



In 2002, many advocates throughout Florida recognized the need for a statewide legal advocacy organization focused on at-risk children, especially children in foster care. We thought that if we combined our individual efforts, prioritized our efforts, and fought united battles, we could make a difference. We also thought that we could help give these children a voice in their own dependency case and in shaping Florida's child welfare system.

Today, Florida's Children First (FCF) has grown into an active Board of Directors, an Advisory Board of fifty, and committees with hundreds of members in local communities that are all dedicated to protecting the legal rights of children. We are proud of our professional staff with two of the state's best children's rights attorneys – our Executive Director, Christina L. Spudeas and Deputy Director, Robin L. Rosenberg; Geori Berman, Youth Coordinator for Florida Youth SHINE, and support staff that includes Laura Rebollo, Development Coordinator and Lia Paul, Administrative Assistant.

We have also helped to give birth to Florida Youth Shine, a group of current and former foster children who have organized local chapters and who communicate their recommendations for systemic change to Florida Department of Children & Family Services and the Florida Legislature. In 2009, FCF took the initiative to increase membership and organization of Florida Youth SHINE. Since that time, Florida Youth SHINE has increased from 3 Chapters to 14 Chapters across Florida, with youth from Miami to Pensacola teaching leadership skills and articulating the very important issues involving FYS.

We at FCF are proud of our Legislative accomplishments for systemic change including; creating, for the first time in Florida, the legislative right for children in dependency proceedings who have special needs to have compensated counsel; creating interagency cooperation between the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Department of Education (DOE) and shared responsibility for each child's success; removing barriers to school enrollment for foster children placed in new schools and providing foster youth with access to their own records which contain their own life story; the Normalcy Bill allowing children in foster care to participate in normal childhood activities without requiring background checks and fingerprinting of the adults who participate with the children; extending foster care to age 21; helping to establish a program to provide for learner's permits, driver's licenses and funding for insurance for children in foster care; extending the tuition waiver to all children who come from care until the age of 28, and so many more wonderful things that have helped children in the past and for years to come.

Our credibility and expertise, along with our great successes, are what cause FCF to be routinely called upon as a resource to educate legislators in the public policy arena. Every year during the legislative session, members of Florida Youth SHINE walk the halls of the state capitol to educate legislators on problems in the child welfare system and to put a face on issues affecting children in care.

We at FCF are especially proud of the publications that we have drafted and provided free of charge (visit our "Resources" section of this website to view all publications). Additionally, training lawyers throughout Florida and providing technical assistance to DCF for improvements to the quality child welfare system are among our highest priorities.

Finally, our highest priority is to give each child in the dependency system a quality advocate to help navigate the child through their own dependency case whether a Guardian ad Litem or an attorney, which includes protecting the funding of the GAL Program.

All our work would not be possible were it not for our grants, sponsors and supporters. Much of the work we do is through passionate volunteers who assist with pro bono legal representation and who raise funds to help FCF keep making a difference. The Florida Bar Foundation has been extraordinarily supportive and has helped us grow through the years through their generous, recurring grant. Our other wonderful sponsors generously contribute to our ability to effect policy changes and make lives better for children in care. Together, we have made a difference and look forward to doing even more in the future.

Thank you,

Howard M. Talenfeld, Esq.

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