



**FLORIDA'S
CHILDREN
FIRST**
FIGHTING FOR
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

2024 Annual Report



Welcome from our **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

I am so proud to share the progress Florida's Children First has achieved this year! The saying "small steps lead to big changes" perfectly captures our journey in 2024. Staying true to our mission, and bolstered by our new Strategic Plan, we forged ahead, one step at a time, one collaboration at a time, and one new initiative at a time.

Together, it culminated in a year of great progress on the path to providing youth in the child welfare system with more advocacy, stability, support, opportunities, and a stronger platform for their voices to be heard and valued.

I feel immense gratitude to our loyal donors, chapter mentors, friends, supporters, and colleagues who continue to offer the guidance, input, and assistance that make our work possible. Most of all, we are grateful to the hundreds of youth who courageously share their voices and expertise to improve the lives of so many children who come after them. Without their input guiding our work, we could not achieve our mission.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR INCLUDE:

■ **Expansion of Tools & Resources**

After a year in development, our new website was released. It includes an array of new features that make accessing resources and information easier. We have updated and added new critical documents for professionals and youth. We developed a new membership tool for Florida Youth SHINE members to receive important leadership training and resources. We also have an array of free training and workshops available. We hope you enjoy this important new tool!

■ **Heightened Visibility**

From panels to podcasts, traditional print news stories to radio interviews, Florida's Children First and Florida Youth SHINE participated as experts to the media and beyond. Their expertise was featured at conferences and committees around the state and across the country.

■ **Championing Children's Rights & Representation**

As longtime proponents of children receiving high-quality legal representation, we proudly added children's rights attorney Christine Smith to our staff. With her on board, we were able to provide guidance, brief advice, assistance, and direct representation to more than 190 individuals. Excited by the progress made so far, we focused on capacity building to add additional children's rights attorneys in the coming year so we can help more children receive the high-quality legal representation they need and deserve. She updated several important resources for kids and caregivers alike, and she developed a multi-part training series specifically for youth so they can understand all of their rights.

■ **Lifting Up Youth Voices**

Our efforts to improve the lives of youth by presenting new opportunities for them to advocate and achieve more, expanded again this year to include:

- **9,701 youth** benefitted from our advocacy efforts
- **100+ opportunities** for the voices of youth to be heard, valued, and respected
- **And a remarkable 6 recommendations** from Florida Youth SHINE's innovative "#YouthcanSHINEwith" policy report were actually implemented by the State, and their second policy report was developed and released.



■ Landmark Change

After last year's big legislative win, Florida Youth SHINE's young advocates were motivated to pursue another important topic outlined in their "Youth can SHINE with" policy report: the need for increased After Care support as they age out of the system. Too many were struggling to get by on their own at 18. They prioritized this issue, prepared their advocacy efforts, passionately told their stories, and, I am delighted to report, their voices were heard! **The bill passed unanimously and now, more than 1,835 additional young adults are eligible for these essential benefits.**

That's the power of youth voice.

It's the foundation of all we do and sets these young changemakers in the child welfare system on a path to a more stable, successful future. It's what we strive for day by day, and why it is so rewarding to realize success again this year.

Of course, we did not accomplish this alone. We are privileged to collaborate with brilliant and dedicated community partners and benefit from a network of concerned, caring donors who share our mission to protect and advance the rights of our most vulnerable children so they can have a future that shines brightly. Your generosity sustains our work, and enables us to continue making progress.

As we look ahead to our priorities for next year, please join us on this journey once again. Together, we can continue to transform lives and build a brighter Florida for all Florida's children.

Sincerely,

Geori B. Seldine
Executive Director





A Word From The **BOARD CHAIR**

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

I am enormously proud to present our 2024 Annual Impact Report. I do so with immense reflection and gratitude, as your support this year helped Florida's Children First make a lasting difference in the lives of more than 24,000 children and young adults in Florida's child welfare system.

I am also extremely fortunate. Not only have I dedicated my life to advocating for children's rights, through Florida's Children First, the nonprofit I founded nearly 25 years ago, I have had the great fortune to work side by side with some of Florida's finest child advocates who, like me, are committed to making enduring, systemic improvements to the system of care and the lives of children in Florida's child welfare system.

Many of these individuals serve on our board of directors, committees, or support our mission in countless ways. Several comprise our small but mighty team of innovative and selfless professionals who work in service to our most vulnerable youth. I thank each one of you for your contribution to the success you see reflected in the following pages.

Over the last two dozen years, the number of lives we have impacted through our work is staggering. It's something I am very proud of, and an accomplishment that would not have been achieved without your unwavering support for the work we do.

But when you look beyond the numbers, you discover the real stories: ones of love, resilience, hope, and transformation.

A few of those stories are featured in this report. You'll read about new initiatives; about organizations and companies that have joined us on our journey; and you'll meet some amazing young adults who have found a family through Florida Youth SHINE. Please know your support has helped them move one step closer to realizing their passion, their purpose, and their full potential.

Each program we offer is more than just a service—it's a lifeline. When we talk about these programs, we are really talking about our team of 300+ dedicated young FYS change makers, our phenomenal, forward-thinking staff, and our loyal supporters. Together, we are driving change. We are providing a support system that helps create every success story. Together, we are the reason so many children can harbor hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Thank you for being a pivotal part of our success story. I encourage you to share this report with others, so they too can be a catalyst for change by being part of the Florida's Children First family.

With sincere gratitude,

Howard Talenfeld
Board President

OUR MISSION, VISION, AND WORK

■ Our Mission

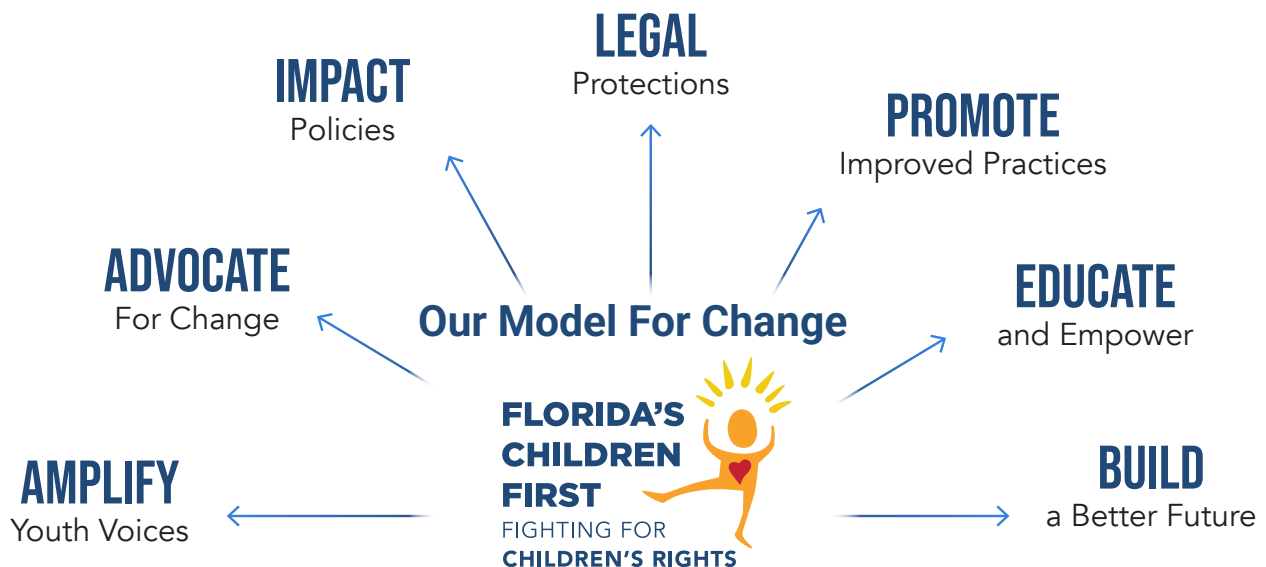
Florida's Children First is a non-profit, nonpartisan, independent advocacy organization committed to protecting and advancing the rights of children and youth impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and disability systems through systemic reform, education, youth voice, and promoting high-quality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

■ Our Vision

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

■ Our Work

We impact the lives of Florida's children, advocating for their rights and creating an environment where they can soar.



Overview of ORGANIZATION PROGRAMS

For over two decades, Florida's Children First has been committed to addressing the complex challenges faced by youth, especially those in the dependency system. Our programs fill gaps, complement existing services, and focus on the specific needs of this population.

We offer programs that:

- Champion the rights and protection of children
- Support their journey through the system to independent living
- Elevate their voices and drive their educational success
- Advocate for and provide high-quality legal representation to ensure their safety and needs are met

Above all, our programs reinforce our belief that every child deserves to be safe, nurtured, housed, and heard. ♥

Education & Training



Professional Training & Workshops

Every year, we offer a new series of free training workshops that keep those who interact or care for youth in the system informed and up-to-date on current issues and changes in benefits, policies, and practices. CLE credits for professionals are provided and sessions are accessible on our website's "resource center" for future reference.



Publications

We produce, update, and distribute free fact sheets, guidebooks, charts, and other informational tools on critical issues industry professionals and youth alike need. Publications are also written and designed to be youth-friendly so youth can better understand the content and access benefits and services. All publications can be found on our website:

FloridasChildrenFirst.org



Youth Education & Leadership Training

From leadership training to empowering self-advocacy, our youth training programs are crafted specifically for the needs of youth in care. Through our innovative Florida Youth SHINE program, which is led by a team with lived experience in the system, youth find an environment that nurtures genuine peer connections and motivates participation. We equip youth with the tools and confidence they need to reach high and become confident, fearless leaders they were born to be.

Professional Assistance & Advocacy



Florida Dependency Law Center

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



Professional Support

The Florida's Children First team of experts offers guidance, training, technical assistance, and ongoing support for lawyers, judges, case workers, and frontline professionals in the child welfare arena. We keep them abreast of evolving laws, regulations, benefits, best practices and provide resources and daily troubleshooting.



Information, Brief Advice, and Referrals

Regarded as the "go to" source for information on child welfare issues, programs, benefits, and related topics, Florida's Children First staff and attorneys promptly respond to inquiries submitted via email, phone and our website.



Advocacy Initiatives

Advocacy drives our activities at all levels. On a legislative level, we propose, draft, and comment on new legislation, providing comprehensive documentation on the potential impact of proposed bills. We file amicus briefs asserting children's rights and aid in the appointment of attorneys for them. We also advise the Executive branch, offering insights on new rules, and participate on task forces, panels, and forums that shape policy.



High Quality Legal Representation

We provide independent, personalized guidance, brief advice, and quality representation to ensure more youth receive the representation they need and deserve and to be sure they have a voice in the proceedings that shape their lives.

Youth Leadership & Empowerment



Florida Youth SHINE

The award-winning Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) program offers leadership, mentorship, and advocacy opportunities to youth ages 13-26 in the child welfare system and that experienced homelessness. Through leadership training, engagement with positive mentor role models, a curriculum crafted to address their unique needs, and one-of-a-kind opportunities, youth conquer challenges, gain confidence, and emerge as goal-oriented, accomplished young adults. Emboldened by their experiences in Florida Youth SHINE, these young changemakers drive positive change by elevating and amplifying their voices and leading their peers in care.



Florida Youth SHINE 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.



Florida Youth SHINE Local & 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 personal narratives and astute recommendations spotlight the challenges faced by youth in care, driving significant improvements throughout the care system.



Florida Youth SHINE Statewide Conference

Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors convene annually in Tallahassee for Children’s Week. They engage with legislators and agency officials as they advocate for vital child welfare issues. Prior to each state capitol visit, FYS members undergo intensive training covering teamwork, leadership, public speaking, legislative processes, advocacy skills, and more. Four times a year, Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors also come together for intensive advocacy and leadership workshops. Held around the state, these quarterly meetings allow youth to interact with peers in care from other areas to bond and bring attention to the issues and solutions affecting youth in care.



Florida Youth SHINE Policy & Initiatives Program

Nearly 20 youth meet virtually twice monthly, playing an active role in researching issues, advocacy work, learning the legislative process, and implementing youth-led projects to impact effective policy change. This vital program hones youth leadership and organizational skills.



Florida Youth SHINE Peer Connection Events

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.



I am really happy to be part of Florida Youth SHINE and know that we continue to impact current and future youth in foster care by using our voices to help fix the system where it is broken, and to help lead and support my peers in care.

-Kyle Johnson, Florida Youth SHINE 2024 Statewide Chair



2024 PROGRAM IMPACT

In 2024 we proudly continued to educate, advocate, enlighten and empower youth, and make meaningful change in the system of care throughout Florida. Our efforts again this year yielded impacts that touched the lives of thousands, and will continue to improve outcomes and opportunities for children and youth for years to follow. These accomplishments were the result of long-term strategic planning, forward thinking, and the support of a broad coalition of supporters committed to being a leader in enduring systemic change.

Advocacy Impact

8

8 New Publications with direct youth input were created and distributed across Florida.

190

190 Individuals received guidance, assistance, and direct representation from our children's rights attorneys.

2,982

2,982 Children in foster care, a record 110% increase, had their own attorney to represent their needs, a reflection of our efforts.

\$298K

\$298,000 is the value of the 450 hours of legal professional services donated to Florida's Children First in 2024.

6,038

6,038 Individuals trained on child welfare issues, including workshops led or with participation from Florida Youth SHINE members sharing their experiences to offer a candid youth perspective.

9,701

9,701 Children and Youth benefitted from our advocacy efforts.

2024 FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE IMPACT

44

44 Youth and mentors met with more than 80 decision makers and presented at legislative committee hearings to successfully advocate for statewide support for vital support services for youth who age of state care at 18 years old.

100+

100+ Monthly, quarterly and annual meetings, celebrations, workshops and special events were led by youth, to gain leadership and advocacy skills.

1,835

1,835 Youth previously not eligible for Aftercare benefits, including mental health, career, financial, and emergency funding support, will now qualify for this much needed support when they transition to independent living at 18.

7,850

7,850 hours of youth education, advocacy, emotional healing, life skills and leadership training, and unique opportunities that lead to personal growth, development, and mentorship.



Through 2024 OUR IMPACT INCLUDES:



\$8,482,732 in donated professional services



38,335 people trained statewide on child welfare topics.



18,982 pro bono hours donated to support children's rights



60 publications on children's rights distributed statewide.



110,547 hours dedicated to youth advocacy and training.



40 amicus briefs filed & 50 child protection bills supported or passed.



IMPACTING LAWS, POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES

For more than two decades, Florida's Children First has made transformative changes in the child welfare system that enable children to reach high and achieve their dreams. While others feed, shelter, and provide basic needs, we dive into the high-impact programs, supports, and systemic changes that give kids the foundations to flourish.

By impacting laws and policies, we have:



Secured the option for youth to remain in foster care until age 21.



Paved the way for FREE in-state college tuition until age 28 for youth from foster care, relative care, or those experiencing homelessness.



Made obtaining a driver's license and insurance possible for youth in foster care.



Enhanced youth representation in court decisions.



Removed barriers to normalcy, allowing participation in activities like sports and sleepovers – becoming a national model.



Spearheaded laws to support sibling unity.



Reduced overmedication and unnecessary psychotropic drug prescriptions.



Fought for rights of sex-trafficked children, ensuring they receive appropriate services.



“If it weren't for the Florida Youth SHINE members fighting for the Extended Foster Care program and college tuition exemptions, I might never have attended college.”

-Selena Rose, Florida Youth SHINE

STANDOUT MOMENTS OF 2024

Florida Youth SHINE Opens New Chapter

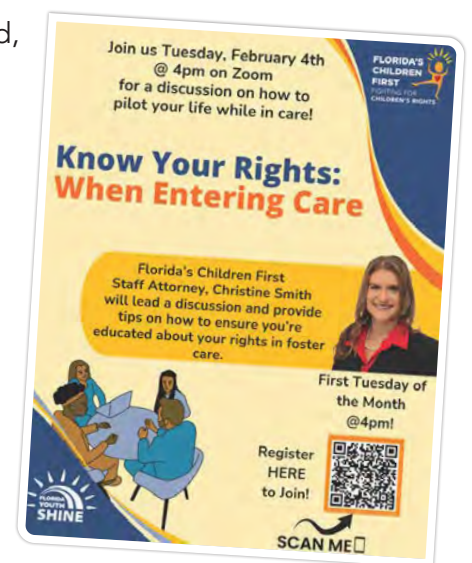


We were excited to add our newest Florida Youth SHINE chapter in 2024 – the Brevard County Chapter! Our new FYS Community Engagement Manager, Kaya Lee, was busy building youth membership and new chapter development in underserved areas. Partnering with Smile for Budgie, which is supported by Brevard Family Partnerships, the Brevard chapter was the first to come online since Kaya joined the team, setting the stage for a new era of youth advocacy and engagement opportunities throughout Brevard County and other regions of Florida, including Jacksonville and Gainesville, due to launch in 2025.

Direct Legal Services for Youth Now Offered

Fulfilling a founding goal of the organization and a longtime statewide need, adding Children’s Rights Attorney Christine Smith to the FCF team has enabled Florida’s Children First to now offer direct legal services to children and young adults in the child welfare system. In addition to providing guidance, advice, and brief representation to many youths during the year, more than 18 youth clients received direct legal counsel. Among those she counseled were two homeless teens, whom she helped receive services, which they were now eligible for due to passage of FYS’ expanded Aftercare bill. **This illustrates the direct impact of FCF’s advocacy work on the lives of children in state care, and how Florida Youth SHINE contributes to that impact.**

Christine also updated many of our resource documents, created new publications, and developed a new educational series for youth, adult supporters, and case managers to educate young people on all aspects of knowing their rights.





FYS Advocacy Leads to LANDMARK CHANGE TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES

Using their Florida Youth SHINE “#YouCanSHINEwith” policy report as a guide, Florida Youth SHINE chose to tackle an important topic in 2024: **Expansion of Aftercare Services.**

Aftercare Services help young people from foster care, to life on their own at 18, offering connections to vital community services and the temporary financial support they need to achieve self-sufficiency. It’s a lifeline for kids aging out of care.

However, many youth who were placed with relatives, non-relatives, or were adopted were ineligible for Aftercare Services and had NO support when they aged out of care, making their transition to independence intensely scary and challenging.

So, Florida Youth SHINE young advocates met with over 80 legislators and took numerous trips to Tallahassee, taking off from work and school to provide personal testimony on the need for this bill.

Legislators were moved by their stories and their courage, and the **“Improving Outcomes for Youth From Foster Care Bill,” (SB564/HB631)** passed unanimously in each committee and became law in July 2024. It’s a testament to the power of youth voice and the important work of Florida’s Children First. Now, this critical population of young adults can have the support they need to thrive.

Scan the QR Code to view our **Aftercare Eligibility Explained** document.



Aftercare Eligibility Expanded - Thousands Can Benefit

Senate Bill 564 (2024) Made the Biggest Revision to Independent Living Statutes Since the Creation of Postsecondary Education Services and Support and Extended Foster Care.

WHAT IS AFTERCARE?
Aftercare is services and financial support for young adults who were previously in the foster care system. The Aftercare Law is Florida Statute §409.1451(3)A.

AFTERCARE SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Mentoring or tutoring
- Mental Health Services
- Substance abuse counseling
- Life skills classes
- Parenting classes
- Job and Career skills training
- Counselor consultations
- Temporary financial assistance
- Financial literacy skills training
- Daycare referrals
- Educational extracurricular activities
- Emergency financial assistance to overcome barriers to self-sufficiency

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR AFTERCARE?
Young adults who were previously in the foster care system if they are now between the ages of 18 and 23.

AND

- Were placed by the dependency court into out of home care for 6 months or more, after they turned age 14 and either:
 - Aged out when they were still in out of home care,
 - Were adopted,
 - Were placed into guardianship, or
 - Were emancipated by a court prior to turning age 18.

Out of home care includes youth placed in foster care and those placed with relatives or non-relatives, whether or not they obtained a foster parent license.

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How This Bill Impacts Lives



At 18, in my senior year of high school, I was kicked out of my adoptive family's home. Despite spending nearly my entire life in foster care, I suddenly became an unaccompanied homeless youth, ineligible for all Independent Living Supports, simply because I was adopted 4 MONTHS before turning 16. Many youth fall in this gray area, as I did, and find themselves chronically homeless, in dangerous environments, hopeless and alone. With passage of this bill, they have the opportunity to not become another failed statistic and know they are not forgotten."

- Tee Lamore, Florida Youth SHINE Statewide Chair

Testifying to Senate Children, Families, Elder Affairs, Jan 17, 2024



Youth placed with a family member, non-relative, or adopted are ineligible for support after 18, making the transition to adulthood very tough. One FYS peer was kicked out of his grandmother's house when he turned 18. While pursuing his bachelor's and graduate degree, he became homeless several times, while working and going to school full time. This bill will help young people who find themselves on their own navigating adulthood without support."

- Selena Rose, Florida Youth SHINE

Testifying to the House Health & Human Services Committee, Feb 15, 2024



When I turned 18 in my senior year of high school I was not eligible for Aftercare Services, yet I definitely needed support. I worked two jobs while trying to maintain my GPA. I struggled to balance this, became stressed, lost sleep, and needed services. It became more difficult when I moved to Tallahassee for college and had to figure out where I would live. All I had was my first month of rent and gas to get there, yet I needed to complete college to be successful. I do not want others to be in the same situation. This is why I support HB631."

- Aheim King, Florida Youth SHINE

Testifying to Senate Children, Families, Elder Affairs, Jan 17, 2024



Where and with whom young adults lived when they were children should NOT be a deciding factor. All foster children have the same need for transitional support. We frequently don't have ANYWHERE to go for help, like parents or relatives, so these emergency supports ensure we don't become homeless, we can access mental health services, and have the economic and housing security we need to achieve our dreams, like I am pursuing mine of becoming a first generation graduate, a nonprofit founder, and your future Miss America!"

- Sofia Coffey, Florida Youth SHINE Vice Chair

Testifying to the Senate Children & Families committee, Jan. 17, 2024

Expanding the population of youth eligible for Aftercare Services enables more youth in care to receive the financial assistance and services to lead strong, productive adult lives. Thank you to all Florida Youth SHINE supporters for giving kids the ability to achieve their dreams. **Thanks to your support, Youth Can SHINE!**

Florida Youth SHINE Educates Advocates Statewide & Nationally

Florida Youth SHINE's advocacy and expertise was in demand in 2024. FYS youth advocated on Capitol Hill with national partners Journey to Success, Leaders for Change, and Foster Youth in Action, and joined a roundtable with other national youth organizations to discuss statewide initiatives. FYS member Alexia Nechayev spoke on the importance of the federal Foster Youth to Independence Voucher, which benefits youth aging out of care. Sharing her personal experiences, she urged other states to follow FYS' lead and work with their Public Housing Authority to accept the vouchers statewide—an advocacy initiative FYS prioritized for the coming year.

FYS also took part in the annual Florida DCF Conference in Orlando, where they participated in a breakfast with the DCF Secretary and leadership. FCF Executive Director Geori Seldine delivered the opening address at the three-day Youth Villages convening on housing for youth from foster care—a critical challenge. FYS Statewide Chair Sophia Coffey, who experienced homelessness when aging out of care, joined a panel, and FYS hosted a team-building workshop for all youth attending the conference.

Florida's Children First Honored at AFP's Annual "National Philanthropy Day" Event

In November, the Association of Financial Professionals' (AFP) 37th National Philanthropy Day luncheon honored Florida's Children First and Board Chair Howard Talenfeld for their unique contributions and dedication to nonprofit causes. This annual celebration of community champions recognized the fundraising efforts of founder and board chair, Howard Talenfeld, and FCF's work advocating for better outcomes for society's most vulnerable youth.



Florida Youth SHINE's New Policy Report

Buoyed by the success of their initial Policy Report—which resulted in six key FYS recommendations being implemented statewide—Florida Youth SHINE launched the new #YouthCanSHINEwith: Youth Voice Action Campaign in March 2024. During the July Quarterly Meeting, FYS conducted a survey that was shared with chapters statewide to gather youth input on priority areas for the next Policy Report. The four priorities selected were:

- Supportive Adults and Effective Case Managers & Connections
- Housing and Food Security
- Individualized Mental Health Supports
- Youth Engagement

The FYS Policy & Initiatives Team then compiled a 20-page report outlining these priorities, including personal stories illustrating the need for policy changes and specific recommendations for improvement. They also identified housing insecurity as their focus area for 2025.



We updated our Website & Online Access
Scan to visit our updated website with new tools, resources, and ways to connect.



Honoring 2024's OUTSTANDING CHILD ADVOCATES & YOUTH



Celebrating the remarkable contributions to the well-being of children made by some of Florida's most dedicated child advocates, the annual "Outstanding Advocates for Children Awards" fundraisers once again honored an exceptional group of individuals and organizations and, raised more than \$350,000 for Florida's Children First.

From innovative nonprofits to fierce defenders of children's rights, the awards recognized unsung heroes working daily to help children and six brave youths from foster care whose resilience, passion for helping their peers, and courage are helping transform the future of Florida's foster care system.

2024 Outstanding Advocates for Children Honorees

Broward

- **Keiser University**, Outstanding Champion for Children
- **SOS Children's Villages Florida**, Outstanding Nonprofit Champion for Children
- **Takara Young**, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Miami

- **Trudy Petkovich**, Outstanding Foster and Adoptive Parent
- **Senator Ileana Garcia**, Outstanding Legislative Champion for Children
- **Demarco Mott**, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Orlando

- **Foster Youth of America**, Outstanding Nonprofit Champion for Children
- **Wekiva Foster Closet**, Outstanding Nonprofit Advocate for Children
- **Michael Farbsten**, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Palm Beach

- **The Hands and Feet**, Outstanding Nonprofit Champion for Children
- **Mike Yackulics**, Outstanding Youth Mentor
- **Jesepi King**, Outstanding Youth Advocate

Tampa

- **Patricia Alten**, Outstanding Child Advocate
- **Suncoast Voices for Children**, Outstanding Nonprofit Advocate for Children
- **Isaac Cedeno**, Outstanding Youth Advocate
- **Austin Lawson**, Outstanding Youth Advocate





Austin Lawson

Florida Youth SHINE, Administrative Chair 2024

Though the issues facing children in foster care are complex, the solutions don't need to be. Caring

adults can make all the difference, and Austin Lawson knows this firsthand.

Austin's early years were marked by instability, disruption, and situations no child should endure. Placed into foster care as a child, he was moved from place to place, across the state. His fifth placement was a short-term "temporary" shelter where kids are supposed to stay temporarily. Austin languished there for over a year.

While there, he was not allowed to contact anyone. He lost connections with family and friends. He wasn't allowed to participate in pastimes he enjoyed like the football team and gaming club. He couldn't leave the facility, see friends, or do any activities kids his age take for granted.

Desperate to get out of this facility, he found another placement through a volunteer at his shelter. She took him into her home, helped get him the support he needed, and have a more "normal" life. Most importantly, she helped him realize that nothing he went through was HIS fault, it was the adults who should have looked out for his well-being that were at fault.

Eventually, this foster family became his Forever Family when they adopted him. Now in a supportive environment, Austin's voice started coming out. He began volunteering at the Foster Closet. He got involved in Florida Youth

SHINE, where he flourished and developed into a passionate youth advocate. In 2024 he took a leadership role in FYS, joining the Statewide Board of Directors.

Over the many years he has been involved in Florida Youth SHINE, Austin met with dozens of legislators to successfully advocate for change to the foster care system. In fact, he was a compelling voice advocating for the landmark "Education for Youth in Foster Care Bill" which will now educate youth on their rights and provide an ombudsman youth can contact when their rights are being violated – so no other kids go through what he did. In 2024, he also participated in successfully advocating for passage of the "Young Adult Housing Support Bill," a bill that will help many of his peers in care.

Today, Austin has obtained his GED and is working, living life, but still involved as an outspoken advocate and a great role model for his FYS "family."



I extend my deepest gratitude to my mentors, family, friends, and the unwavering dedication of the entire Florida Youth SHINE team. Your belief in me has been the driving force behind my journey. Your guidance, encouragement, and support shaped me into the person I am today. Together, we have made a tangible difference in the lives of young people across Florida. I'm committed to continuing to advocate for FYS and empowering young people to reach their full potential."

- Austin Lawson



KEISER
UNIVERSITY

Keiser University

Corporate Sponsor & Board Participation

When Florida's Children First sent out their very first appeal letter soliciting donation

support for the newly formed nonprofit, the first check that arrived in the mail was from Keiser University. Fast forward more than two decades, and Keiser University continues to be a loyal supporter of Florida's Children First and a valued ally in the fight to give kids the future they deserve.

In fact, their support for the organization and the needs of Florida's children goes deeper than the donation checks they write. Over the years, Keiser University and its leadership team have championed numerous FCF initiatives to protect and expand the rights and protections of Florida's children, and ensure youth have the tools and opportunities needed to thrive, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

In 2014, when the Governor appointed Keiser University Vice Chancellor Belinda Keiser to participate in Florida's Constitution Revision Commission, she worked with FCF to identify areas benefiting children that should be constitutionally addressed. She submitted what is now known as "Proposal 40 - Establishing the Right to Counsel for Dependent Children." Though this provision was not adopted into the revised state constitution, Mrs. Keiser and the university have continually supported efforts to provide counsel for children in the child

welfare system, those with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations. They have voiced their support to legislative committees to help FCF/FYS bills gain approval over the years. Indeed, their efforts have often been behind the scenes and gone unheralded – but their hearts were always with making sure Florida's laws, practices, and policies provide youth impacted by the child welfare system the foundations they need to have a future filled with promise and possibility.

Always committed to enriching the lives of Florida children by providing educational and workforce opportunities for low-income and disadvantaged students, in 2024 they pledged to provide a scholarship for a deserving youth from the foster care system. And, in 2024, Keiser University's Vice Chancellor of the Graduate School, Robert M. Keiser, joined the Florida's Children First board of Directors, where he can work together with FCF to improve circumstances and opportunities for Florida's children.



Keiser University is a leader in providing social mobility gains for students. I am pleased to join the FCF Board so that I may continue our work in meeting the needs of Florida's next generation of young leaders. As a member of the FCF Board, I am eager to serve the children in our community in new and important ways."

- Robert M. Keiser
Vice Chancellor, Keiser University



Martavius Lowery

Florida Youth SHINE Alumni

Martavius “Marty” Lowery’s childhood was marked by instability, uncertainty, and very

little love or nurturing. He entered care at age two and, over the years, was moved around so frequently he barely had time to make friends, adapt to a new school, or learn the house rules of a new placement before being shipped off to the next one.

Relocating to over 30 placements during his time in care created a challenging environment to grow up in. Separated from his siblings, he had no sense of belonging and a strong sense of abandonment. Anger issues would often surface, prompting him to be moved yet again to another foster home, continuing the cycle of volatility.

Marty joined the Seminole Chapter of Florida Youth SHINE when it was first created and became an active member and a passionate advocate. He also found a family of sorts, with his FYS peers and mentors. He evolved into an articulate advocate for himself and other youth in care who, he discovered, faced similar challenges. He attended quarterly FYS meetings. He spoke on panels to educate the public about life in care. The digital story he created about his experiences was shown to over 3000 attendees at an annual DCF Summit and is still used to give foster parents and others working with kids better insight into the mindset of children in their charge.

In Florida Youth SHINE, his live testimonies and advocacy led to passage of several pieces of landmark legislation, including the Keys to Independence, Education for Youth in Foster Care, and the After Care bills, among others.

Marty’s ability to drive and obtain insurance through the Keys program enables him to now work as a thriving car insurance professional, a career he loves.

Even as he aged out of Florida Youth SHINE, he has remained involved with his Florida Youth SHINE and FCF family. He was part of the FCF Strategic Planning committee. He has been a great mentor and sounding board to FYS peers and new FYS members. And he has vowed to be part of the new Florida Youth SHINE alumni group that is set to launch in 2025.

Far from letting his childhood trauma define him as an adult, Marty has turned those experiences into being a leader, a changemaker, a role model, and an important part of his forever Florida Youth SHINE family.



“The whole village – Florida’s Children First, Florida Youth SHINE, the CBC’s, the mentors, and the many people and organizations who provide their time and support to help Florida Youth SHINE continue their amazing work – helped me move from a trauma-filled childhood to a flourishing adult. I am so grateful for that support and will continue to be involved with Florida Youth SHINE to help the next generation of kids in care succeed.”

- Martavius “Marty” Lowery

ELEVATING YOUTH VOICES



I extend my deepest gratitude to my mentors, family, friends, and the unwavering dedication of the entire Florida Youth SHINE team. Your belief in me has been the driving force behind my journey. Your guidance, encouragement, and support shaped me into the person I am today. Together, we have made a tangible difference in the lives of young people across Florida. I'm committed to continuing to advocate for FYS and empowering young people to reach their full potential."

- **Isaac Cedeno**, Florida Youth SHINE Board Delegate
2024 Outstanding Youth Advocate, Tampa



I've changed quite a bit since joining Florida Youth SHINE. I appreciate what they do for the foster care community and hope to be a part of their continued efforts to make Florida a better place for the youth. I was in the system for years until I eventually aged out. I've seen both the good, bad, and ugly sides of the system. While I appreciate all the benefits I reap today from the system - like my college waiver and my assistance finding housing - I'm glad to be a part of an organization dedicated to bringing more good things and positive change for youth in care, giving them a chance at leading a good, strong life."

- **Jesepi "Jamar" King**, Florida Youth SHINE
2024 Outstanding Youth Advocate, Palm Beach

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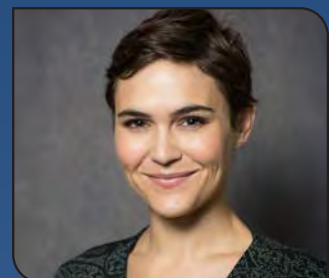
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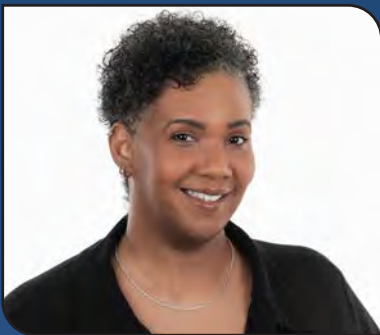
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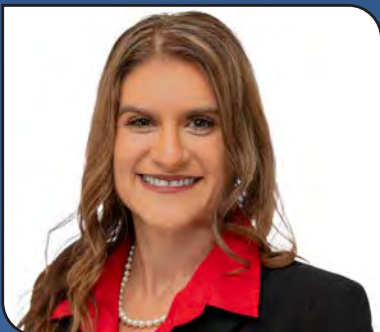
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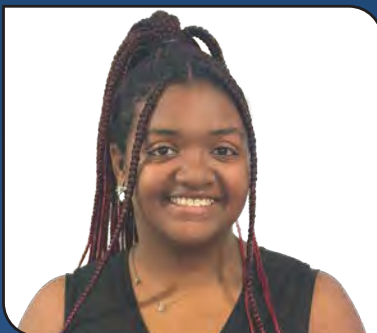
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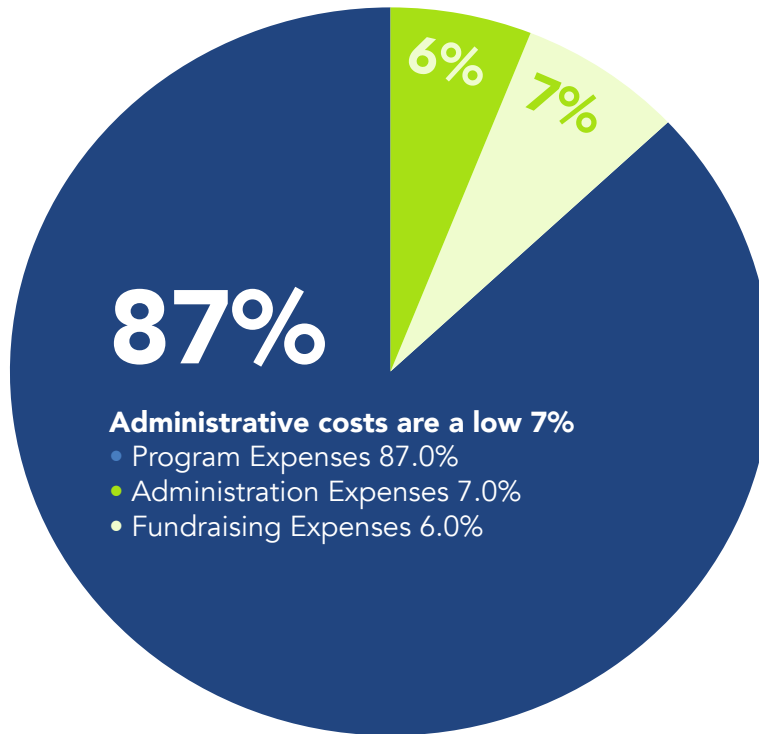
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OUR 2024 FINANCIALS



INCOME

Grants	\$926,156
Contributions	\$542,586
Investment/Dividend Income	\$38,689
Total Income	\$1,507,431

EXPENSES

Legislative Education	\$38,675
Salaries	\$445,900
FYS Operating Expenses	\$245,843
Occupancy	\$48,376
Events	\$70,873
Training	\$735
Fundraising	\$2,936
General Operating	\$562,005
Total Expenses	\$1,415,343



The Florida's Children First Accountability & Finance Score is: 100

Only 2% of charities rated by Charity Navigator have earned a 100 out of 100 score for Accountability and Finance. A perfect score on this measure reflects adherence to the highest standards for transparency, financial health, sustainability, trustworthiness and commitment to governance practices and policies.

.....▶ Give with confidence to a **4-Star Charity** 

2024 SUPPORTERS

With deep gratitude, we thank every individual and organization that generously supported our work this year. Your exceptional act of giving enabled us to fulfill our mission and our commitment to providing training, education, advocacy, and a world of hope to thousands of children, families, and professionals throughout Florida. Because of you, we have planted the seeds of happiness, hope, and success for their future. Thank You!

\$25,000 & ABOVE

Funding Florida Legal Aide
Funding Florida Legal Aide – IOTA
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Kelley Kronenberg
Kim & Brock McBride
Leslie L. Alexander Foundation
Paul Palank Memorial Foundation
Shane McGee Foundation
Stuart Building Products
Youth Villages

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Anonymous Donation
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Children's Services Council - Broward County
Christopher's Kitchen
Coffey I McPharlin
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Florida
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Sharon & Mitchell Berger
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The Children's Trust
The Hope Fund / Broward Police Benevolent Association
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Coral Gables Trust Company
David Lawrence
Davida Franklin
Debbie Dickinson /Thermaband
Deborah & David Schopp
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FISKE
FoundCare
Grace Noethen
Hersh Kirtman Injury Law
JAFCO
Jane Horst
Jane Moy
Joan Readding
Kathleen & Don Sokolick Charitable Fund
KDST CPAs
Lehrman Law
Linda & Steven Caster
LMPons Consulting
Lyris & Eric Newman
Marsh MMA
Melissa Lader Barnhardt & Family
Neumann Construction & Roofing
Olson Group International
Panter Panter & Sampedro
RIMKUS
Robert Swindell & John Cotter
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Rosalind & Bernie Perlmutter
Ross Goodman
Setnor Byer Insurance
Stabilify
Stiles Property Management
Susan Sternberg
The DePrimo Law Firm
Tin Fish
Tracey & Matt Blair
Transworld Business Brokers
US Legal Support
Westcare Foundation - The Village South
Winston & Strawn

LOOKING AHEAD

We eagerly anticipate the year ahead! We will be reaching a big milestone by celebrating the 20th anniversary of Florida Youth SHINE. Guided by our new Strategic Plan, we plan to make progress in building our team of children’s rights attorneys, ramping up our training schedule, and continuing to deliver on our promise to meet the needs of the youth we serve. Below is a glimpse into some of our priorities for the year ahead.

■ Celebrating 20 Years of Florida Youth SHINE Success

What began two decades ago as a mission to invite youth to the table so they can be involved in decisions being made affecting them, grew into an award-winning, system-changing force for positive change in the child welfare system called Florida Youth SHINE. As we head into the new year we look forward to celebrating the powerhouse of impact Florida Youth SHINE has achieved in it’s 20 years, as well as launching some exciting Florida Youth SHINE initiatives that speak to the evolving needs of youth in care, the housing insecurity they experience, and to deepen the curriculum to help make their transition to independent living successful. Among the projects planned are:

- Starting a Florida Youth SHINE alumni group, where former FYS members can stay connected and provide role models and mentors for current members
- More leadership/life skills training opportunities, including an intensive workshop for developing new chapter leaders
- Expanding the Florida Youth SHINE chapter network to new areas
- Creating a new series of Florida Youth SHINE Digital Stories, which are powerful short videos conceived, created, and narrated by youth, sharing intimate chapters of their life in care.

Paramount will be sharing the power of youth voices in new and meaningful ways.

■ Expanding our Team of Children’s Rights Attorneys

Building on the success of the past year, and fulfilling another goal of our Strategic Planning process, we eagerly anticipate further developing our team of children’s rights attorneys in the new year. We look to adding Children’s Rights Attorneys in new areas of the State and help field more inquiries and requests each month. With more people power, we can help fill a gap in the system by providing additional free advice, counsel, and representation to children and young adults.

■ Increasing our Educational Training Schedule & Tools

Our free training workshops, which offer CLE credits, are attended by hundreds of professionals, caregivers, foster parents, lawyers, and others who interact with youth in the child welfare system every year. With so many critical topics to cover and changes to existing laws and policies happening, in the year ahead we look forward to expanding the schedule to nearly one workshop a month. Also in the works is a series of “lunch and learn” type workshops specifically designed for youth attendees, on topics generated from their feedback.

■ Expanding Our Resource Library

New and updated publications, tip sheets, booklets, videos and other resources will be created to provide useful references for those who need timely, up-to-date information to best meet the needs of youth in their charge, or those they interact with. These tools will also be youth-friendly, so young people can also have a free, easily accessible resource portal to find information and answers to the many complexities of the system they face daily.

■ Aligning with New Partners, Collaborators, and Advocates

Nurturing strong partnerships has been a key driver of our success since our inception as they provide access to resources, expertise, markets, or problem solvers that are often difficult to acquire alone. Strategic collaborations create mutually beneficial alliances rooted in trust and aligned goals, which spur innovation, accelerate growth and success. In the new year, we look forward to developing new alliances, partnerships, and committees that will contribute to better opportunities, options, and results for young people.

■ Elevating the Voice of the Youth & Championing High-Quality Legal Representation

Our dedication to ensuring young people in care have opportunities to lift their voices and be an integral part of the decision-making process remains resolute. In the new year, we will stand by this commitment to ensure youth have an attorney who is there to guide them, stand by them, and support them as they navigate their way to excellence and independence.

Indeed, we remain committed to ensuring every child in Florida is safe, heard, and has the opportunity to flourish.

We welcome you to join us on this important journey.



YOUR SUPPORT MAKES A DIFFERENCE



Join Us in
**Shaping Brighter
Futures**

Your donation isn't just a gift – it's a declaration that children's needs come first.

Today, you can transform a child's trajectory toward a brighter tomorrow. With our 4-star charity rating, rest assured your donation directly funds programs that significantly uplift youth.

Donate today – be the catalyst for change in a child's life.

Florida's Children First

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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.



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