



## **Florida's Children First**

Remarks prepared for the Inaugural  
Meeting of the

### **Children and Youth Cabinet**

October 1, 2007

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to present the concerns of Florida's Children First.

First, let me introduce Florida's Children First, Inc., a 5 year old, not for profit, statewide, children's legal advocacy organization. FCF was founded by advocates who were willing to pool their time, money, talent to make a coordinated, meaningful and sustained difference in the lives of children in Florida. I am privileged to be the Executive Director and have been so for the past two and a half years.

Florida's Children First was instrumental in the research and drafting of language that became the Children and Youth Cabinet Act. We are very enthusiastic about the possibilities of the Cabinet, under the leadership of Governor Crist and Lt Governor Kottcamp and with all of you participating.

As you organize and prioritize, we ask you not only to "vision" what could be; but also, to attend to what should be. Today I want to address 3 matters that are integral to the Children and Youth Cabinet law that we wish to bring to your attention: Interagency Coordination, The Children's Impact Statement and Children's Budget.

### **Interagency Coordination:**

As you can tell from the size of the Cabinet, and the many agencies and organizations that are not represented and thought they ought to be, the systems that serve children in Florida are fragmented.

It has been our observation that the agencies and programs serving children generally do not perceive that they can accomplish more by working together. Well-intentioned professional staff may maintain contact with some of their partner agencies, but they rarely have a clear understanding of those agencies' legal mandates, policies, procedures, and resources. We have even found that within state government, you do not speak the same language. For example, when DOE talks about a "placement," they mean a school program;

while for DCF and APD, a "placement" is a term they use for a home.

Some of the communication problems arise even among leadership like you. We wonder how many of you spoke with each other about your proposed budget cuts and the impact they might have on other Departments. We have reason to believe that communication did not regularly occur, to the potential detriment of Florida's children and youth.

Even when statutes have been enacted to require coordination, only limited collaboration actually occurs. For one example, we commend to you the study recently released by the University of Miami and FCF on the incomplete implementation of Interagency Agreements for Education of Children in the child welfare system which are required by Fla. Stat. 39.0016.

This Cabinet provides a unique opportunity. You can create a coordinated and effective continuum of services; identify opportunities for efficiencies and for creative uses of resources; remove "turf" related barriers to cross-agency programming. You can model collaborative behavior for your employees and community partners. You can make Florida a leader and innovator.

Florida, through this Cabinet, should join with state and local governments across the United States that have begun working to improve information sharing among key agencies responsible for the health and wellbeing of at-risk children and youth designed to result in: coordination of services, the avoidance of duplication, referral to the most appropriate services, more seamless eligibility determinations and service delivery, better comprehensive assessments. Information sharing could also serve the needs of the broader community for accountability and safety.

The federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and other federal departments such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Education, have begun promoting information sharing among juvenile justice, education, and other youth-serving agencies. Reportedly, 35 other states have enacted new legislation regarding juvenile records. In addition, policymakers have (rightfully) begun requesting that agencies provide accurate data to measure program effectiveness, costs, gaps, or redundancy that can best be provided through information sharing.

Last but certainly not least, you can help fulfill the promise of Open Government. Only by shining the light of open government onto the child serving systems will we restore confidence in Florida's policies and programs for children. Transparency should apply to the good being done, as well as the problems. It should be grounded on protecting privacy, but must stop past practices of using privacy and confidentiality to shield the government and its contractors from public scrutiny. Transparency is being supported by the Governor and DCF and should be supported by everyone.

We urge you to use this opportunity to do the following:

- *Adopt, as a core principle, the need for improved communication and collaboration with, among and between all of the agencies providing prevention, protection and treatment services for children.*
- *Identify opportunities in your own areas of authority for collaboration and rapidly implement needed changes.*
- *Identify opportunities across Departments and Agencies for collaboration, including the transferring or merging of programs where appropriate.*
- *Immediately create and implement a common process for obtaining informed consent for information release and sharing among all state agencies and their contractors that serve children and families.*<sup>1</sup>
- *Join with the Governor's Commission on Open Government and update Florida laws regarding confidentiality practices, privacy*

---

<sup>1</sup> Youth-serving agencies often have difficulty receiving timely and reliable information which may be needed for: for determining eligibility; conducting assessments; or determining appropriate supervision, plans, placements and services for children and youth. We are not advocating unlimited information sharing. And information sharing must respect the individual's right even when information is properly shared among agencies. **Any disclosure of youth or family specific information needs to be based on appropriate legal authorization.**

A common consent form used by all participating agencies is one option that can reinforce the respect for the privacy rights of the children and the informed consent process while facilitating the prompt sharing of information needed to provide services.

*protections and information sharing.*

- *Develop a meaningful yet simplified system to monitor privatized services and contracts.<sup>2</sup>*

## **Children & Youth Budget:**

One of the charges in the enabling Legislation, requires that you develop a children-and-youth-based budget structure and nomenclature that includes all relevant departments, funding streams, and programs. The children's budget is supposed to implement the State's vision and strategic plan and facilitate improved coordination and efficiency. Mostly, we are seeking a budget for children that citizens, including citizen Legislators, could understand and review to see if you have aligned public resources in a manner that supports the healthy growth and development of children and youth.

It is only fair to this new administration to acknowledge that children's services of all types have been historically and chronically underfunded in Florida, in both the public and private sectors. In order to make the best policy choices given the limited resources, you will need real data. Floridians will never know the true needs and shortfalls if you do not project the workload and establish the required state and federal funding needed to fully meet that workload.

In order to prepare the mandated Children's Budget we urge you to

- *Conduct a Children and Youth Estimating Conference to obtain and analyze real data on the real need.*
- *Develop a budget structure and nomenclature that includes all relevant departments, funding streams, and programs to implement the state's vision and strategic plan and to facilitate improved coordination and efficiency for children and youth. Make it a budget for children and youth that citizens can understand*

---

<sup>2</sup> Many children and youth programs are now delivered by entities other than the State, both public and private entities. In order to continue innovation while protecting the taxpayers, the State must develop a meaningful yet simplified system to monitor its contracts. A system must ensure that tax dollars in private contracts are being spent properly. But it should not be a system that measures only whether the right paperwork is filled out, but rather it must contain measurable performance standards, and clear remedies for any substantial lapse in performance. No one wants the state to micro-manage private contracts, but there has to be monitoring to protect the investment made by the taxpayers.

*and review to see if you have aligned public resources consistent with public will.*

### **Impact Statement:**

One aspect of aligning resources in support of children and youth requires that all of us look at proposed legislation and determine what impact it will have on children and youth, both the intended and unintended consequences. The underlying purpose of an Impact Statement is to increase the thoughtfulness with which policy decisions are made, giving children and youth a meaningful place at the table. Just as the Legislature now consciously considers the economic impacts of new legislation, so it should require its analysts to report on impacts for children and youth.

For your work, you are to create a children and youth impact statement designed to evaluate proposed legislation, requested appropriations, and programs. We believe this work is vital to achieving the goal of making Florida a child-friendly state.

We urge you to

- *Recommend that the Legislature require a Child and Youth Impact Statement for its legislative debates.*
- *Develop a meaningful Child and Youth Impact Statement for legislation to be considered in the 2008 Legislative Session and seek collaboration from the Legislature on use of the Impact Statement.*
- *At a minimum, the child and youth impact statement must:*
  - (1) *Describe the population of children and/or youth who will be affected and the nature of the impact.*
  - (2) *State whether the proposed legislation is consistent with or furthers the strategic plan this Cabinet adopts.*
  - (3) *State whether the proposed legislation will affect the ability of children and youth to access state services or exercise their rights.*
  - (4) *Evaluate all legislation, not only social, health and education services.*

### **SUMMARY**

Florida's Children First strongly supports the efforts of the Cabinet. We advocate a common sense approach to creating a continuum of services that will benefit children from prenatal care through services

for youth in transition to adulthood. The above comments are a compilation from our collective experience and expertise. Our comments are not meant to be exhaustive; they are, however, suggestive of places to begin. We hope you share our sense of urgency because our youngest citizens need your immediate leadership in these and other matters.

We hope our work will assist the Cabinet. We offer our continuing consultation and technical expertise because together we are making a difference.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrea L. Moore, Executive Director  
Robin L. Rosenberg, Deputy  
Director

Florida's Children First, Inc.