

# FLORIDA FOSTER CARE REVIEW



## **CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT**



**FISCAL YEAR  
2023 - 2024**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida Foster Care Review (FFCR) advances the safety, stability and success of children in Miami-Dade County's foster care system. Our programs connect children and young adults to essential services, supportive relationships, and permanent families to help build resilience, stability and connectedness - essential ingredients for lifelong well-being. Since 1989, FFCR's Citizen Review Panel (CRP) Program has engaged, trained and supported community volunteers who review the cases of hundreds of children and young adults in foster care each year and issue specific findings and recommended orders to address unmet needs and to facilitate a safe and expeditious exit from foster care to a lifelong family.

During FY 2023-24 (July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024), FFCR's CRP Program conducted **402 review hearings for 276 children and young adults** under the jurisdiction of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit's juvenile division.

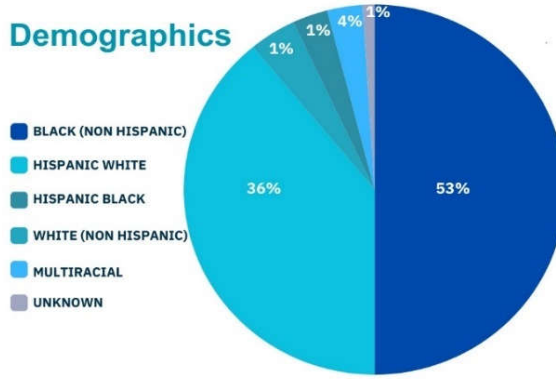
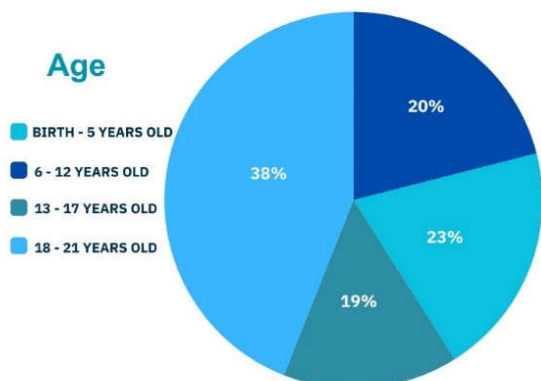
- The program identified **3,204 unmet needs** and issued recommended orders to address them.
- FFCR's targeted **advocacy helped resolve 83% of the issues** identified by the CRP, ensuring that children, young adults and their families received the resources, services and support they need.
- The CRP program's **outreach and engagement** efforts promoted participation by caregivers and young adults in their CRP hearings, enhancing the quality and impact of the reviews.
- FFCR's **71 dedicated volunteers donated 2,045 hours valued at just over \$136,000** to support the safety, stability and success of our community's most vulnerable children.

This report describes the unique impact of the CRP in two complementary ways. First, it presents aggregate data of the well-being, safety and permanency of the children reviewed by FFCR's citizen review panels during FY 2023-24. Second, the report provides a firsthand account of the challenges faced by those we serve and demonstrates how the CRP process improves their lives.

To accomplish our mission, FFCR relies on enduring partnerships. We are especially grateful to the leadership, judiciary and administration of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court. We also appreciate the hundreds of child welfare professionals, service providers and attorneys who participate in CRP review hearings. Most importantly, we recognize the many caregivers, parents, youth and young adults who courageously shared their stories and struggles with our review panels and put their trust in our process.

# CHILDREN & YOUNG ADULTS SERVED

The CRP Program reviewed 276 children, approximately 12% of the total number of children and young adults under the dependency court's jurisdiction between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024. Of those reviewed, 54% were boys/young men and 46% were girls/young women.



HOME ENVIRONMENT/CAREGIVER	NUMBER OF CHILDREN
Foster Home	67
Group Home	4
Group Shelter	3
Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) Home	17
Medical Foster Home/Medical Group Home	3
Relative/Non-Relative	71
Therapeutic Home/Specialized Therapeutic Home	6
Institutional (SIPP/Enhanced Residential Group Care)	2
Independent Living / Transitional Housing (ages 18-22)	81
With Parent(s)	12
Incarcerated/Other	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>276</b>

PERMANENCY PLAN	YEARS IN CARE				CHILDREN (0-17)
	<1	1-2	3-4	5+	
Adoption	4	81	33	28	146
Another Permanent Planned Living Arrangement (APPLA)	0	1	1	8	10
Maintain & Strengthen	0	6	5	0	11
Permanent Guardianship	0	0	1	0	1
Reunification	5	1	0	0	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>174</b>

# THE REVIEW PROCESS

Florida law, in accordance with federal law, requires that the court conduct a ‘judicial review’ every six months for every child under its jurisdiction due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. Florida Statute 39.701 details the specifics of the review process explaining that, “before every judicial review hearing or citizen review panel hearing, the social service agency shall make an investigation and social study concerning *all pertinent details* relating to the child.” The statute further lists the areas that should be assessed during a judicial review - from mental health and educational records to parents’ progress with services and the status of parent-child and/or sibling visitation.

## REFERRALS TO THE CRP

According to Florida Statute 39.701(1)(c)(2), “citizen review panels may conduct hearings to review the status of a child. The court shall select the cases appropriate for referral to the citizen review panels and may order the attendance of the parties at the review panel hearings. However, any party may object to the referral of a case to a citizen review panel. Whenever such an objection has been filed with the court, the court shall review the substance of the objection and may conduct the review itself or refer the review to a citizen review panel.”

In 2020, the CRP commenced a collaborative project with Children’s Legal Services (CLS) and the Guardian ad Litem Office whereby the CRP secured the agreement of these parties to refer a child to the CRP for their next review as well as that of the attorney ad litem when assigned. This only occurs when the child’s permanency goal is adoption and the parents’ rights have been terminated. However, even when the referral is agreed to by the parties, the decision to refer a child to the CRP rests solely with the judge responsible for that child’s case. Additionally, the CRP meets regularly with the court administrators, judicial leaders and judges assigned to the dependency division to discuss the CRP process and how judges and advocates can utilize the CRP review process. During fiscal year 2023-24, juvenile court judges referred 240 children for review by the CRP; approximately the same number of children referred last fiscal year, which was a significant increase from the 171 referred during FY 2021-22.

## PREPARING FOR THE REVIEW

Prior to the actual review hearing, FFCR’s Review Managers methodologically examine the many documents in the child’s dependency court file and equip the panel with a comprehensive summary report that includes the child’s history, current status, case plan goals and any known red flags. Volunteers have virtual access to these case summaries and the case manager’s Judicial Review Social Study Report (JRSSR) the day before the hearing, and prior to each child’s review they discuss any concerns or questions with FFCR’s Review Managers. This extensive preparation

by staff and volunteers allows them to ask in-depth questions within the 40-50 minutes allotted per review hearing and to successfully identify unmet needs and permanency barriers.

FFCR's Review Managers use FFCR's customized database, ChildWatch, to capture information required for each review, including progress with case plan tasks, placement information, visitation details, barriers to permanency, medical and mental health information, independent living skills, education, disability and much more. ChildWatch also provides information from all previous CRP review hearings, which is incorporated along with current information into the preparation report provided to volunteers, including previous orders recommended by the CRP.

## CONDUCTING THE REVIEW

As part of their Pre-Service training, CRP volunteers are taught how to carefully review well-child exams, psychological evaluations, report cards, therapy reports and more. In preparation for a review, each panel member is assigned a topic area – which allows them to focus on that subject matter and carefully review the related records. CRP review hearings have been conducted remotely since April 2020 when the 11<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court transitioned to using video conferencing to conduct judicial review hearings. During the review hearing, panel members ask detailed questions about their assigned topic area and listen intently to each party and participant and ensure they all have an opportunity to be heard. Approximately one hour is reserved for each child's review hearing, which provides sufficient time for each volunteer to gather sufficient information for making thoughtful recommendations.

### SIENNA, CARLOS, CHRISTIAN & ESPERANZA<sup>1</sup>

Siblings Sienna, Carlos, Christian and Esperanza were all under the age of 10 at the time of their first CRP hearing. Their mother had severe mental health issues and requested that her children be placed in the care of her father, who lived across the country. The children had been living with their grandfather for a little over a year and, although he was doing a good job caring for them, each child had significant developmental, psychological and/or educational needs. Nine-year-old Esperanza was experiencing traumatic flashbacks from the time she lived with her mother, but was not receiving therapy. Sienna, who was only 3 years old, also needed mental health support. Seven-year-old Christian was experiencing bed-wetting and neither Carlos (4 years old) nor Sienna had been screened using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire to determine whether they were developmentally on target or needed early intervention services, despite clear delays in their communication and fine motor skills.

The children's grandfather had been a tireless advocate on behalf of the children; however, they were receiving no services to address their issues. Because the children's case had been transferred out-of-state, there were many people involved, which complicated

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<sup>1</sup> The names and identifying information of the children, young adults and families discussed in this report have been changed to protect their privacy and to maintain confidentiality.

communication and the exchange of critical information and documentation. Case manager turnover further complicated circumstances.

After the panel made its findings and recommendations, FFCR's CRP team prepared a thorough, clear and detailed report highlighting each of the panel's recommendations. FFCR's Review Manager and panel immediately flagged the case for an expedited Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge. After a productive Post Judicial Review hearing, the Court ordered the services and evaluations recommended by the CRP to be provided immediately and set the case for a follow up hearing. The Court also entered a precise order, based on the panel's recommendations, to ensure that the children would have each and every service and support they needed before their case was closed. Ultimately, the services were provided and their grandfather was able to formally adopt the children.

## **FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the conclusion of each hearing, the panel issues findings and recommended orders designed to ensure child welfare agencies provide services and interventions, overcome barriers and ensure children exit foster care as soon as possible to a permanent family. The panel's recommendations target a multitude of issues from health to education to caregiver appropriateness and much more. Once adopted by the Court, the CRP's recommendations become binding court orders with which agencies and parties must comply. Using the ChildWatch database, the Review Manager captures the CRP's findings and recommendations in the report, which is filed with the court and distributed to the parties within ten business days of the hearing.

## **POST REVIEW ADVOCACY**

FFCR incorporates various forms of post review advocacy designed to effectively address issues that arise during CRP hearings. FFCR's Advocacy Manager presents time-sensitive issues and concerns directly to the court through Post Judicial Review Hearings. For other important, but not urgent issues, FFCR engages in Follow Up Advocacy and harnesses our vast network of contacts and relationships to ensure that children's needs are met by connecting case managers and parties to a variety of community resources such as, mentors, tutors, extracurricular activities or special services. When the panel learns of a safety threat during a review hearing, FFCR issues an immediate Case Alert to the lead child welfare agency by providing, usually within 24 hours, the Court and all parties a document detailing the alleged safety concerns raised during the review. During FY 2023-24, FFCR engaged in Post Review Advocacy efforts 290 times, including 155 Post Judicial Review Hearings, 6 Case Alerts, and 129 Post Review Advocacy follow ups aimed at resolving critical safety issues, child/family needs and overall barriers to permanency. Post Review Advocacy efforts are also captured within our internal database so Review Managers, in preparation for the CRP hearing, may review the most up-to-date information, assess progress made, and then follow up as necessary during the next CRP review hearing.



## ENGAGING CAREGIVERS & YOUNG ADULTS

Over the course of the past several years, FFCR has focused intently on engaging caregivers and young adults in their review hearings by emailing each young adult and caregiver (when accurate contact information is available) with detailed information regarding the CRP process, a link to Frequently Asked CRP Questions, and zoom details before their hearing. FFCR's Program Specialist also calls each young adult and caregiver to confirm receipt of the email and answer any questions. Engaging caregivers and youth in CRP hearings helps our panels recommend more targeted, individualized orders to the court that more meaningfully impact the lives of the children and families we serve. Their participation is crucial and helps the panel obtain detailed and timely information about any unmet needs or concerns, and to more effectively center the hearing around the child or young adult. During FY 2023-24, FFCR's outreach efforts resulted in the participation of caregivers in 37% of the CRP's hearings of children birth to 18 years old. Our engagement with young adults in the Extended Foster Care Program resulted in their collective participation in 49% of their CRPs.

### JANICE & JOHN

Janice (2 years old) and John (4 years old) are siblings who had been in foster care for most of their young lives at the time of their CRP review hearing. The children had extensive medical and developmental needs. They lived together with a pre-adoptive medical foster family. To prepare, CRP staff and volunteers reviewed the numerous reports, medical records, therapeutic assessments, and developmental evaluations available in the children's court file. Also, in advance of the hearing, FFCR's Advocacy Manager contacted the children's foster parent, explained the purpose of the CRP review hearing and encouraged her to participate. She was also provided with an FAQ document to explain the CRP review process and the value of her participation in the review hearing.

During the review hearing, the case management agency was not able to provide written or verbal updates regarding Janice's or John's current medical, psychological, educational or developmental status. Thankfully, their foster parent was able to provide a detailed account of the children's daily activities, needs, and progress with the many interventions and services they were receiving and, as a result, the CRP provided the Court with an extensive, detailed, and up-to-date report that highlighted each child's needs and recommended orders to address barriers to their safety, permanency and well-being.

Without the caregiver's participation, the absence of information and documentation would have painted a very different picture of the children's needs. The panel thanked Janice and John's foster parent for participating in the review hearing and commended her incredible commitment to the children as well as her involvement in their complex care.

## TRAINING

During FY 2023-24, FFCR facilitated and coordinated 155.5 hours of training and education across 53 sessions provided to our staff and volunteers. Additionally, FFCR's CRP team also vetted 28.5 hours of relevant training provided by community partners and offered these sessions to staff and/or volunteers. FFCR also trains other child welfare stakeholders including, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), GAL Office attorneys, foster parents, case managers as well as attorneys who represent parents and the Department of Children and Families.

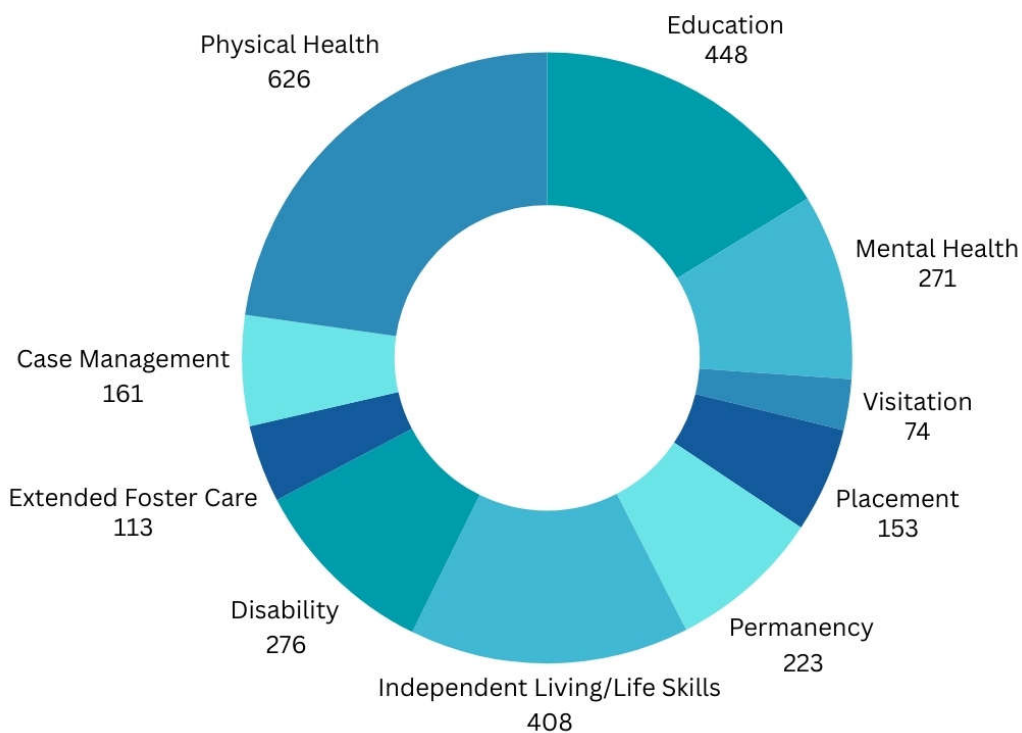
FFCR's Annual Advanced Training Institute (ATI), which started in 2018, is an opportunity for staff and volunteers to hone their skills and to broaden their knowledge of trending issues and relevant matters pertaining to child welfare. ATI has covered topics such as youth and young adult engagement (with a youth voices panel) and transitioning youth programs, the adoption process, the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) and the role of an Attorney ad Litem. This year, our ATI explored the role of unconscious bias in decision-making, intercultural communication and cultural competency.

FFCR's CRP team also plays an integral role in preparing case managers for review hearings before the CRP and increases their understanding about the critical importance of the Judicial Review Hearing. Through this customized training, case managers meet with FFCR team members in a small group setting to review the legal aspects and overall goals of the Judicial Review Hearing. The new case managers also observe a live CRP hearing after which they meet with our Senior Training & Engagement Manager who facilitates a discussion about the essential components of delivering a meaningful Judicial Review. FFCR staff also provide trainings to case managers, Guardians ad Litem and other child welfare stakeholders regarding the core values and key strategies necessary for achieving permanency for ALL children in foster care.



# IDENTIFYING & ADDRESSING UNMET NEEDS

The CRP’s structured process enables FFCR to identify the many unmet needs of children and young adults in foster care. Ranging from untreated medical conditions to unsafe homes, and unaddressed academic challenges to the need for mentoring and a permanent family, the CRP recommended 3,204 orders in FY 2023-24. The chart below demonstrates the top 10 unmet needs identified and addressed by these orders.



## COMPLIANCE WITH ORDERS & OBLIGATIONS

During FY 2023-24, the CRP reviewed 6 children with a permanency goal of reunification and 11 children who were living with one or both parents and had a permanency goal to “maintain and strengthen” the relationship with their parent(s). Although these 17 children only constituted a small percentage of the reviews conducted, reviews by the CRP can have a significant impact on parental participation in required services, visitation with their children and, ultimately, reunification. When parents appear to be struggling to engage in required services, citizen review panel members ask precise questions to fully understand barriers to a parent’s progress, such as a change in case managers, lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services, housing and/or transportation issues, etc. The CRP promotes timely resolution of these issues, which can increase the parents’ ability to engage in and benefit from the services offered while also

ensuring that newly removed children receive the care and support they need in a timely manner. Meaningful and consistent visitation between parents and their children is a key driver of timely reunification. Knowing this, the CRP works to ensure children have access to see their parents, unless the court has restricted visitation.

The CRP only makes a finding of “non-compliance” with services or visitation in the event that the parent has not been engaged with a particular service or case plan task *and* it was in fact feasible for the parent to participate in the required service or task. The CRP assessed mothers’ compliance with their case plans during 22 review hearings and assessed fathers’ compliance with their case plans during 17 reviews. The panel found mothers substantially compliant with their case plan requirements in 36% of the reviews, partially compliant in 59% of the reviews, and non-compliant with their case plans in 5% of the reviews. Fathers were determined by the panel to be substantially compliant in 35% of the reviews, partially compliant in 12% of the reviews, and non-compliant in 53% of the reviews.

The CRP is also required to determine the compliance of child welfare agencies with their court-ordered tasks and responsibilities. In fiscal year 2023-24, the case management agency/DCF was found in *compliance* with their obligations under the case plan in 90% of all reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel. The agency/DCF was found to be in *non-compliance* in less than 3% of the reviews and found in *partial compliance* with their obligations to the child and/or family in 7% of the reviews conducted by the Citizen Review Panel Program.

## RACHEL

Nine year-old Rachel had been in foster care for three years when the CRP reviewed her case. Originally removed from her mother who suffered from untreated mental health issues that led to neglect, both of her parents’ rights were terminated; however, her foster parents were not interested in adopting her. Although she had several relatives who wished to adopt her, they were unfamiliar to Rachel and she experienced extreme anxiety after visits. In fact, she had very clearly expressed in writing that she did not want to be adopted by them. Even so, the visits with her biological relatives continued, despite her therapist’s concerns that the visits were negatively impacting Rachel’s emotional well-being and causing anxiety-related behavioral issues. The CRP raised this issue with the Court, and, based on the CRPs thoughtful and thorough recommendations and testimony by the therapist, the Court ordered that Rachel not be required to visit her family.

Because CRP volunteers and staff receive training about the critical importance of permanency, the panel members immediately recognized the importance of carefully and therapeutically proceeding towards securing a forever family for Rachel. They recommended that Rachel’s case be referred to FFCR’s Permanency Roundtable Program so a facilitated team could collaborate with a sense urgency to identify and actively pursue a lifelong family for Rachel that respected and incorporated her wishes.

Once a child has been reviewed by the CRP, at each subsequent CRP hearing, the panel assesses the agency’s compliance with previous orders recommended by the CRP that were adopted by the court. In FY 2023-24, parties have complied with 83% of the orders recommended by the CRP program. The CRP Program’s robust Advocacy initiative was implemented in FY 2019-20 and has resulted in significantly increased compliance with the program’s recommended orders over the past four years.

## LINKING CHILDREN TO SPECIALIZED SERVICES

Many of the children and youth referred to the CRP have complex physical, cognitive and/or emotional disabilities or conditions. A meticulous review of each child’s records is even more critical for children with specialized needs and behavioral issues. Often, children’s case files contain dozens of specialists’ reports, extensive progress notes and multiple medical evaluations. FFCR ensures our staff and volunteers are equipped to make impactful recommendations for children with special needs. They are trained to understand common diagnoses and a multitude of treatments, services and interventions, such as individualized education plans, applied behavior therapy, therapeutic methods and best practices and psychotropic medication. FFCR’s staff is also extremely knowledgeable about community resources and services that target specific needs.

Age Range	Developmentally on Target	Academic Achievement of C’s and above
0-5	58%	N/A
6-12	73%	73%
13-17	79%	57%

During FY 2023-24, 72 of the 276 children and young adults reviewed by the CRP were determined to have special medical needs that required follow up at the time of their review, including 23 children who had serious medical issues such as asthma, epilepsy, hyperthyroidism, chronic respiratory failure, sickle cell anemia, blindness and sleep apnea. The case manager was not able to report on the medical status of 2 of the children reviewed and the dental care needs of 9 children, which prompted the CRP to request medical documentation and to recommend that all children be immediately provided with an annual well-child exam and biannual dental exams. Services were *not* in place at the time of their most recent review for 17 of the 72 children and young adults requiring follow up care for their medical needs.

Based on the records reviewed and information provided during review hearings, the CRP found that a total of 67 children were not developmentally on target for their chronological age. At the

time of their review hearing, 42% (28) of these children were not receiving all the recommended services required to address their developmental delays.

As the chart above describes, academically, of the 108 youth ages 6-17 enrolled in school, 29 were earning below average grades or failing; academic progress could not be provided by the case manager for 8 of the youth reviewed.

## DANIEL

Just before his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, Daniel's father murdered his mother. He was eventually found guilty of second-degree murder with a deadly weapon and sentenced to extended time in prison. Daniel was placed with non-relatives through a permanent guardianship and his foster care case was closed. However, his caregivers returned Daniel to the foster care system when he was 7 years old. By the time Daniel's case was referred to the CRP, he was already 2 years into his second stint in foster care.

The panel combed through extensive educational and psychological records and uncovered a number of significant issues that had fallen through the cracks. Daniel was reportedly struggling in school. The panel discovered that despite the significant impact of Daniel's ADHD diagnosis on his academic progress and behavior at school, he did not have a 504 plan or an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). To immediately address this situation, the CRP connected the case manager with the school liaison who could assist with expediting the IEP and/or 504 plan process which would provide academic accommodations and support for Daniel.

Daniel's psychological records showed that he had suffered extensive trauma due to his mother's death, and that he was displaying behaviors consistent with a "trauma response." The CRP discovered that years ago, a psychologist had recommended applied behavior therapy; however, Daniel never received this service. The panel ensured that his current therapist received these evaluations and reports, which he had not previously known existed, and the panel recommended that applied behavior therapy and additional services be immediately explored with Daniel's treatment team to determine whether he needed additional psychological services. Further, due to his diagnosis and his mother's death, the CRP advised the case manager that he would likely be entitled to both SSI and SSA benefits, which would assist in covering the cost of any future treatment needs. The case manager provided this information to the physician after the CRP's hearing.

The CRP set Daniel's case for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge and provided the judge with an overview of Daniel's traumatic life and family situation as well as his complex education and psychological needs. The judge adopted the CRP's recommendations and ensured that appropriate orders were in place. The CRP also recommended that Daniel's case be referred to FFCR's Permanency Roundtable Program to ensure that whoever became Daniel's next 'forever family' would have the help and support they needed to ensure that Daniel never again has to enter the foster care system.

## PROMOTING SAFETY

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Division of Violence Prevention, “safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments are essential to prevent early adversity, including child abuse and neglect, and to assure that all children reach their full potential.”<sup>2</sup> At every review, the CRP determines whether children and young adults are living in a safe and appropriate environment that is meeting their needs and protecting them from abuse and neglect.

## ENSURING CONTINUITY OF CARE

The CRP review process is designed to ensure continuity. When a child’s case has been reviewed by the CRP, the subsequent CRP review begins with a discussion of compliance with the panel’s previously issued orders. This allows the panel to ensure judicial orders are followed, identify issues that have been pending and uncover new or unknown barriers to a child’s safety, stability and well-being. Additionally, FFCR’s robust Post Review Advocacy efforts promote consistency of care by bringing unresolved issues before the court for judicial intervention.

The high turnover rate for case managers and other frontline professionals in the child welfare system is well-established. The pandemic, changes in labor market dynamics and inflation exacerbated the problem. In contrast, 28% percent of FFCR’s volunteers have served six or more years on our monthly citizen review panels, with 16% serving between 10 and 33 years. Our Chief Programs Officer and Chief Finance & Operations Officer have both been with the organization for 16 years and our Chief Executive Officer recently started her 13<sup>th</sup> year with FFCR and her 27<sup>th</sup> year in the field. The CRP Program & Advocacy Director is an attorney who has been with FFCR for 6 years, our Program Specialist has been part of the team for 10 years, and our CRP Program & Volunteer Coordinator just concluded her 27<sup>th</sup> year with FFCR. Our current team of five Review Managers have extensive and diverse child welfare expertise, including senior case management experience, child advocacy and early childhood development.

## MAINTAINING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

“A growing body of literature supports the critical role of siblings in helping children in out-of-home care maintain a sense of continuity with family.”<sup>3</sup> Often, judges refer large sibling groups to the CRP for review, acknowledging the challenge of conducting a thorough review for 6, 8 or 12 children from the same family. When reviewing any children with siblings, and especially large sibling groups, panel members always inquire about the frequency, duration, and quality of sibling visitation. Due to case manager shortages, transportation issues, complicated sibling

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<sup>2</sup> CDC - Essentials for Childhood: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/essentials-for-childhood-framework508.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> James S, Monn AR, Palinkas LA, Leslie LK. *Maintaining Sibling Relationships for Children in Foster and Adoptive Placements*. Child Youth Serv Rev. 2008 Jan;30(1):90-106. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.07.001. PMID: 19122749; PMCID: PMC2409199.

dynamics and a lack of foster homes, consistent sibling visitation is often a challenge; however, Florida Statute 39.4024 requires that efforts be made to place siblings together and maintain contact. Unfortunately, when children are moved from one foster home to another, sibling relationships are further affected. If the CRP determines that sibling visits are not occurring or are inconsistent, the panel members ask a series of questions to pinpoint the barriers and brainstorm creative ways to ensure siblings see each other and stay connected.

## DEVELOPING “LIFE SKILLS”

Approximately 26,000 youth “age out” of the U.S. foster care system every year upon turning 18. Many are unprepared to live independently and often do not have the support and guidance of a trusted adult. During FY 2023-24, the CRP reviewed the cases of 54 youth ages 13-17 who were eligible for independent living services. Even though FFCR works tirelessly to ensure that every child has been connected to a lifelong family before turning 18, the CRP also must ensure that youth are provided the tools and resources to prepare for and successfully transition to adulthood. The CRP employs a specific set of questions designed to help the panel assess the youth’s preparation for the transition to adulthood. The questions cover educational and/or careers plans, resume building, financial preparation, plans for housing after turning 18, employment preparation, access to food and basic resources, and more.

All children 13 and older in Miami’s foster care system must be provided an assessment to identify the behaviors and competencies youth need to achieve their long-term goals. After completing the assessment, the case manager, Guardian ad Litem if assigned, caregiver, and other adults involved in their care are expected to work with the youth to develop an Annual Plan that incorporates a set of goals based on the youth’s life skills assessment scores. During CRP reviews, the panel enquires about the completion of the assessment and whether the youth is actively working towards making progress in their areas of need in a timely manner. The panel also determines what additional resources each youth needs to accomplish his or her goals.

	Has	Does not have	Case manager did not know
Florida ID	18.5%	74%	5.5%
Social Security Card*	57%	32%	5.5%
Birth Certificate	85%	7%	5.5%
Medicaid Card	78%	13%	2%

*Note: 1 child was not eligible for a Florida ID and 3 youth were not eligible for a social security card, so they are not included in the above totals.*

The CRP also ensures that 15-17-year-olds have the important documents needed to apply for a job, obtain a driver’s license and/or access benefits. For 16-17 years old youth at risk of aging out of foster care, the panel assesses whether they have a viable plan for transitioning from foster care along with access to critical information, services and supports as they approach their 18<sup>th</sup>



birthday. During FY 2023-24, only four (4) of the nine (9) seventeen-year-olds reviewed by the CRP had a formal transition plan.

	Yes	No	Unknown by Case Manager	Not Applicable
Was youth provided information about Post-Secondary Educational Support Services (PESS)*	62%	33%	0%	5%
Was youth informed about Extended Foster Care*	71%	19%	0%	10%
Did youth complete Financial Literacy training*	28%	48%	19%	5%
Does youth have a Bank Account*	19%	76%	5%	0%
Does youth have a driver's license or permit*	5%	90%	5%	0%
Is youth employed*	9%	86%	0%	5%
If not employed, does youth wish to be employed*	50%	39%	11%	0%

\*Responses from 16-17 year-olds only

### **Transition to Extended Foster Care**

- 88% were reportedly planning to transition into the Extended Foster Care Program upon turning 18 – a notable increase from 50% in fiscal year 21-22.

### **Employment Preparation**

- Only two youth had a resume
- 33% had some work experience

### **Post Foster Care Living Arrangements (Youth ages 17+)**

- 33% did not know where they would live once they transitioned from foster care
- 22% planned to live in their current foster home or new foster home upon entering Extended Foster Care
- 22% planned to live in transitional housing
- 1 youth planned to return to his/her biological parents

## **LAURA**

When Laura's case was heard by the CRP, she was one month shy of turning 18. She had speech delays, cognitive delays and a rare disease and would need significant support as she transitioned to adulthood, and most likely throughout her lifetime. During her CRP review hearing, it became clear to the panel that Laura did not have the services, tools and resources she would need to have stability and well-being as she made this transition. Despite having lifelong disabilities that rendered her unable to perform a number of 'activities of daily living,' Laura did not have a plenary guardian to ensure her physical, emotional and financial well-being once she turned 18. She had also applied to receive services from the Agency for People

with Disabilities (APD) after she turned 18, but she had been denied. Her court-appointed Attorney ad Litem had not even explored the possibility of filing an appeal.

Laura was receiving SSA benefits; however, no one had helped her file the paperwork to make her the direct payee upon turning 18. Furthermore, like so many older youth in foster care, Laura did have her social security card in her possession and she did not have a Florida ID, both of which are critical for many tasks of adulthood. Additionally, even though five months earlier the court had ordered the child welfare agency to ensure that Laura received dental treatment, a vision exam, and a speech evaluation; however, she did not even have an appointment for these services.

Time was of the essence, so the CRP set Laura's case for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge, just before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Pursuant to the panel's recommendations, Laura was linked with a pro bono legal team to appeal the denial of her APD application and to further explore the provision of a plenary guardian. At the CRP's request, the Court signed the necessary orders to ensure Laura would begin receiving her SSA benefits on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her case worker helped Laura obtain a Florida ID and to apply for a new social security card, and her vision exam and her tooth extractions were completed in record time.

Unfortunately, the speech evaluation could not be completed prior to her turning 18; however, FFCR provided the CRP Program's Findings & Recommendations Report to the Extended Foster Care Program, and Laura's Extended Foster Care case manager helped her schedule this appointment and ensured she was properly evaluated. The CRP Program will continue to review Laura's case until she is 22 years old to ensure that she receives the care and support she needs to thrive.

## **NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD**

During FY 2023-24, the CRP reviewed the cases of 104 young adults ages 18 to 21 years old who aged out of foster care and elected to participate in the state's Extended Foster Care program. They must be enrolled in school or employed part-time and they must reside in a living arrangement approved by the lead community-based care agency. A young adult may also qualify for the program if they are participating in an activity that eliminates barriers to attending school or gaining employment, or if a young adult is determined to have a documented disability that prohibits them from engaging in any of these qualifying activities. A young adult with a documented disability may also qualify to partake in the EFC program until age 22.

As part of the Extended Foster Care program, young adults receive assistance with Medicaid, allotted monthly stipends for daily living expenses, assistance with applying for food stamps or food stipend if necessary, bus card, and rental expenses. They also receive case management and access to the Nurse Case Management department, Education Specialist, and Housing Coordinator at the lead child welfare agency. The CRP ensures that young adults are aware of these resources and know how to access them. A number of young adults who are reviewed by

the CRP do not have a consistent adult in their lives other than their Transitioning Youth Specialist (TYS). They often need extra guidance and support to learn how to access the many benefits and services available to them.

The CRP ensures that young adults' voices are heard by personally inviting them to their judicial reviews, via e-mail and telephone, and purposefully and thoroughly engaging them during the review hearings. Young adult engagement is crucial because only by hearing directly from the young adult can we best assess their needs and develop appropriate, detailed recommendations. Forty-nine (49%) percent of the young adults whose cases were reviewed by the CRP during FY 2023-24 participated in their CRP hearings. At the hearing, panel members and FFCR's Review Managers ensure that each young adult is provided ample opportunity to tell the panel how they are doing, share their concerns and request assistance. The panel also uses this opportunity to commend young adults for their hard work in school and/or at their job and for efforts they are making to develop life skills as they transition to adulthood.

## JANET

Janet entered foster care at 17 ½ years old and transitioned to Extended Foster Care when she turned 18. The parent of 2 young children, Janet participated in her first post-18 CRP review hearing after being informed and encouraged by FFCR's team to participate in the hearing. During her review, Janet reported that the home she was living in with other young adults in the Extended Foster Care program was dirty, constantly smelled of marijuana, and was infested with roaches. Some of the young adults did not clean up after themselves and one was reportedly using drugs. These concerns were particularly alarming since Janet's children live with her in this home. Janet explained that she had complained numerous times to her landlord, but nothing had been fixed. Given the serious nature of the concerns, the CRP set the case for a Post Judicial Review hearing before the judge. Janet appeared at the hearing and reiterated her concerns, adding that now the refrigerator was broken and there was rotting food.

Following the CRP's recommendations, the judge immediately ordered the child welfare agency to visit Janet's home to address the issues and set a follow up hearing within the week. During the follow up hearing, Janet confirmed that the home had been cleaned, the refrigerator was working, the roach infestation had been resolved, and the young adult who was using drugs and causing some of the issues had been evicted. Additionally, Janet and her housemates were offered coaching and support to help them maintain a clean home and improve their daily life skills. The judge asked Janet to let her case manager know if any new issues arose regarding her living arrangements. By engaging Janet and young adults like her prior to their CRP hearing and encouraging them to actively participate and advocate for their own needs, FFCR provides an accessible platform for young adults to express their challenges and successes to a group of concerned and action-oriented volunteers focused on hearing and addressing each young adults concerns and barriers to success.

## ***Housing***

Eighty-four percent (84%) of the 104 young adults in Extended Foster Care who were reviewed by the CRP were living in “transitional housing” (often alone in a rental home or with a roommate, often another youth in Extended Foster Care) at the time of their review. One (1) young adult was not in an “approved living arrangement” and the remaining 16 young adults had the following living arrangements:

- APD (Agency for Persons with Disabilities) home (11)
- Relatives (2)
- Assisted Living Facility (1)
- Enlisted in the Military (1)
- Diversion Program (1)

## ***Education***

Seventy-three (73) of the 104 young adults were enrolled in an educational setting at the time of their review:

- 48% were working towards a high school diploma
- 29% were studying for a GED
- 21% were enrolled in post-secondary or vocational programs
- 2% were enrolled in a high school completion/credit recovery program

## ***Employment***

- 41% of the young adults able to work were employed at the time of their review
- 29% of those employed had full-time employment
- 22% of all young adults reviewed who were able to work reported having no work experience

# CONCLUSION

The Judicial Review Hearing serves as a critical 360° “check point” every six months that provides an analysis of the child and family’s progress towards their safety, well-being and permanency goals. This hearing also ensures that the child welfare agency is fulfilling its responsibilities to the child, the parents and the children’s caregivers.

In addition to identifying and addressing unmet needs, ensuring access to essential services and assessing compliance with court orders, the CRP Program facilitates progress towards critical milestones. The CRP process also provides a unique venue for youth, parents and caregivers to share their challenges, concerns, hopes and dreams. Furthermore, FFCR harnesses our extensive community network to connect children, young adults and families served by FFCR to resources, opportunities, experiences and adult support.

The Citizen Review Panel Program’s ultimate goal is to give children in foster care the chance to grow up with the love and support of stable, nurturing adults who are able to keep them safe and help them thrive. The staff, board and volunteers of Florida Foster Care Review are inspired and humbled by this challenging and uplifting work, and we are grateful to the 11<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court administration and judiciary, the child welfare system stakeholders, and our many organizational partners, and supporters for entrusting our team with this crucial mission.