



Florida Youth SHINE History through Achievements

FYS is a youth run, youth driven organization with representation from across the state. Membership is open to young adults between the ages of 18 and 27. FYS is supported and advised by caring adults, some of whom are themselves foster care alumni.

Below is a summary of the history of Florida Youth SHINE

2005

December 2005 FYS held its inaugural meeting in Deerfield Beach, Florida. The meeting included a weekend filled with connections and trainings. The young adults looked at the possibilities of forming a youth driven advocacy group. They explored common experiences, good and bad, and the value of uniting to improve foster care for others. The nationally acclaimed group, California Youth Connection, facilitated the meeting. Sun Sentinel Editorial Writer Doug Lyons spoke, explaining to the young adults that their voices are important in public debate over children's issues.

2006

February 2006 Youth planned the next meeting, again held in Deerfield Beach. Members of the California Youth Connection attended. The young adults explored the possibilities of uniting around a common purpose, mission, values, commitment and much more. Judge Sarah Zabel helped facilitate some of the discussion. Representative Marco Rubio, then Speaker Designate of the Florida House of Representatives, met with the youth for three hours learning about their experiences and ideas for improving foster care. He was so impressed; he invited them to share their stories and ideas with the Legislature in Tallahassee.

March/April 2006 Youth traveled to Tallahassee seeking to educate legislators about the needs of abused, abandoned and neglected children. The youth participated in a number of skill development sessions, reviewed all pending bills, learned how to write and speak to the legislature, created speaking points, and addressed legislators over the next two days. They discussed the problems children and youth experience in obtaining health care and the need to extend Medicaid to transitioning youth; along with the need to develop housing options including extending the time they could continue to live in foster homes and removing disability of non-age to enable youth to enter into leases for housing when youth turn 18 and leave care. The youth explained the need for improvements in laws governing the Independent Living program. A critical part of their work was highlighting the importance of Guardians ad Litem and Attorneys ad Litem in protecting the children in care and encouraging the Legislature to provide increased funding for GAL's and AAL's and the Independent Living Program.

July 2006 FYS met to review what it had accomplished and look at what it wanted to do next. As the organization needed a governance structure, youth invited experts from the local office of



Holland and Knight to help them learn how to run and govern themselves as a corporation. Other training included public policy development from Government Affairs Consultant Missy Timmins. The group also decided on the issues that they wanted to next address, including more training and the need for better implementation of existing laws.

2006/2007 Two members of FYS, Marcus Ward and Kim Foster, were invited to join the Florida Team participating in the National Governor's Association Public Policy Academy on Transitioning Youth. They attended meetings by phone and in person, regarding policy, practices and laws. A Report was produced documenting that Florida's laws were now improved, but that implementation remains a problem.

2006/2007 Youth chose and supported members who appeared at the first statewide Children's Summit. Youth presented information at the Annual Meeting of the Neighborhood Lending Partnerships. Youth SHINE members used their experiences while in care to explain their recommendations for systemic improvement (strategic sharing).

2007

February 2007 Florida Youth SHINE members met to prepare for public policy work in Tallahassee.

March/April 2007 FYS met in Tallahassee. FYS participated in Children's Week. Activities ranged from setting up tables to participating in the "Legislative Listening Session," which was recorded and broadcasted on Florida Public Radio. The youth testified in Tallahassee to legislative committees and spoke with the press. They met with the newly appointed DCF Secretary, Bob Butterworth, and others from DCF, starting what has become an excellent working partnership. They also explained the pros and cons of adoption to Jim Kallinger, the Governor's newly appointed chief child advocate and head of the Office of Adoption and Child Abuse Prevention. They participated in skill training including public speaking and strategies for increasing the impact of their message. The group reviewed and took positions on pending legislation. FYS youth consulted with Speaker Marco Rubio, and made new acquaintances with legislators. Three of the four bills that included ideas from the young adults passed the legislature and were signed into law by Governor Crist. Those 3 bills include:

1. Independent Living Bill (SB 2114) impacted several existing laws. They include Medicaid coverage to all youth aging out of care to age 21, new means for youth to open bank accounts and obtain driver's licenses and expanded eligibility for the Road To Independence Program to youth who were adopted or placed into permanent guardianship after the age of 16
2. Keeping Children Safe Act (FL Statute 39.0139) protects youth from unsupervised visits with parents or caregivers accused of sexually abusing them
3. Children and Youth Cabinet Act (FL Statute 402.56) bringing together the head of every state department touching the lives of children with a mandate to hold public



meetings and create improved and child focused public policy for children and youth.

The fourth bill, a foster care “Bill of Rights” did not pass in the 2007 legislative session and may take years to become law. The “Bill of Rights” legislation collects the rights of children and youth in one place and mandates its distribution to all children in the dependency system. After the legislative session, FYS met again with Secretary Butterworth and staff and asked if DCF would publish a bill of rights in a youth friendly format and ensure its’ implementation. The Secretary agreed and the youth assisted DCF in the publication by making specific suggestions to create a user friendly pamphlet. Secretary Butterworth then published a document, called **“Rights and Expectations for Children and Youth in Shelter or Foster Care,”** and distributed it across the state.

The members learned that there is more than one way to accomplish a goal and DCF Secretary, Bob Butterworth kept his promise. Moreover, he had the document formatted into a pamphlet and a pocket-sized booklet that youth can carry with them .

April 2007 Members were asked by Secretary Butterworth to return to Tallahassee and make a presentation to approximately forty of DCF’s Senior Management. Youth selected “talking points” including: Accountability of DCF, CBCs, and foster parents; Letting the youth’s voices be heard; and Youth need to know their rights. Members also met with Governor Crist and asked for his support of their initiatives. Significant portions of the meeting were broadcast on The Florida Channel, which reports legislative coverage throughout the state. As a result of this advocacy, youth representatives were appointed to the Task Force on Child Protection. Rochelle Hooke was appointed the first FYS representative.

May 2007 Youth Representatives presented to Judge Leifman and Secretary Bob Butterworth at The Florida Bar Committee on Legal Needs of Children Forum on Mental Health. Discussed were issues of over prescription of psychotropic medications and exaggerated diagnoses. The Youth also presented on the problems surrounding rights to records. The testimony of the youth and their ideas along with recommendations made by Florida’s Children First were adopted by Judge Leifman in his report to the Supreme Court and the Legislature.

June 2007 The developing partnership with DCF Secretary Butterworth took another step when he asked FYS members to plan and train over 120 DCF and CBC staff, calling a statewide meeting for that purpose. Implementation Issues raised by members with DCF/ CBC’s included:

- Ensure normalcy and permanency for all youth
- Assure that youth attend staffings and court hearings
- Provide youth access to their personal records and documents
- Keep children safe
- Help youth know rights & responsibilities
- Support accountability, quality assurance and measurable outcomes for programs
- Improve licensing and inspect placements



Enforce/encourage sibling visitation
Make sure youth receive their allowance
Improve life skills training

Members introduced the powerful “Postcard Project” from Foster Care Alumni of America to Florida’s child welfare community. http://www.fostercarealumni.org/postcard_gallery_main.jsp Caseworkers, supervisors, managers and support staff were challenged to commit to making improvements in their programs, listen to youth, encourage them while in care, and do postcards for the project. Assistant Secretary, George Sheldon asked those present to submit their commitments to improvement and the artwork to DCF Secretary, Bob Butterworth

June 18, 2007 Florida Youth SHINE representatives presented to members of the Supreme Court Subcommittee on Transitioning Youth issues of the Families and Children in Court Committee. The core recommendations of the youth, engaging youth in making their own plans and appearing at their own court hearings, resonated with the sub-committee and were forwarded to the full committee where the youth were requested to attend.

Summer/Fall2007 Through meetings, training sessions and speakers, the group learned strategies to improve their work with all three 3 branches of government. Legislative, Judicial and Executive Branch strategies were addressed. During the summer, FYS worked with its adult supporters and allies providing the questions and reviewing responses to create a “hands on” guide to Florida’s Road to Independence Program for transitioning youth. DCF liked the work so much they 10,000 copies of **FAQ Frequently Asked Questions For Foster Youth Transitioning To Adulthood**, distributing it to every youth in the custody of the State of Florida.

October 2007 FYS spoke to the Florida Supreme Court Committee on Families and Children in the Courts regarding enforcing the law requiring that every youth have a case plan and participate in making the plan. They can also make sure the youth is in court and has access to their records. The youth also asked that judges conduct more thorough reviews before sending children to residential treatment programs and ordering administration of psychotropic medication. Additionally, they asked that the judges help youth understand their rights and responsibilities and ensure that all youth have GAL’s and attorneys if needed.

September 2007 Members led a workshop on independent living at the Dependency Court Improvement Summit, where seventy people attended in person and many others viewed the presentation via the web.

December 2007 FYS members met to review goals and issues for the upcoming year. Speakers included Representative Ari Porth, DCF’s Anthony Glover, Andrea Khoury from the American Bar Association, and others. FYS decided on new trainings as well as new chapters to begin in 2008. Clarence McKee (McKee Communications) worked with the group on effective speaking to the media. The members offered ideas for the ABA/FCF Bar-Youth Empowerment Project, including more “hands-on” information to assist youth, and better preparation for all, including the youth, in court proceedings.



2008

January 2008 The issues selected at the December 2007 meeting were presented in Tallahassee to the Committee on Healthy Families by representatives of Florida Youth SHINE. Educating the legislators in this key committee in advance of the Legislative Session helped inform their work in a significant way. Also in January, FYS Representatives presented to participants at the DCF Special Project on Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention. In addition FYS reached out to others working on their issues including the Independent Living Advisory Council, Youth Law Center, CBCs, Eckerd Family Foundation and others.

February 2008, Representatives of Florida Youth SHINE presented to the Children and Youth Cabinet and were interviewed for the ComCast NewsMakers program. They also attended the Fostering Success public policy seminar sponsored by Florida's Children First.

March/April 2008, Florida Youth SHINE went to Tallahassee for 5 days. During the first two days, the youth improved their skills and honed their messages on ideas and bills they chose to support. They also had presentations on the budget crisis from leaders of DCF, the CBCs, and the GAL Program. After the presentations, the youth chose to work on funding for Independent Living Programs and Protective Investigators. They were successful in those efforts. In addition, the youth participated in Children's Week activities, met with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Judge Nicki Clark, chair of the Families and Children in the Courts Steering Committee, met with the Secretary of DCF, House Speaker Marco Rubio and others about better implementation of programs and accountability issues. The young adults ended their work by doing a presentation and training to the leadership team for the re-organized attorneys for the Department of Children and Families on Youth being heard in the Dependency Court Room and wherever decisions are made.

June 2008, During this 3 day weekend meeting, FYS members updated their corporate governance documents, received training on the state budget for child welfare and reviewed their concerns needing to be further addressed within the foster care system. These issues will lead to training the community; advocating and providing technical advice and assistance. FYS worked on collaboration with DCF, judges, committees, and all advocates in the state of Florida to raise awareness and interagency connections for the upcoming year.

July 2008, The youth met by conference calls to finish their By-Laws and work on training materials and other issues. Then, when DCF Secretary Butterworth resigned, the youth spoke with him on the day of his resignation. The youth requested, and the Secretary helped arrange, a meeting with the Governor's Office regarding his replacement. The youth developed a list of traits they wished to see in the next Secretary and drafted a letter to the Governor to express their concerns and their ideas regarding the individual who could be the next Secretary.

August 2008, The youth met with representatives of the Governor's Office regarding a new DCF Secretary and made their case for continued youth involvement with DCF leadership. Members



asked the Governor's Deputy Chief of Staff Lori Rowe if the Governor would continue to hear from youth. Ms. Rowe assured us that the Governor valued our opinions and was impressed by the time we have volunteered to help improve DCF. She stated the Governor would require the new Secretary to meet with and listen to the youth beginning in the first week of his or her employment and continue the work with the youth throughout the Governor's tenure. We were reassured by the message she conveyed from the Governor and the interest she displayed in the issues we were working on.

August 15, 2008. The very morning the new Interim Secretary was appointed by the Governor, Secretary Butterworth held a teleconference with FYS Members and introduced the new Interim Secretary, George Sheldon. The youth were saddened to say good bye to their friend and mentor Secretary Butterworth, and welcomed their first choice of a replacement, Secretary Sheldon.

August 27-29, 2008. FYS Members attended the Dependency Summit where they were recognized by both the out-going and new Secretaries of DCF as important partners in the improvements in child protection and child well-being. The youth also presented two very successful workshops, attended circuit breakouts, and worked with the DCF Children's Legal Services Attorneys. In a private meeting with Secretary Butterworth, the youth made him an honorary member of Florida Youth SHINE.

September, 2008. FYS held its quarterly meeting. The group reached out to and included new youth who had expressed an interest in forming local chapters in Palm Beach, Seminole and Broward Counties. The youth provided an overview of FYS, its mission, vision, and work. All present adjourned to the local offices of DCF where Deputy Secretary Don Winstead and CFO Melissa Jaacks and staff answered their questions on the budget process and the projections for the future. The youth had a visit from new DCF Secretary George Sheldon, that was more like a reunion for older members and a surprise for the new members. The work ended with planning for the next meeting in December in Jacksonville.

October, 2008. Mike Dunlavy and Tammy Workman joined Andrea Moore and others in presenting on Transitioning Youth Issues to the United Way of Florida Board Meeting and meeting of Community Involvement Leaders.

November 2008. For the second year in a row, an FYS leader has been selected to participate in the Foster Care Alumni of America Leadership Institute in Washington DC. Last year, Tammy Workman participated. This year Mike Dunlavy was invited.

The FYS North East Florida Chapter is sponsored by Florida's Children First, United Way of North East Florida and the 4th Circuit GAL. Local attorneys and Jacksonville Area Legal Aid attorneys along with volunteers from the community have assisted. Three youth from the chapter regularly participate in the statewide group.

The FYS Miami Chapter is sponsored by Lawyers for Children America and funded in part by The Florida Bar Foundation and the Children's Trust. The Miami Chapter was the first formed



and longest existing chapter. Three youth from the chapter regularly participate in the statewide group.

The FYS Palm Beach Chapter is in the formative stages. The group has met twice and generated real excitement. Its founding has been supported by Florida’s Children First and Child and Family Connections. The Palm Beach Office of the Guardian Ad Litem Program has also been helping. One youth from the chapter has long been a statewide member and now will be joined by local representatives.

The FYS Seminole Chapter is “under construction.”

The FYS Leon County Chapter is “under construction.”

For questions and involvement contact:

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