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## Hillsborough's new child protection director readies for July 1 takeover

TAMPA — Lorita Shirley asks what's wrong with child protection. Everyone unloads.

Caseworkers speak in codes, complains a grandmother who has been through four in seven months. Lawyers never take a phone call. Foster parents need backup. Adoptive parents need to not be forgotten after the adoptions. Latino families need workers who speak Spanish. Everybody needs help on weekends, when things always go wrong. So far, Shirley's new job is a jumble of voices in her ear.

On July 1, she takes charge of the protection of 2,900 Hillsborough County children from neglect, abuse and death. Her predecessor failed in that task nine tragic times in the past two years. Many of those times, all it took to turn a \$65 million system of child protection upside down was some teenage mother's bad boyfriend deciding he'd shut up the crying baby.

If another of those horrors happens on Shirley's watch, she owns it.

In her line of work, the payoff is often tar and feathers.

Shirley's employer, Eckerd Community Alternatives/Hillsborough, is replacing Hillsborough Kids Inc., the nonprofit agency that for a decade was the county's lead child protection agency for the state Department of Children and Families. Overshadowing the change were the nine deaths in two years of children under Hillsborough Kids' supervision.

Eckerd has its No. 1 troubleshooter on it. Shirley did the same work for Eckerd in Pinellas and Pasco counties. Some of her colleagues there say half-jokingly they hope she bombs in Hillsborough so she comes back to them.

She's known as relentless and passionate, driven by her spirituality, a woman on a mission. She takes on critics face to face. She shows warts. She boasts that she has never said, "That was before my time."



Lorita Shirley is a wife, a mother of three and a Big Sister.

Shirley comes to Hillsborough amid a mandate by the state to get out of the business of raising kids. Foster care has become the last option.

It's the last option in theory, but the main option in practice. Over the past eight months, numbers of sheltered children are up 20 percent — almost double the rate statewide.

In eight of the nine child deaths in the past two years, the children had been transferred from state custody, where they were safe, back to their families, where they fell back into danger. The subsequent increase in sheltered children may mean that investigators are now erring on the side of caution.

If the trend continues, it would place an extra 300 children in the foster care system by the end of the year — each child costing from \$12,000 to \$100,000.

Shirley asserts that every child should either be reunited with parents or placed in a permanent home within nine months. Unless there's significant risk, she believes children belong with their families, flaws and all.

"The child always says, 'No one loves me like my family loves me,' " Shirley told biological and foster parents last month.

One of those foster parents who listened was Margaret Thompson, 64, who has opened her home to 67 children over the past dozen years. She takes in only babies. She has two now, one 6 months old and the other 19 months.

She and other foster parents of babies say family reunification may be called a priority, but the gears of bureaucracy grind far too slowly, sometimes two years or more. By then, babies have attached to foster parents and separations are wrenching.

"If you're going to find family," Thompson said, "find them early."

Even faster-paced, Thompson worries reunifications can put children back in the bad environments they had escaped and they are even secretly reunited with abusive parents by relatives who can't say no.

It's a problem that child protectors have to solve with the families in mind, said Robin Rosenberg, deputy director of the state advocacy group Florida's Children First.

"We could take children from every parent suspected of abuse or neglect and lock them in their own room where they are physically safe from abuse," Rosenberg said. "They would be 'safe' but emotionally devastated. Phrases like 'when in doubt, yank 'em out' have no place in our child welfare system."

Shirley remembers a child's question posed to her 20 years ago when she was a freshly graduated foster care counselor:

"When am I going home?"

She remembers giving an answer she couldn't believe herself.

"Soon."

To avert more tragedy, Shirley set out to review cases of every Hillsborough child under state supervision before July 1. It caused a stir among the six agencies that currently monitor homes for Hillsborough Kids. Many believed caseworkers would be fired.

None have been, Shirley said. Case managers were told in advance what would be expected. Gaps were closed before cases reached reviewers.

Recently, Eckerd completed reviews of 280 of the highest-risk cases — children under 5, living at home with a parent. "Safety concerns were addressed," she said, "but no children were removed."

But Eckerd did find "no rhyme or reason" for how cases are assigned. A new caseworker just out of college could randomly end up with one of the county's most complex or potentially dangerous cases. Shirley wants those cases assigned to the most experienced workers.

Last year, Hillsborough Kids altered contracts for two of the subcontractors — Mental Health Care Inc. and Children's Home Society — each cited for mistakes in a child's death.

Shirley has promised to assign her own staff to audit Hillsborough's highest-risk cases: those children under 5.

"There's a lot of oversight, a lot of file audits, more than what the state requires," said Suzanne Parker, program director for Hillsborough's Guardian ad Litem volunteers. She served on the selection committee that recommended Eckerd's takeover.

Shirley promises parents that everything will be the same when Eckerd takes over on July 1. She won't say, though, that everything will be the same six months down the road.

A lot depends, she says, on more analysis of the recent reviews.

"If an agency is doing poor work, it's going to come out."

Lorita Shirley grew up in Orlando, a middle child whose older sister, Loretta, was the family star, a valedictorian. Lorita was the underdog, the striver. "Everything came easily to me," sister Loretta said. "Lorita really had to work."

Lorita's breakout came in middle school: "I learned I could run."

Running cross-country, she said, not only gave her an identity, "it was my segue into Florida State University."

She began her career as a foster care counselor for the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which DCF replaced in the mid 1990s.

She went on to be a child abuse investigator, her first exposure to sexual predators and extreme poverty. It made her a believer in "wraparound services," meaning wide safety nets for families in crisis. It also reinforced her workaholic nature.

"I'm a little bit ... not anal," she says. "It's just going above and beyond the call. There's something internal that draws you to this field. It gives you the drive to make personal sacrifices." There's also the awareness that "a single mistake can be career-defining."

So she goes to evening forums in high-risk neighborhoods. She pledges to get more bilingual caseworkers. She promises help on weekends. She hasn't gone running in eight months. She has three daughters, ages 19, 15 and 5. She's Big Sister to a girl in St. Petersburg. And one day she and her husband, Ben, who works for the DCF, plan to take in foster children.

There's no way to gracefully prepare for the worst. One day, Shirley nibbles at breakfast — five french fries — as she talks into one of her two cellphones while a conference call blares on her desk phone. Another day, she wanders through USF's desert-like parking lots 38C, B and F, dripping sweat, looking for a meeting in either Building NEC, CPH or MHC.

Lorita Shirley has been at it for 20 years.

The pressure has never been greater.