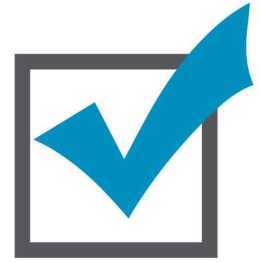


FLORIDA FOSTER CARE REVIEW



CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT



**FISCAL YEAR
2022 - 2023**

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 care 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 2022-23 (July 1, 2022 - June 30, 2023), FFCR's CRP Program conducted **403 review hearings for 254 children and young adults** under the jurisdiction of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit's juvenile division.

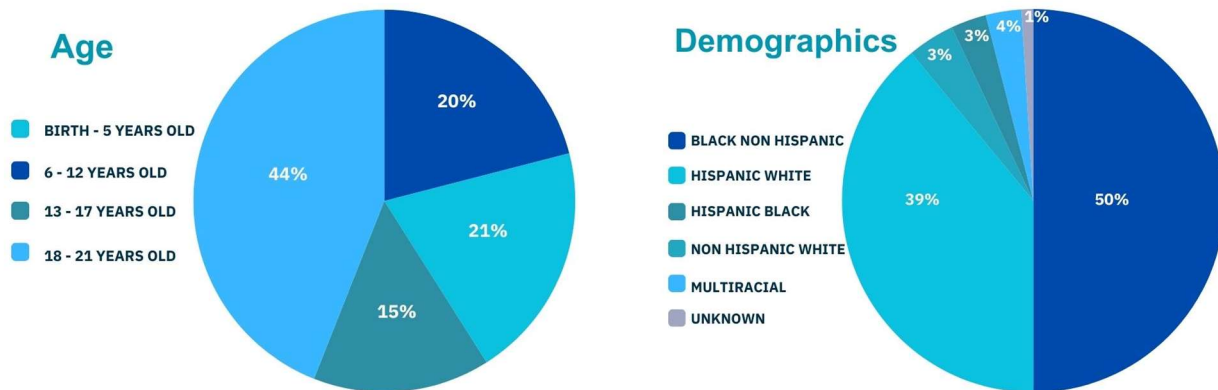
- The program identified **3,007 unmet needs** and issued recommended orders to address them.
- FFCR's targeted **post review advocacy efforts helped resolve 76% of the issues** identified by the CRP, ensuring that children, young adults and their families received the resources, services and support they need.
- The CRP program's **outreach and engagement** efforts promoted participation by caregivers and young adults in their CRP hearings, enhancing the quality and impact of the reviews.
- FFCR's 63 dedicated volunteers **donated 2,132 hours valued at just over \$180,000** 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 2022-23. 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

The CRP Program reviewed approximately 11% of the total number of children and young adults who were under the dependency court's jurisdiction between July 1, 2022 and June 30, 2023. Of the 254 children and young adults reviewed, 54% were boys/young men and 46% were girls/young women.



PERMANENCY PLAN	YEARS IN CARE				CHILDREN (0-17)
	<1	1-2	3-4	5+	
Adoption	1	51	36	23	111
Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement (APPLA)	1	0	2	3	6
Maintain & Strengthen	2	3	4	0	9
Permanent Guardianship	1	1	1	0	3
Reunification	6	7	1	0	14
TOTAL	11	62	44	26	143

HOME ENVIRONMENT/CAREGIVER	CHILDREN
Foster Home	67
Group Home	2
Group Shelter	1
Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) Home	16
Relative/Non-Relative	67
Institutional/Therapeutic	5
Independent Living / Transitional Housing (ages 18-22)	81
With Parent(s)	9
Incarcerated/Other	6
TOTAL	254

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

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 Guardian ad Litem Program 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 advocates can utilize the CRP review process. During fiscal year 2022-23, juvenile court judges made 258 referrals to the CRP. This is an increase from the 171 referrals made in FY 2021-2022, but a significant decrease from the 332 children referred during fiscal year 2020-21.

PREPARING FOR THE REVIEW

Prior to the actual review hearing, FFCR’s Review Specialists methodologically examine the many documents in the child’s dependency court file 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) the day before the hearing, and prior to each child’s review 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. 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 JEAN ¹

Twins John and Jean were removed from their parents when they were five years old. About two years later, their parents' rights were terminated. Soon after, the children were referred to the CRP for a review hearing. Initially, the children lived with relatives; however, the relatives were unable to adequately care for the twins, and they were moved to a foster family. Around the time they turned nine years old, a family located outside of Miami-Dade County had been approved to adopt the twins, and they went to live with this family while the adoption paperwork was being prepared and legal proceedings were being scheduled.

About one month after moving, the CRP conducted a review hearing. During the hearing, the panel discovered that both children needed dental extractions, and they had run out of their prescribed psychotropic medications. However, due to the out-of-county move, they did not have assigned medical or psychiatric doctors, and had not received these critical medical and mental health services.

The CRP immediately set these matters for a Post Judicial Review hearing and FFCR's Advocacy Manager remained in contact with the case manager to provide support and to ensure that the medical services and medications were received by the children. By the time the Post Judicial Review occurred a few weeks after the CRP hearing, the children had undergone several dental treatments and both had been linked to a local psychiatrist for new evaluations and medication management.

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.

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.

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 2022-23, FFCR engaged in Post Review Advocacy efforts 295 times, including 169 Post Judicial Review Hearings, 8 Case Alerts, and 118 Post Review Advocacy follow ups aimed at resolving critical safety issues, child/family needs and overall barriers to permanency. Post Review Advocacy efforts are also captured within our internal database so Review Specialists, in preparation for the CRP hearing, may review the most up-to-date information, assess progress made, and then follow up as necessary during the next CRP review hearing.

NATALIE AND DAVID

Natalie and David entered foster care at ages four years old and birth, respectively, due to their parents untreated substance abuse addiction. Sadly, their father passed away and their mother's rights were terminated a year into the case. The children lived with a foster family who hoped to adopt the children. Natalie was diagnosed with autism and presenting with behavioral issues at school. Moreover, as to permanency, the children had a grandmother in Georgia who had also expressed her desire to adopt them; however, the panel discovered that no one involved in the case had obtained the special court order required to initiate an out-of-state adoption-quality home study. This type of home study can take up to a year or more and should have been completed already. The CRP also learned the were not receiving the SSA benefits to which they may be entitled.

FFCR scheduled a Post Judicial Review hearing, and the judge issued the required order to initiate the out-of-state home study and, as required by law, appointed a “special needs attorney” for Natalie due to her diagnosis. The agency also reported that they had applied for SSA benefits, due to the death of the father, for both children, and a student support meeting had been scheduled for Natalie to begin the process for developing and implementing her Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which would ensure that she received special accommodations at school.

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. FFCR’s Outreach Assistant also calls each young adult and caregiver to confirm receipt of the email and answer any questions. Engaging caregivers and youth in CRP hearings helps our panels recommend more targeted, individualized orders to the court that more meaningfully impact the lives of the children and families we serve. Their participation is crucial and helps the panel obtain detailed and timely information about any unmet needs or concerns, and to more effectively center the hearing around the child or young adult. During FY 2022-23, FFCR’s outreach efforts resulted in the participation of caregivers in 51% of the CRP’s hearings of children birth to 18 years old and our engagement with young adults resulted in their participation in 46% of the CRP’s hearings.

DENNIS

When Dennis was three years old, his parents abandoned him. Since then, he has lived with the Garcias, who knew his parents, but are not licensed foster parents or relatives and resided outside Miami-Dade. FFCR’s Outreach Assistant invited the Garcias to Dennis’ CRP hearing and provided them with the information to participate via videoconference. As an undocumented immigrant, Dennis was not eligible for Medicaid. During the CRP hearing, Ms. Garcia shared that they were struggling with the cost of his medical care, and she expressed frustration with the many barriers caused by Dennis’ legal status. The Garcias did not know how to navigate the immigration system and were not receiving sufficient assistance from the case manager in their county. Further, Ms. Garcia expressed concerns about Dennis’ motor skills and speech development. She explained that he often tripped and she was worried he would seriously hurt himself. When she shared this with Dennis’ pediatrician her concerns were dismissed and he did not provide referrals for further evaluation.

The panel issued recommended orders to address each of these issues and set the case for a Post JR hearing before the judge to ensure the agency followed up with the CRP’s recommendations. By the time of the hearing, the case management agency had linked the Garcias to a local immigrant advocacy group who was helping them navigate Dennis’ immigration issues. The agency also helped the Garcias to identify providers in their area and offered to cover the costs. The Garcias immediately scheduled speech and physical therapy appointments.

By engaging Ms. Garcia in the CRP hearing and learning first-hand of her concerns about Dennis' development, the CRP Program ensured that his family had the resources and tools to support Dennis's health and well-being and to provide him with the stability and care he deserves.

TRAINING

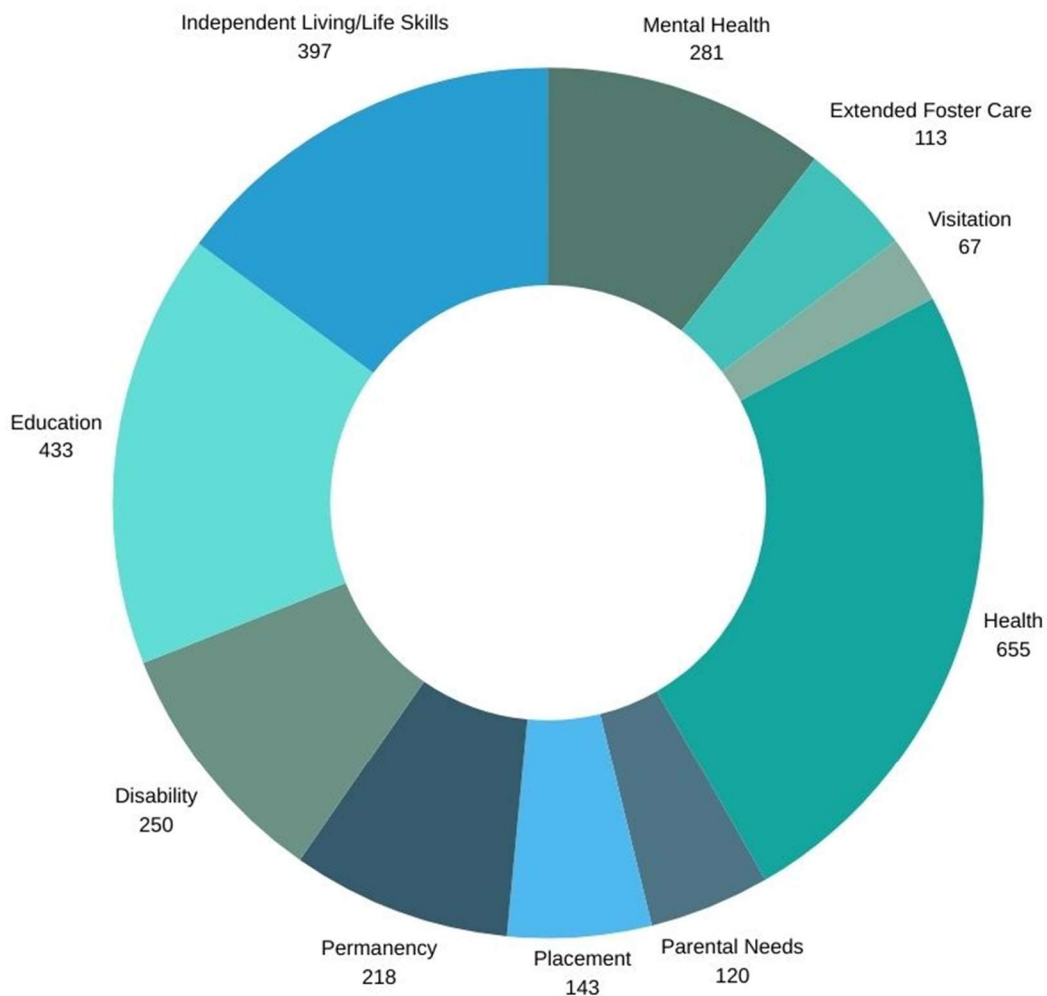
During FY 2022-23, FFCR facilitated and coordinated 101.5 hours of training and education across 39 sessions provided to our staff and volunteers. Additionally, FFCR's CRP team also vetted 30.5 hours of relevant training provided by community partners and offered these sessions to staff and/or volunteers. FFCR also trains other child welfare stakeholders including, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), GAL program attorneys, case managers as well as attorneys who represent parents and the Department of Children and Families.

FFCR's Advanced Training Institute (ATI), which started in 2018, is an opportunity for participants to hone their skills and to broaden their knowledge of trending issues and relevant matters pertaining to child welfare. ATI has covered topics such as youth and young adult engagement (with a youth voices panel) and transitioning youth programs, the adoption process, the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) and the role of an Attorney ad Litem. In the past few years FFCR's ATI has had a strong focus on race, equity, and inclusion in child welfare and other systems. Staff, volunteers, and community partners examined racial equity and its impact on infancy and early childhood well-being. ATI took a deeper dive into this realm as last year's participants explored unconscious bias, microaggressions, and intercultural communication.

FFCR's CRP team also plays an integral role in preparing the new case managers not only for hearings before the CRP but also in heightening their awareness of the power and importance of the Judicial Review Hearing. This tailored training involves the new case managers meeting with the FFCR team members in a small setting to review the legal highlights and goals of the Judicial Review. The new case managers then observe a live CRP hearing and meet with the CRP training and engagement manager to discuss their impressions and further explore essential components of delivering a meaningful Judicial Review.

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, and unaddressed academic challenges to the need for mentoring and a permanent family, the CRP recommended 3,007 orders in FY 2022-23. The chart below demonstrates the top 10 unmet needs identified and addressed by these orders.



COMPLIANCE WITH COURT ORDERS & OBLIGATIONS

During FY 2022-23, the CRP reviewed 14 children with a permanency goal of reunification and 9 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 23 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 makes a finding of “non-compliance” with services or visitation if a parent has not been engaged with a particular service or case plan task *and* it is in fact feasible for a parent to do so.

The CRP assessed the mother’s compliance with her case plan in 35 review hearings and assessed the father’s compliance with the case plan in 15 reviews. The panel found mothers substantially compliant in 20% of the reviews, partially compliant in 71% of the reviews, and in non-compliance with their case plans in 9% of the reviews. Fathers were determined by the panel to be substantially compliant in 47% of the reviews, partially compliant in 6% of the reviews, and in non-compliance in 47% of the reviews.

Meaningful and consistent visitation between parents and their children is a key driver of timely reunification. With this in mind, the CRP works to ensure children have access to see their parents, unless the court has restricted visitation.

The CRP is also required to determine the compliance of child welfare agencies with their court-ordered tasks and responsibilities. In fiscal year 2022-23, the case management agency/DCF was found in *compliance* with their obligations under the case plan in 91% of all reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel. The agency/DCF was found to be in *non-compliance* in less than 1% of the reviews and found in *partial compliance* with their obligations to the child and/or family in less than 9% of the reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel.

JOHNNY, GEORGIA & JANA JONES

At the time of their most recent CRP hearing, Johnny (12), Georgia (12) and Jana (14) Jones were in the process of being adopted by a non-relative with whom they had been living for 3 months. However, during the review, the panel uncovered a number of serious issues that raised significant concerns about the ability of their potential adoptive family to care for the children over the long-run. Two of the siblings had many unaddressed educational and health needs. Furthermore, the caregiver shared that he was not receiving non-relative caregiver funds and struggling financially. Aside from these and other issues that came up during the review hearing, the agency had not provided the CRP with sufficient documentation and information, which made it nearly impossible for the panel to fully assess the children’s progress, explore whether additional services were needed, and make recommendations related to the long-term needs of the children.

With the children’s adoption hanging in the balance, the CRP set a Post Judicial Review so the judge could more immediately address the many barriers to adoption. Ahead of the Post Judicial Review hearing, the case management agency had not made significant progress responding to the CRP’s recommendations. During the hearing, the judge issued specific orders addressing each of the CRP’s recommendations and set monthly status report hearings. By the first status hearing, the children had been assigned mentors, were referred

to tutoring, and scheduled for follow up medical appointments and evaluations. The agency also provided therapy reports and educational records. Finally, the children's caregiver had started receiving the necessary funds to be able to properly care for the children. Without the CRPs insightful recommendations, which were reinforced by the court, the Jones children would not be receiving the care they need and their pre-adoptive family would not be equipped to properly care for them.

Once a child has been reviewed by the CRP, at each subsequent CRP hearing, the panel assesses the agency's compliance with previous orders recommended by the CRP that were adopted by the court. In FY 2022-23, case management agencies complied with 76% of the orders recommended by the CRP program, which is consistent with the past several years. The CRP Program's robust Post Review Advocacy efforts were implemented in FY 2019-20, and resulted in a significant increase in compliance that has been sustained through our ongoing Post Review Advocacy throughout the past four years.

LINKING CHILDREN TO SPECIALIZED SERVICES

Many of the children and youth referred to the CRP have complex physical, cognitive and/or emotional disabilities or conditions. During FY 2022-23, 65 of the 254 children and young adults reviewed by the CRP were determined to have special medical needs, including 26 who had serious medical issues. The case manager was not able to report on the medical status of 10 of the children reviewed, which prompts the CRP to request medical documentation and recommend follow up, including ensuring all children complete an annual well-child exam and biannual dental exams. Based on the records reviewed and information provided during review hearings, the CRP found that a total of 46 children were not developmentally on target for their chronological age. Of these children, 24% (11) were not receiving services to address their developmental delays at the time of their review hearing.

A meticulous review of each child's records is even more critical for children with specialized needs and behavioral issues. Often, children's case files contain dozens of specialists' reports, extensive progress notes and multiple medical evaluations. FFCR ensures our staff and volunteers are equipped to make impactful recommendations for children with special needs. They are trained to understand common diagnoses and a multitude of treatments, services and interventions, such as individualized education plans, applied behavior therapy, therapeutic methods and best practices and psychotropic medication. FFCR's staff is also extremely knowledgeable about community resources and services that target specific needs.

ROBERT

When 5-year old Robert's case was first reviewed by the CRP, his grandmother was already in the process of adopting him. During the review hearing, she expressed that Robert's recent autism diagnosis and the fact that he was non-verbal was extremely concerning to her. She was primarily worried about her ability to meet his many special needs once the adoption was finalized and she no longer had assistance and support. Despite Robert's diagnosis, the panel was surprised to discover that he had not been appointed a Special

Needs Attorney ad Litem, which is required by statute for children with autism. They also learned that his grandmother had not applied for Social Security disability benefits or for benefits through the Agency for Persons with Disability (APD). Most concerning, was the realization that Robert was not receiving therapeutic services from an Applied Behavior Analyst (ABA) therapist, which is often essential for children with autism. His grandmother believed that Robert would significantly benefit from this intervention and hoped it would help him learn to communicate.

The panel addressed each of these issues in its Findings & Recommendations report and set a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge to resolve these time-sensitive matters. During the hearing, the judge appointed an Attorney ad Litem to advocate on Robert's behalf. In the time between the CRP review and the court hearing, the agency had assisted the grandmother with the SSI benefits application and had referred her to the Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) to begin the process of determining Robert's eligibility for the program, which would cover the long-term costs of services needed due to his disabilities. Lastly, the grandmother was also linked with ABA services, which would greatly assist her with understanding and addressing Robert's behaviors in a healthy and productive manner. By securing crucial therapeutic services *prior* to his adoption, the CRP ensured that both Robert and his grandmother were set up for long-term health, well-being and success.

Age Range	Developmentally on Target	Academic Achievement of C's and above
0-5	56%	N/A
6-12	80%	90%
13-17	68%	70%

PAUL

Evaluating whether children are developmentally on target and assessing their educational progress are key components of CRP reviews. The CRP dedicates an entire portion of the review to education, and in preparation for this, the panel combs through dozens of educational records to carefully determine where a child may need assistance or whether previous recommendations may have been overlooked. Such was the case with Paul, who was 15 years old, residing in a foster home, and had been in care for over five years at the time of the CRP hearing. When the panel heard Paul's case, the panel learned that despite being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and a learning disability, Paul did not have an individualized education plan (IEP) or 504 plan in place to provide the accommodations he needs to succeed in school. This diagnosis might also qualify Paul for social security (SSI) disability benefits, but the agency had not explored these on Paul's behalf.

A psychological evaluation conducted eight months prior had recommended that Paul be placed in a special education setting, yet this had not been followed up on. Paul was

struggling in school and was not engaged in tutoring services. Paul’s mentor had stopped visiting him for some time and the case manager could not report why this occurred or when the mentor would resume visits. After completing post review advocacy efforts and setting the matter for a hearing, the agency reported that several educational meetings occurred with the school and the IEP process was well underway. Paul was assigned a new mentor, a new tutor, and the agency applied for disability benefits. By ensuring that children with learning disabilities and special needs receive appropriate accommodations and supports and that they are in the *correct* educational setting, the CRP changed the trajectory of Paul’s entire academic journey and put him on a more solid path to academic success and fulfillment.

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 At every review, the CRP determines whether children and young adults are living in a safe and appropriate environment that is meeting their needs and protecting them from abuse and neglect.

STEPHANIE

During Stephanie’s review hearing, one of the parties shared that Stephanie had told her that her caregiver was spanking and hitting to discipline her. The case manager reported that she had not seen any marks or bruises on Stephanie when she did a recent home visit, and it appeared that none of the parties had reported the behavior to the “Abuse Hotline” and there was no formal investigation of these serious allegations. Concerned about the child’s safety, the CRP issued a Case Alert immediately notifying the Court and all parties of the allegations made during the review hearing. A CRP Case Alert is a memorandum to the Court, parties and child welfare agency that is typically issued within 24 hours or less detailing any safety issues alleged during the CRP hearing. FFCR also proactively recommended convening a multidisciplinary team to discuss the safety and appropriateness of Stephanie’s home environment and any services to help her caregiver learn safe ways to set boundaries and consequences for Stephanie.

Having received training about the many therapeutic resources and modalities for this type of situation, the panel recommended exploring Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®), an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that uses empowering and connecting techniques to assist children and their caregivers. Because Stephanie was also experiencing challenges at school, the panel recommended re-evaluating the accommodations required by her Individualized Education Plan (IEP), exploring individual or behavioral therapy, and identifying a mentor.

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

In addition to issuing a Case Alert, FFCR set the case for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the court to ensure that the panel's recommendations had been followed. At that hearing, the agency reported they had completed a multidisciplinary team meeting and the family had been referred to various services, including TBRI. Stephanie had been referred to a therapist and a mentor, and her GAL and aunt met with the school to adjust her IEP. Happily, her behaviors had improved and her caregivers were implementing the coping and disciplinary strategies they were learning through TBRI. With the safety concerns quickly and effectively resolved, and quality therapeutic interventions underway, Stephanie was back on the path to legal permanency.

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. In contrast, 37% percent of FFCR's volunteers have served six or more years on our monthly citizen review panels with nearly 20% serving between 10 and 33 years. FFCR's leadership has been unusually stable. Our Program Director and Assistant Director have both been with the organization for 15 years and our Executive Director is in her 12th year with FFCR and her 26th year in the field. Two of the three CRP Program managers are attorneys and all have been with FFCR 5 or more years. The child welfare careers of the CRP Program Manager, Training & Engagement Manager and Advocacy Manager span a total of 51 years. The program's support team has also been a source of consistency. Last year, the CRP Program & Volunteer Coordinator celebrated her 26th year with FFCR, and our Program Specialist has been with FFCR for a decade. Our current team of five Review Specialists comes from various areas of expertise within child welfare, including senior case management roles, guardian ad litem program advocates, early development and adoption specialists.

The CRP 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.

ZACK

Zack was 18 years old at the time of his recent CRP hearing. He had been in foster care for nearly a decade and, was not adopted by the time he turned 18. He chose to participate in the Extended Foster Care Program, which provides young adults with life skills, financial benefits, and educational, medical, and case management support into adulthood. Upon thorough review of Zack's past CRP reports and the numerous records in his court file, CRP

staff noticed that he had been diagnosed with a severe learning disability when he was 10 years old and, in fact, had been determined eligible for assistance through the Agency for Persons with Disability (APD) as a minor. Moreover, thousands of dollars of SSI benefits had been returned to the Social Security office because his payee information had not been updated when he turned 18. Zack was a junior in High School and was failing his classes. During Zack's CRP hearing, the Transitioning Youth Specialist (TYS) reported that she was not aware of Zack qualifying for APD assistance.

The CRP requested a Post Judicial Review Hearing before the judge to ensure that these time-sensitive matters were handled expediently and that Zack had immediate access to disability benefits and APD funding for services should he need them for assistance with his educational training and other life skills. With this knowledge, Zack's foster parent went with him to the Social Security office, where his benefits were reinstated. Zack also obtained a letter confirming his APD eligibility. Moreover, he completed an educational review, his IEP was renewed and he was starting to be more successful at school. Finally, the judge appointed an Attorney ad Litem to make sure Zack had someone advocating for him and to explore whether he would benefit from a plenary guardian who would be responsible for ensuring he was well cared for and that Zack's finances were being properly managed, especially once he ages out of Extended Foster Care when he turns 22.

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 2022-23, the CRP reviewed the cases of 39 youth ages 13-17 who were eligible for independent living services. 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 an assessment to identify the behaviors and competencies youth need to achieve their long-term goals. After completing the assessment, the case manager, Guardian ad Litem if assigned, caregiver, and other adults involved in

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

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.

<i>Note: 1 child was not eligible for a social security card or Medicaid card.</i>			
	Has	Does not have	Case manager did not know
Florida ID	29%	68%	3%
Social Security Card*	59%	38%	3%
Birth Certificate	79%	18%	3%
Medicaid Card	59%	38%	3%

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 2022-23, only five (5) of the eight (8) seventeen-year-olds reviewed by the CRP had a formal transition plan.

	Yes	No	Unknown by Case Manager	No longer Applicable
Was youth provided information about Post-Secondary Educational Support Services (PESS)*	60%	13%	7%	20%
Was youth informed about Extended Foster Care*	73%	7%	0%	20%
Did youth complete Financial Literacy training*	50%	43%	0%	7%
Does youth have a Bank Account*	20%	67%	0%	13%
Does youth have a driver's license or permit*	13%	67%	0%	20%
Is youth employed*	7%	73%	0%	20%
If not employed, does youth wish to be employed*	45%	55%	0%	0%

*Responses from 16-17 year-olds

Transition to Extended Foster Care

- 88% were reportedly planning to transition to Extended Foster Care upon turning 18 – a notable increase from 50% last fiscal year
- 13% of the youth were undecided about whether or not to enter Extended Foster Care

Post Foster Care Living Arrangements

- 50% of youth ages 17 or older did not know where they would live once they transitioned from foster care
- 50% of youth ages 17 or older planned to live in their current foster home or new foster home upon entering Extended Foster Care

Employment Preparation

- Only one youth had a resume
- 38% had some work experience

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

During FY 2022-23, the CRP reviewed the cases of 112 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 Transitioning Youth Specialist (TYS). 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-six percent of the young adults whose cases were reviewed by the CRP during FY 2022-23 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.

SERGIO

Sergio, now 19 years old, came into the foster care system when he was 15 after being abandoned at a residential treatment center. During his CRP hearing he told the panel members that he was struggling with the side effects of his psychotropic medication. He explained that he did not feel connected to his treating psychiatrist and wanted to explore other providers so he could openly express how the medication was making him feel. Sergio also let the panel members know that although he had been appointed an Attorney ad Litem as a minor, he had lost contact with this attorney and needed a new one. The CRP set this

matter before the Court to address these issues and to ensure Sergio's had the opportunity to directly express his concerns to the judge.

During the Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge, Sergio reiterated his concerns. The Court appointed a new attorney who could better connect with Sergio, and he was connected with a new psychiatrist. Although it is often difficult for young adults to self-advocate in the courtroom, the CRP provides young adults with a collaborative and non-threatening forum where they can ask questions and raise their concerns.

The CRP ensures that young adults' voices are heard by personally inviting them to their judicial reviews, via e-mail and telephone, and purposefully and thoroughly engaging them during the review hearings. Young adult engagement is crucial because only by hearing directly from the young adult can we best assess their needs and develop appropriate, detailed recommendations.

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 young adults in Florida's foster care system, highlighting successes and proposing system improvements. FFCR's Training and Engagement Manager, also an 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-nine percent (79%) of the 112 young adults in Extended Foster Care who were reviewed by the CRP were living in "transitional housing" (alone or with a roommate, who is often another youth in Extended Foster Care) at the time of their review. Four (4) young adults were not in an "approved living arrangement" and the remaining 19 young adults had the following living arrangements:

- APD home (15)
- Regular foster home (2)
- Parent(s) (1) or Relatives (1)

Education

Eighty-two of the 112 young adults were enrolled in an educational setting at the time of their review:

- 21% were enrolled in post-secondary or vocational programs
- 21% were studying for a GED
- 53% were working towards a high school diploma
- 5% were enrolled in a high school completion/credit recovery program

Employment

- 38% of the young adults able to work were employed at the time of their review
- 33% of those employed had full-time employment
- 24% of all young adults reviewed who were able to work reported having no work experience

SALLY

Sally, a 20-year-old young adult in Extended Foster Care, had been abandoned by her parents when she was 17. During her CRP hearing, she expressed feeling overwhelmed and concerned about her mental health. Sally shared that she had wanted to participate in therapy for months, but had experienced issues with past therapist who were either not responsive or with whom she had difficulty building rapport. Sally was also struggling in school and was concerned that she may have a learning disability. She had tried to obtain tutoring services, but her efforts were not successful.

FFCR's CRP Advocacy Manager contacted the case management agency and alerted them to Sally's issues so services could be expedited and Sally could quickly begin receiving educational and mental health support. Soon after the review hearing, Sally had a new therapy provider and was engaged in the intake process. Additionally, she was connected with her school counselor who was able to assist Sally in exploring mental health services as well as tutoring within her school. Although mental health is often a difficult subject to discuss with young adults, the CRP's detailed preparation and open-ended questions enable panel members and staff to effectively navigate this subject matter respecting each young adults' autonomy while also identifying and addressing their needs.

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."⁴ 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.

⁴ 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 and provides a 360° analysis of the child and family’s progress towards their safety, well-being and permanency goals. By identifying and addressing unmet needs, removing barriers to permanency, ensuring access to critical services and assessing compliance with court orders, the CRP Program facilitates progress towards critical milestones. In addition, the CRP process provides an essential venue for youth, parents and caregivers to share their challenges and concerns as well as their hopes and dreams.

Ultimately, the CRP Program works to ensure that every child we serve has the opportunity to grow up in a family, surrounded by a network of nurturing adults who will provide unconditional love and support. 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 our many partners and supporters for entrusting us with this critical mission.