



National Association of Public  
Child Welfare Administrators

an affiliate of the American Public Human Services Association

## How States are Implementing the Fostering Connections Act

### Florida's At-risk Children

In FY 2006, approximately 33,821 of Florida's children were abused and/or neglected and a total of 48,798 children and youth received out-of-home services. In this same timeframe, 10,636 left care for reunification, 5,377 were placed with relatives, 2,991 were adopted, 1,484 aged out or left care for other reasons<sup>1</sup>; and approximately 30,417 children entered state custody.<sup>2</sup> In September 2008, 22,309 children remained in the out of home care system with approximately 1,000 children waiting for a permanent family through adoption. As of February, 2009 the number of children in out-of-home care has fallen by 29 percent since September, 2005 when Florida set a goal of reducing the number of children in out-of-home care by 50 percent by 2012. Florida is more than half way there.

Florida attributes the reduction in foster care to three factors: front end diversion, accelerating the process of reunification and increasing the number of public adoptions. A variety of social services have accompanied each of these major strategies. These include family mental health, substance abuse, anger management and temporary financial support services as well as emphasis on kinship care placements and intensive family finding efforts.

In 2008, Florida finalized 3,389 public adoptions, a historic number.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Florida experienced a reduction in entries into out-of-home placement. This reduction is attributed to front end services established through Florida's IV-E Waiver. Through this waiver every child at risk is eligible for federal foster care funds, which are used for prevention services that enable children to remain in their own homes without compromising their safety.

As of October 2007, the most recent date for which data are available, the in-home service population is 62.32 percent white, 38.27 percent black, 12.32 percent Hispanic, and 1.65 percent other, while the out-of-home population is 60.77 percent white, 40.66 percent black, 10.85 percent Hispanic and 1.18 percent other.<sup>4</sup>

### Florida's Budget Landscape

Florida's current budget shortfall is projected to be \$2.4 billion for 2009, increasing to \$2.5 billion for 2010, or 11.2 percent of the General Fund. Florida has the highest foreclosure rate in the nation and this is expected to increase as the economy continues to struggle. Over the last year, Florida had more than 408,835 new food stamp recipients, a 29 percent increase over 2007. This rise is attributed to increased unemployment resulting from the collapse of the state's construction industry.<sup>5</sup>

### P.L. 110-351 State Options

Florida is interested in exercising the option to implement the new **Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP)**, but to do so would require passage of a new law for which there is no specific plan in place at this time. Florida Children and Families Services must first amend its Title IV-E State Plan and present a proposal to the governor. Once granted, the department can move forward to present a GAP bill to the legislature.

The federal GAP fits well conceptually with Florida's child welfare model, but there are fiscal and structural challenges to its implementation. Paying the state match for the new program could be problematic, given Florida's financial difficulties. The current program is funded through TANF. The state rate is higher than the TANF child only stipend, but lower than licensed foster care. In addition, the state would have to restructure its current relative caregiver program to meet federal eligibility requirements. Relative caregivers are screened for safety but not required to complete a full licensing process. As these caregivers are not considered foster parents the requirements for children to be in foster care six months prior to eligibility could also have additional fiscal implications.

Florida would like to continue to enhance **supports to eligible young adults aged 19, 20, or 21**, if fiscally feasible. Currently children in Florida age out of foster care at age 18. Young adults may request to remain under the court's jurisdiction until age 19 or to remain in a foster home or group home, but foster care status is not extended. Florida has

been innovative in planning for young adults aging out of the foster care system and has had 150 young adults hired through a program called Operation Full Employment. Operation Full Employment encourages both the Department of Children and Families and its community-based care providers to hire youth in foster care and young adults formerly in foster care to give them employment experience. Youth and young adults hired through Operation Full Employment are in positions throughout the agency based on their experiences and interests. This program is a direct result of senior leadership listening to the concerns of youth.

The **support eligible youth who exit care to guardianship or adoption after age 16** option will not have an impact on the state of Florida at this time. However, Florida is exploring both fiscal and programmatic options for the future

### **Florida Tribes**

There are two federally recognized tribes in Florida, the Seminoles and Miccosukee. The Department of Children and Families works with the Seminoles in regard to child protective investigation but not IV-E programs. The Miccosukee have their own court system and handle the own affairs. At this time the Department does not anticipate either tribe requesting to operate a IV-E program under P.L. 110-351.

### **P.L. 110-351 Mandatory Provisions**

Florida has requested Health and Human Services (HHS) delay all the mandatory provisions to give the state time to fully review and evaluate these provisions. Overall the state believes all the components are in place and Florida will be in compliance without any major changes to state law.

Florida law already requires **Relative Notification** of placement.

**Education stability** is supported by Florida law and administrative code, which requires all children to be students.

### **Sibling Connections**

The State of Florida filed a Certification of Required State Legislation in November 2008 with the federal Administration for Children and Families. Reasonable efforts provisions regarding siblings were included as requiring additional legislation. Current law does include legislative intent regarding sibling connections and attachments but does not include the reasonable efforts provisions. In addition, both law and code require careful consideration of the needs for siblings to be placed together or to maintain or to establish contact. Several initiatives underway place emphasis on sibling issues including: family centered practice training, longest waiting teens project, and family finding efforts. Florida will continue to work to improve sibling placement practices.

### **Health oversight and coordination Plan**

The State of Florida is addressing the health care oversight and coordination planning requirements in collaboration with multiple executive agencies. In September 2008, an interagency agreement was signed by the Department with the agencies responsible for Health, Health Care Administration, Persons with Disabilities, and Juvenile Justice. This group was convened on February 5, 2009 specifically for the purpose of addressing health care planning. The state is working with Casey to continue this comprehensive planning effort.

For **transition planning for children aging out of foster care**, Florida law is more stringent than the new Federal requirements. The new act's timeframes for engagement will need to be synchronized with Florida's and with the baseline survey on the National Youth in Transition Data (NYTD). Effective tracking will depend on the roll out of the new Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), which is imminent.

### **Family Connections Grants**

Florida or a partner agency will be applying for a Family Connection Grant. Currently, Florida has a contract with the Kinship Support Center that works out of the University of South Florida and anticipates that this organization (along with others) will make an application. Action will be based on the Administration of Children and Families posting program instructions and request for proposals.

### **Opportunities & Challenges**

One challenge Florida faces is restructuring their current relative guardianship assistance program to meet federal guidelines. Florida wants to extend foster care past age 18, but finds the fiscal implementation may be prohibitive.

## Conclusion

Florida advocates for a comprehensive integrated approach to child welfare that would unify funding streams, eligibility requirements and monitoring. Florida would advocate for there to be changes in federal IV-E eligibility requirements or their waiver be renewed so they will not be restricted to using IV-E funding for out of home care only when their waiver expires in 2011.

Florida is a member of the National Governors Association (NGA) Policy Academy on Safely Reducing the Number of Children in Foster Care. Florida also benefits from a contract and assistance from Casey Family Programs, which supports work in Gainesville and Jacksonville, and a Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative program in Tampa. Florida would welcome any other technical assistance that may be available.

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<sup>1</sup> Florida Department of Children and Family. *Child Protective Service Statistical Data Tables Fiscal Year 2006-2007*. October, 2007. page 15, 125.127 Retrieved February 26, 2009 from [http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/publications/ChildAnnualReport06\\_07.pdf](http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/publications/ChildAnnualReport06_07.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Florida Interprogram Task Force. *Florida's State Plan for the Prevention of Child Abuse, Abandonment, and Neglect: July 2005 through June 2010*. (October 2008). Retrieved February 26, 2009 from <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/>.

<sup>3</sup> Florida Department of Children and Family. *DCF Long Range Program Plan 2009-10 through 2013-14*. September 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Florida Department of Children and Family. *Child Protective Service Statistical Data Tables Fiscal Year 2006-2007*. October, 2007. page 15, 125.127 Retrieved February 26, 2009 from [http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/publications/ChildAnnualReport06\\_07.pdf](http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/publications/ChildAnnualReport06_07.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *Children and Families Secretary and Rep. Yolly Roberson Join Florida's Nonprofit Leaders to Address Rising Numbers of Food Stamp Applicants*. Press Release February 10, 2009. Retrieved February 26, 2009 from [http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/news/2009\\_0219DCFSecretaryAndRobersonFloridaNonprofit.shtml](http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/news/2009_0219DCFSecretaryAndRobersonFloridaNonprofit.shtml)

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