

# System works best when citizens are involved

## Commentary by Jean Bell

**F**inally, 12 years after 4-year old Rilya Wilson went missing, her foster parent, Geraldine Graham, was sentenced to 55 years in prison for kidnapping and abusing the little girl. One of the most disturbing aspects of the case is the fact that Rilya's disappearance went unnoticed by DCF for more than 15 months. Furthermore, the case manager responsible for visiting Rilya on a monthly basis forged reports and lied about her welfare.



Bell

Since this tragedy, several reforms have been implemented by the state. The legislature passed the Rilya Wilson Act, requiring children in foster care over 3 years old to be in child care centers and a system for confirming the child's whereabouts when absent. Foster care management has been privatized, increasing accountability for organizations who oversee cases of foster children and bringing the private sector into the child welfare arena. Today, case managers are required to visit and photograph each foster child every 30 days. They are also expected to perform periodic unannounced home visits.

Foster children in Miami benefit from a system of checks and balances that includes the courts and citizens of this community. The juvenile dependency court ensures that case managers follow the legal mandates to protect the safety of children in foster care.

Community volunteers serving on

citizen review panels support the judiciary by reviewing the cases of children under the court's jurisdiction. Foster Care Review Inc. is a nonprofit organization that oversees the citizen review panel program in Miami. The organization trains and supervises 85 volunteers who each dedicate one day per month



Rilya

to conducting case reviews that assess the safety, permanency and well-being of abused and neglected children under the court's jurisdiction.

Case managers, parents, foster parents, relatives and children are invited to participate in the one-hour Foster Care Review panel hearings. Before each hearing, Foster Care Review's staff spend hours reviewing court files and social service reports to determine each child's status and pressing needs. During the review, volunteers ask questions about the child's living environment, the dates of all home visits and whether the visits were announced or unannounced. The panels discuss the living environment with the children who attend, inquiring about the child's relationship with his or her caregiver.

The panel also requests input from the foster parent or relative caring for the child to determine whether they are meeting the needs of the child. Foster Care Review's panels also review the child's educational, physical, social and mental health needs. The culmination of this exhaustive review is a set of recommendations provided to the judge for review that when approved, become of-

**BOARD OF  
CONTRIBUTORS**



Foster Care Review, a nonprofit organization that oversees the citizen review panel program in Miami, trains and supervises 85 volunteers who each dedicate one day per month to conducting case reviews.

ficial court orders.

The benefit of engaging citizens to provide oversight of the system and safeguard children is undeniable. Each panel member's unique perspective helps uncover gaps or inconsistencies that may have otherwise been overlooked. Additionally, the panels gather data that identify failures and successes of the overall child welfare system. For example, we know that from 543 case reviews conducted last year, 98 percent of children were visited every 30 days by their case manager. Almost every child was determined to have seen a medical doctor within 12 months of the review hearing, and 90 percent of children up to five years old were determined by the panels to have received a developmental

screening.

While we cannot change what happened to Rilya Wilson, her memory should serve as a reminder of the importance of accountability and responsibility in our foster care system. Foster Care Review panels apply these principles to their thorough reviews of Miami's foster children, giving these children the chance for living safe, healthy, and happy lives.

**Jean Bell is board chair of Foster Care Review. She is also a senior vice president with Bank of America Merrill Lynch.**



Scan to read more contributors