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Is group foster care slowly becoming extinct?

By [Kate Santich](#), Orlando Sentinel

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During the past five years, the state of Florida has reduced by more than a third the number of kids in its child-welfare system — a drop that has meant nearly 11,000 children were either never removed from their biological families in the first place or were placed in homes with relatives or adoptive parents.

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Though most children's advocates celebrate the trend as a sign of progress, it also means that group homes — once the norm for kids in the state's custody — are slowly disappearing. And some worry the few left will feel increasing pressure to follow suit despite a lingering need.

In Central Florida alone, 29 facilities have closed since January 2008 — including Orlando's Crisis Nursery, which for two decades had taken in babies, toddlers and young children who had been abused, abandoned or neglected. The once-celebrated facility, founded by the Junior League, had housed as many as 400 children during 2006. Three years later, the number had plummeted by more than half and the facility was losing as much as \$250,000 annually.

It closed in March.

This month, discussions during an Orange County Commission meeting of what to do with the 60-bed Great Oaks Village — opened as an orphanage in 1924 — sparked speculation that the group home for children age 6 and older also would be shuttered.

County officials, however, say they merely want to study how to run the facility most efficiently.

"The question came up: Should the county even be in the child-welfare business?" said Deputy County Administrator Linda Weinberg. "There are 67 counties in Florida, and only two or three providing foster services for kids. So that's a legitimate question for an elected official to ask."

The county plans to hire an outside consulting firm to assess the local foster-care system and see whether the facility could be run differently or for less than the \$2 million a year the county currently spends on it. One option could be selling it to a not-for-profit organization, as Osceola County did with its group home a few years ago.

Great Oaks' 50-acre campus off Michigan Street in Orlando now houses about 50 kids at any given time, most of them teens who previously have been shuffled between foster families.

"What we don't want is a less stable environment for these children who have not fared well in individual foster homes," said Lonnie Bell, director of the county's Family Services Department. "They have been in and out of several placements already, and this group-home setting is what works best for them."

In June, the county did close a second, much smaller group home — the Laurel Hill Independence Center — after the number of teens housed there dropped from 12 to four. The kids, mostly older boys who had been involved with the juvenile-justice system, were brought to Great Oaks Village, as was some of the Laurel Hill staff.

Families better

David Bundy, president and CEO of Children's Home Society of Florida, said the trend of closing group homes is generally a good one. "Most kids will do better in a family setting," he said. "But there are certainly exceptions."

It's better to keep siblings together in a single facility, Bundy said, than to divide them up among various foster families — few of whom are willing to take more than two children at once.

And for kids with "complex" physical or mental issues, group homes often provide a range of therapeutic services and activities that children can't get in a family setting. At Great Oaks Village, for instance, there is individual and group counseling, mentor programs, tutoring and a range of sports available.

But the shift away from such places is part of a Florida Department of Children and Families' strategy that other states are trying to emulate.

"I'm not saying that group care is bad," said John Cooper, DCF's Central Region director. "I think Great Oaks Village is an exceptional facility. They have a great track record. But In 2007, 2008, one of the goals going forward was to reduce group care for older kids and eliminate it for children under 5."

Ultimately, Cooper said, he'd like to put all group homes out of business someday.

For the most part, studies support the notion that children do better in families, but the data isn't always clear-cut. A recent study published by The Future of Children, a collaboration between Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, said comparisons can be tricky. The stability of a child's environment, what he or she endured before coming into foster care and the child's inherent coping skills all affect how well they develop.

The money factor

But the other issue, especially in the current economy, is money. The cost difference between group homes and foster families, Cooper said, is "huge." The state pays about \$90 a day per child for group homes — or about \$2,700 a month — versus less than \$400 a month per child in foster families.

Yet up-front expense isn't the only way to measure success, Weinberg cautioned. "You can always cut back on money, but you'll also cut back on outcomes for these kids. We've had a number of them who have come out of really horrifying family situations and come to Great Oaks Village, and they go on to college and get jobs and get married. You can't put a price tag on that kind of stuff."

Glen Casel, president of Community Based Care of Central Florida, the nonprofit that decides where to place local foster children, agrees. But he thinks that children who do better in group settings are those whom the system failed early on. Perhaps they didn't go to the right foster home initially, they were moved around too much or they weren't given the services they needed to adjust.

"Ultimately," he said, "foster care is no place for kids to grow up. We need to either get them back home, if we can do so safely, or get them adopted."

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