



 **20th Anniversary
Annual Report**

**FLORIDA'S
CHILDREN
FIRST**

FIGHTING FOR
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



2022

Annual Report





Dear Supporters,

Looking back on the work of Florida's Children First and Florida Youth SHINE in 2022, three words capture the year: Reflection, Transition, and Progress.

REFLECTION

2022 marked our 20th anniversary of positively improving children's lives. We took time to reflect on our last 20 years, delving into our history, celebrating our impact, connecting with partners, and looking back on what we have learned along the way. We began the year by evaluating some of our biggest achievements and the lives impacted over the last two decades, such as the 30,000+ people we have trained to help children, and the 40+ bills we have advocated for that protect thousands of children for years to come.

TRANSITION

2022 ushered in a period of change and transformation for our organization. I assumed my new role as the Executive Director at Florida's Children First, succeeding our esteemed E.D. of over a decade, Christina Spudeas, who retired. We navigated a shift back to in-person events while maintaining virtual programming, opening up fresh avenues for advocacy and youth engagement. Notably, we provided over 100 statewide advocacy opportunities for Florida Youth SHINE members to share their lived experiences, continuing the innovative hybrid model. Collaborating with Florida Youth SHINE, Florida's Children First successfully championed substantial legislative changes to assist transitioning youth:

- Expanding additional resources and financial support for 5,000 young adults who aged out of foster care.
- Enabling 6,926 homeless children and young adults to obtain a driver's license.
- Aiding 8,866 youth in foster care or experiencing homelessness to access their birth certificate at no cost.
- Enhancing educational outcomes for 27,000 eligible youth through a tuition exception by establishing campus liaisons to guide them through college.

PROGRESS

In 2022, we made progress and positive strides both within Florida and across the nation. This was underscored when Florida Youth SHINE was invited to speak at the White House and subsequently welcomed back to attend President Biden's Elton John concert, recognizing change-makers nationwide. We also made headway in our day-to-day efforts by:

- Creating 11 new publications for individuals and youth to be better informed about the system, their rights, the law, and practices.
- Training 4,209 individuals to improve practices to help children.
- Supporting 877 attorneys by providing them with resources and support via the Florida Dependency Law Center.

The impact and accomplishments of this year are a profound testament to the dedication of the people, partners, decision-makers, youth, alumni, mentors, and volunteers who have passionately committed their support over the years. We are so grateful for their belief in our work and our fight to protect children's rights.

As we begin a new decade, we are planning for our future. We have embarked on a strategic planning process aimed at devising innovative ways to grow and adapt the organization to meet the evolving needs of Florida's youth.

The words HOPE, EXCITEMENT, and IMPACT will define our next era.

We invite you to join us on this journey as we turn awareness into action and affect meaningful change, ensuring that Florida's Children are always at the forefront of our hearts, minds, and endeavors.

Sincerely,

Geori Seldine
Executive Director





Our Mission & Vision



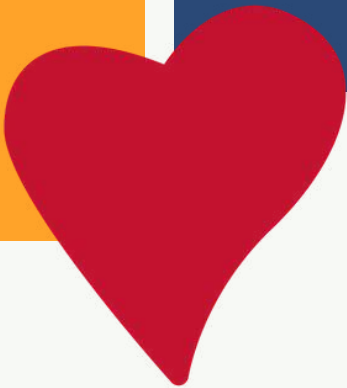
Mission

Florida's Children First is a non-profit, nonpartisan, independent advocacy organization committed to protecting and advancing the rights of children and youth impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and disability systems through systemic reform, education, youth voice, and promoting high quality legal representation.



Vision

Florida's laws, policies, and practices respect, prioritize, and protect children and youth impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and disability systems.





Overview of Organization Programs

At the core of Florida's Children First is our dedication to addressing the myriad challenges faced by our youth, especially within the dependency system. Our dynamic programs are tailored to meet a vast array of needs: from championing the rights of children, promoting safety for the abused, and supporting the journey to independent living for many, to providing high-quality legal representation. Furthermore, our efforts have been ceaseless in empowering the youth and driving educational success. Our unyielding commitment throughout the years underscores our belief that every child deserves the chance to fully realize their potential.

As you explore this section further, you'll uncover a sample of some of our efforts, woven together to create a comprehensive narrative of our unwavering commitment to protect, support, represent, and uplift the children of Florida.

Training Workshops for Industry Professionals and Participants

Each year, we offer a series of free training workshops that cover current topics and legislative updates. These sessions aim to keep individuals who interact with or care for youth in the system well-informed and current on policies, practices, and benefits. CLE credits for professionals are also provided.

Publications

We produce, update, and distribute key guides, books, charts, and other informational tools that are youth-friendly to educate those in need of these resources better.

Youth Education & Leadership Training

From empowering self-advocacy training to fostering genuine peer connections and community education, we ignite a fire within our members and equip them with the tools and confidence they need to rise strong and become the bold, fearless leaders they were born to be.

Professional Support

The Florida Children's First team of experts offers guidance, technical assistance, training, and ongoing support for lawyers, judges, case workers, and frontline professionals. Our aim is to enhance their practices and keep them abreast of evolving laws and regulations through a range of resources and daily troubleshooting.

Florida Dependency Law Center

Through our FloridaDependencyLaw.org web portal, we support lawyers who represent all parties in child welfare cases and help build the available pool of pro bono legal services.

Advocacy Initiatives

Advocacy at all levels is the core of our activities. On a legislative level, we propose, draft, and comment on new legislation, providing comprehensive documentation on the potential impact of proposed bills. Additionally, we file amicus briefs to assert children's rights and aid in the appointment of attorneys for them. We also serve as advisors to the Executive branch, offering insights on new rules, and participate in various task forces, panels, and forums that shape policy, drawing upon our extensive expertise.

High-Quality Legal Representation

At the core of our mission lies the commitment to ensuring every child's right to legal representation is upheld. Through our experienced and passionate team, we champion the rights of children, ensuring they have a voice in the proceedings that shape their lives.

Florida Youth SHINE

Our award-winning Florida Youth SHINE program offers ongoing empowerment and advocacy opportunities and mentorship to young individuals aged 13-26. Drawing upon their experiences, our youth members help shape the future of the child welfare system for the next generation. Through comprehensive leadership training, exposure to positive mentor role-models, and one-of-a-kind opportunities, our youth conquer challenges, emerging as confident, goal-oriented, and accomplished young adults who amplify their voices to drive positive change and enhance the child welfare system.

Florida Youth SHINE Statewide Conferences

Each year, Florida Youth SHINE representatives and mentors convene in Tallahassee for Children's Week. They engage with legislators, officials, and staff, advocating for vital child welfare issues. Before their capitol visit, Florida Youth SHINE members undergo intensive training covering leadership, teamwork, public speaking, legislative processes, advocacy skills, and more.

Additionally, Florida Youth SHINE members gather four times per year at our Statewide Quarterly Meetings where they represent their local areas to bring attention to the issues and solutions most affecting youth in care.

Florida Youth SHINE: Local and Statewide Advocacy

Florida Youth SHINE chapters are at the forefront of advocacy, both locally and statewide. At the local level, youth members spearhead training in their communities, fostering public awareness while honing essential life skills and shaping effective solutions. On the statewide front, FYS champions change with youth-led training sessions. Their potent personal narratives and astute recommendations spotlight the challenges faced by youth in care, driving significant improvements throughout the care system.

Florida Youth SHINE Youth Action Hours

Each month, our open forums bring Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors together in a virtual space to process issues, topics, and solutions for local and statewide advocacy needs.

FYS Peer Connection Events

This new series of fun, themed programs and events provide much-needed social connection to our youth. Additionally, the virtual platform has enabled more tech-savvy individuals to participate more frequently. Topics are chosen by the youth themselves, who take the lead in organizing and enjoying the programs.

Florida Youth SHINE Policy & Initiatives Program

Nearly 20 youth meet virtually twice monthly, playing an active role in advocacy work, researching issues, learning the legislative process, and implementing youth-led projects with the goal of impacting policy change. This new program hones their leadership and youth organizing skills. They, in turn, educate and empower their peers so their voices can guide more decisions made in child-serving systems.





Program Impact

At Florida's Children First, we educate, inform, advocate, legislate, elevate, and empower. In 2022, our 20th anniversary year, our efforts left a profound impact on children, families, industry professionals, and beyond.

Advocacy Impact

8,257

8,257 previously unhoused children and young adults now benefit from college tuition waivers and the Keys to Independence program, ensuring they can obtain their driver's licenses and insurance.

\$8 Mil

Successfully advocated for 6 bills benefiting youth, generating over \$8 million in economic impact with new monthly stipends.

250%

Introduced 11 timely publications—a 250% increase—to aid both youth and those who support them.

3,800

Conducted 16 workshops training 3,800 individuals, with several sessions co-led by youth sharing their firsthand experiences.

Florida Youth SHINE

85

Engaged with 85 legislators in Tallahassee, including the DCF Secretary and her team.

100

Provided over 100 opportunities for advocacy and skill-building experiences that foster leadership and personal growth.

News

FYS youth prominently featured across TV, radio, and print media. Visit our website, FloridasChildrenFirst.org, to learn more about FYS in the news!

8,257

Thanks to FYS youth sharing their narratives with legislators, 8,257 homeless children and young adults now benefit from enhanced college support and the means to secure a driver's license and insurance.

"Florida Youth SHINE means so much to me because I joined during the hardest time of my life. I did not trust people and I did not feel like the system was created to help children. I felt it was created to profit off them. After joining FYS, I realized that there are people who genuinely care about foster children and have the biggest hearts I've seen. I can feel the care, love, and effort into everything that they do. It broke barriers that I created, and I see how they break barriers for other youth. I also get to connect with other kids and find out how much alike we all are."

– Alexia Nechayev, Florida Youth SHINE, Events & Meeting Chair





The Stories Behind Florida's Children First & Florida Youth SHINE



Rebekka Behr
Florida Youth SHINE, Legislative Chair

The day Rebekka was taken out of her classroom and thrust into the foster care system, her world changed dramatically. Torn from her parents and siblings, she was forced to miss weeks of school, causing her, a once stellar student, to fail a class.

Forbidden to speak to her siblings, clad in the same clothes for days on end, and denied essential medical services, Rebekka felt helpless and unheard, cut off from the outside world.

Discovering the resources offered by Florida's Children First and Florida Youth SHINE helped her to recognize her own strength. This underscores the significance of programs like Florida Youth SHINE—where peers in care uplift and support one another.

“After feeling so alone in care, Florida Youth SHINE led me to find other youth like me who want to stand up and fight for change within the system. Though I struggled for years, I WAS able to get support from my Florida Youth SHINE Family and the many great laws in place to help me. I’ve now graduated college, am a working professional, and own my own house and car. It gives me pride to be able to leave a legacy through the positive change Florida Youth SHINE helps facilitate.”

– Rebekka Behr, Florida Youth SHINE, Legislative Chair



Martavius Lowery
Florida Youth SHINE, Alumni

At just 4 years old, Martavius "Marty" Lowery was introduced to the foster care system. Over the next 18 years, he would move through nearly 30 different housing situations. This constant upheaval left Marty wrestling with feelings of anxiety and anger, often feeling adrift without the anchor of a nurturing home.

Then he found Florida Youth SHINE—a haven where he discovered a family among peers who understood his journey, having walked paths strikingly similar to his own. Not only did Marty find solace, but he also realized his voice held power: power to represent himself and others like him.

When Florida Youth SHINE took on the mission to pass "The Keys to Independence" initiative—aimed at enabling youth in care to learn to drive, obtain licenses, and secure car insurance—Marty was at the forefront. His advocacy bore fruit when the bill passed, and fittingly, he became one of its first beneficiaries.

But Marty didn't stop there. In 2022, he passionately conveyed to decision-makers the transformative impact of this program on his life, particularly its role in shaping his career. Advocating for an expansion of the program to include youth facing homelessness—a demographic that sadly encompasses many who age out of foster care—he played a pivotal role. His efforts, combined with those of his peers, ensured the extension's approval, paving the way for nearly 10,000 more young individuals to access opportunities to drive and, through associated tuition waivers, pursue higher education.

"I spent roughly 18 years within the foster care system... When I was 13, I knew I wanted to be a part of my case and advocate for myself. I started becoming more involved with my case and more educated on knowing my rights, which I think is critical for all youth in care. Now, I want to empower and advocate for other youth, while trying to reform the child welfare system in Florida. I'm very passionate about youth in care having a fair chance to live a normal life. It is one of my goals to see all foster youth live normally and be successful once they age out of care."

- Martavius Lowery, Florida Youth SHINE, Alumni



Janella K. Leibovitz
Staff Attorney, Legal Lifeline for YouthProject™,
Legal Aid of Manasota

Attorneys like Janella Leibovitz from the Legal Lifeline for Youth Project work in the ever-changing fields of child dependency and family law, where staying updated on legislative shifts is crucial for the welfare of the youth they represent.

Understanding the nuances of benefit eligibility, especially with evolving laws that extend coverage to more youth categories, can be intricate. However, in 2022, the dedicated work of Florida's Children First and Florida Youth SHINE, once again, paved the way for expanded benefit legislation. Florida's Children First further supports professionals with free legislative update workshops and resource guides, ensuring they remain informed and adept at serving Florida's youth.

"At the Legal Lifeline for Youth Project™ we are so fortunate to have Florida's Children First as a resource for legislative updates. These updates keep us informed of legislation that directly affects the youth we serve.

Florida's Children First has also created many invaluable resources that keep us up to date on benefits for youth, including the new Independent Living Benefit Table. This year we were fortunate to have one of our Juvenile Judges do a whole training on the Benefit Table, which emphasized how truly important the table is in keeping youth aging out of care and the people who work with them aware of the available options."

- Janella K. Leibovitz

Staff Attorney, Legal Lifeline for YouthProject™, Legal Aid of Manasota



Nathan Cook
Florida's Children First Board
of Directors, Secretary

Introduced to Florida's Children First by esteemed child advocate and founding FCF board member, Dick Batchelor, Nathan Cook, while serving as a legislative aide in Tallahassee, became deeply invested in FCF's transformative work within the foster care system.

As he and his then-wife embarked on their journey as foster parents, FCF became their guiding star. When they chose to adopt two children, both with developmental challenges due to prenatal complications, FCF's staff became an invaluable beacon, assisting them in accessing crucial resources and expertly navigating the intricate foster-to-adoption journey. Amid the maze of child welfare agencies, Nathan experienced the unparalleled support Florida's Children First provides - a unique role unfulfilled by any other organization. Through Florida Youth SHINE, Nathan gained a profound understanding of the emotional landscape these children traverse, even as they step into a nurturing home. This insight shaped his approach, ensuring a smoother transition for his two adopted sons into their new family.

"Florida's Children First has given me, and thousands of children and families throughout Florida, so much. I wouldn't have my family without their guidance. I, and thousands of foster and adoptive parents like me, would not have the vital benefits we need to keep our kids healthy and stable. And morning or night, they are always there for the young people in care. They do what they say. They always put Florida's Children First."

- Nathan Cook, Florida's Children First, Board of Directors, Secretary

20 Years of Achievements to Improve the Lives of Children

For two decades, Florida's Children First has championed the rights and well-being of the state's youth in care. Here's a glimpse into the transformative milestones and steadfast advocacy that have marked our 20-year journey.

Laws & Policies

- Secured the option for youth to remain in foster care until age 21.
- Paved the way for in-state free college tuition until age 28.
- Made obtaining a driver's license possible for youth in foster care.
- Reduced unnecessary psychotropic drug prescriptions.
- Enhanced youth representation in court decisions.
- Championed laws promoting normalcy in sports and activities—becoming a federal model.
- Ensured the Agency for Persons with Disabilities aids youth exiting foster care.
- Advocated for educational stability in placement changes.
- Spearheaded laws to support sibling unity.
- Fought for rights of sex-trafficked children, ensuring they receive appropriate services.





\$7,885,872 in donated professional services.



26,349 people trained statewide on child welfare topics.



16,754 pro bono hours donated to children.



90,366 hours dedicated to youth advocacy and training.



40 publications on children's rights distributed statewide.



38 amicus briefs filed & **41** child protection bills supported or passed.



Developed a nationally recognized, best-practices model for youth advocacy inclusion.

Training & Education

- Educated hundreds of children about self-advocacy and their rights.
- Trained thousands of attorneys, foster parents, GALs, and caseworkers on best child service practices.
- Produced materials for youth & adults to understand rights and complex policies.
- Continuously ensured accountability in child welfare entities.
- Prioritized children's needs in DCF's policymaking.
- Led partnerships in Florida's child advocacy for sustainable child-centric solutions.

Standout Moments of 2022

♥ Youth Advocacy Succeeds! Expands Benefits to Thousands.

Nearly four dozen youth and mentors traveled to Tallahassee on several occasions in 2022 to advocate for a number of bills that affect the lives of vulnerable youth. Meeting with more than 85 legislators and agency officials, they bravely shared stories of their time in care, and how passage of these bills would help thousands of kids thrive in future years and not have to endure the struggles they faced. Their voices were heard, and they made a difference!

Effective July 1, 2022:

HB 1577/SB 1708

now allows youth experiencing homelessness to participate in the Keys to Independence Program providing them the ability to obtain a Driver's License and insurance. It streamlines the documentation process for youth qualifying for tuition exemption, and addresses challenges youth experience in higher education by requiring college campuses to have a responsive liaison on site to assist all youth from foster care or those experiencing homelessness navigating college. Collectively, this bill impacts more than 70,000 young people.

SB7065

raises the monthly PESS stipends to \$1720/month – the first increase since 2013 - to accommodate for cost of living increases, and ensure youth have funds to have safe housing while in college. This change allocates more than \$8 million in new funding to youth from care who are pursuing post-secondary education.

“I spent most of my life in foster care but became an unaccompanied homeless youth. I struggled with transportation, school, job interviews, and more. I want to have a better life. I want to do better and be better. I don't want to be another statistic. This bill will help other youth thrive, and not need to face the struggles I went through.”

– **Tee Legend Lamore**, Florida Youth SHINE member testifying before the House Senate Committee on Children, Families and Elder Affairs



Florida Youth SHINE invited to the White House – TWICE!

At a pivotal National Foster Care Month roundtable at the White House, Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) stood as one of just seven organizations nationwide chosen to give voice to foster youth. Maria Batista and Tee Legend Lamore championed the cause, articulating the intricacies of their personal experiences and the broader challenges shadowing their peers. Engaging with White House officials, they spotlighted the critical issues shaping the lives of youth nationwide.

Tee, deeply moved by the honor, reflected, "Joining FYS, I realized I had a voice worth hearing, one that could drive change. Boarding that plane to D.C., I was fueled by a purpose to stand for the countless children feeling forgotten, hurt, or isolated - the children who mirrored my past."

A few months later, the White House rolled out the red carpet for FYS once more, this time celebrating young trailblazers from across the nation. Hosted by President and Dr. Biden, the event not only gathered global young luminaries like Malala Yousafzai but also bestowed upon attendees like Sophia Coffey, Tee Legend Lamore, Rebekka Behr, and Maria Batista the privilege of an intimate concert by Sir Elton John on the South Lawn, broadcasted on PBS.

Florida Youth SHINE Statewide Coordinator, Maria Batista, recounted the whirlwind preparation for the event, "This phenomenal opportunity sprung up unexpectedly. With tight timelines, arranging hotels, flights, meals, and even suitable attire for the chilly outdoor event became a challenge. Thanks to our magnanimous donors, we transformed this dream into a reality. This experience, amidst such a distinguished assembly, underscores the national esteem and foundational strength FYS has cultivated."

11 New Publications Produced, Including the "Independent Living Benefit Table" and "FAQ" Sheet for Accessing a College Tuition Waiver

In 2022, our persistent advocacy ignited transformative policy changes, particularly benefiting youth from care who are eligible for tuition exceptions for college. Recognizing the challenges they face, we crafted a youth-centric "FAQ" guide, elucidating the fresh updates. This intuitive resource stands as one of our many initiatives designed to simplify the intricate journey to college and maximize their tuition benefits.

The complex web of benefits awaiting a child aging out of care often bewilders even the seasoned professionals guiding these youth. The recent legislative shifts have added layers to this puzzle. Responding promptly, we introduced a cross-reference chart with clickable links, ensuring easy access to updated information on our website.

Janella Leibovitz, an advocate at the Legal Lifeline for Youth Project™, attests to its significance, stating, “I consult this table daily, explaining to our teen clients on the brink of transitioning out of foster care, the full array of resources and options awaiting them. This tool empowers us to ensure they make pivotal life choices with clarity and confidence. We've extended its reach, sharing printed versions with our clientele, courts, and other relevant organizations.”

Florida Youth SHINE Showcased by Casey Family Programs to Promote Best Practices

Florida Youth SHINE was selected as a premier model organization to provide input, interviews, and work closely with Casey Family Programs for three national briefs published by Casey and disseminated nationwide. These briefs cover best practices for authentic youth engagement, and FYS is mentioned in all three of them as a best practices model.

Florida Youth SHINE Invited to Join the Child Well-Being Council

Florida Youth SHINE was invited to have a permanent representative on the Child Well-Being Council, which was created by DCF to strengthen the partnership with families and the dependency system.

“When you become a member of FYS you aren’t just changing lives, you’re becoming a part of a family. And that’s something I will cherish forever.”

- **Shawn Mitchell**, Florida Youth SHINE member



Florida Youth SHINE Present to the Annual Foster/Adoptive Parent Association Conference

Six FYS members conducted two presentations for over 300 attendees at the annual Foster/Adoptive Parent Association Conference.

♥ Award Events Shine Light on Stellar Advocates and Accomplished Youth

The annual “Outstanding Advocates for Children Awards” events returned in 2022 after being dormant during the pandemic years. Nearly 750 people participated in 6 awards events across Florida, generating more than \$350,000 for the organization. Some of Florida’s top champions for children were recognized for their significant contributions to the well-being of children around the state, along with eight youths from foster care who were celebrated for their resilient spirit, passion for helping their peers, and using their voices to help change the system.

2022 Outstanding Advocates for Children

Broward

Christina Spudeas, Lifetime Achievement in Child Advocacy
Kyle Johnson, Outstanding Youth Advocate
Elijah Sylverin, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Miami

Judge Jeri Beth Cohen, Retired, Outstanding Champion for Children
Robert Latham, Outstanding Child Advocate
Rufus Wallace, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Orlando

Dick Batchelor, Outstanding Champion for Children’s Rights
Glen Casel, Outstanding Child Advocate
Andy Gardiner, Outstanding Champion for Children
Josh Ogozaly, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Palm Beach

Ted Babbitt, Outstanding Champion for Children
Junior league of the Palm Beaches, Outstanding Champions for Children
Vita Nova, Outstanding Non-Profit Champion for Children
Tee Legend Lamore, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Tampa

Chris & Danielle Fellerhoff, Outstanding Foster & Adoptive Parents
HQEEDY (High Quality Early Education for Dependent Youth Collaborative), Outstanding Child Advocate
Selena Rose, Outstanding Youth Advocate
Shawn Mitchell, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Jacksonville

Michael Aubin, Outstanding Champion for Children
Jay Howell, Outstanding Champion for Children’s Rights
Lavarian Ouma, Outstanding Youth Advocate

“Don’t let your past define who you are today. Florida Youth SHINE has shown me that there’s so much more to life than what I experienced.”

- Rufus Wallace,
Outstanding Youth Advocate 2022



What FYS Members Are Saying

"I get to use my experiences to make a change."

– Shawn

"Finding a place I am valued."

– Adam

"Having a family to love."

– Isaac

"I have hope now for being in foster care and seeing that we have opportunities."

– Heiry

"Showing me I can be part of something bigger."

– Jamar

"Allowing us to use our voice to make a direct change."

– Sophia



Looking Ahead: Our Next Chapter

As we stand at the precipice of another promising year for Florida's Children First, our eyes are set firmly on the horizon, with goals that reach further, aiming to elevate even more lives of children in Florida's systems of care. Here's a glimpse of our roadmap as we forge ahead:

Launching Our New Strategic Plan

We are thrilled to unveil our new strategic plan, set to kick off on January 1, 2024. This plan is not only about reinforcing our core but also expanding our horizons. Integral to this plan is the strengthening of our board, a commitment to expand our staff, and a focused strategy to diversify our funding sources. Furthermore, Florida Youth SHINE will experience a renewed emphasis, ensuring they continue to be well-equipped and supported in their invaluable advocacy work.

Expanding Support for Florida Youth SHINE

The strength of Florida Youth SHINE lies in its chapters and local advocacy. To bolster this, we are expanding our support staff. This strategic enhancement aims not only to strengthen the individual chapters but also to fortify the collective voice of youth advocacy at a local level, ensuring that their voices echo louder in corridors of power and influence.

Advocacy through Education

Knowledge is power. We firmly believe that by educating our youth about the laws and resources at their disposal, we're equipping them with tools to advocate for themselves and others. We're ramping up our efforts to ensure that every child and young adult is well-informed, enabling them to navigate the intricate legal and bureaucratic pathways with confidence.

Strengthening Partnerships for Lived-Expertise Opportunities

Our philosophy embraces the belief that experiences shape expertise. By increasing our partnerships, we are expanding opportunities for lived experience. This enables individuals who've walked the path to share their insights and experiences, enriching our knowledge base and enhancing our advocacy strategies.

Collaborating with the Department of Children and Families

Our ambition is to amplify the youth voice, making it an integral part of decision-making processes. To this end, we're expanding opportunities to collaborate closely with the Department of Children and Families. This partnership aims to ensure that the lived experiences of our youth inform and shape policies and practices, creating a system that's more attuned to their needs and aspirations.

Access to Legal Representation

Justice is the cornerstone of our mission. To ensure that we provide robust legal support to our youth, we're expanding our legal team. This augmentation will enable us to provide personalized guidance, brief advice, and ensure that children and young adults receive the independent, quality legal representation they deserve.

Championing High-Quality Legal Representation

Our commitment extends beyond just providing legal support. We're invested in ensuring that the representation our youth receive is of the highest quality. We're focusing our energies on promoting top-tier legal representation for young individuals transitioning from foster care. Every youth deserves a legal advocate who stands by them, guiding and championing their rights, and we're here to be sure they get just that.





Elevating Youth Voices

“ It is awe-inspiring to witness how lives can transform in positive ways when kids are educated on opportunities out there for them to succeed. It’s crucial step towards empowering foster youth. ”

– Isaac Cedeno,
Florida Youth SHINE,
Statewide Delegate

“ Florida Youth SHINE has given me an overwhelming sense of community and friendship. Being around people who have shared similar experiences as myself helps me know that I did not struggle alone. Knowing we are using those experiences for something bigger is empowering. ”

– Sofia Coffey, Florida Youth SHINE,
Communications & Marketing Chair

“ Florida Youth SHINE is an organization that puts youth voices at the forefront and ensures that lasting, systemic changes to the child welfare system are advocated for and by those who have actually lived it. ”

– Taylor Sartor, Attorney
L. David Shear Children’s Law Center



Our Staff



Geori Seldine
Executive Director



Robin Rosenberg
Deputy Director



Jaye Abbate
V.P. Communications &
Community Relations



Lia Paul
Bookkeeper and
Office Manager



Christine Smith
Staff Attorney



Maria Batista
Florida Youth SHINE
Statewide Coordinator



Kaya Lee
Florida Youth SHINE
Community Engagement
Manager



Our Board



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Talenfeld, Esq.**
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**Jesse H.
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Joshua Rydell, Esq.



Matt Blair



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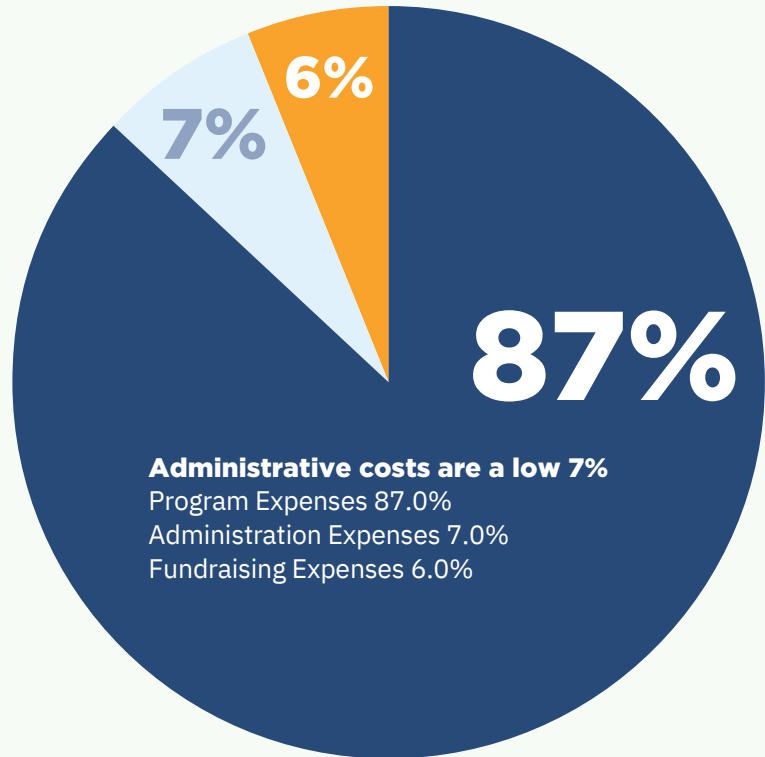
**Debbie
Dickinson, Esq.**



Julie Silver Talenfeld



Our 2022 Financials



INCOME

Grants	\$386,800
Contributions	\$767,500
Investment/Dividend Income	\$10,000
Total Income	\$1,164,300

EXPENSES

Legislative Education	\$4,000
Salaries	\$469,058
FYS Operating Expenses	\$210,350
Occupancy	\$24,600
Events	\$46,300
Training	\$2,000
Fundraising	\$6,800
General Operating	\$368,550
Total Expenses	\$1,131,658



Accountability & Finance Score: **100**

“This beacon provides an assessment of a charity’s financial health (financial efficiency, sustainability, and trustworthiness) and its commitment to governance practices and policies. Scores are assessed on three consecutive years of data.”

- Charity Navigator





2022 Supporters

Thanks to the generous contributions of our supporters, we can provide education, training, advocacy, empowerment, and hope to thousands of children, families, and industry professionals across Florida. Because of you, hope for a brighter future for these children and their families is possible. Thank You!

\$25,000 and above

The Florida Bar Foundation
Guardian Trust
Kelley Kronenberg
Leslie L. Alexander Foundation
Stuart Building Products
The Shane McGee Foundation

\$10,000 - \$24,999

Paul Palank Memorial Fund
Cox Family Foundation
Leibowitz Family Foundation
Schlessinger Law Office
Jennifer Voss & Blake Delaney
G Foundation
The Batchelor Foundation

\$5,000 - \$9,999

Baker McKenzie
Darran Blake
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida
Brown & Brown
George Cavallaro
Citrus Family Care Network
Jesse Diner & Adele Stone
Falcone Group
Mazda of Palm Beach
Angelica & Phil Sharlet
Project Management Institute
Rosemary Armstrong & Sandy Weinberg
ÜKG

Donations \$1,000 - \$4,999

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4 Sisters Solutions
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Conclusion

To our Community, Partners, Supporters, and all the Youth of Florida,

As we reflect on the incredible journey of Florida's Children First, we are filled with gratitude and optimism. We recently celebrated our 20th anniversary, a milestone that represents two decades of unwavering commitment to the children of Florida.

But while we cherish our history, our eyes are firmly focused on the horizon. We are resolved that all youth shall have their voice heard, and a future that beckons with promise and potential. To that end, we are thrilled to announce the launch of our new strategic plan, designed to enhance our impact and extend our reach even further. Accompanying this is the unveiling of our revitalized website and refreshed brand identity — both testaments to our evolving vision and renewed commitment.

Our past is filled with stories of resilient youth, who, with our support, have grown into empowered adults living successful and meaningful lives. They inspire us daily, reminding us of the transformative power of advocacy, protection, and unflagging belief in potential. It's this very legacy that shapes our vision for the future. We envision a world where legislative advancements, strengthened protections, and comprehensive advocacy efforts unite to protect every child in our state.

Yet, this is just our prologue. Florida Youth SHINE shall expand throughout Florida and be available to all Youth in care and experience homelessness. Indeed, our dedication remains undiminished: we won't rest until all children within Florida's systems of care have the same opportunities for normalcy, for education, for dreaming, for achieving, and for becoming all they were meant to be. The journey ahead is vast, but with your continued support and belief in our mission, we're poised to make the dreams of countless more children a reality.

With heartfelt appreciation and enduring hope,



Howard Talenfeld
Founder and Board Chair
Florida's Children First

Give with 
Confidence
TO A 4-STAR
CHARITY!



Charity Navigator **99**
OUT OF 100

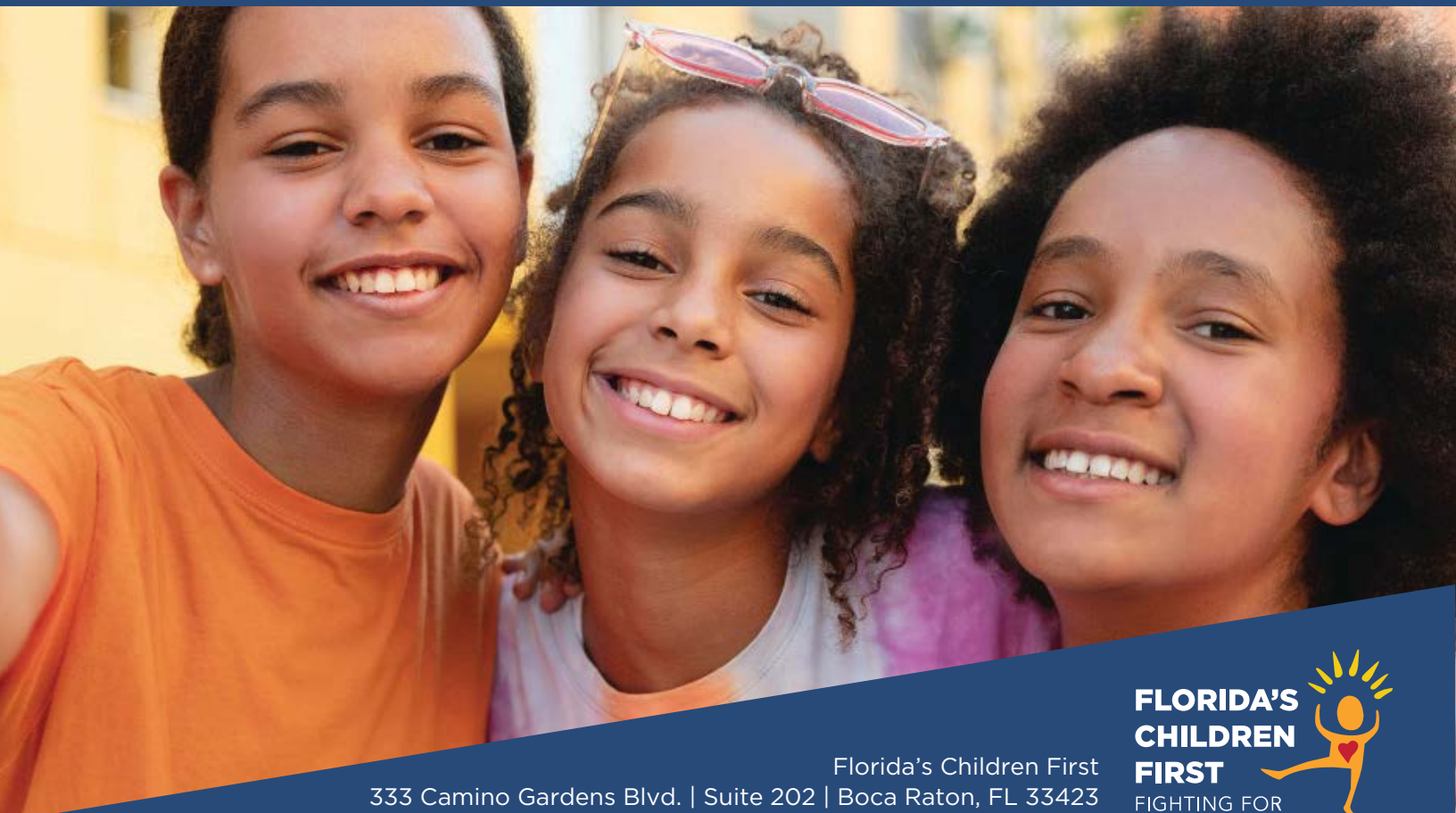
Get Involved!

- VOLUNTEER
- ATTEND
- CONNECT
- DONATE 
- CONNECT



There is more work to do!

All of us working together can create a future that shines bright for youth.
Join us on our journey to transform the lives of children.



Florida's Children First
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954.796.0860 | www.FloridasChildrenFirst.org

