

NEWS

Guest Commentary: Citizens board helps oversee foster care

By Willie West, Naples, Volunteer And Board Member, Citizens Foster Care Review Board

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When children are placed in foster care or protective supervision by the Department of Children and Families (DCF), it becomes the responsibility of the juvenile court to monitor the progress of these cases. In Collier County, judicial reviews are conducted by Family Court Judge Keith Kyle and the Citizens Foster Care Review Board (CFCRB).

In 1990 the Florida Legislature recognized that family judges may not have adequate time to review dependency cases and passed a law allowing volunteer citizens to assist in this process. The Collier County CFCRB was established in 1991 as a nonprofit volunteer organization to provide independent oversight of children in foster care.

Our community has witnessed many changes over the years in the operations, management and structure of the child-welfare system. The most significant has been the move to privatization. However, problems continue to exist. The most tragic of these has been the recent deaths of three children in Lee County. Contracted agencies also report high turnover rates of case managers, resulting in shortages, backlogs, training issues and questionable practices.

The volunteers that make up CFCRB are an invaluable asset to the community, Dependency Court and the DCF. We have been, and remain, in a unique position to monitor the safety and well-being of children in foster care by holding contracted agencies accountable and by ensuring

that federal and state requirements are being met. Statutes require that permanency for a child be achieved by 12 months. Children should not linger in foster care with no hope in sight, but rather receive timely, positive and permanent outcomes.

Last year, our volunteers reviewed cases involving 538 children. By law, each of these cases must have a judicial review every six months to ensure that progress towards permanency is made by all parties. CFCRB panels hear cases at the five- and 10-month intervals. The 12-month permanency review is heard by the Family Court judge. If the case is not closed at that time, it reverts back to the panels.

There are two scheduled hearing days a month. Eight panels made up of five volunteers each hear approximately 10 cases. Because we are not under the usual time constraints of a regular court, we are in an excellent position to give full attention to each case. Having five well-trained, inquisitive panel members also makes the chance of something being overlooked less likely.

All recommendations from the panel are presented to the Family Court judge. They then become an order of the court.

The legislature privatized foster care in order to establish community-based care. CFCRB serves as a model of community involvement and citizen participation in furthering this goal. With anticipated state budget cuts, it is also important to note that it is cost effective. Last year our volunteers logged 2,107 volunteer hours, which translates into a significant savings for the state.

If you believe that children are our most precious resource and that their rights must be protected, you can become a volunteer. We strive for a board that is culturally and ethnically diverse and representative of the community we serve. You must be at least 25 years of age and not have a conflict of interest with another agency involved in foster care. Panel members must be available for one-half day on one or more Wednesdays per month and must prepare for the judicial review by reading cases in advance. Volunteers must complete a background check, meet with

interview committee, complete a multifaceted training program and sign a confidentiality agreement.

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