



STARS IDEAS

Making

**to improve the
system of care**



Family Support Services
DUVAL • NASSAU • PASCO • PINELLAS

Reflecting on 2023

Fulfilling our Mission



FAMILIES SUPPORTED
& STRENGTHENED

11,386



FAMILIES REUNIFIED

10,135



FOSTER FAMILY HOMES

2,149



FOREVER FAMILIES CREATED

6,847

Community-based care continues to make great strides

Community-based care is the result of a redesign of Florida's child welfare system under the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF)—an initiative that allows nonprofit agencies to provide child welfare services within their local community. It engages competent agencies in the provision of foster care and related services with an increased *local community ownership* of service delivery and design. This statewide reform increases accountability, resource development and system performance.

The transition to community-based care began in 1996, initiated by Governor Jeb Bush and the Florida legislature. By December 2005, the community-based care model had been implemented statewide through a competitive procurement process.

As the lead agency in Florida's Circuits 4 (Duval and Nassau counties) and 6 (Pasco and Pinellas counties), Family Support Services is responsible for administering, outsourcing and managing its services to the community, directly and indirectly, in partnership with other local case management organizations (CMOs). We work with these trusted partners to provide needed services to the children and families we serve.

In Duval and Nassau Counties:

- The LJD Jewish Family & Community Services
- Daniel
- National Youth Advocate Program

In Pasco County:

- Youth and Family Alternatives
- Gulf Coast Jewish Family Community Services
- Camelot Community Care

In Pinellas County:

- Lutheran Services Florida
- Camelot Community Care



Family Support Services

DUVAL • NASSAU • PASCO • PINELLAS

MISSION & VISION

Our mission is to be the leader in providing safety, stability and quality of life for all children by working with the community to strengthen the family unit.

Our vision is that children grow up connected to their own families, supported by families and embraced by the community; that children have the opportunity to achieve in school and to learn to be productive citizens; and that citizens of Duval, Nassau, Pasco and Pinellas counties, organizations and agencies recognize that child protection is a community responsibility and represents the best interests of all county residents.

JENN PETION

A note from the President and CEO



As FSS concludes its 20th anniversary celebration in Duval and Nassau counties and completes its second year of service in Pasco and Pinellas counties, it gives me great joy and tremendous humility to see how our staff and partners continue making strides to improve the system of care in each of our communities.

Collectively, both circuits exceeded several benchmarks, including helping to create more than 500 forever families through adoption; reuniting nearly 700 children with their biological families; and supporting more than 370 newly licensed foster homes.

Kicking off 2024 in our renovated Suncoast and North Florida headquarters is symbolic of our demonstrated commitment to serving as a place of hope and healing for children and families. It will be our local hub to recruit and support kinship, foster, and adoptive families and a place to host community partners for meetings and trainings.

Thank you ... to our board of directors, executive team, staff, contracted partners, community friends and families for making 2023 an exceptional year in furtherance of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenn Petion". The signature is fluid and cursive, matching the name of the person in the portrait to the left.

FSS Executive Team

Jenn Petion, President and Chief Executive Officer

Carlos Cruz, Chief of Staff

Brian Zaletel, Chief Financial Officer

Chris Compton, Vice President Technology and Operating Services

Precious Hill, Vice President Human Resources

Jennifer Pendergraph, Vice President Case Management Services

Tory Wilson, Vice President Placement Resources

Kenneth Barton, General Counsel

Jada Hunter, Executive Director of Community Reinvestment



Family Support Services

Board & Executive Team

On behalf of the board of directors, I'm pleased to be a part of an amazing organization whose leadership and staff continually show immense dedication and commitment to its mission of ensuring the safety, stability, and quality of life for all children.

While the task of navigating the needs of nearly 4,000 children across two circuits and four counties can be intense, the incredible hard work of every FSS team member, contracted partner, judiciary representative, case manager, Guardian Ad Litem, foster and adoptive parent, donor and volunteer makes it all possible.

Thank you for another year of working to strengthen the family unit.

Sincerely,

Joshua Nixon

Joshua Nixon
Chairman of the Board

FSS Board of Directors

Josh Nixon, Chairperson
Grant Thornton

Kisha Shabazz, Vice Chairperson
Macquarie Group

Suzanne Legg, Vice Chairperson
Dayspring Academy

Dr. LaTonya Summers, Vice Chairperson
Jacksonville University

Dr. Jennifer Katzenstein, Vice Chairperson
Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital

Dr. Akilah Pope
Florida Department of Health
(Duval County)

Pastor Ronald Cooney, Director
Calvary Church

Susan Gottesmann-Jarzyna, Director
Story & Song Bookstore/Bistro

Chief Brian Kee, Director
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office

Andrew Park, Director
Park & Eleazer Construction

Shannon Spowls, Director
Business Consultant

Stephanie Cardozo, Director
Southern Group

Paul Madson, Immediate Past Chair
Johnson & Johnson Vision



▲ FSS' new Suncoast headquarters

What we do

As the State of Florida's designated lead agency for community-based care, Family Support Services (FSS) provides services in Duval and Nassau counties (comprising Judicial Circuit 4) as well as Pasco and Pinellas counties (comprising Judicial Circuit 6). We collaborate with trusted local case management organizations (CMOs) to:

- improve the circumstances and outcomes for families
- provide safe homes for neglected and abused children through foster and kinship care
- find forever families for children through adoption



FAMILY PRESERVATION

When families face temporary social-emotional, financial or physical challenges, they often need short-term services and lasting solutions to get them through the crisis and beyond.

If there's no immediate danger or threat to safety, our default position is that children belong with their families whenever possible. Our goal is to provide support that avoids the need for foster care, so children can remain at home. We accomplish this through a series of programs created for families referred by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) investigative teams. The programs are provided by FSS and local CMOs.



FOSTER CARE

Children and teens are placed in foster and kinship care because they've experienced a negative family situation, often marked by trauma, abuse and/or neglect. As a result, life at home becomes temporarily or permanently unsafe—sometimes suddenly. We offer solutions that follow two tracks: First, we place the child temporarily in a home that's been determined to be safe, stable and supportive. At the same time, we work with parents to identify and resolve issues that cause these conditions.

Beyond removing the child from any immediate potential danger, our priority is to establish permanency for the child, while keeping them connected to family roots when possible. That might mean reuniting the child with their family when it becomes safe to do so; in other situations, it might mean matching the child with a loving, committed adoptive family. Either way, we ensure the child's foster care experience is as supportive, impactful and positive as possible.



ADOPTION

In cases where reunification is not in a child's best interest, the courts may terminate parental rights. We do our utmost to place the child in a forever home with a qualified and vetted adoptive family. To meet this constant need, we have ongoing programs to recruit, train and certify prospective adoptive parents.

Most children available for adoption are between 8 and 17 years old. With a priority of finding the best home for each child in care, we start our search with the child's extended family, friends and neighbors. Next, we typically seek families who are the most compatible match for the child based on interests, parenting styles and more. In the process, we provide:

- personalized attention
- ongoing, child-specific training, support and guidance
- helpful resources during and after the adoption process



CARING FOR TEENS

As all children mature, they approach the age at which they must make their own life decisions. For children in foster care, without the guidance of consistent parental figures this natural coming-of-age process can be especially challenging. We use a proactive trauma-responsive system focused on relationships, connection and healing to help teens as they prepare to age out of care. This systematic approach encompasses:

REACHing Teens (Reaching, Empowering, Advocating, Connecting and Healing), a trauma-sensitive training and behavioral framework that examines the challenges of aging out by considering a wide range of perspectives.

CORE (Critical Ongoing Resource family Education) training, a practical module that reduces teen trauma by providing parents with knowledge and skills to meet the needs of teens with emotional and behavioral challenges.

Extended Foster Care, with ongoing support from the case manager, helps foster care youth 18 to 21 years old, who are finishing school or entering the workforce, to make a successful transition to adulthood.

Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) is a financial aid program funded through DCF, that provides a monthly stipend up to \$1,720 to help defray housing, utilities and other living costs while former foster youth are enrolled in college.

Aftercare services provide a backstop for eligible former foster care youth, ages 18 to 23, in crisis. Young adults receive temporary financial assistance and access to community-based emergency resources to mitigate crises or prevent homelessness.



First-year Youth Advisory Council (YAC) members shared experiences and perspectives with peers from Minnesota in an Airstream that had been converted into a private dining space.

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCILS

Empowering teens in care by amplifying voices

Foster kids are just as lovable, with just as much potential, as any other child. That's the most important message the Family Support Services (FSS) Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) want to convey about kids in foster care.

The first council, established in 2022 in Circuit 4 (Duval and Nassau counties), was launched with the support of a mini-grant from the Selfless Love Foundation. A separate council in Circuit 6 (Pasco and Pinellas counties) was established the following year. The goal, according to youth well-being program coordinator Elizabeth McGillin, is to amplify the voices and lived experiences of teens in the system of care.

“As much as we might study and learn, most have not lived in that [foster care] situation”

- Elizabeth McGillin, FSS youth well-being program coordinator

“You can’t fully understand it [the experience] unless you’ve lived it,” explains McGillin. Or at a minimum, heard directly from the kids who have. “So, it’s important to amplify their voices and provide them with the opportunity to share what they think and need. It’s a way of empowering those most directly affected by being in foster care.”

“Youth Advisory Councils are a great addition to our system,” says Jenn Petion, FSS’ president and CEO. “Foster teens absolutely should have a say in their care, and their self-advocacy helps us change the system for the better.”

Daisy Steele-Higgins, 26, a YAC member and advisor who spent about 10 years in foster care, agrees. “I think it’s important to use my experience and knowledge to help those in care and those who have aged out to help spread awareness and knowledge.”

The councils had an entertaining and informative kickoff in 2022—a visit from members of a similar foster teen group sponsored by a Minnesota YMCA. “The youth recognized that much of their experience is universal” (i.e., not limited to any single location), according to McGillin. “It was good to see the changes that are possible” when young people in foster care speak up.



“

I think it's important to use my experience and knowledge to help those in care and those who have aged out to help spread awareness and knowledge.”

- Daisy Steele-Higgins, YAC member

Speaking up can also be emotionally challenging. “We advocate for giving power back that has been taken away,” McGillin explains. At the same time, the agency retains its emphasis on providing trauma-informed care. Those two aims are very much related. “We encourage council members to share from a place that’s genuine and authentic” while taking care to avoid triggering any participants.

Last year, the council’s main goal centered on reducing the stigma associated with children in foster care. “We increased the number of opportunities to communicate with foster parents,” McGillin says. The idea is to give prospective foster parents a way to learn about a foster child in greater detail. Children in care are encouraged to complete a short *Help Me Get To Know You* document (like a personal fact sheet) and a *My Story, My Words* narrative about themselves and their journey. Together, these documents elevate the individual and provide an opportunity to tell their story in their own words, to share perspective on their life.

This year’s goals are more granular. First is to bridge the gaps in communication between children in care and those serving them (i.e., parents, caseworkers, medical and education professionals). “We are truly one team,” McGillin says, and it helps when all the members are aligned.

The second goal is to create training modules for staff working with children at specific moments of transition, when a teen is most vulnerable. This includes when a child first enters the foster care system, when their goals change, when they’re placed into a different home, when their identity evolves, or when they age out of the

system. For each of these milestones, caseworkers will create a transition plan, including training opportunities for the foster parents involved.

A set of formal operating guidelines, establishing basic rules, responsibilities, procedures and expectations for both councils, is also in the final stages of preparation.

The councils continually welcome new members, which ensures a flow of new perspectives. Council members also may move on when they’ve reunited with their birth families, been adopted, relocated to another town, or aged out of the system.

Fortunately, there’s no shortage of interest in joining the councils. Meetings are held monthly and are open to all youth in care. If someone attends at least two meetings, they’re eligible to apply. Membership is open to teens, ages 16 to 23, with at least one year in the foster care system.

Still new for FSS, YACs are off to a promising start. What will they look like a decade from now? McGillin envisions councils with full leadership, performing multiple projects in their communities, and a solid number of members attending meetings and actively engaged with each department at FSS.

Steele-Higgins hopes to see the councils “flourish, so their progress can be part of the reform process. The councils are a solid first step to get engaged with other foster youth. It’s a great way to use your experience in a positive way! It’s also very rewarding to experience being a part of a team that’s engaging in making positive impacts and changes.”

YAC MEMBERS One-on-One



Tiana Irby, 19, grew up in Jacksonville, was in foster care for three years and has been on the YAC for over two years.

▶ Why did you choose to become a member of YAC?

I was in foster care and know how much I wished my voice could have been heard. Also, I know what it's like coming into a foster care home and all these bad expectations of what teens in foster care feel like. I want to be the voice for all teens within foster care who experience those kinds of things. People might not listen to the kids, but they will listen to me.

▶ What goals do you hope to accomplish?

Three goals I plan to achieve by the end of the spring semester are: Find and start applying to internships at a local news station in Tallahassee; attend the career center and fix up my resume, setting up plans to fill in gaps within it; and start networking, putting myself out there, joining organizations that are in my major and more.

▶ Why would you encourage others to join YAC?

Why not? Get yourself involved with something a lot of other kids have been through. It brings great opportunities for you to become more professionally developed. Plus, you have already become an expert at the foster care system. Why not have your story or voice be heard by the next generations of kids?

▶ What two improvements would you like to make in the foster care system?

Change the minds or opinions of foster parents who are unconsciously placing negative traits and unfair expectations on teens because a previous foster child was like that, especially if they haven't even tried to get to know the new teen. It only pushes the teen away and makes them want to prove you right.

Provide help to the birth parents of the children within foster care. Kids come into care thinking that they're going to go back to their parents once they complete all the requirements but there is more to it. Especially with parents who are addicted to drugs or alcohol or who suffer from mental health issues. We need to implement more mental health and substance abuse treatments to help support the parents on this difficult path.



Sofia Elizabeth Degaetano Edwards, 17, was born in Jacksonville and lived in Mexico when she was very young. Growing up in the U.S., she was in

foster care for three years as a teen and has been on the YAC for almost two years.

▶ Why did you choose to become a member of the YAC?

I was invited and told that my voice would be heard to make positive changes for those in foster care.

▶ What goals do you hope to accomplish?

Make the foster system a better place for both kids and foster parents.

▶ Why would you encourage others to join the YAC?

I would encourage others to join the YAC because many people want to help others.

▶ What are two improvements you'd like to make in the foster care system?

Kids need to understand that it may not just be a temporary placement, that it could be much longer.

Caseworkers listening to the kids. I had a great caseworker, but friends have told me horror stories of theirs.

J'Nesise Wilson, 21, (not pictured) grew up in Jacksonville and was in foster care for three years and in extended foster care for two years. She joined the YAC in 2023.

▶ What goals do you hope to accomplish?

A better career path and job.

▶ Why would you encourage others to join YAC?

Because this program is very helpful for young adults. We received a lot of tips on making changes in foster care, tips on life. The people in this program are very supportive emotionally.



Mauce Linne Salka, 17, grew up in Jacksonville, has been in foster care for over two years, and has been a part of the YAC for three months.

▶ **Why did you choose to become a member of the YAC?**

I wanted to make a difference in the fostering sphere. There are things I don't like and I hope to change some of them.

▶ **What goals do you hope to accomplish?**

I want to make a better connection between caseworkers and their kids and make a better mental space for kids in care to nurture and grow their identities.

▶ **Why would you encourage others to join the YAC?**

If they are hard workers and want to do something to impact their communities.

▶ **What are two improvements you'd like to make in the foster care system?**

Better the connection between caseworkers and their kids because caseworkers have many kids on their caseload and most don't get a personal connection with their kids, which leads to a devoid conversation and a worse care experience.

Try for better mental health care and identity expression.

Janya Thomas, 18, (not pictured) was raised in Norfolk, Virginia, spent two years in foster care and recently joined the YAC.

▶ **Why did you choose to become a member of the YAC?**

To let the younger children know they have a voice while in the system.

▶ **What goals do you hope to accomplish?**

Growing as a person and to be successful.

▶ **Why would you encourage others to join the YAC?**

They are a good group who talks to you and helps you understand what things to do differently.



Daisy Steele-Higgins, 26, joined the YAC a few months ago. Growing up in Georgia, Texas and then Jacksonville, she has collectively experienced 10 years in foster care.

▶ **Why did you choose to become a member of the YAC?**

Being on this council allows me and other foster youth to use our expertise to help spread awareness and knowledge to those in positions who have the power to modify certain aspects that will positively impact the youth in care and those who have aged out.

▶ **What goals do you hope to accomplish?**

To see the council flourish, to see the council be a part of the process of reforming things that foster youth have spoken about, and lastly, to see the goals that we have within the council succeed.

▶ **What are two improvements you'd like to make in the foster care system?**

More education, support, and training for those who are interacting with foster youth/adults who have aged out; more resources available for those who have aged out, more opportunities to help them succeed.



Jacayla Simmons, 18, grew up in Jacksonville, was in foster care for three years and has been on the YAC for five months.

▶ **Why did you choose to become a member of the YAC?**

To help others in foster care.

▶ **What goals do you hope to accomplish?**

Getting my GED and starting my clerical job.

▶ **Why would you encourage others to join YAC?**

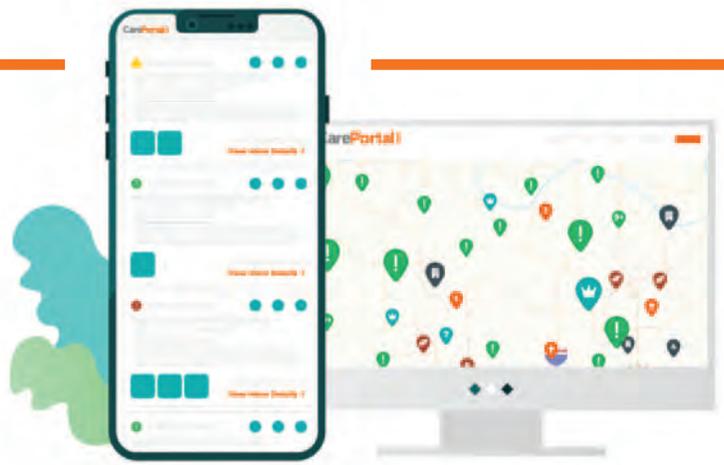
It's a very good program and it really teaches you to become a better person advocating for others.

▶ **What are two improvements you'd like to make in the foster care system?**

To better caseworkers and foster parents.



Connecting caring people to kids and families in crisis



There are over 400,000 kids in the U.S. foster system, 2,149 under the watchful eye of Family Support Services (FSS). Though many people think that’s because those children have “bad” parents, Adrien Lewis, founder and president of CarePortal, knows that’s usually not the case.

CarePortal helps meet the needs of foster families nationwide by harnessing two abundant resources: technology and the kindness of local churches. Supporting foster families is one of Florida’s most intractable challenges, and CarePortal is a promising solution that’s straightforward and logistics-based.

In the past, budgetary considerations forced FSS to struggle in meeting the non-emergency needs of families. Donations were accepted, but difficulties cataloging, organizing and distributing items, such as car seats, clothes, small appliances and furniture made it difficult to connect families with what they needed consistently. In some cases, individual caseworkers paid for family emergency items out-of-pocket.

Today the process works differently and more efficiently, thanks to CarePortal. When a need is identified for a preservation, kinship or foster family, a licensing specialist or caseworker enters it into a database accessed by a network of faith-based organizations whose members have the means and desire to provide the need to the family.

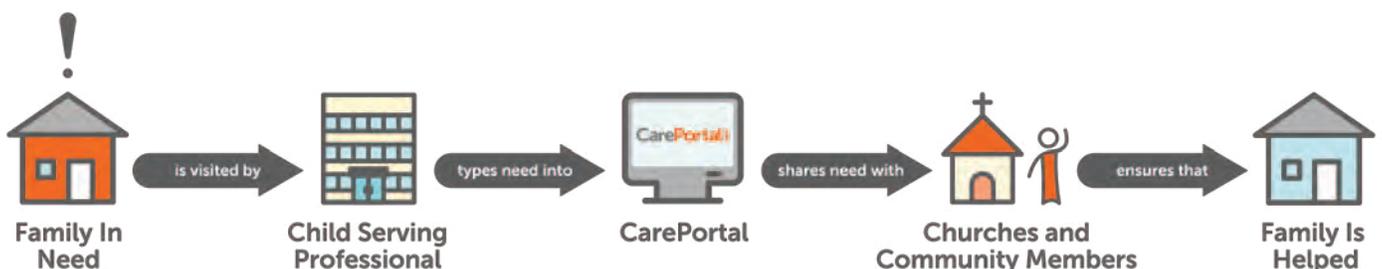
In the past two years, FSS has contracted with two organizations to manage the CarePortal connections

in its Circuit 6 and Circuit 4 districts: Florida 1.27, a Tampa-based nonprofit, works to support the needs of families in Pasco and Pinellas counties; and COMPACT, administered by missionary chaplains Ted and Angie Stackpole, works to support Duval and Nassau counties. Each organization is responsible for recruiting churches and their congregations to join the CarePortal network; they also oversee the relationships between caseworkers, churches and families established online in their respective circuits.

“The concept of CarePortal does much more than provide the tangible things a family may need,” says FSS’ Cynthia Harpman, manager, contract grants. “The local churches often provide spiritual, emotional and other support, which plants the seed for an ongoing relationship that benefits [all parties involved].”

The needs requests often are for tangible items, like baby supplies, beds, car seats, diapers, cleaning supplies or an appliance replacement. Or the need may be financial, like help paying for utilities or car repairs.

In November, an FSS caseworker in Duval County posted a request for a twin mattress, bedding and a booster seat for a 3-year-old toddler who was placed with a kinship caregiver to help maintain a family connection. Refuge Church fulfilled this request and the family was very grateful. In Pasco County, a single mom living in a hotel with her 4-year-old daughter needed help with transportation to find a job. A \$150 Uber/Lyft gift card was immediately donated by First Baptist Church of Elfers.





CarePortal impact:

145
FAMILIES IN
NORTHEAST FLORIDA

88
FAMILIES ON
THE SUNCOAST

\$140,000+
SPENT ON
ITEMS DELIVERED

The wraparound services provided because of CarePortal mean that the time and money saved allows FSS' grant-specific funding to cover other services and needs as intended.

Julie Toledo, STEPS Family Advocate for FSS in Circuit 6, utilizes CarePortal regularly to assist families in her caseload. "CarePortal has been one of the biggest blessings! It has such a positive impact on my families in such a beautiful way ... many joyful tears have been shed because of it. When I submit requests, they are not only fulfilled most of the time, but the people I've been connected with have gone above and beyond. They want to meet the families, build trust and show them love," Toledo says. "Often, churches get families more than what was requested because they understand the struggle and the need, which is so crucial. They truly make our families feel heard, valued and loved, and they bring back hope to these families to know their communities are there to help."

But it's not only churches that can help. Anyone can get involved by signing up at careportal.org. They will be matched with a local church to help execute donations. The website shows real-time requests and responses across the country, at the city and local agency level. Every second, a family's needs are being met, because of the network's communication system.

CarePortal received the First Lady's Medal for Courage, Commitment and Service in 2021. It has been an integral resource supporting Hope Florida—A Pathway to Prosperity, whose goal is to transform how state government collaborates with communities to serve children and families in need. CarePortal is a ministry platform launched in 2015 by The Global Orphan Project.

"Faith-based organizations are in a unique position to support vulnerable kids and families beyond what FSS does, and FSS is in a unique position beyond what CarePortal does," says Kristen Lassiter, community engagement specialist at Florida 1.27. "So, it's a beautiful partnership, a collaborative effort that increases families' hopes for coming out of the situation."

Lassiter works daily with individual caseworkers. She functions as a liaison—between Florida 1.27, churches, CarePortal and FSS caseworkers to arrange for needed donations. "The partnership offers unbelievable potential," she says.

And as a former foster child herself, Lassiter has firsthand experience. "Foster families come from trauma and have to feel supported and know their dignity is intact," she observes, adding that member organizations "have unique opportunities to bring encouragement." In interactions with foster families "the purpose is to find out what the family needs, not police them. How can we support the family and help restore them so they can heal?"

Many of the requests through CarePortal are for mattresses, bedding and dressers to accommodate children moving into kinship homes or reunifying with their families.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Kaelani's story: Reunited with love and a lifelong friendship



Joseph Brader and Anna Brader with their biological 3-year-old son, Asaph, and foster children, 2-year-old Kaelani and baby A.

At the age of two, Kaelani had already experienced more than what most do in a lifetime. Her birth mom, Erin, was incarcerated, her teenage brother was living with his father and her grandmother was unable to get licensed as a kinship caregiver. Family Support Services (FSS) faced the challenge of finding an alternative.

"When they told me Kaelani was going to foster care, I broke down in the courtroom," Erin says. But she was assured that the foster parents were really nice and that Kaelani would be in good hands.

Anna and Joseph Brader, a local couple who had recently started their foster parent journey, were up to the challenge. They welcomed Kaelani into their home in April 2023. Shortly after the placement, Erin was released—then the Bradens did a brave and wondrous thing: without hesitation, they chose to reach out to Erin and started building a relationship with her. They committed to doing all they could to reinforce and strengthen the relationship between young Kaelani and her mom.

In September, out of nowhere, tragedy struck.

They learned Kaelani's brother had been accidentally shot and killed by another child. The Bradens responded by continuing to wrap their arms, figuratively and literally, around Erin and Kaelani. The funeral for Kaelani's brother was officiated by Joseph, who is also a pastor. That fall, with the holidays approaching, they navigated through a painful period.

As they healed, Erin had one goal in mind—to be reunited with Kaelani as soon as she completed her reunification plan. The Bradens supported her efforts while they continued caring for Kaelani. Despite the tragedy, the change in Kaelani was dramatic, according to Nellie Gordon, the FSS caseworker who managed Kaelani's foster placement. "They taught Kaelani a lot," Erin says.

For foster parents, unconditional love trumps everything else. You have to be able to provide it, unreservedly and constantly, for a child you might barely know—and, in most cases, be prepared to return the child to their birth parent(s) regardless of any emotional attachments you may have formed. You have to put your own needs aside and focus exclusively on the needs of the child in your care.

Erin and her daughter, Kaelani, were reunited in November after successfully completing the steps for reunification.

“

The Braders are honestly some of the best people that I know. They were the best people to have Kaelani while I was incarcerated. We still keep in touch and Kaelani still sees them every so often.”

- Erin, mom of Kaelani

“From day one, when Kaelani went with the Braders, it was a whole new world for her,” Gordon says. “She used to be closed off, quiet. But when I saw her in the presence of the Braders, she was open, talking about her mom. Anna kept Erin in focus and made sure to remind Kaelani that her mom is still fighting for her.”

Meanwhile, Erin focused on completing the programs and processes required to be reunited with her daughter. She would need to make consistent behavioral changes and maintain them for six months, but she was determined to get it right. “She jumped on it,” Gordon recalls. “She worked hard to get through the process and even completed some assigned tasks while still incarcerated. She got a job as soon as she was released.”

Erin met every metric, and she welcomed her daughter back home on November 10, 2023—in time for the holidays. And the two families have stayed in close touch ever since. “We stopped by their house with Christmas presents,” Anna says. “Kaelani is super happy, bubbly, laughing, running around. We have confidence her sense of security will continue.”

“The Braders are honestly some of the best people that I know,” says Erin. “They were the best people to have Kaelani while I was incarcerated. We still keep in touch and Kaelani still sees them every so often.”

With children of their own, the Braders had more experience with parenting than with fostering. “We had heard about fostering through a friend at church who is a caseworker at FSS,” says Joseph. He credits foster parent training with giving them the tools to succeed.

“The trainer talked about trauma and how it impacts kids,” he says. “There was an in-depth half-day session with a child psychologist that was helpful.” It’s useful even now, he adds. “The training kicks in all the time—with foster kids, our own kids, it even helps with pastoring.”

Joseph encourages people who are motivated to consider fostering to go for it and offers this advice: “Make sure you’ve really bought into it. It’s really hard,” he admits, “and so worth it. You have to be so present and invested in that little kid who has experienced trauma. They just need someone to love them and be present with them. It takes compassion and empathy.”

Gordon says she foresees a good life for Kaelani. “She has a very bright future, with a large support system and the Braders still involved in her life. She loves learning new things and will have a loving and fulfilled life. You can tell that Erin is a different person now. By every indication, she loves her daughter more than anything.”



Kaelani and Asaph enjoy some summer fun in the Brader’s backyard.

Center of Hope gives residents just that:

Hope



Like the children, families and community members it serves, the FSS Center of Hope at Emmett Reed has come a long way. Established in 2020, the project concentrates unprecedented resources, energy and attention into one of Jacksonville's marginalized neighborhoods: a defined 3.5-mile tract in Zip code 32209.

The neighborhood experiences significantly higher rates of poverty, unemployment, violence, and intergenerational trauma, impacting a higher number of marginalized families than the rest of Duval County. With a commitment to social and racial equity, the Center of Hope serves as a family resource center, where people can thrive, unite, connect and uplift each other, while striving for a more prosperous and healthy life.

The Center is providing many services envisioned by community leaders. In 2023, the program exceeded its goals and objectives:

SERVING
458
FAMILY
PARTICIPANTS

HOLDING
25
BIWEEKLY
PARENT MEETINGS

PROVIDING PARENT
EDUCATION TO
28
CAREGIVERS/PARENTS

ENGAGING WITH
1,658
RESIDENTS AT
COMMUNITY EVENTS

Every month, the Center of Hope hosts a series of programs, services and special events, including Hope and Healing Circles, financial success series, Parent Cafés, diaper distributions, Pink Party (mobile mammograms), men's counseling center, grocery giveaway, Fall Fest, Christmas on Candy Cane Lane and many others.

Going forward, with refined service offerings, FSS envisions greater representation on local, city and state boards and committees to mobilize change and greater support from all available sources.



PERSISTENCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Santonya Brown, a single mom of two boys, ages 9 and 11, visited the Center of Hope at Emmett Reed in crisis. Her older son, Zyon, faces a lifelong challenge—he has Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), a genetic neuromuscular condition that primarily affects boys starting around the age of four and worsens quickly. Most are unable to walk by the age of 12.

For years, Brown's grandmother had been Zyon's primary caregiver. But tragedy struck when her grandmother passed away, leaving Brown to face caring for her severely disabled son alone. To make matters worse, Zyon's disability and Medicaid benefits were abruptly stopped after Brown's grandmother died, leaving him without the crucial medical coverage he needs.

Brown met with the Center of Hope's family support navigator (FSN), who requested a case management meeting. Jada Hunter, executive director of community reinvestment for FSS, and DCF's Hope Navigator escalated the case and connected the team to a Social Security disability case expert.

Zyon's Medicaid benefits have been reinstated and he now has access to the vital medical care he requires. The FSN continues to work to ensure Brown has the necessary medical equipment to provide the best care for her son. FSS is also helping the family explore options for a home healthcare aide to provide much-needed help on a regular basis.

Brown's tenacity and experience illustrate the power of teamwork and community partner support. The Center of Hope and Hope Florida came together to transform a family's crisis into a path toward stability and optimism. Through their dedication and collaboration, they have made a lasting difference in the Browns' lives, reminding them that even in the darkest of times, there is always a glimmer of hope.





ADOPTION

Streamlining processes to reduce delays

What's taking so long? That's the question all foster children and families wonder while waiting to be placed in a forever home. In Florida, until recently, the question wasn't just driven by impatience. Some adoption-related processes really were taking longer than they used to. In 2023, Family Support Services (FSS) partnered with the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to find out why—and to fix the problem.

DCF determined it wanted to “streamline things to achieve permanency in a more productive way,” Nyla Williams, director of adoptions for FSS in Circuit 6, says. Data showed Circuit 6 (Pasco and Pinellas counties), one of two Florida circuits with the highest number of children awaiting adoption, would be ground zero in the effort.

Adoptions, which typically require an average of 90 days for paperwork processing, were taking as long as six months to complete, Williams explained. And the paperwork required for an adoption is significant—the safety of the children involved requires it. But excessive delays fuel frustration among children in care and the families waiting for the chance to welcome them into their homes. Mandatory background checks, for example, often had to be repeated unnecessarily because they expired before other paperwork could be completed.

As further study revealed, the delays were being caused by the paperwork and processes—and were not attributable to staff. “Individuals who do this work on the front lines work really hard,” Williams says, “and they have the best of intentions. It's a hard job but they have to make it work.”

FSS and DCF assembled a “strike team” of adoption professionals to relieve the immediate short-term backlog, then recommend process changes for the longer term. *What are the barriers to a speedier adoption process?* The group wanted to know. *Where does the process usually get stuck?* The focus was on children legally freed for adoption who were already living in the home that wanted to adopt.

Responses were swift and granular. And once they were analyzed, approved and implemented, they produced significant reductions in red tape—and, ultimately, processing time.

Processes that took weeks to complete now take just days. Instead of having to redo expensive and detailed studies that had expired, adoptive families have the option of simply declaring that nothing had changed since the last study. Ultimately several specific process changes were accepted by DCF and are being rolled out statewide in 2024.

What it means for foster kids and adoptive families

The streamlined procedures have been well received by all parties involved in adoption—but for different reasons. For caseworkers at FSS, the procedures mean they can be more effective in their jobs, with greater ability to finalize more kids in their forever homes. For an adoptive family, anything that shortens the time before the child you've welcomed is legally yours forever is a blessing. For a child in foster care, a sense of permanency can be life-changing. Any delay can make them feel less secure.

“We're grateful to be able to work with DCF to evaluate existing policies to find efficiencies that allow children to achieve permanency more quickly, without compromising quality or safety,” said Jenn Petion, president and CEO of FSS. “Every extra day a child spends in foster care is a day too many.”

The results have been impressive, Petion added. “This pilot has allowed us to streamline paperwork so that children already living with their forever family can achieve adoption finalization more quickly, which has enabled us to complete more than 230 adoption finalizations from July to December, a record for our Pasco and Pinellas communities.”



Home Run for the *Holidays*

**AN ADOPTION CEREMONY
WITH THE TAMPA BAY RAYS**





Family Support Services

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