



CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM

ANNUAL REPORT
July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida Foster Care Review (FFCR) advances the safety, stability and success of children in Miami-Dade County's foster care system. Our programs connect children and young adults to essential services, supportive relationships, and permanent families to help build resilience, stability and connectedness - essential ingredients for lifelong well-being. Since 1989, FFCR's Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Program has engaged, trained and supported community volunteers who review the cases of hundreds of children and young adults in foster each year and issue specific findings and recommended orders to address unmet needs and to facilitate a safe and expeditious exit from foster care to a lifelong family.

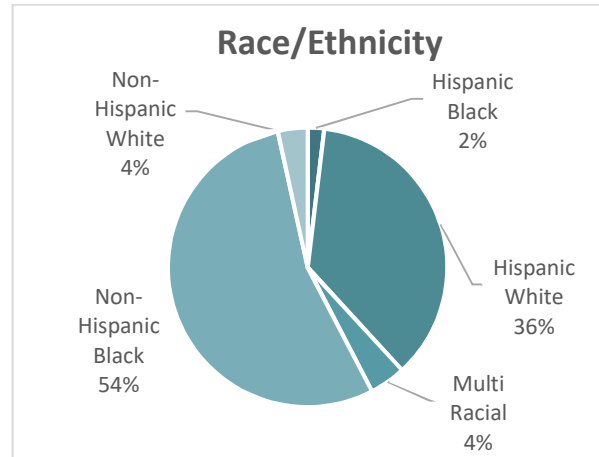
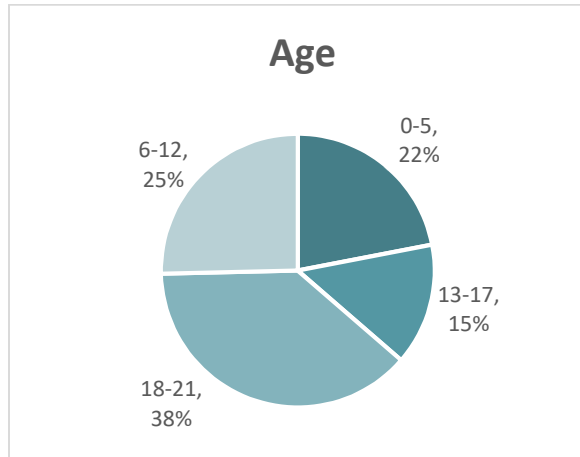
During FY 2021-22 (July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022), FFCR's CRP Program conducted **418 review hearings of 264 children and young adults** under the jurisdiction of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit's juvenile division.

- The program identified **2785 unmet needs** and issued recommended orders to address them.
- FFCR's targeted **post review advocacy** efforts helped achieve a record 77% compliance with court orders issued through the CRP, ensuring that children, young adults and their families received the resources, services and support they need.
- The CRP program's special **outreach and engagement** initiative ensured that caregivers and young adults participated in their CRP hearings in record numbers, enhancing the quality and impact of the reviews.
- FFCR's 70 dedicated volunteers **donated 2410 hours valued at just over \$203,000** to support the safety, stability and success of our community's most vulnerable children.

This report describes the unique impact of the CRP in two complementary ways. First, it presents aggregate data of the well-being, safety and permanency of the children reviewed by FFCR's citizen review panels during FY 2021-22. Based on our best estimates, the CRP reviewed approximately 20% of the children and young adults under the dependency court's jurisdiction, and this data highlights system strengths and areas requiring improvement. Second, the report provides a firsthand account of the challenges faced by those we serve and demonstrates how the CRP process improves their lives.

To accomplish our mission, FFCR relies on enduring partnerships. We are especially grateful to the leadership, judiciary and administration of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court. We also appreciate the hundreds of child welfare professionals, service providers and attorneys who participate in CRP review hearings. Most importantly, we recognize the many caregivers, parents, youth and young adults who courageously shared their stories and struggles with our review panels and put their trust in our process.

CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULTS SERVED



| PERMANENCY PLAN | YEARS IN CARE | | | | CHILDREN (0-17) |
|---|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|
| | <1 | 1-2 | 3-4 | 5+ | |
| Adoption | 8 | 60 | 37 | 30 | 135 |
| Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement (APPLA) | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| Maintain & Strengthen | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Permanent Guardianship | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Reunification | 3 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 11 |
| TOTAL | 11 | 77 | 41 | 34 | 163 |

| HOME ENVIRONMENT/CAREGIVER | CHILDREN |
|---|------------|
| Foster Home | 78 |
| Group Home | 4 |
| Group Shelter | 1 |
| Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) Home | 19 |
| Relative/Non-Relative | 75 |
| Institutional/Therapeutic | 7 |
| Independent Living / Transitional Housing (ages 18-22) | 71 |
| With Parent(s) | 5 |
| Incarcerated/Other | 4 |
| TOTAL | 264 |

THE REVIEW PROCESS

Florida law, in accordance with federal law, requires that the court conduct a 'judicial review' every six months for every child under its jurisdiction due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. Florida Statute 39.701 details the specifics of the review process explaining that, "before every judicial review hearing or citizen review panel hearing, the social service agency shall make an investigation and social study concerning *all pertinent details* relating to the child." The statute further lists the areas that should be assessed during a judicial review - from mental health and educational records to parents' progress with services and the status of parent-child and/or sibling visitation.

According to Florida Statute 39.701(1)(c)(2), "citizen review panels may conduct hearings to review the status of a child. The court shall select the cases appropriate for referral to the citizen review panels and may order the attendance of the parties at the review panel hearings. However, any party may object to the referral of a case to a citizen review panel. Whenever such an objection has been filed with the court, the court shall review the substance of the objection and may conduct the review itself or refer the review to a citizen review panel."

REFERRALS TO THE CRP

During fiscal year 2021-22, juvenile court judges made 171 referrals to the CRP. This is a significant decrease from the 332 children referred in fiscal year 2020-21. By statute, the decision to refer a child to the CRP is entirely at the discretion of each individual judge. In 2020, the CRP commenced a collaborative project with DCF and the GAL whereby the CRP secured the agreement of these parties to refer a child to the CRP for their next review as well as that of the attorney ad litem when assigned. This only occurs when the child's permanency goal is adoption and the parents' rights have been terminated. However, 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. Additionally, the CRP meets regularly with the court administrators, judicial leaders and judges assigned to the dependency division to discuss the CRP process and how judges and advocate can utilize the CRP review process.

PREPARING FOR THE REVIEW

Prior to the actual review hearing, FFCR's Review Specialists methodologically examine dozens of court documents and equip the panel with a comprehensive summary report that includes the child's history, current status, case plan goals and any known red flags. Volunteers have virtual access to these case summaries and the case manager's Judicial Review Social Study Report (JRSSR) 24 hours prior to the hearing and prior to each hearing they discuss any concerns or questions with FFCR's Review Specialists. This extensive preparation by staff and volunteers allows them to ask in-depth questions within the 40-minutes allotted per review hearing and to successfully identify unmet needs and permanency barriers.

FFCR's Review Specialists use FFCR's customized database, "ChildWatch," to capture information required for each review, including progress with case plan tasks, placement information, visitation details, barriers to permanency, medical and mental health information, independent living skills, education, disability and much more. ChildWatch also provides information from all previous CRP review hearings, which is incorporated along with current information into the preparation report provided to volunteers, including previous orders recommended by the CRP.

CONDUCTING THE REVIEW

As part of their Pre-Service training, CRP volunteers are taught how to carefully review well-child exams, psychological evaluations, report cards, therapy reports and more. In preparation for a review, each panel member is assigned a topic area – which allows them to focus on that subject matter and carefully review the related records. CRP reviews have been conducted via video conference since April 2020 due to the pandemic. This allows ample time to prepare for an in-depth review of the case. During the review hearing, panel members ask detailed questions about their assigned topic area and intently listen to each party and participant and ensure they all have an opportunity to be heard. Approximately one hour is reserved for each child's review hearing which provides sufficient time for each volunteer to gather sufficient information for making thoughtful recommendations.

JOHN AND JAMES ¹

Case manager turnover and the inconsistency caused by bouncing children between caregivers often results in misplaced records and crucial medical care falling through the cracks. Sixteen-year old James and his older brother, 17-year old, John who at the time of our review had been in care for nearly a decade. While reviewing the court's file prior to conducting the CRP's first review of John and James, the CRP team discovered that one of the children had been previously diagnosed with a serious immune disease. There was no documentation of the status of the child's illness. Additionally, both children had been pending dental extractions for several months, and one of them was experiencing dental pain. Following the CRP's recommendations, the court ordered further diagnostic testing to assess the status of the immune disease, and the agency expeditiously scheduled the tooth extraction.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

At the conclusion of each hearing, the panel issues findings and recommended orders designed to ensure child welfare agencies provide services and interventions, overcome barriers and ensure children exit foster care as soon as possible to a permanent family. The panel's recommendations target a multitude of issues from health to education to caregiver appropriateness and much more. Once adopted by the Court, the CRP's recommendations become binding court orders with which agencies and parties must comply. Using the ChildWatch database, the Review Specialist captures the CRP's findings and recommendations in the report, which is filed with the court and distributed to the parties within ten business days of the hearing.

¹ The names and identifying information of the children, young adults and families discussed in this report have been changed to protect their privacy and to maintain confidentiality.

POST REVIEW ADVOCACY

FFCR incorporates various forms of post review advocacy designed to effectively address issues that arise during CRP hearings. FFCR's Advocacy Manager presents time-sensitive issues and concerns directly to the court through Post Judicial Review Hearings. For other important, but not urgent issues, FFCR engages in Follow Up Advocacy and harnesses our vast network of contacts and relationships to ensure that children's needs are met by connecting case managers and parties to a variety of community resources such as, mentors, tutors, extracurricular activities or special services. When the panel learns of a safety threat during the course of a review hearing, FFCR issues an immediate Case Alert to the lead child welfare agency by providing, usually within 24 hours, the Court and all parties a document detailing the alleged safety concerns raised during the review. During FY 2021-22, FFCR engaged in Post Review Advocacy efforts 249 times, including 146 Post Judicial Review Hearings, 2 Case Alerts, and 101 Post Review Advocacy follow ups aimed at resolving critical safety issues, child/family needs and overall barriers to permanency. All Post Review Advocacy efforts are also captured within our internal database so that future Review Specialists and volunteers are able to review the updates provided during post review efforts and ask any necessary follow up questions.

WILL

When Will was born, doctors determined he had been exposed to drugs while in utero, and he had to be placed in the intensive care unit. When he was discharged from the hospital, his mother failed to pick him up. His grandmother stepped in and, after Will's parents' rights were terminated by the court, she sought to adopt him. Eighteen months after his birth, Will's case came before the CRP for a review. In addition to having significant special needs, the panel identified barriers that were delaying Will's adoption.

The required adoption home study of the grandmother had not been completed. Will was also waiting for Medicaid to approve coverage of several necessary developmental services. The grandmother was not sure whether Will would qualify for any additional benefits to help manage his disabilities. Furthermore, he had been waiting to receive a medical procedure for several months; however, delays with a medical affidavit needed to complete the procedure had created barriers. FFCR set the case for a Post Judicial Review. In response, the agency was able to start his developmental services, complete the grandmother's home study, and provide the necessary medical affidavit to Will's pediatrician. A few months later, on National Adoption Day, Will's grandmother was finally able to adopt him.

ENGAGING CAREGIVERS & YOUNG ADULTS

Over the course of the past several years, FFCR has focused intently on engaging caregivers and young adults in their review hearings by emailing each young adult and caregiver (when accurate contact information is available) with detailed information regarding the CRP process, a link to Frequently Asked CRP Questions, and zoom details before their hearing. CRP also calls each young adult and caregiver to confirm receipt of the email and answer any questions. This initiative engages the people at the heart of the case and ensures they understand the review process and purpose. Their participation is crucial to obtain detailed information about unmet needs, which in turns leads to more effective orders that can

truly make a positive impact on the lives of the families we serve. During FY 2021-22, 55% of caregivers and 45% of young adults participated in their review hearing. This enabled the CRP to more effectively connect with those we serve and to ensure that their lived experience and articulated needs are informing the outcome of the review hearing process.

PETER AND ROBERT

When Peter and Robert's case came before the CRP, Peter was already an adult in the Extended Foster Care program and his 16-year-old brother was living with their relative. FFCR staff contacted Robert's relative to explain the review process and to encourage her to attend the sibling's review hearing.

The caregiver had a number of questions and concerns and was happy to have the chance to participate in the review hearing. She expressed concerns regarding the brothers' immigration status. (Despite having lived in the U.S. for many years, they were not citizens.) She was afraid this could impact their access to a wide range of opportunities and worried that once the dependency case closed, she would not be able to help them apply for citizenship. Moreover, she reported there was a hold on Robert's social security number that was preventing him from seeking employment. She also shared her concerns about having sufficient financial resources to help Robert transition to adulthood and attend college.

At the conclusion of the review, FFCR's Advocacy Manager followed up with the Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) and ensured that Robert's caregiver was informed of all of the program benefits, including how to assist Robert in obtaining the college tuition waiver. Moreover, she connected the brothers to Americans for Immigrant Justice (AIJ) and confirmed they were assigned an immigration attorney to receive the necessary assistance to begin their path towards citizenship. AIJ committed to remain on the case once closed by the dependency Court. Our Advocacy Manager confirmed that the caregiver knew where to seek guidance if she had any immigration or GAP benefits questions in the future.

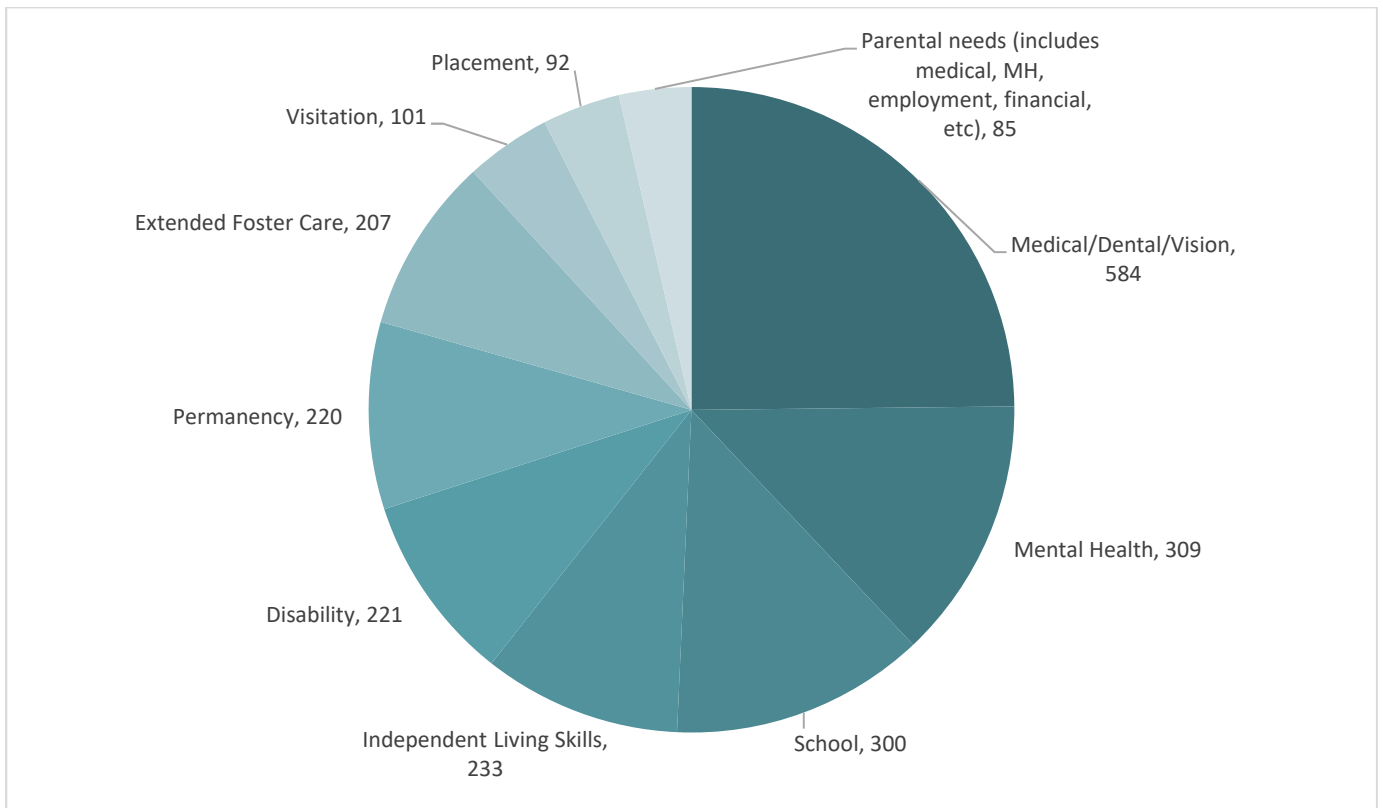
By engaging the caregiver and allowing her to express her concerns during the review, the CRP was able to accurately assess the situation, make the necessary recommendations and take action to move Robert one step closer to permanency and ensure both boys were set up for success as they transitioned to young adulthood.

TRAINING

During FY 2021-22, FFCR facilitated and coordinated 107 hours of training and education across 27 sessions provided to our staff and volunteers. FFCR's training team also vetted an additional 40 hours of relevant training offered by our community partners and offered these 20 sessions to staff and/or volunteers. FFCR also provides training to child welfare stakeholders such as Guardians ad Litem (GALs), GAL program attorneys, case managers as well as attorneys who represent parents and the Department of Children and Families on a variety of topics including permanency values, quality parenting initiative and legislative updates, LGBTQ and cultural competency, mindfulness and more. These community partners were invited to participate in our Advanced Training Institute and a training series we offered in collaboration with the Miami-Dade County Community Based Care Alliance.

IDENTIFYING & ADDRESSING UNMET NEEDS

The CRP's structured process enables FFCR to identify the many unmet needs of children and young adults in foster care. Ranging from untreated medical conditions to unsafe homes, academic challenges to the need for mentoring and a permanent family, the CRP recommended 2,785 orders in FY 2021-22. The chart below demonstrates the top 10 unmet needs identified and addressed by these orders.



ASSESSING COMPLIANCE WITH COURT ORDERS & OBLIGATIONS

During FY 2021-22, the CRP reviewed 11 children with a permanency goal of reunification and 5 children who were living with one or both parents and had a permanency goal to “maintain and strengthen” the relationship with their parent(s). Although these 16 children only constituted a small percentage of the reviews conducted, because the panel members ask precise questions to fully understand barriers to a parent’s progress, such as a case manager turnover, lack of culturally and linguistically aligned services, housing and/or transportation issues, etc., the CRP process often has a significant positive impact on reunification and parental engagement. Once challenges are identified, the panel recommends solutions to help the family reunify in a timely manner. The CRP only finds a parent “non-compliant” with services or visitation when it is feasible for them to complete these tasks.

The CRP assessed the mother's compliance with the case plan in 26 review hearings and assessed the father's compliance with the case plan in 21 reviews. The panel found mothers substantially compliant in 12% of the reviews, partially compliant in 61% of the reviews, and in non-compliance with their case plans in 27%. Fathers were determined by the panel to be substantially compliant in none of the reviews, partially compliant in 29% of the reviews, and in non-compliance in 71% of the reviews.

Meaningful and consistent visitation between parents and their children is a key driver of timely reunification. Acknowledging this fact, the CRP works to ensure children have access to see their parents, unless the court has restricted visitation. Interestingly, during FY 2021-22, there was a significant increase in mothers' substantial compliance with visitation, perhaps due to the increased use of "visiting" via videoconference.

THE MILLER CHILDREN

The extensive expertise of FFCR's staff and volunteers and the CRP's unique process that allows the panel members to dedicate time to each child's individual circumstances are key to supporting successful reunification. FFCR's CRP team also provides parents the opportunity to express their concerns and challenges and to feel heard and seen.

The six Miller siblings were removed from their parents due to physical abuse, medical neglect, environmental hazards and inadequate supervision. Ranging from age 2 to 13, all of the children have special needs; four have been diagnosed with developmental delays. At the time of the review hearing, three of the children had been reunified with their father and three remained in foster care. The panel reviewed hundreds of documents and dedicated an entire afternoon to reviewing the Miller children's case.

During the review hearing, the parents expressed confusion about their case plan tasks and what was required of them to regain custody of the children remaining in foster care. While the father had completed substance abuse treatment, individual therapy, and evidence-based parenting there were still tasks left in his case plan, namely, being able to demonstrate he could co-parent with the mother and showing responsibility over the children's well-being by attending their various specialist appointments. The panel recommended that the agency facilitate a Case Plan conference to create a detailed transition plan with specific action items. As part of this plan, the panel recommended that the agency work with the parents to create a log noting all of the children's medical and therapy appointments.

After reviewing the children's medical, therapists, and developmental services reports, the panel discovered that two of the children had been waiting for speech therapy for several months and one child was not yet receiving Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy with the parents which would educate them about the child's behavioral needs. Another child had not been scheduled for the sleep study and an audiology exam previously recommended by his physician to address hearing and sleep issues, and one child had not been provided the special needs attorney to which she was entitled due to the diagnosis of autism. The panel recommended that the court order the agency to immediately ensure each child received the services and diagnostic testing previously recommended by multiple experts.

FFCR set the case for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge who adopted each of the panel's numerous recommended orders that addressed key issues, established a plan of action to achieve permanency and ensured critical services to support the children's healthy development.

The CRP is also required to determine the compliance of child welfare agencies with their court-ordered tasks and responsibilities. In fiscal year 2021-22, the case management agency/DCF was found in *compliance* with their obligations under the case plan in 90% of all reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel. The agency/DCF was found to be in *non-compliance* in 2% of the reviews and found in *partial compliance* with their obligations to the child and/or family in 8% of the reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel.

Additionally, once a child has been reviewed by the CRP, at each subsequent review hearing before the CRP, the panel assesses agency compliance with previous orders recommended by the CRP that were adopted by the court. In FY 2021-22, case management agencies complied with 77% of the orders recommended by the CRP program, continuing an upward trend. We believe this is due in large part to FFCR’s extensive Post Review Advocacy, which has also significantly increased over the past four years.

| Fiscal Year | Compliance with CRP Recommended Orders |
|-------------|--|
| 21-22 | 77% |
| 20-21 | 75% |
| 19-20 | 72% |
| 18-19 | 68% |

LINKING CHILDREN TO SPECIALIZED SERVICES

During FY 2021-22 fiscal year, 71 of the 264 children and young adults reviewed were determined to have special medical needs that required follow up and of these 19% had severe medical needs. The meticulous review of records is even more critical for children with specialized needs and behavioral issues. Often, their cases involve dozens of specialist’s reports, progress notes and medical evaluations. Many of the children and youth referred to the CRP have complex physical, cognitive and/or emotional disabilities or conditions. To ensure our staff and volunteers understand common diagnoses and treatments and that they are equipped to make impactful recommendations for children with special needs, FFCR’s provides training on individualized education plans, applied behavior therapy, therapeutic methods and best practices, psychotropic medication, etc. Our staff are also extremely knowledgeable about community resources and services.

WARREN AND WENDY

The CRP process is particularly effective in ensuring that children with extensive and complex health, behavioral, emotional and educational issues receive the care and resources they need to thrive.

At the time of their review, siblings Warren, age 13, and Wendy, age 12, had been in foster care for nearly five years. Wendy had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, cortical blindness and has significant developmental disabilities. She resides in a skilled nursing facility. Her brother, Warren, has resided in more than 10 foster homes due to his challenging behaviors.

In preparation for the CRP review hearing, the panel scoured dozens of medical and educational records and reports from the children’s service providers; however, there was insufficient information making it difficult to assess whether the children were receiving all of the services and resources they required. Additionally, despite Warren’s behavior and the instability of his living arrangements, the panel discovered that he was not receiving therapy. He was also failing several classes and needed more educational support.

The CRP’s comprehensive recommendations report provided an in-depth review of the children’s complex needs information regarding precisely which types of support and services were needed. Given Wendy’s extensive needs and the challenges monitoring her care, the case was set for a Post Judicial Review hearing. Based on the panel’s recommendations, the court ordered the nursing facility to distribute a monthly report outlining the provision and progress of her medical and developmental services. The school system conducted an educational review for Warren and developed an individualized education plan (IEP) to address his educational and behavioral challenges. He was also referred for a psychological exam with IQ testing to determine the most effective mental health interventions. In the meantime, he was connected to an individual therapist and a dietician to assist with his dietary needs.

| Age Range | Developmentally on Target | Academic Achievement of C’s and above |
|-----------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 0-5 | 53% | N/A |
| 6-12 | 82% | 73% |
| 13-17 | 87% | 73% |

KATIE AND JOHN

Evaluating whether children are developmental on target and assessing their educational progress are key components of CRP reviews. Siblings Katie and John have extensive behavioral and educational needs. Katie was diagnosed with Autism and had recently failed 2nd grade. The panel had serious concerns about John’s low reading and writing level. During their CRP review hearing, the panel learned that neither child was receiving special accommodations in school. Due to his diagnosis, John was entitled to representation by a Special Needs Attorney; however, one had not been appointed. Moreover, Social Security Income (SSI) had not been explored on the children’s behalf, despite their needs. This is critical because SSI provides additional financial support to the family to assist with the children’s special needs.

FFCR requested a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge who promptly appointed a Special Needs Attorney for John. FFCR also contacted Miami Dade County Public Schools to ensure they were aware of the children's needs and ensured that the child welfare agency sought specialized educational services for the children, including individualized education plans (IEPs). Finally, the agency initiated the SSI benefits application process.

The judge expressed his appreciation for the CRP's thorough process, thanked FFCR for bringing these issues to the court's attention and applauded the panel's advocacy to ensure Katie and John had the tools they needed to succeed academically and beyond the classroom.

PROMOTING SAFETY

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Violence Prevention, "safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are essential to prevent early adversity, including child abuse and neglect, and to assure that all children reach their full potential."² The CRP determines whether children and young adults are living in a safe and stable environment.

BETTY

During Betty's review hearing, the panel was made aware of a domestic violence incident between the Betty's caregiver (her aunt) and the aunt's paramour that had occurred almost a year prior to the review hearing and was the subject of a pending motion for modification of placement. The caregiver shared her side of the story and what measures she had taken to protect the child. The agency had not worked with Betty's aunt to develop and implement a safety plan and the case manager was not sure whether Betty would be able to remain in the care of her aunt. In order to address the safety concerns and make the home as safe as possible while awaiting the decision on the modification of placement, the CRP issued a Case Alert to the lead child welfare agency and requested a Post Judicial Review hearing with the judge.

To reinforce Betty's safety, the panel recommended that the agency implement a safety plan and conduct a background check on all of the adults in the aunt's home. Additionally, the panel recommended that the caregiver's domestic violence counseling progress reports be filed with the Court, along with the child's child care attendance logs to provide an objective assessment of the caregiver's insight and care of the child and to ensure there was additional oversight of Betty. To promote Betty's safety while also advancing permanency, the CRP recommended an "Ability to Parent" assessment designed to assess the aunt's parenting skills and protective capacities. The Court adopted all of the panel's recommendations and ordered that the assessment be completed within 30 days.

ENSURING CONTINUITY OF CARE

The high turnover rate for case managers and other frontline professionals in the child welfare system is well-established. The pandemic and changes in labor market dynamics have exacerbated the problem. In fact, over the past year, there have been extensive vacancies at the Guardian ad Litem Program, Children's Legal Services as well as the full case management agencies. Conversely, 33% percent of FFCR's CRP volunteers have served on monthly review panels for six or more years with some of our volunteers serving 10, 15, 20 and even 25+ years. FFCR's Program Director has been with the organization for 14 years and our CRP program leadership have been with FFCR an average of 5+ years.

² CDC - Essentials for Childhood: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/essentials-for-childhood-framework508.pdf>

The CRP Program & Volunteer Coordinator has been with FFCR for 25 years. Nearly all of our CRP Program management started as Review Specialists and have extensive expertise and review skills. Our Senior Review Specialist has been with FFCR for more than three years and, until very recently, we experienced relatively low turnover in the Review Specialist position.

JACOB

Ongoing, relentless advocacy ensures that some of the most vulnerable children in our community receive continuous and consistent care. At the time of his CRP hearing, 21 year old Jacob had been in foster care for nine years. Due to his many disabilities, he resides in a specialized home where he receives wrap-around care. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Jacob's in-person occupational and speech therapy services had stopped because of safety concerns. Even though many of the Covid-19 restrictions had been lifted by the time the CRP conducted their review in mid-2022, Jacob's services had not resumed.

The CRP immediately set his case for Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge and partnered with the lead agency to ensure that the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) was aware of Jacob's need for immediate services. An APD representative appeared at the Post Judicial Review hearing requested by FFCR and reported that Jacob would be commencing services within the month.

The CRP Program's review process is designed to ensure continuity. When a child's case has been reviewed by the CRP, the subsequent CRP review begins with a discussion of compliance with the panel's previously issued orders. This allows the panel to ensure judicial orders are followed, identify issues that have been pending and uncover new or unknown barriers to a child's safety, stability and well-being. Additionally, FFCR's robust Post Review Advocacy efforts promote consistency of care by bringing unresolved issues before the court for judicial intervention.

EMILY, ZOEY & HALLE

Continuity of care is particularly challenging in cases with multiple siblings. However, through our meticulous review process, the CRP is able to provide each sibling individualized attention and ensure that their unique needs are met and that multiple issues, affecting multiple children are each effectively addressed.

At the time of their review hearing, Emily, Zoey, and Halle had been living with their grandmother for almost two years. Their parents' rights had been terminated, but their grandmother had not been approved for adoption and would thus need to be evaluated by the Adoption Review Committee (ARC).

While preparing for the review hearing, the panel discovered that medical recommendations made more than 8 months prior had not been followed. Emily required a psychological evaluation and Zoey needed a neurological evaluation and genetic testing. After the CRP's review, the case was set for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge. In the meantime, FFCR's Advocacy Manager stayed in contact with the case management and lead agencies to ensure that the required appointments and necessary adoption reviews were scheduled.

Mission accomplished! Several weeks after the CRP review, at the Post Judicial Review hearing, the agency reported that an ARC hearing date had been set and that the children were scheduled for their necessary services.

DEVELOPING “LIFE SKILLS”

All children and youth, regardless of their age, deserve a lifelong family, safety and stability. However, about 26,000 youth “age out” of the U.S. foster care system every year upon turning 18. Many are unprepared for living independently and often do not have even one stable adult in their corner. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, “an average of 1 out of every 4 youth in foster care will become homeless within 4 years of aging out of foster care.”³

During FY 2021-22, the CRP reviewed the cases of 38 youth ages of 13-17. Even though FFCR works tirelessly to ensure that every child has been connected to a lifelong family before turning 18, the CRP also must ensure that youth are provided the tools and resources to prepare for and successfully transition to adulthood. The CRP employs a specific set of questions designed to help the panel assess the youth’s preparation for the transition to adulthood. The questions cover educational and/or careers plans, resume building, financial preparation, plans for housing after turning 18, employment preparation, access to food and basic resources, and more.

All children 13 and older in Miami’s foster care system must be provided the Ansell Casey Life Skills assessment to identify the behaviors and competencies youth need to achieve their long-term goals.⁴ After completing the assessment, the case manager, Guardian ad Litem if assigned, caregiver, and other adults involved in their care are expected to work with the youth to develop an Annual Plan that incorporates a set of goals based on the youth’s life skills assessment scores. During CRP reviews, the panel inquires about the completion of the assessment and whether the youth is actively working towards making progress in their areas of need in a timely manner. The panel further determines what additional support and resources each youth needs to accomplish his or her goals.

| | Has | Does not have | Case manager did not know |
|-----------------------|-----|---------------|---------------------------|
| Florida ID | 25% | 67% | 8% |
| Social Security Card* | 48% | 46% | 6% |
| Birth Certificate | 80% | 17% | 3% |
| Medicaid Card | 57% | 40% | 3% |

**1 child was not eligible for a social security card or Medicaid card.*

The CRP also ensures that 15-17 year-olds have the important documents needed to apply for a job, obtain a driver’s license and/or access benefits. For 16-17 years old youth at risk of aging out of foster care, the panel assesses whether they have a viable plan for transitioning from foster care along with access to critical information, services and supports as they approach their 18th birthday. During FY 2021-22, only three (3) of the 10 seventeen-year-olds reviewed by the CRP had a formal transition plan.

³ National Foster Youth Institute: <https://nfyi.org/issues/homelessness/>

⁴ Casey Life Skills Assessment: <https://www.casey.org/casey-life-skills/>

| | Yes | No | Unknown by Case Manager | No longer Applicable |
|---|-----|-----|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Was youth provided information about Post-Secondary Educational Support Services (PESS) | 55% | 27% | 0% | 18% |
| Was youth informed about Extended Foster Care | 59% | 27% | 0% | 14% |
| Did youth complete Financial Literacy training* | 6% | 93% | 0% | 0% |
| Does youth have has a Bank Account* | 20% | 80% | 0% | 0% |
| Does youth have a driver's license or permit* | 20% | 80% | 0% | 0% |
| Is youth employed* | 27% | 73% | 0% | 0% |
| If not employed, does youth wish to be employed* | 55% | 36% | 9% | 0% |

* Information only sought from 16-17 year-olds

Transition to Extended Foster Care

- 50% were reportedly planning to transition to Extended Foster Care upon turning 18
- 20% of the youth were undecided about whether or not to enter Extended Foster Care
- 3 youth did not plan to enter Extended Foster Care

Post Foster Care Living Arrangements

- 3 youth did not know where they would live once they transitioned from foster care
- 30% planned to live in their current foster home or new foster home upon entering Extended Foster Care
- One youth planned to return to his biological parent(s)
- One youth planned to join the U.S. Military

Employment Preparation

- 40% had a resume
- 50% had some work experience

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

During FY 2021-22, the CRP reviewed the cases of 101 young adults ages 18 to 21 years old who aged out of foster care and elected to participate in the state's Extended Foster Care program. They must be enrolled in school or employed part-time and they must reside in a living arrangement approved by the lead community-based care agency. A young adult may also qualify for the program if they are participating in an activity that eliminates barriers to attending school or gaining employment. If a young adult is determined to have a disability that prohibits them from engaging in any of these qualifying activities, they may partake in the EFC program until age 22.

As part of the Extended Foster Care program, young adults receive assistance with Medicaid, allotted monthly stipends for daily living expenses, assistance with applying for food stamps or food stipend if

necessary, bus card, and rental expenses. They also receive case management and access to the Nurse Case Management department, Education Specialist, and Housing Coordinator at the lead child welfare agency. The CRP ensures that young adults are aware of these resources and know how to access them. A number of young adults who are reviewed by the CRP do not have a consistent adult in their lives other than their case manager. They often need extra guidance and support to learn how to access the many benefits and services available to them.

The CRP invites young adults to participate in their CRP hearings by contacting them in advance and ensuring they understand the review process, the role of the CRP and the value of their participation. Forty-five percent of the young adults whose cases were reviewed by the CRP during FY 2021-22 participated in their CRP hearings. At the hearing, panel members and FFCR's Review Specialists ensure that each young adult is provided ample opportunity to tell the panel how they are doing, share their concerns and request assistance. The panel also uses this opportunity to commend young adults for their hard work in school and/or at their job and for efforts they are making to develop life skills as they transition to adulthood.

CARLOS

Carlos entered foster care when he was 14 years old and had experienced instability during his three years in the system. His case was reviewed for the first time by the CRP when he was only a few months shy of his 18th birthday.

During the review hearing, the panel discovered that Carlos had not received a diagnostic medical procedure recommended more than six months earlier. Six months before the review, Carlos had expressed a desire to re-engage in therapy, but he was still waiting for a therapist to be assigned. He did not have his Medicaid or Social Security cards which he would need to secure medical and mental health services, among other things, once he turned 18. Carlos shared that he was working on his high school diploma, but he was unsure if he was on track to graduate on time. On top of all of this, he also needed his wisdom teeth extracted.

Carlos' upcoming 18th birthday created extreme urgency, and FFCR set this case for Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge. The agency jumped into action and by the time of the court hearing, they had scheduled Carlos' medical and dental procedures, requested duplicates of his legal documents, set a meeting with Carlos' school counselor to discuss what he needed to do to graduate on time and linked him with a community provider, Educate Tomorrow, who would assist his pursuit of post-secondary education after he graduated.

The CRP's Findings & Recommendations report was provided to Carlos' new Extended Foster Care case manager, and the Court ordered the agency to follow up on the remaining issues, including connecting Carlos with a therapist for young adults. FFCR will continue to review Carlos' case while he remains in Extended Foster Care to ensure he receives all of the support and assistance he needs to improve his well-being and successfully pursue his goals.

Two of FFCR's long-time team members are particularly well-versed in the laws, policies and practices affecting older youth and young adults in the child welfare system. Their unique expertise enhances FFCR's ability to effectively serve older youth and young adults in foster care. Our Advocacy Manager, a seasoned attorney, serves on the statewide Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC) that is empowered by Florida Statute 409.1451(7) to make recommendations "concerning the implementation

and operation of the independent living transition services.” To that end, the ILSAC submits an annual report to the Florida Legislature and the Department of Children and Families assessing the status of services provided to youth in Florida’s foster care system, highlighting successes and proposing system improvements. FFCR’s Training and Engagement Manager, also an experienced attorney, works closely with youth in Florida’s foster care system as a volunteer adult mentor for Florida Youth SHINE’s Miami Chapter – a youth-run, peer-driven organization advocating to change the culture of Florida’s child welfare system and improve outcomes for their peers in foster care.

Housing

Seventy-two percent (72%) 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 included:

- APD home (17%)
- Own apartment or an apartment/home with roommate(s) (3%)
- College campus housing (1 young adult)
- Armed forces (2)
- Shelter (1)
- Relatives (3)

Education

Seventy of the 101 young adults reviewed were in school:

- 14% were enrolled in post-secondary or vocational programs
- 24% were studying for a GED
- 45% were working towards a high school diploma
- 14% were enrolled in a high school completion/credit recovery program
- 3% enrolled in an ESOL / English proficiency program

Employment

- 38% of the young adults were employed at the time of their review
- 24% of those employed had full-time employment
- 29% of all young adults reviewed reported having no work experience

PATTY

Patty entered foster care when she was 8 years old. Due to a diagnosis of intellectual disability and developmental delays, she began receiving services from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) at age 13. APD provides for her home and services. As part of FFCR’s young adult outreach and engagement efforts, if a young adult is receiving services through APD, the CRP contacts the young adult’s plenary guardian, if one is assigned, as well as any members of the APD home who may be able to provide relevant information to the panel during the review hearing. If a young adult is not able to independently access a phone or email, the CRP engages with his or her caregivers, guardians and foster family members. In Patty’s case, her plenary guardian was able to facilitate his

participation in the review hearing. During the review, Patty shared that she would like to have a permanent adult connection and wanted to re-establish contact with her biological family.

FFCR set a Post Judicial Review to ensure the judge was aware of Patty's wishes. During the hearing, the plenary guardian reported that she was working on identifying Patty's relatives, whom she located out of state. To help identify potential family members, the judge offered to provide parts of the file to the parties and the CRP provided past reports from hearings years prior.

FFCR's Advocacy Manager connected with the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) to explore how Patty could also continue the relationship with her previous GAL (from when she was a minor) as another source of support. The court issued an order to allow the GAL to visit and contact Patty freely.

MAINTAINING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

"A growing body of literature supports the critical role of siblings in helping children in out-of-home care maintain a sense of continuity with family."⁵ 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. When reviewing any children with siblings, and especially large sibling groups, panel members always inquire about the frequency, duration, and quality of sibling visitation. Due to case manager shortages, transportation issues, complicated sibling dynamics and a lack of foster homes, consistent sibling visitation is often a challenge; however, Florida Statute 39.4024 requires that efforts be made to place siblings together and maintain contact. Unfortunately, when children are moved from one foster home to another, sibling relationships are further affected. If the CRP determines that sibling visits are not occurring or are inconsistent, the panel members ask a series of questions to pinpoint the barriers and brainstorm creative ways to ensure siblings see each other and stay connected.

SALLY AND JACK

Sally and Jack were removed from their parents due to allegations of substance misuse. Their parents' rights were terminated and Sally went to live with her relative who planned to adopt her; however, she was unable to care for Sally's brother, Jack, and he remained in foster care. During the children's review hearing, the panel discovered that there was family in Chicago interested in adopting Jack. The panel recommended that the progress of the home study in Chicago be closely monitored and also that Jack should begin to have virtual visits with the family in Chicago. The panel also learned that the siblings had not visited with each other for several months.

FFCR set a Post Judicial Review hearing before the Court to address these issues. At the hearing, the case manager reported that the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) process, which ensures oversight and services to children who are placed across state lines, was underway. The Court set regular status hearings regarding progress with the ICPC to ensure that there were no delays with the process. The Court also ordered the agency to ensure the siblings visited every weekend and that Jack be allowed to spend Saturdays with his sister at their grandmother's home. Jack also began virtual visits with his family in Chicago who will hopefully become his forever family.

⁵ James S, Monn AR, Palinkas LA, Leslie LK. *Maintaining Sibling Relationships for Children in Foster and Adoptive Placements*. Child Youth Serv Rev. 2008 Jan;30(1):90-106. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.07.001. PMID: 19122749; PMCID: PMC2409199.

SUMMARY

The Judicial Review is one of the most important court hearings in the dependency process. It serves as a critical “check point” every six months to conduct a 360° analysis of the child and family’s progress towards their well-being and permanency goals. Every Citizen Review Panel Program staff member and volunteer approaches their work fully aware of the magnitude of their responsibilities and the potential transformational impact of the review process.

The CRP advances the safety, stability and success of children and young adults in Miami’s foster care system by identifying and addressing unmet needs, removing barriers to permanency, ensuring access to critical services and advocating for compliance with orders issued by the court through the CRP process. We ensure that every party and participant in the CRP process has an opportunity to have their voice heard and equal access to resources. The CRP provides a venue for youth and caregivers to share their challenges and concerns as well as their hopes and dreams.

To thrive, we all need family (or family-like) relationships and a network of reliable and consistent adult support. The CRP Program strives to create a world in which every child has the opportunity to grow up in a family, surrounded by loving and nurturing adults who will be there through the good times and the bad. The staff, board and volunteers of Florida Foster Care Review are inspired and humbled by this challenging and uplifting work, and we are grateful to be entrusted with such a noble task.