

# **CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM**

## **ANNUAL REPORT**

**FISCAL YEAR**

**2019-2020**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 1989, Florida Foster Care Review has engaged community volunteers to advance the safety, stability and success of children in Miami-Dade County's foster care system. We accomplish this by connecting children and young adults under the jurisdiction of the dependency court to essential services, supportive relationships, and permanent families. Our programs promote resilience, stability and connectedness – essential ingredients for lifelong well-being.

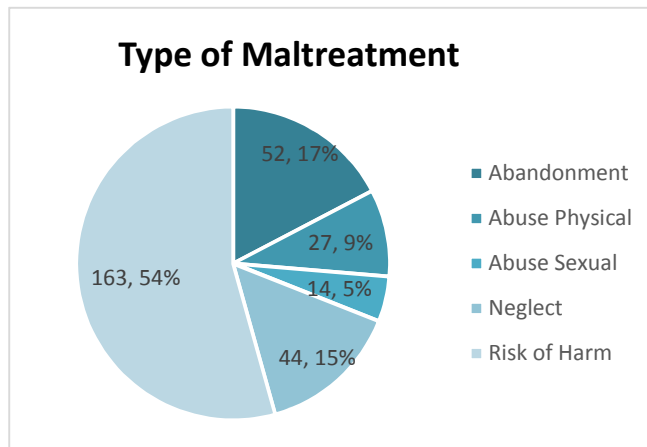
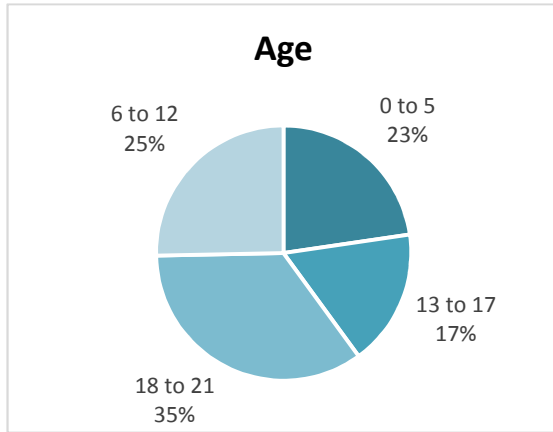
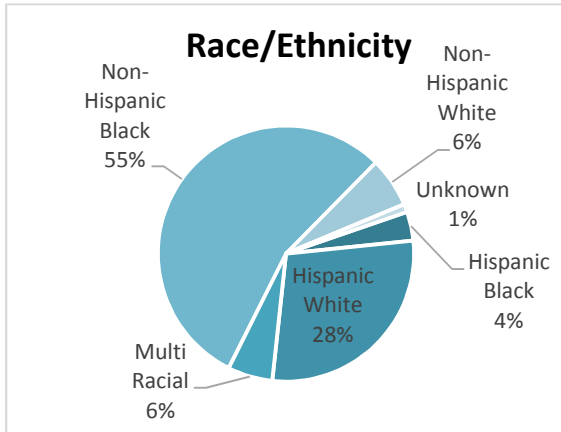
In preparation for a Citizen Review Panel (CRP) review, FFCR staff, called Review Specialists, examine court documents, develop a comprehensive summary of the child's experience in care and note red flags. Prior to each hearing, CRP volunteers review the summary and discuss concerns with the Review Specialist. During the hearing, panelists interview case parties and participants – children, parents, caregivers, foster parents, Guardians ad Litem, case managers, and others involved in the child's life such as the child's therapist – in order to assess the child's needs. With guidance from staff, panelists gather information about critical therapeutic, educational, medical and other service needs for the child and family.

***Between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020 (fiscal year 2019-20), FFCR's Citizen Review Panel (CRP) volunteers conducted 507 review hearings of 300 children, youth and young adults in Miami's foster care system. This accounts for approximately 20% of the children and young adults under the jurisdiction of the dependency court during that time period.***

At the conclusion of each hearing, after parties are excused, CRP members consider the evidence presented. They then issue recommended court orders that prioritize the child's safety, their physical and mental wellbeing, and their attainment of a permanent home. The CRP has its most profound impact through these recommendations that, upon judicial signature, become court orders with which foster agencies must comply. Because of orders initiated by the CRP, a girl with an undiagnosed hearing impairment might receive treatment, a teenager with a substance abuse problem might receive counseling, or a child might be provided with tutoring to overcome an educational obstacle.

FFCR's team of professionals evaluate the effectiveness of our work and implement innovative approaches to improve outcomes for the children we serve. By analyzing the data collected during the CRP review process, FFCR is uniquely positioned to highlight developments and trends impacting children, youth and young adults involved with Miami-Dade's child welfare system. This report highlights both quantitative and qualitative data about the children, youth and young adults served by the Citizen Review Panel Program, describes their experiences in Miami's foster care system, and showcases the transformative impact of the Citizen Review Panel Program.

# SNAPSHOT OF YOUTH SERVED



PERMANENCY PLAN	YEARS IN CARE				TOTAL
	<1	1-2	3-4	5+	
Adoption	40	32	27	26	125
APPLA	7	4	6	9	26
Maintain & Strengthen	3	8	1	0	12
Permanent Guardianship	4	5	0	0	9
Reunification	18	11	0	0	29
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>201</b>

Note: This data includes all 201 children who had at least one review before the CRP while under age 18 during FY 2019-20. Some may have subsequently aged out or transitioned to Extended Foster Care.

PLACEMENT TYPE	# OF CHILDREN
Foster Home	93
Group Home	3
Group Shelter	1
APD Home	17
Relative/Non-Relative	76
Institutional/Therapeutic	10
Independent Living or Transition Housing	73
With Parent(s)	19
Incarcerated/Other	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>300</b>

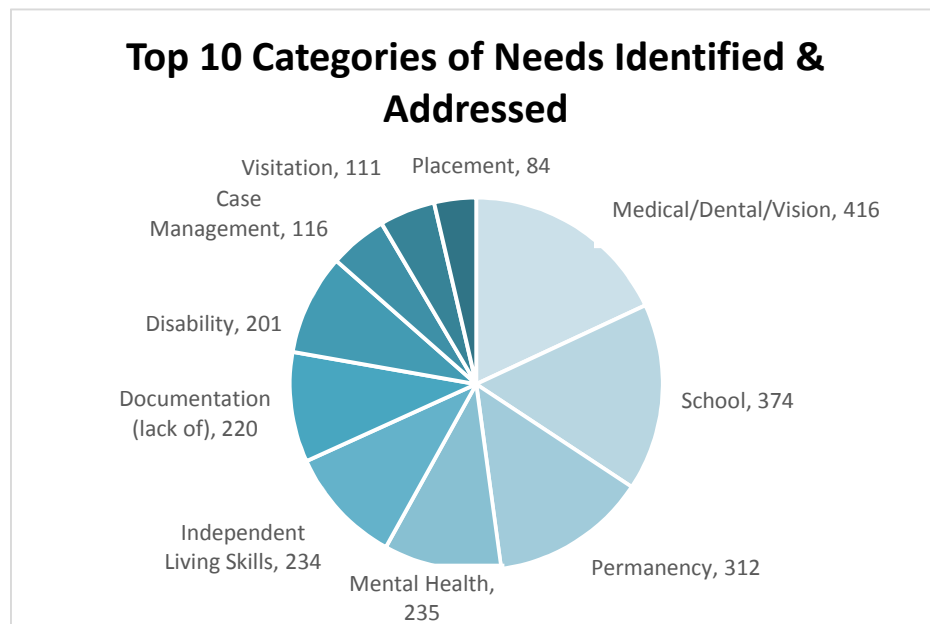
## THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS

Collectively, FFCR'S 85 volunteers active during FY 2019-20 contributed nearly 2890 hours of volunteer service valued at just under \$200,000. About 30% of our volunteers have served on a monthly review panel for six or more years, far longer than the average case manager has been in the field.

Approximately 80% of our volunteers are professionals or have retired from a profession. Nearly all have a college degree, with about 44% holding advanced degrees. In addition to their contribution of time and talent, many of our volunteers are involved with other organizations and are able to provide information about community resources to case managers, caregivers, and/or youth who participate in review hearings. More than 60% of our volunteers are also donors to FFCR, and many go above and beyond the call of duty to help children and youth thrive.

## THE IMPACT OF CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS

To thrive, children and youth need stable, supportive relationships with stable adults as well as safe environments within which to grow and learn. Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) assess the extent to which children in foster care are safe and well-cared for. Most critically, CRPs work to ensure that every child, youth and young adult in the foster care system is connected in both the short and long-term to a forever family. To accomplish this, CRPs recommend specific actions to the Court to specifically address identified needs.



## **CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS PROMOTE ACCOUNTABILITY**

In 21% of all reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel, the case management agency/DCF was found in *partial compliance* with their obligations under the case plan. The agency/DCF was found to be in *non-compliance* in 4% of the reviews. The agency/DCF was found by the CRP to be *in compliance* with their obligations to the child and/or family in 75% of the reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel. Far too often, case managers were unable to provide the status of a parent's engagement in services, particulars about a child's needs, and oral confirmation and/or written documentation of the provision of specific services.

After the child's case has come before the CRP one time, at each subsequent review hearing, the panel assesses agency compliance with prior CRP orders approved by the court. In FY 2019-20, case management agencies complied with 72% of the orders recommended by the CRP program and approved by the court. Even with the many challenges created by the global COVID-19 pandemic during the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the fiscal year, this represents an increase from 68% compliance in FY 2018-19.

To promote increased compliance with court orders on behalf of children and families, FFCR has implemented a number of Post-Review Advocacy strategies. In October 2019, an Advocacy Manager position was developed to focus on increasing the impact of the CRP and the participation of children, youth, young adults and their caregivers in CRP hearings. A seasoned child welfare attorney and former CRP Review Specialist, our Advocacy Manager conducted 73 Post-Judicial Review Hearings before the Court to elevate critical or urgent issues and promote timely action by case management agencies and others.

## **MAGGIE'S STORY**

*Maggie\* appeared before the Citizen Review Panel one month before her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Once she turned 21, she would no longer be eligible for the Extended Foster Care program. During her review hearing, Maggie revealed that she was anxious about being on her own without any form of support. Maggie also expressed concern about where she would be living after she turned 21 and told the panel that she did not have any furniture.*

*Deeply concerned, the panel made a number of recommendations, including that Maggie should be provided with information about applying for Medicaid, get connected to a college advisor, and receive assistance accessing the tuition waiver for youth formerly in foster care. The panel also recommended that the case management agency ensure Maggie was familiar with Aftercare Support Services available to her pursuant to Florida Statute 409.1451 until the age of 23, which includes job training, mentoring, and emergency funds.*

*Because time was of the essence and the CRP would not hear Maggie’s case prior to her leaving the foster care system, the CRP scheduled a follow up hearing before the Court prior to Maggie’s birthday to ensure that the panel’s recommendations, which had been approved by the judge, were immediately followed by the case management agency.*

*Transitioning from Extended Foster Care is a daunting task for young adults. Thanks to the swift and decisive action of the CRP, all of the recommendations were implemented and Maggie was able to move into her new furnished home before turning 21. Additionally, during the post-review Court hearing, the Judge encouraged Maggie to contact the Court and/or the case management agency for assistance at any time.*

*\*Name and identifying information changed to protect privacy.*

### **CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS COMPLEX NEEDS**

Many of the children and youth referred to the CRP have complex physical, cognitive and/or emotional disabilities or conditions. Often, judges refer large sibling groups to the CRP for review, acknowledging the challenge of conducting a thorough review for 6, 8 or 12 children from the same family.

During the review hearing, the CRP evaluates all documentation and asks specific questions related to developmental and academic benchmarks and extracurricular activities. The number of children reviewed provided in the following table refers to the number of children reviewed by the CRP in that particular age group with respect to the particular topic.

Age Range	Developmentally on Target	Academic Achievement of C’s and above	Enrolled in Extracurricular Activities
0-5	63%	N/A	N/A
6-12	71%	63%	22%
13-17	81%	48%	35%
18-21 (EFC)	81%	78%	6% of 81 enrolled in school

Addressing these complex needs while also advancing the child’s permanency is a difficult task. Our experienced staff and seasoned volunteers are trained to assess each child’s case systematically and objectively, evaluating testimony and documentation in order to identify gaps and offer solutions. Equally important, they bring to the table a deep knowledge of policies and resources that are particularly helpful when it comes to solving complex problems.

## JAMAL'S STORY

*Jamal\*, a young adult with significant disabilities, was participating in the Extended Foster Care program. Youth with disabilities may stay in this program until they are 22 years old. If a youth has disabilities, when they are 16 years old or older, the CRP inquires about the need for a plenary guardian to oversee and manage the youth's financial, medical and emotional needs upon turning 18. Initiating the process prior to the youth's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday is critical, and, about six years ago, FFCR helped establish a clear protocol for doing so in partnership with child welfare system stakeholders and Legal Aid.*

*During his review hearing, the panel inquired whether Jamal had a plenary guardian. The case manager was not aware whether one had been appointed or not because she was not Jamal's case manager until he turned 18. After further inquiry, it was discovered that the case management agency responsible for Jamal's case prior to his turning 18 had failed to follow the protocol and had not sent the necessary documents to Legal Aid that they needed to complete the legal process. In fact, they were about to close out Jamal's case. Thanks to the CRP's thorough review and post review advocacy, Legal Aid kept his case open and is completing the guardianship process. Appreciative that the CRP identified this significant issue, the judge set ongoing status hearings to ensure he is assigned a plenary guardian. \*Young adult's name and identifying information changed to protect his privacy.*

## CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS PROVIDE A SAFETY NET IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, Miami-Dade County's child welfare system, like many around the country, faced significant turnover rates among case managers and a deficit of foster parents. Once the pandemic hit in mid-March 2020, overworked case managers have faced the added challenge of ensuring children's safety without being able to safely enter their homes. Foster children have had few, if any, in-person visits with their parents, siblings and extended family members. Many therapeutic and medical services are being provided over phone or video conference. Parents are trying to balance court-ordered services and responsibilities while trying to keep or find employment in the worst job market in recent memory. Foster caregivers are struggling to balance remote work and parenting while also managing the additional challenge of caring for children who have already experienced substantial trauma. Many of the institutions we all rely on – public schools, hospitals, courts – are straining under the weight of this pandemic.

FFCR's quick pivot to remote review hearings in mid-April 2020 (described more fully on page 15) provided an even more critical safety net for children and young adults in foster care. The CRP's "360 degree" review process has not only continued to identify and address ongoing challenges and gaps in services, but has also effectively uncovered many new and unique issues created by the pandemic.

## BERTA'S STORY

*When the pandemic shutdown schools in March 2020, Berta\*, a 7-year old with special needs was living with her grandfather, who would soon be adopting her. Berta's grandfather has a medical condition and was extremely concerned about both his and his grandchild's health and safety. Prior to school closing, Berta had been struggling academically. At that time, she was waiting for an educational evaluation to determine what type of academic setting and services would be most helpful. Because the evaluation requires an in-person observation, it was put on hold.*

*Needless-to-say, ensuring that his energetic elementary school-age granddaughter was actively engaged in virtual school presented extreme challenges. Even with assistance from the case management agency, Berta's grandfather was not able to help her access the school's virtual platform. The CRP responded by obtaining a court order for an educational surrogate for Berta who could be an independent advocate for her within the school system worked with her grandfather to secure the interventions and services she required to learn – even during the pandemic. CRP Program staff also connected with the Miami-Dade County Public Schools Juvenile Justice Support Office to schedule an urgent educational review to assess what resources could be provided through the school system that would best facilitate Berta's learning and her grandfather's ability to support her success. \*Child's name and identifying information changed to protect her privacy.*

## CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS HELP YOUTH SAFELY TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Youth ages 13-17 who are placed in a licensed care setting are required to have specific services and supports to prepare them for adulthood. Of the 57 youth ages 13-17 reviewed by the CRP in 2019-20, 52 youth qualified for “independent living services.” This means that the state is required to ensure that they receive life skills training and preparation for living independently. Nearly 85% of the youth who qualified for independent living services were reported to be receiving some sort of life skills preparation and training by their caregivers. Unfortunately, the quality and effectiveness of these services is difficult to verify.

Of the 52 qualifying youth, 26 had a “permanency goal” of APPLA (Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement), which, ultimately, does not result in permanency.

The CRP also determines whether these 13-17 year olds have important documents so that they can apply for a job, obtain a driver's license and/or access benefits. As the table below demonstrates, 62% did not have any form of Florida ID.



	Has	Does not have	Case manager did not know
Florida ID	33%	62%	5%
Social Security Card	63%	23%	6%
Birth Certificate	85%	12%	2%
Medicaid Card	85%	12%	4%

The CRP asks additional questions to youth who were 15-17 years old and qualified for independent living services at the time of their most recent review hearing. On occasion, a question is deemed “not applicable” due to a youth’s physical or emotional disability and/or specialized placement (i.e. psychiatric hospital or correctional facility).

	Yes	No	Case manager did not know	Not applicable
Was youth provided information about Post-Secondary Educational Support Services (PESS)	51%	31%	8%	10%
Was youth informed about Extended Foster Care (EFC)	62%	31%	5%	2%
Did youth complete Financial Literacy training*	7%	79%	3.5%	10.5%
Does youth have has a Bank Account*	35%	55%	7%	3%
Does youth have a Driver’s License or Permit*	17%	76%	0%	7%
Is youth employed*	17%	76%	0%	7%
If youth is not employed, does youth wish to be employed*	36%	50%	14%	0%
	* Question only asked to 16-17 year olds			

The panel also seeks to ensure that youth who are 17 and facing the potential of aging out of foster care when they turn 18, have a stable place to live, even for those youth who are planning to go into Extended Foster Care. During FY 2019-20, the CRP reviewed 22 youth who were 17 years old at the time of their review. Reportedly, 77% had a transition plan in place.

#### ***Transition to Extended Foster Care***

- 63% were reportedly planning to transition to Extended Foster Care upon turning 18
- 14% of the case managers didn’t know what the youth planned to do when they turned 18
- 14% were reportedly not planning to transition to Extended Foster Care upon turning 18
- 9% of the youth were undecided

### **Post Foster Care Living Arrangements**

- *Nearly one-third (32%) did not know where they would live once they transitioned from foster care*
- 32% planned to live in their current foster home or a new foster home upon entering Extended Foster Care
- Two of the youth reviewed planned to return to living with their biological parent(s)

### **Employment Preparation**

- 32% of the 17 year-olds had a resume
- 46% had some work experience

## **CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS SUPPORT YOUNG ADULTS IN EXTENDED CARE**

Between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020, FFCR's CRP conducted judicial reviews for 104 young adults ages 18-21 who were participating in the Extended Foster Care (EFC) program at the time of their review. To qualify for Extended Foster Care, a former foster youth must be enrolled in school or employed part-time and they must reside in a living arrangement approved by Citrus Family Care Network (Miami's lead community based care agency). A young adult may also qualify for the program if they are participating in an activity to eliminate the barriers to attend school or employment or if a young adult has a disability that prohibits them from engaging in any of these qualifying activities. Young adults may voluntarily enter or exit EFC at any time between the ages of 18 and 21 (22 if disabled). They may also be removed from EFC when they no longer have a qualifying activity or approved living arrangement.

Nearly all of the young adults reviewed by the CRP in FY 2019-20 reported that they were engaged monthly by their case manager, received life skills preparation, received their allowance (most received \$200/month), and that their case manager assisted them with maintaining their qualification for the EFC program. For 95% of the young adults reviewed, this was their first time in the EFC program. Ten of the young adults reviewed were at risk of being discharged from the program at the time of their review.

### **Housing**

Sixty-one percent (61%) of the young adults reviewed were living in "transitional housing" at the time of their review. The "approved living arrangement" for the remaining young adults reviewed included:

- APD group/foster home (17%)
- Own apartment or an apartment with roommate(s) (11%)
- College campus housing (1 young adult)
- Three (3) of the young adults did not have an approved living arrangement

### **Education**

Of the 81 young adults in school:

- 13% were enrolled in post-secondary or vocational programs
- 17% were studying for a GED
- 46% were working towards a high school diploma
- 8 young adults had achieved either a GED or high school diploma

### **Employment**

- 28% of the young adults were employed at the time of their review
- 76% of those employed had only part-time employment
- 27% reported having no work experience

## **SEBASTIAN'S STORY**

*Throughout his childhood, Sebastian\* was abused by his mother and her family. While fleeing his home country as a young teenager, Sebastian was arrested at the border, placed in a children's detention center and ultimately sent back to his country. Eventually, he was able to come to the U.S and was placed in the care of a relative; however, they were abusive and Sebastian was placed into a group home. He enrolled in high school and chose to enter Extended Foster Care when he turned 18.*

*Sebastian's final review hearing before the panel took place just two weeks shy of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. He was enrolled in college and intent on pursuing a career in the medical field. The transitional housing program in which he was now living reported that they would no longer be able to provide rent-free housing once he turned 21. Although he had been approved for Special Juvenile Immigrant visa, he was still waiting for this and was not permitted to legally work. Unless he could come up with the funds to cover his rent, Sebastian would soon be homeless.*

*This was unacceptable. CRP staff immediately contacted Sebastian's immigration attorney for assistance and provided his case manager with information about a church that was offering monetary assistance. In the meantime, Ruth, one of the CRP volunteers who had heard Sebastian's case, was unable to shake the thought of him becoming homeless. She and her family wanted to assist him with his living expenses. Ruth met Sebastian on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday with a special cake. She told him that her family was there for him – but he owed them nothing in return.*

*Sebastian gladly accepted Ruth's help and, within a short period of time, he was texting with his new "extended family" several times a week. Without the panel bringing Sebastian's dire situation to light, he most certainly would have become homeless. Instead, in the matter of weeks, he gained the love and support of a family, has a safe place to live, and is pursuing a career that will allow him to help others. \*Young adult's name changed to protect his privacy. Volunteer's name used with permission.*

## **BARRIERS TO PERMANENCY**

Data gathered during CRP review hearings continue to reflect a number of recurring issues that create barriers to children achieving permanency within the statutory timeframes. Every time the CRP reviews a child 0-17 years old, the panel determines whether there are barriers to permanency and, if so, describes the barrier(s) in the written report submitted to the court and the parties. CRP staff code each barrier in the CRP database. The most significant barriers to permanency identified during FY 2019-20 are discussed below.

### **LENGTH OF TIME THE CHILD HAS BEEN IN CARE (186)**

It is well-established that the longer a child stays in foster care without a permanent family, the lower the likelihood of that child achieving permanency and the more likely the child will develop physical or emotional issues that will negatively impact them in their teen, young adult and adult lives. Although many children in Miami-Dade's foster care system eventually achieve permanency, the process still takes far too long for most children.

Last fiscal year, the CRP conducted 322 review hearings for 196 children under age 18 at the time of their most recent review. In 234 of these review hearings, the CRP determined that the child had been under the court's jurisdiction with an open dependency case longer than 12 months. For children with a goal of reunification, the delay was typically due to the parents needing more time to continue to progress with their services. For children with a goal of adoption, the delay was often due the lack of an identified adoptive family or the failure to finalize adoption with an identified family (see Legal and Procedural delays below).

In addition to creating instability and distress for the child, it is well-known that changes in a foster child's living arrangement often extend a child's stay in foster care and reduces the likelihood of timely permanency. However, in some instances, a placement change can be a step towards permanency, such as moving to a pre-adoptive family. In 25% of the reviews conducted by the CRP, the child or young adult was determined to have experienced at least one placement disruption in the past 6 months. For 60% of the children under age 18 who experienced a placement change, the change was considered to promote permanency. The placement change was NOT a step towards permanency for 40% of the children who experienced a placement change within 6 months of their review date.

## **LEGAL OR PROCEDURAL DELAYS (178)**

There are a variety of legal and procedural issues that delay permanency for children. A child may have one or more of the following, which are discussed and addressed (when applicable) at each review:

- Paternity has not been established
- No Legal Father order has not been entered
- Diligent Search pending
- TPR petition has not been filed
- TPR trial is pending
- TPR final judgement is being appealed
- Adoptive placement has not been identified
- Parent was not referred to services in a timely manner
- Home study for placement is pending (particularly out of county or out of state home studies)
- Adoption finalization is pending

## **SPECIAL NEEDS AND/OR BEHAVIORAL ISSUES (102)**

In some instances, the child's special medical, cognitive or emotional needs may require a living arrangement that is not conducive to permanency. For example, a child may have cerebral palsy and require the care and support offered by a medical foster home; however, most medical foster parents are not looking to adopt a child and many prospective adoptive parents are not willing or able to take on an extremely medically need child (although there are parents who adopt special needs children). Alternatively, the child may have too many special needs to safely return to the care of his or her parent, despite the parent's devotion to the child and compliance with his or her case plan.

## **PARENTAL NON-COMPLIANCE WITH CASE PLAN REQUIREMENTS (41)**

When the child's permanency goal is reunification, the CRP assesses parents' engagement in court ordered services deemed necessary to create a safe family environment and to reduce potential safety threats. In recent years, the child welfare system has been focused on increasing the protective capacities of parents such that a child can safely be returned home. Furthermore, parent-child visitation is essential to reunification and long-term stability and well-being of both the parent and the child.

During FY 2019-20, the CRP reviewed 29 children with a goal of reunification, compared to 175 children with a goal of reunification reviewed in the previous fiscal year. (Please find a further explanation of the reason for this reduction on page 18).

The CRP assessed the Mother's compliance with the case plan in 59 review hearings and assessed the father's compliance with the case plan in 29 reviews. The panel found that Mothers "substantially complied" with their case plans in only 12% of the applicable reviews and "partially complied" in 64% of

the reviews. Fathers were only substantially compliant in 10% of the applicable reviews and partially compliant in 36% of the reviews.

There was an overall decrease in parental compliance with visitation requirements compared to last fiscal year. Forty-eight percent (48%) of mothers substantially complied with visitation requirements, 18% partially complied, and 34% did not comply. Forty-one percent (41%) of fathers complied with visitation requirements, 14% partially complied, and 45% did not comply.

Undoubtedly, the reduced parental engagement in their case plan and visitation requirements is connected to restrictions and limitations imposed by the pandemic. That said, although the restrictions created challenges, many parents engaged in video visitation and were able to receive remote services. Furthermore, the CRP only determined a parent in non-compliance with services or visitation when it was feasible to complete these tasks. For example, when visits via video conference were appropriate and offered, the panel assessed compliance. When visits via video conference were not found to be appropriate (often because of the child's age or ability to engage in such a visit), the parents were not held accountable/found in non-compliance.

When the panel identifies parental compliance as a barrier to permanency, volunteers seek to determine what specifically is preventing the parent from engaging in required services and/or visitation. Since the onset of the pandemic, the panel held the agencies accountable for making reasonable efforts to eliminate barriers that prevented a parent from participating, (i.e. parents who needed digital devices or needed help learning how to set them up and join a scheduled visit or appointment via videoconference). Additionally, if barriers to parental participation are identified, the CRP issues recommended orders intended to help remove these impediments.

### **CHILD HAS EXPRESSED RESISTANCE TO ADOPTION (40)**

The false notion that older children are “not adoptable” has long been used as an excuse for the system's failure to pursue a forever family for older children in foster care. While this is sometimes genuinely true, more often than not, when a youth claims he or she does not wish to be adopted, it is masking other concerns. A youth may not understand what it means to be adopted; he or she may feel being adopted would be disloyal to his/her family of origin; and/or a youth may be tired of years of rejection by foster parents and even adoptive families and has lost hope in the possibility of a forever family. Sometimes, the youth has not been asked how he or she feels about adoption or having a permanent family, and the case manager just assumes that the youth is not interested or has been told by another case manager or supervisor that this is the case. Rarely does anyone readdress the issue once a youth has said “no” the first time.

When panel members hear that a youth does not wish to be adopted, they work to better understand what the youth knows about adoption and what efforts have been made by the agency to truly educate the youth about what it means to have a forever family. The panel may recommend specialized therapy to address this issue, especially if the permanency goal will remain adoption. Often, these youth are referred to our Permanency Roundtable Program to further explore permanency options and to better understand his or her true wishes and desires around his future goals.

## **SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES**

In mid-March 2020, when the global pandemic caused the closure of many government offices, courthouses, schools and businesses, FFCR quickly and efficiently transitioned our business operations to a remote environment. The ease with which we accomplished this transition was the result of the technology and processes already in place that enabled us to conduct core operations remotely as delineated in our Disaster Preparedness and Business Continuity Policies and Procedures.

### **ENSURING CONTINUITY OF CRP REVIEW HEARINGS**

The Children’s Courthouse has been closed to the public since mid-March 2020. On April 13<sup>th</sup>, the Unified Children’s Division began holding non-emergency hearings via video conference. On April 15<sup>th</sup>, the CRP began conducting “Remote Reviews” using the same platform. To successfully launch remote CRP review hearings, our team drafted and implemented procedures, technical needs were assessed and tested, and relevant staff and 20+ volunteers were trained. These start up activities were accomplished in a brief two week period – with staff working around the clock to ensure that Remote Reviews could successfully launch without compromising our practice standards or access to the review process. Simultaneously, CRP team members resumed their participation in remote Post-Judicial Review Hearings before the Court via video conference and continued training the remainder of our volunteers who were willing and able to transition to the remote review process.

### **TRAINING VOLUNTEERS & STAKEHOLDERS**

FFCR held our 3rd Annual FFCR Volunteer Summit on March 7, 2020, just days before the pandemic shut downs. The Summit focused on learning about trauma-informed care principles and volunteers and staff engaged in skill building activities to develop new strategies and identify opportunities to integrate these principles during our citizen review hearing process. During the Summit, we also celebrated those volunteers who had reached their 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> year of service with FFCR and recognized several volunteers of the year for their exemplary service.

All in-person ongoing training opportunities for our volunteers that were scheduled for April and May were cancelled and online training links were provided to all volunteers. By the end of June, we had scheduled virtual trainings for our volunteers through the end of the year using an interactive

videoconference platform. Over the course of the year, our team provided 126.5 hours of training to FFCR volunteers, case managers, GALs, attorneys, and other child welfare stakeholders.

## **ENGAGING CHILDREN & CAREGIVERS IN THE CRP PROCESS**

Moving our CRP review process to a videoconferencing platform increased the level of participation by children, youth and young adults. Their participation in CRP review hearings elevates the entire process by providing accurate, firsthand accounts of what is taking place in their lives and also allows panel members to hear directly about their current needs and future aspirations. This, in turn, leads to more specific and impactful recommendations by the CRP. In an ongoing effort to better engage youth and young adults, we developed a resource tool for Youth and Young Adults and presented information about the CRP Program and the child welfare system in general to several of our local foster parent associations.

## **EXPANDING OUTREACH TO CHILDREN & FAMILIES**

Prior to the pandemic, but most definitely since that time, we have expanded our support for foster children, youth, and young adults beyond that which we provide through our CRP and PRT Programs. In May, FFCR conducted a very successful Digital Device Drive during which volunteers donated funds and/or gently used devices to FFCR that were distributed to children, parents, and young adults in need of devices to participate in school and visitation. In June, FFCR spearheaded an event in partnership with Love Hope Music and Casa Valentina to honor the graduates' hard work and perseverance. The event, which also streamed on Zoom, was hosted live at Casa Valentina where residents had a socially distanced backyard party complete with snacks, pizza and decorations. Current and former foster youth who graduated in 2020, along with their friends and supporters from across the county, enjoyed a concert by talented local musician Bryant Del Toro along with encouraging messages from a fellow graduate, Citrus Family Care Network's education coordinator, and the founders of Love Hope Music.

## **FOSTERING RESILIENCE & RACIAL EQUITY**

In mid-2019, Florida Foster Care Review (FFCR) initiated a conversation to explore ways to more effectively and systematically address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and promote resilience for the children and families we collectively serve. We were joined by representatives from Voices for Children Foundation, Educate Tomorrow, Casa Valentina and The Alliance for GLBTQ Youth. Our discussions turned into planning sessions which ultimately resulted in the formation of *The Resilience Collaborative*. Grounded in the Building Community Resilience (BCR) framework developed by Dr. Wendy Ellis of the Center for Community Resilience (CCR) at the Milken School of Public Health at George Washington University, *The Resilience Collaborative's* goals are to foster equity, prevent adversity and build community resilience by establishing strategic linkages between clinicians, social service providers, public sectors, policymakers and community members.



On January 23, 2020, *The Resilience Collaborative* hosted a Convening Conference facilitated by Dr. Ellis and attended by 85 individuals representing 60+ organizations and agencies. Participant engagement and feedback clearly indicated an interest in continuing to learn together and to expand the collaborative. The Steering Committee partners reconvened in early March 2020 to develop a Theory of Change based on the themes that emerged in January and our internal theory of change discussion. We decided that we would focus on racial equity, policy advocacy, and grassroots empowerment. Later that week, COVID-19 shut down society. Soon thereafter, George Floyd was killed. Both events clearly underscored the gross inequities and disparities faced by people of color and fueled our continued resolve to be part of a solution.

## **STRENGTHENING OUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

One of our core organizational beliefs is the importance of relationships and connections in promoting resilience and overall well-being. In addition to guiding our programs and services, this belief also underscores the type of organizational culture that we have intentionally built and support. Transitioning to remote work posed new challenges to our organizational culture, which is reinforced by regular team building/bonding activities, professional supervision by an external clinician, and one-on-one coaching and interaction.

With many of the “natural” opportunities for interaction cut off, we found a number of ways to intentionally stay connected and to provide support for one another. For example, each day of the week has its own theme: Mindful Monday (focuses on a mindfulness teaching), Tuesday Tidbits (sharing positive information and/or stories), Wednesday Words (staff share inspirational quotes), Thankful Thursdays (staff share something for which they are grateful), and Friday Fun (sharing something funny or an idea for something fun to do). A few times a month, a staff member leads a weekly virtual Affirmations session or a 15 minute exercise break. All activities are optional; however, many staff participate as they are able. These daily touchpoints are augmented by virtual monthly staff meetings and occasional virtual team lunches for our various internal teams.

## **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES**

By statute, referrals to the CRP are entirely at the discretion of each individual judge. The number of referrals to the CRP directly impacts the number of reviews scheduled. Before mid-March 2020, several phenomena were beginning to negatively impact the flow of referrals to the CRP. The pandemic and ensuing shutdown of the Unified Children’s Court in mid-March 2020 exacerbated these pre-existing conditions and further impinged the referral pipeline. Although we were able to successfully transition the Citizen Review Panel Program to an online platform and our operations are being conducted remotely, nearly every aspect of administering the CRP has become more challenging and time-consuming.

FFCR employs a number of strategies to promote referrals to the CRP and to facilitate the logistics of the referral process. Even when the referral is agreed to by the parties, the decision to refer a child to the CRP rests solely with the judge responsible for that child's case.

During FY 2019-20, juvenile court judges made 126 referrals to the CRP. The pandemic has impacted referrals since mid-March 2020 in the following ways:

- Referrals are typically made 5 months in advance. Thus, referrals in August were made in March, which is when the court first shut down. When court resumed remotely via Zoom, it was on a very limited basis. Since March, referrals to the CRP have been much more challenging to obtain.
- For the 4.5 weeks it took the CRP to transition to a remote platform, no reviews were held and a significant number of children's cases were returned to the division judge to ensure compliance with federal and state statutory hearing timeframes, which were not waived by the federal government.
- Most children referred to the CRP have a case plan goal of APPLA (another planned living arrangement) or a goal of adoption and have been permanently committed to DCF subsequent to the termination of their parents' rights. However, limited court operations and few to no TPR trials since March 2020 has resulted in far fewer children meeting these criteria and has negatively impacted referrals to the CRP.

Prior to the onset of the global pandemic, the following factors contributed to the reduction of referrals and the overall number of reviews scheduled:

- Since January 2020, CLS attorneys have requested the removal from the CRP's calendar any case that has been reviewed 2 consecutive times by the CRP. This is based on their interpretation of Chapter 39.701 which states that the CRP may not review cases more than 2 consecutive times without the child and the parties coming before the court for a "judicial review." Over the course of the program's 30+ year history, judges generally have interpreted this requirement to be fulfilled by the Permanency Review Hearing that takes place 12 months after the child's removal. However, this now appears to be a minority opinion among the judicial leadership in the UCC division.
- CLS also began objecting to the referral to the CRP any child with the goal of reunification. Although the court is within its rights to overrule such objections, all but one of the judges have upheld CLS's objections. Considering that most children in dependency court have the goal of reunification, this has significantly reduced the pool of potential referrals to the CRP, which is unfortunate considering the immense value of a thorough review in such cases.
- There are fewer children in the dependency court system in Miami – about 1500 as of October 1, 2020 compared to approximately 2200 around the same time in the prior year. In fact, the total number of children under the jurisdiction of the dependency side of the Unified Children's Court division has dropped significantly over the past five (5) years.

CRP typically is able to review 50-55% of the children referred to the program. Since children are referred to the CRP 5-6 months in advance of their review hearing, a number of children referred reach permanency or turn 18 and their cases are closed by the Court prior to their scheduled CRP review hearing. Additionally, the court may consolidate the judicial review hearing with another hearing set before the court after the original referral date. On other occasions, a party may petition the court to hear the judicial review instead of the CRP. In both of these instances, the child's case is removed from the CRP's calendar. FFCR is working diligently to ensure that the scheduled reviews are not removed from the CRP's calendar unless the child achieves permanency.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Having overcome a number of challenges over the course of this fiscal year, FFCR leadership and staff are focused on identifying additional opportunities to more meaningfully fill gaps in the system of care and address the extensive unmet needs of the children, youth and young adults we serve. We are also using this moment to deepen our partnerships with existing community partners and to explore new partnerships that will amplify the impact of our work.

Underlying much of this is our deep commitment to tackling racial equity, diversity and inclusion within our organization as well as the child welfare system. As part of this effort, we are looking inward to assess FFCR's role in inadvertently contributing to disparate outcomes for children of color. We are also investigating ways to more deeply engage our current and future volunteers to help the young people we serve gain access to opportunities, resources, networks and experiences that will allow them to explore their passion and achieve their potential.

Grounded by our enduring core values, in the year ahead, FFCR will build on more than 30 years of harnessing the power of volunteers and community resources to advance the safety, stability and success of youth in foster care to deepen the transformative impact of our work.

As always, we are grateful for our extraordinary partnership with Miami's 11<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court, child welfare stakeholders, community based providers, governmental and private agencies, and the many dedicated supporters who generously contribute their time, treasure and talent to promote a bright future for children, youth and young adults in foster care.