to better align with the court calendar, a speaker phone is available to call in and FFCR staff reach out to attorneys and case managers in advance of the hearing to

determine whether accommodations must be made to ensure participation.

In FY 13-14, 1,635 parties, participants and others involved in the cases appeared before the CRP across the 462 reviews.

FFCR works to engage all parties and participants, including family, children and providers, and to support their attendance at reviews so that their input can be considered. This has proven challenging. Despite our outreach, we see far too few foster parents, youth and children.

Case Continuances

This past year, case continuances have been an ongoing challenge. With the influx of cases, the high case manager turnover and attorneys' logistical challenges, the number of resets, or case continuances, was high. The table to the right lists the primary causes of the 212 case continuances this year.

Reasons for Case Continuances	Totals
Case Manager Did Not Appear	57
Case Manager Refused to Proceed without CLS Attorney	2
Case Manager/CLS Attorney Requested	22
Failure to Notify Material Party by Clerk	35
JRSSR Not Prepared or Filed	41
Legal Party Requested	6
No CLS Attorney	22
No Power at Location	13
Parent Needs Legal Representation	5
Parent Refused to Proceed without Attorney	3
Scheduling Error by Clerk	4
Scheduling Error by FFCR	2
Total	212

STACEY'S STORY

When twelve year-old Stacey came before the Citizen Review Panel (CRP), she had been in foster care for over two years. Her pre-adoptive mother had recently decided not to adopt Stacey and she was removed from her home after complaints about her conduct. At the time of her first CRP review, the goal was to seek another adoptive family for Stacey. However, traumatized by the rejection of her former pre-adoptive family, she refused to participate in any adoption recruitment events or efforts. The CRP issued a recommended order for Stacey to begin specialized therapy to explore her feelings of loss and the possibility of adoption.

At the next review hearing five months later, the case manager reported that Stacey was actively engaged in therapy. Although a new adoptive family had not yet been identified, Stacey had been linked with a mentor and, with her consent, she had been listed on an adoption recruitment website.

The therapeutic intervention recommended by the CRP coupled with our core organizational belief that children should grow up in safe, stable, permanent families, has greatly increased the likelihood that Stacey will be adopted.

The CRP program will continue to monitor and promote Stacey's progress toward the lifelong, permanent connections that will give Stacey the support she needs.

SPECIAL INITIATIVES & PROJECTS

Over the past year, FFCR has engaged in a number of initiatives to enhance the effectiveness of the Citizen Review Panel Program and to broaden the skills and knowledge of the volunteers. The following six (6) initiatives are representative of our broader work.

Transitioning Youth with Disabilities Initiative

This initiative seeks to ensure that youth with disabilities exit foster care with safeguards in place to ensure their physical, emotional and financial well-being. This project has involved volunteer training and the development of a 'disability expert' on each of FFCR's 12 CRP Program panels. In addition to enhancing volunteer panelists' skills and knowledge base, FFCR also modified the questions asked during the review to be sure that youth who may need a plenary guardianship upon turning 18 are identified. FFCR also revised panel practices to recommend orders ensuring that the documentation necessary for plenary guardianship is ready by the time youth turn 18. Further, volunteers follow up with case managers to encourage their compliance with recommended orders specific to youth with disabilities.

As part of FFCR's work to share its knowledge with the greater child welfare community, on April 11, 2014, FFCR sponsored and facilitated a community roundtable focused on solutions to challenges faced by older youth in foster care who have disabilities. The event was attended by child welfare and community stakeholders and was an opportunity to strategize and develop more effective working relationships with community providers serving former foster youth with disabilities. This project was initially funded by a grant from The Miami Foundation Safe Passage grants program and a gift from an anonymous donor. The project has been continued through the unsolicited support of The Miami Foundation's MLM III Fund.

Foster Parent Outreach & Engagement Initiative

The involvement of foster parents in CRP hearings enables the panels to make more informed decisions. In partnership with the Junior League of Miami, FFCR sought to increase the active participation of foster parents in CRP review hearings. Junior League volunteers, supported by FFCR staff, contacted foster parents to encourage their attendance at the reviews of their foster children and then volunteers followed up with a survey about the experience. The volunteers also tracked the responses of foster parents and administered a survey to those foster parents who attended the review hearing. There were many logistical challenges with this effort, and FFCR is strategizing how best to continue this project with our volunteers and/or staff. With OurKids taking licensing and foster parent management in-house, some of these logistical issues may be resolved.

Youth Connections Project

This project focused on improving the outcomes of the case reviews for older youth in foster care by engaging and supporting their involvement in the CRP hearing process. To achieve this, FFCR hired a young adult formerly in foster care to serve as a Peer Advocate. The Peer Advocate called youth and invited them to attend their reviews, educated them about the CRP process and conducted a follow-up survey to assess the young people's experiences at the reviews. This project also engaged FFCR volunteers to follow up with case managers on CRP orders for youth close to aging out, to ensure that they had the necessary documentation and resources to live independently. The Paul Palank Memorial Foundation funded this program. Now that the funding has ended, FFCR has shifted some staffing towards the project and, starting in January 2015, will continue to have volunteers reach out to case managers regarding compliance. We will also re-start our Peer Advocacy efforts in April or May of 2015, once we have settled into the new courthouse, as we would like our Peer Advocate(s) to be able to attend the reviews with the youth in order to provide a more individualized approach.

Teen Health Initiative

This initiative seeks to promote the sexual health of youth ages 13 through 17 through the CRP process. This project is built around a national judicial benchcard designed to prevent teen pregnancy and promote the sexual health of youth in foster care. After staff and volunteers received specialized training, nine (9) specific questions from the national benchcard were incorporated into the CRP hearing process. This allowed the panels to make findings related to youth's access to and understanding of sexual health needs, services and education. FFCR also began participating (and continues to participate) in meetings of the community-wide Teen Sexual Health Workgroup. At the organizational level, FFCR began formulating recommendations regarding the sexual health needs of youth in foster care. These system-level recommendations are based on the aggregate data collected as a result of the new benchcard questions and reported through our newly redesigned database.

Improving Experiences for GLBTQ Youth in Foster Care

This project, funded by the GLBT Community Projects Fund of The Miami Foundation, enabled FFCR to partner with the Alliance for GLBTQ Youth to conduct an anonymous survey of young adults formerly in foster care to learn more about their experiences as or with GLBTQ youth. The confidential survey, based on a validated tool used in Los Angeles, CA, was administered to 116 former foster youth ages 18 to 21 years old. The partnership with The Alliance for GLBTQ Youth illuminated the need for improved data collection and better training for CRP volunteers and system partners. FFCR will continue to work with The Alliance on this issue and we are gratified to know that the University of Miami Youth and Law Clinic is convening an extensive work group around the issue of the treatment of GLBTQ youth in foster care.

Policy Advocacy Initiative

This initiative harnessed the power of Florida Foster Care Review's CRP Program by engaging and training volunteers to take the lessons learned 'in the trenches' to policymakers in Tallahassee. FFCR developed a core group of volunteers dedicated to advocacy and held several advocacy skills trainings, as well as a celebration of advocacy hosted by Sabadell Bank. Jack Levine, a seasoned advocate who lives and works in Tallahassee, provided the training and consultation. Although this project did not take hold to the extent anticipated, it did underscore volunteers' interest in expanding their advocacy from the courtroom to the Capitol. FFCR will be exploring ways to more effectively engage its volunteers in advocating for policy improvements. This project was funded in part by the William J. and Isobel G. Clarke Foundation.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

FY 13-14 has been a year of significant development for FFCR. We **celebrated our 25th Anniversary** in May 2014 by honoring our 25 'Stars of FFCR' on the rooftop of the New World Symphony. We also underwent an extensive process to change our name and, with the help of the Greater Miami Convention & Visitor's Bureau, redesign our logo.

In the past year we also implemented our **Pathways to Permanency Initiative** in two different courtrooms. The goal of this effort is to expedite permanency through comprehensive review hearings conducted by the Citizen Review Panel and planned, intensive judicial follow up. At the shelter hearing (an initial hearing that occurs within 24 hours of DCF intervention if the family is deemed to need the oversight of the dependency court or, more frequently, when a child has been removed from the parent(s)), the Judge refers cases to the CRP for the first Judicial Review (approximately five (5) months after removal). Through the Pathways to Permanency Initiative, the Judge then holds a hearing within 45 days of the first review by the CRP to address compliance with orders recommended by the CRP. The case then returns to the CRP for a second review hearing five (5) to six (6) months later. The idea is that by identifying critical issues earlier in the case process and more actively partnering with the court, the CRP will be able to identify breakdowns in cases and pinpoint the solution. This effort has resulted in the referral of many cases to the CRP and an enhanced partnership with the judiciary. We have also been able to extend the CRP process to children with a goal of reunification. This expansion has created some logistical challenges for parents' attorneys not accustomed to appearing before the CRP, but we continue to work diligently to iron out the wrinkles in the process.

Additionally, on January 1, 2014, legislation extending foster care to 18- to 21-year-olds went into effect. Extended Foster Care (EFC) is designed to provide a safety net to those foster youth who are not connected with a forever family by the time they turn 18 or those youth who were

formerly in foster care but wish to re-enter. Unfortunately, the rules and regulations for implementing this law have not been finalized as of the writing of this report, causing both confusion and some disagreement about the roles and responsibilities of the case management agency (in this case, OurKids) and the young adult. The law clearly requires that a judicial review be held every six (6) months for young adults in EFC, and most of the dependency court judges have been referring their EFC cases to the CRP for these reviews. We plan to build in a Peer Advocacy component (as mentioned previously) in order to provide additional support to these young adults.

This year, FFCR completed a two-year **redesign of our Citizen Review Panel database, *Child Watch***. The goal was to update the technology and ensure a more effective user interface that aligns with current law and CRP practice. Significant improvements were also made to the database's quality control and reporting capabilities.

Because of the new database, the CRP review process was slightly modified. As a result of this as well as the addition of the new Reunification and Extended Foster Care cases, FFCR designed and hosted mandatory **Advanced Skills Training** for all 70 volunteers. This training, offered four (4) times over the summer, reviewed the core skills required to be an effective CRP volunteer and also provided key information about cases involving reunification and young adults in Extended Foster Care. Also in FY 13-14, we **revamped the Pre-Service Training** for new volunteers, changing it from a knowledge-based training to a skills-based training. Feedback from participant evaluations has been very positive.

The FFCR team and supporters were also very pleased that this year, the Chief Judge of the 11th Judicial Circuit, the Honorable Bertila Soto, signed a **new Administrative Order** re-authorizing FFCR to administer the Citizen Review Panel Program.

During FY 13-14, FFCR engaged a part-time grant writer who was **successful in garnering significant foundation funding** for a new program planned for FY 14-15. FFCR's Executive Director, Candice Maze, also made several trips to Tallahassee, including one during Children's Week, to meet with legislators and was successful in advocating for **continued legislative support** for FY 14-15.

In an effort to be more engaged with the child welfare and larger communities, FFCR's Executive Director Candice Maze was **elected to the Miami-Dade Community Based Care Alliance**. Candice was also granted a **Miami Leaders Award by The Miami Foundation** that enabled her to attend a seven-day Non-Profit Management Executive Certificate Program at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The year ahead holds much promise for FFCR. The organization is well-positioned to effectively pursue its mission of promoting positive outcomes for abused and neglected children, but continues to seek new ways to have an even greater impact. This year, FFCR is seeking to enhance and diversify its volunteer corps. In a related effort, FFCR will also continue to increase the engagement of our volunteers so that they are equipped to serve as ambassadors to the community about the needs of abused and neglected children. We are also further developing and expanding our community outreach and communications strategies through a new website and monthly e-newsletter.

Thanks to grant funding received from private foundations, we also anticipate the full rollout of a new initiative focused exclusively on permanency. This new project will require a great deal of collaboration and networking with child welfare system partners. FFCR is also looking forward to the relocation of the Citizen Review Panel Program to the new Children's Courthouse, as well as to the eventual co-location of both our administrative and court operations. Finally, FFCR will begin to explore the possibility of serving as an umbrella organization to facilitate the expansion of the use of citizen review panels throughout Florida.

Even during a very challenging time in the history of Florida's child welfare system, FFCR remains hopeful and confident that our work can and does make a difference in the lives of abused and neglected children. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve them.