

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

## Trained volunteers, Citizen's Foster Care Review Board advocates for child safety

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I have a Facebook friend who ends each post by saying “life is good.” For him, it is. But unfortunately for some children, life isn’t good — these children are victims of child abuse or neglect.

Whenever there are allegations of this nature, it’s up to the courts to assure the safety of children while protecting the rights of parents. And cases resulting from these instances come under the jurisdiction of the Collier County Dependency Court.

Some 31 years ago, the Citizen’s Foster Care Review Board (CFCRB) was founded to help the court deal with the case load and to ensure that no case would fall through the cracks. A panel of this board reviews dependency cases working collaboratively and in partnership with the judges.

“By using a group of trained volunteers, we are able to allot ample time to each family that appears before us, we have the five sets of eyes of the panel members on each case, and our volunteer members come from a diverse background and bring a wealth of life experiences to the table,” says CFCRB Court Liaison Judy Groos.

Last year, the CFCRB conducted 163 judicial reviews involving 257 children. Over



COURTESY PHOTO / CITIZEN'S FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD  
CFCRB panel members Bob Dehaven, Claire O'Keefe, Lori Cohen and Willie West deliberate after a hearing.

the years, CFCRB volunteers have donated more than 20,000 hours to the court to allow the judges to allocate time for more complex or compound cases. Since 1992, safety and permanency plans have been reviewed for more than 7,000 Collier children.

Permanency, in child welfare cases, is what’s referred to as an enduring and safe family relationship. It encompasses family-based living situations that are permanent such as reunification with parents, permanent placement with relatives or adoption. Other less permanent resolutions might include placing a child in a licensed foster care home or with a nonrelative caregiver.

And who are the children the CFCRB

serves? They are in the system for a variety of reasons, according to Lori Cohen, VP of the CFCRB. “The primary reason is substance misuse followed by domestic violence and mental health issues. Quite often it’s a combination of these along with physical or sexual abuse, abandonment by a parent or a parent’s incarceration.”

More than 40 percent of these children are five years old and younger. Ms. Cohen goes on to say that “they are the most vulnerable. Due to their age they’re not able to relate to a responsible adult when they are in a dangerous position at home. They may not have other eyes on them in a potentially abusive environment.

On the other hand, children who are older will likely be more visible in the community at activities such as school, daycare or sporting events.”

Ms. Cohen says that one aspect of what she does that weighs heavily on her is the fact that the children are innocents in all of this. “They never asked to be removed from their home, sometimes hurt and oftentimes scared. There have been many occasions where the panel members listened to the child and realized that he or she actually feels responsible for the well-being and recovery of the parent.”

“Without question, the Dependency Court docket is the most challenging of all assignments a Circuit Judge will perform,” according to Circuit Judge Shannon McFee. “Every decision has an impact on the very fabric of our community, being its children and families. The CFCRB is an essential and critical component of our overall dependency system in Collier County. The CFCRB has been a fantastic partner with the dependency bench and is very much appreciated,” Judge McFee stresses.

CFCRB is a nonprofit entity — they could use your support as they tend to the needs of abused and neglected youngsters. To learn more, visit [www.cfcrcbcollier.org](http://www.cfcrcbcollier.org). ■

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