

Florida's Children First, Inc.

Accomplishments of Note in 2006

Our goal is to advance children's rights consistent with their medical, educational and social needs. We use legislative and policy advocacy, executive branch monitoring, training and technical assistance to lawyers representing children, public awareness, recruiting of pro bono attorneys and filing of *amicus briefs* as strategies to improve child serving systems.

Legislative & Executive Advocacy:

- FCF worked to ensure representation for each child in the foster care system by advocating and helping secure an \$8 million dollars increase of funding for Florida's Guardian ad Litem Program and a pilot project in Pinellas County for public defenders to represent children in the dependency system.
- FCF was the primary proponent of improvements to programs to ensure that children who are aging out of the foster care system are appropriately trained with life skills, education, and workforce skills plus securing \$5 million additional dollars to fund the workload increase.
- FCF led the work to extend Medicaid coverage to 18 and 19 year olds aging out of the foster care system and allocation of over \$2.8 million new dollars to cover this extension.
- FCF secured a change in public policy now requiring that children in the child welfare system who have developmental disabilities receive priority for services from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.
- FCF participated in the Legislature's "Interim Project on Permanency" developing improvements to child welfare laws to secure either prompt re-unification with family when safe or another permanent home within time parameters consistent with Federal law.
- FCF also added a strong voice for additional funding of the child welfare system with an increase of \$20 million for community based care and an increase in the daily rate paid to foster parents to offset expenses of keeping children in their homes.
- FCF was publicly credited by legislative staffers and DCF officials with making the well-being of Florida's older foster children an important issue since 2004 and in 2006 was appointed to the National Governor's Association Public Policy Academy on Transitioning Youth.

Direct Service to Youth:

- FCF has organized a youth advocacy organization that the youth have named “Florida Youth SHINE”, which stands for Striving High for Independence and Empowerment. The youth will be trained to become their own advocates to ensure their voices are heard in the public policy debates regarding child welfare.

Leadership in Child Advocacy Community

- FCF continued its efforts to implement its previous successful work requiring the Department of Children and Families and the local school boards to work together to improve the education of Florida’s foster children.
- FCF provided training or technical assistance for attorneys, guardians ad litem, community based care staff, and others across the state, notably in Miami, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Panama City, Clearwater, and places in between.
- FCF is on the planning committee and a partner for the statewide Children’s Summit planned for October bringing together over 1500 advocates from across the State.
- FCF was invited to and participated in the 2006 Askew Institute on Child Welfare.
- FCF was invited for the second year to a national “think tank” for leaders in child welfare concerned with the education rights and progress of children caught in the foster care system working on federal and state-based issues.
- FCF continues to build partnerships and coalitions creating a constituency for the children of Florida.

Amicus Project

FCF represents children in matters of systemic improvement by filing *amicus briefs* in Florida's Supreme Court and its lower courts. Our amicus briefs aim to educate courts about the potential impact of their decisions on all of Florida's children and to highlight specific policy issues involved in the case. Additionally, where appropriate we follow up on our amicus positions by advocating for legislative and executive reforms.

Cases are referred to us by numerous child-serving organizations, including: Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County, Florida State University Children's Law Clinic, University of Miami Children and Youth Law Clinic, Office of the Statewide Guardian Ad Litem Program, Juvenile Law Center, Florida Legal Services, Statewide Advocacy Council, and private counsel. Cases include:

- Agency for Persons with Disabilities v. F.G., SC06-240 (Fla. 2006) (supporting the authority of trial court to subpoena employees of APD to testify in juvenile dependency proceedings)

- Woodard v. Jupiter Christian, et. al., SC05-1986 (Fla. 2006) (asserting that children's communications with health professionals and counselors should remain confidential)
- Russell. v. Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 929 So. 2d 601 (Fla 1st DCA 2006) (supporting the right of children in foster care to receive developmental services on a crisis basis) *We advocated for and obtained a statutory change to prioritize care for all children with developmental disabilities in the child welfare system.*
- F.L.M. v. DCF, 912 So. 2d 1264 (Fla. 4th DCA 2005) (asserting that the legal standard for determining whether child was abandoned for purposes of seeking lawful permanent resident status necessarily included orphaned children.) *We advocated for and obtained a statutory change to address this situation.*
- DCF v. T.R., 906 SO. 2d 335 (Fla. 4th DCA 2005) (supporting court order requiring state to provide subsidized independent living program to a youth in the dependency system but not in a foster care placement) *We advocated for and obtained a statutory change to address this situation.*
- DCF v. Florida Statewide Advocacy Council, 884 So.2d 1162 (Fla. 2nd DCA 2004) (supporting the right of an advocacy organization to obtain records of DCF clients in order to investigate quality of service provided)
- DCF v. CK, 851 So.2d 206 (Fla. 3d DCA 2003) (supporting dependency court's assertion of jurisdiction past the age of 18 to ensure provision of transitional services to former foster youth) *We advocated for and obtained a statutory change to clearly extend the courts' jurisdiction through age 19.*
- S.C. v. GAL, 845 So. 2d 953 (Fla. 4th DCA 2003) (supporting a child's right to assert the psychotherapist-patient privilege to prevent a court appointed GAL from having access to records covered by the privilege)
- A.Y. v. Regier, 2003-CA-159(2nd Jud. Cir. 2003) (supporting a child's right to retain independent counsel and counsel's right to access the child's confidential DCF records)