

by Lori Cohen
Vice President of Collier's Citizens Foster Care Review Board



The data is ominous. The challenges are daunting. But the devoted dedication and work of our volunteers is invaluable.

Let me explain:

Children are removed from their parents for reasons of neglect, caregiver drug or alcohol abuse, physical abuse, caregiver inability to cope, inadequate housing, parental incarceration,

child behavior, abandonment, sexual abuse and more.

Whenever there are allegations of child abuse or neglect, it is up to the Court to protect the rights of parents and assure the safety of children who have been removed from their homes or those who remain at home.

Since 1992, the Circuit Court judges hearing cases in Collier County have shared this responsibility with volunteer panel members from the Citizens Foster Care Review Board, Inc. Legislators and Founders of our non-profit 501(c)3 organization believed that panels of trained, involved, inquisitive citizens would provide the extra time and attention needed to assure that important tasks and details would not "fall through the cracks" in a complex and fragmented system.

The mission of the Citizens Foster Care Review Board is to protect and advance the interests of abused and neglected children and young adults in Collier County who come under the protection of the Dependency Court by providing well-trained volunteers to oversee their safety, stability, and well-being.

Panel members hold parents and caregivers accountable to correct the problems affecting their families.

Of the cases heard in 2022 by the Citizen's Foster Care review panels:

- 43% of the children were ages 5 and younger
- 26% were 6 to 10 years old
- 24% were 11-15 years old
- 7% were age 16 and older

Since its inception, CFCRB volunteers have donated over 30,000 hours to review the safety and permanency plans for approximately 12,000 children. In 2022, our 30 volunteers reviewed 163 cases involving 257 children.

Before each hearing, panelists study reports from case managers, guardians ad litem, prior court orders, and health records. Each panel examines the children's safety, education, medical, dental, psychological and enrichment statuses. Children are encouraged to attend these reviews. After deliberation, the panel makes recommendations to the Court, which are incorporated into a Court order.

The panels work to ensure the safety of the children and expedite permanency. The panelists bring objective and comprehensive analysis to the process for the maximum benefit of the children.

Testimonial

Fifteen years ago, before I became a panelist, I was naïve to dysfunctional family struggles and the suffering of abused and neglected children. Although I knew it existed, it was not part of my world. I was truly shocked to learn of the realities involved when I prepared for the panels. Today, I am no longer shocked but still saddened.

But being a panelist is also rewarding. It is gratifying to see parents break free of unhealthy habits, learn to be better parents, and have their kids return home. It is so satisfying to see a family reunited by conquering traumas.

To keep up with the growing child abuse and neglect challenges, the Citizen's Foster Care Review Board, Inc. needs help in two ways:

First, we need more volunteers to serve as panel or board members.

Panelists must be over 25 years old; attend half day court sessions held at the Collier County Courthouse and have no conflicts of interest. Panelists must also successfully pass a background check, attend a training program, prepare in advance for each hearing by reading cases and attend on-going continuing education training courses.

Second, our Citizens Foster Care Review Board needs additional funding.

The Citizen's Foster Care Review Board, Inc. is a tax-exempt 501(C)3 not-for-profit organization. We rely on donations to continue our mission.

Please consider assisting us to achieve timely, positive, and permanent outcomes for our vulnerable dependent children.

You can obtain additional information on our website at www.CFCRBCollier.org, or fjrcbcollier@gmail.com.



L-R Bob DeHaven, Claire O'Keefe, Lori Cohen, Willie West deliberate following a hearing



L-R Lori Cohen (panel chair), Judy Groos (Court Liaison) prepare for the day's hearings



Left - Judy Groos, CFCRB Court Liaison, and Lori Cohen, CFCRB Vice President take a break for a moment from working on the annual schedule