Executive Summary

Introduction
Florida’s current community-based child welfare projects represent a substantial step toward determining ways to improve Florida’s child welfare system. In fact, the three continuing projects represent a shifting of the responsibility for the child welfare function from the public to the private sector. Such a significant change dictates that we, as a state, seek to learn all that we can from these projects. The outcome evaluation is a continuing step toward learning from the experiences of the privatization projects, and toward using this information to shape Florida’s child welfare system into the next century.

Sweeping privatization legislation, in the form of HB 3217, was passed during the 1998 legislative session. HB 3217 amends the original privatization legislation (Section 409.1671, Florida Statutes). Under the original legislation, the Department of Children and Families was required to establish pilot programs during fiscal year 1996-97 that privatized child welfare services through contracts with community-based agencies. Continuing community-based child welfare programs are in place in Districts 4, 8, and 13. The original legislation afforded these pilot sites significant latitude in determining the focus and scope of their respective programs. Subsequently, these sites have developed unique approaches to the delivery of services that are intended to improve child welfare in the area they serve.

The Evaluation
The 1998-99 outcome evaluation of the three continuing community-based pilot sites culminated in this evaluation report being submitted to the Legislature. Also developed, but separate from this report, is a preliminary report on implementation of privatization in District 5. Previously, two privatization evaluation reports have been developed. The first is entitled “Implementation Study Report on the Child Welfare Privatization Projects” and the second is entitled “Interim Evaluation of Florida’s Child Welfare Privatization Projects.”

Factors that need to be considered relative to the evaluation of privatization efforts to date include the following:

- The continuing privatization projects in Districts 4, 8, and 13 experienced staggered implementation processes during 1997 (their first year of operation). For example, the District 8 privatization project became responsible for adoption cases in Sarasota County on January 1, 1997, foster care cases on March 1, 1997, and protective services (supervision) cases on June 2, 1997.

- Key outcomes, such as reducing the average length of stay in care, are long-term in nature and require that the projects be up and running for at least a couple of years before definitive data are available by which long-term success can be gauged.

Although the next iteration of evaluation activities will provide an even better opportunity to examine performance based on outcomes that are long-term in nature, the current set of evaluation activities attempts to examine as much useful and available outcome data as possible in order to determine the status of the privatization projects at this early point in their existence/development. Thus, the evaluation looks at a core set of outcomes that have been established for the privatization projects. These outcomes are identified in the model privatization contract developed by the Office of Family Safety and Preservation.
Broad Evaluation Questions

The outcome evaluation attempts to address the broad question of whether privatization is doing a better job of meeting the needs of children and families than is the Department of Children and Families. This question addresses system effectiveness. Secondarily is whether privatized systems of care can effectively perform the child welfare function more efficiently than the Department. In other words, are the privatization projects better at utilizing resources to achieve desired outcomes than is the Department? A related issue is the extent to which the projects are able to supplement the dollars channeled to them by the Department with community resources. If a privatized system of care is found to be more costly, the issue of supplementing project resources with community resources takes on increased significance. The answers to these questions require that the privatization projects be evaluated over an extended period of time; i.e., the next two to three years at least.

Availability of Long-Term Data

The amount of long-term outcome data that are available is presently limited due to the length of time that the privatization projects have been in operation. Although the community-based programs in Districts 4, 8, and 13 were all implemented beginning January 1, 1997, the manner in which they were implemented directly impacts data availability. For example, the Bridges Program in District 13 grew incrementally - as new children entered shelter care each month. As a result, an insufficient number of children will have been in the Bridges Program in excess of one year to allow for a large cohort to be available for tracking. While the importance of examining success from the standpoint of long-term outcomes is undeniable, the opportunity exists to examine some performance indicators that are related to a child’s experience while in care. For instance, how do the privatization projects and the Department compare with respect to the amount of involvement/contact that staff are having with children and families in care? The answers to such questions indicate whether systems of care are doing the things necessary to increase the likelihood that desired outcomes will be obtained.

Future Evaluation Activities

The privatization legislation calls for the privatization projects to be evaluated annually. Significant challenges are inherent in an ongoing evaluation of program effectiveness and efficiency for diverse community-based child welfare projects. Keys to success in this area include:

1) Ensuring that existing and planned data systems will support outcome measurement; and
2) Allowing for a sufficient demonstration period before definitive conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness and the efficiency of community-based child welfare.

As statewide implementation of community-based child welfare has started, the issue of transitioning successfully from one system to another is of increasing importance. Note that an entire section of the evaluation report has been dedicated to presenting issues related to transitioning. Several of these issues, in the opinion of the independent evaluator, pose substantial threats to the overall health of the state’s child welfare function (both public and private sectors) if not addressed proactively and aggressively.
Individual Project Summaries

Family Services Coalition

The Family Services Coalition in District 4 has the potential to provide valuable information on how the private sector handles the burden of being the child welfare function, and with children ages 12 to 18 - the most challenging group for which to develop solutions. The Coalition affords information about the transition of a residential service array in an urban community with a large number of group home beds to a more community-based (i.e., foster care) array. However, key issues must be successfully navigated by the Family Services Coalition, in conjunction with the Department, if the program is to function effectively over time. These issues include the following:

- Transferring the necessary Department positions to the Family Services Coalition to allow it to case manage all children currently in Coalition placements. The Coalition presently does not case manage all youth residing in Coalition placements.
- Implementing and operating under a new board structure that increases broader community input into the decision making process for the Coalition.
- Beyond increased community representation on the Coalition’s Board of Directors, efforts need to be made to expand/enhance community support for community-based child welfare through increased stakeholder support and involvement.
- Effectively developing the capacity to supplement contract dollars from the Department with other dollars to provide the level of care called for by the project’s design. The individual Coalition members are each working to develop their Medicaid billing capacity. Beyond developing other federal funding, efforts need to be made to further cultivate community resources.

Sarasota County Coalition for Families and Children

Presently, the Sarasota County Coalition offers the most comprehensive look at how the private sector manages the enormous task of the Department with respect to ongoing child welfare. To date, the Coalition has managed to support its intensive design through aggressive leadership and significant community support. Key stakeholders within the local community have expressed a desire to be responsible for the child welfare function, and presently evidence a tangible willingness to support the Coalition in its efforts. Concerns do exist relative to the Coalition. These include the following:

- The extent to which what is in place in Sarasota County can be replicated in various locales throughout the state. Notably, the level of community ownership and support, including financial support could prove hard to develop in other communities.
- Can the Coalition sustain its approach over time? While recent increases in the contract dollars available to the Coalition somewhat diminish the current relevance of this question, it still is to be determined whether deficit spending will occur over the long-term.
- The relationship between the Coalition and the existing Department functions in Sarasota County must be continually supported. Concerns were expressed to the independent evaluator from both Coalition staff and Department staff as to difficulties in maintaining an effective relationship. Involvement of local stakeholders in helping to resolve issues between the Coalition and the Department in Sarasota County could possibly help to make a more cohesive and efficient child welfare function in the county.
The Bridges Program

The Bridges Program has grown dramatically within the last six months. Based on information provided by Bridges staff, the program is beginning to implement the types of support mechanisms and expand staff resources so as to develop system capacity to meet the level of need. Furthermore, 1998 saw significant administrative change - the elimination of the case rate payment methodology, multiple “stop gap” contracts following elimination of the case rate, and staffing issues. In the opinion of the independent evaluator, the most notable development since the last round of evaluation activities may be what appears to be deterioration in the relationship between the Department and the Lake County Boys Ranch. As of this writing, Bridges Program management reported a number of steps that are either being taken or are to be taken in the immediate future to address key issues, including steps to improve communication with the Department.

Conclusions

How is the private sector handling the assumption of the Department’s burden to serve Florida’s children and families in need? Specifically, how is the private sector managing with a finite amount of dollars to serve all children and families in need of help, without the option of discontinuing involvement when cases become too challenging? This is the broad question to be answered as thoroughly as possible in order to understand the benefits and potential pitfalls of implementing community-based child welfare throughout the state. This section presents conclusions deriving from the data collection and analysis work undertaken by the evaluation, including those pertaining to system performance and system efficiency.

Conclusions Deriving From Evaluation Activities

Although the three continuing community-based child welfare systems are distinct from one another, it is possible to compare across these three systems to the Department’s approach and arrive at some broad conclusions regarding differences at this early point in the life of the projects. Several conclusions present findings on specific performance areas that suggest that community-based child welfare is being effective.

Before presenting conclusions regarding system performance, system efficiency, and other areas, a major conclusion regarding the current usefulness of Department-generated outcome data is provided.

Department-Generated Outcome Data

**Conclusion:** There are simply too many issues regarding the accuracy of outcome data from Department data systems to be able to draw reliable conclusions about system performance on outcome measures that have been identified for the community-based child welfare systems.

Broad System Performance

**Conclusion:** Data from a variety of sources were examined to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and efficiency of community-based child welfare. Taken together, the data do not conclusively distinguish community-based child welfare from the Department’s approach with respect to performance. However, there are several specific indications that community-based child welfare has made it through its second year of operations with some of its quality enhancements intact and functioning.
Contrasting the Two Systems

**Conclusion:** The majority of surveyed foster parents and staff who were formerly with the Department and who are now with the private sector rate the private sector as the better system.

Caseload Size

**Conclusion:** The caseload of a community-based worker, on average, is considerably lower than that of a Department worker.

Level of Contact/Involvement

**Conclusion:** The community-based programs have at least weekly in-person contact with a significantly (statistically) larger percentage of their clients than does the Department.

Differing Expectations

**Conclusion:** Department staff and the staff of the community-based systems appear to have differing expectations with respect to what constitutes meaningful intervention in the lives of those served. Those associated with the Department tend to regard lower levels of in-person client contact as sufficient or more than enough when compared to the responses of foster parents and staff associated with the community-based systems.

Closed Cases

**Conclusion:** The Sarasota County Coalition is closing cases at a faster rate than the Department.

Partnering Between the Private Sector and the Department

**Conclusion:** The long-term health of Florida’s child welfare function will be impacted by the extent to which the private sector and the Department form cooperative partnerships. Effective partnering between the Department and community-based child welfare programs is a must if child welfare is to be improved. Without effective partnering, we run the risk of having a fragmented and possibly less effective child welfare system than existed prior to community-based child welfare.

The Protective Investigations Function and the Ongoing Child Welfare Function

**Conclusion:** The community-based child welfare systems not having responsibility for the protective investigations function may contribute to parents they work with being less resistant to receiving help. The service experiences that parents have with a system that contains the protective investigations function may continue to be negatively influenced to some extent by having been investigated, particularly if a parent’s child/children was/were removed.
The Department’s Oversight and Technical Assistance (TA) Roles

**Conclusion:** The Department’s oversight role/responsibility is a critical one, and can be a facilitator of, or barrier to quality performance on the part of the community-based programs. The extent to which the Department can develop and deliver effective technical assistance will be a factor in the success of community-based programs, at least during the early developmental and implementation stages.

Broader Understanding Needed

**Conclusion:** Much needs to be learned about how the community-based programs perform over time in order to better understand how to manage the re-shaping of the state’s child welfare system. Most notably, we need to learn how to NOT replicate, in the private sector, problems experienced by the Department through the years.

Training

**Conclusion:** The present efforts of the Professional Development Center (PDC) to re-design the child welfare training that is to be delivered to both public and private sector staff appear to constitute positive movement toward a training function that is more workable and more useful for the private sector.

System Efficiency

At this early point in the history of the most substantial community-based system, the Sarasota County Coalition, Coalition costs and those of the Department are similar. Note that considerable forces are at work to influence costs towards being similar for the two systems. Notably, revenues are very similar given that, by and large, they are from the same fund sources; and, federal funding constraints serve to dictate how funds can be spent. That costs are similar could be taken as a positive indicator at this time. This is because the Coalition maintains lower caseloads, on average, than does the Department; and it has more client contact/involvement with a larger percentage of its caseload.

Short-Term Cost Management

**Conclusion:** Presently, the Sarasota County Coalition is managing to pay for a system of care that maintains lower caseloads and has more in-person client contact than the Department’s system.

Long-Term Cost Effectiveness

**Conclusion:** The real test of whether the private sector is more cost efficient will be found by examining the status of closed cases at specific points beyond the date of case closure (e.g., 12, 24, and 36 months).

Alternative Sources of Funds

**Conclusion:** Efforts need to continue to identify additional sources of funds to support the community-based programs in their work to demonstrate more intensive intervention models. For any sources of funds that are identified as being accessible by the community-based programs, consideration must be given to determining how Department-run systems can also access these funds.
Consider Elements of Managed Care that can be Tried In the Community-Based Programs

**Conclusion:** Elements of managed care, such as a case rate may prove workable and beneficial over the long run. Such tools may prove useful in managing costs in child welfare. However, a sufficient demonstration period is necessary in order to determine whether managed care approaches such as a case rate can actually benefit Florida’s child welfare system.

**Transition Issues**

**Transitioning to Community-Based Care**

As in any other service function, the transition from government-run services to privatized operations is a critical process. The extent to which transition planning is thorough and well conceived can determine how rapidly a successful private function can be in place. There could be no area other than child welfare where the need for a well-planned, sufficiently deliberate transition process is greater. What is at stake is the well being of children and families involved with the child welfare system.

A difficult transition process can result in two detrimental situations existing, both of which translate into possibly an extended period of impaired system performance. This impaired performance could be present both before the privatized system actually replaces the previous system, and after it has replaced the previous system. These two situations are as follows:

1) The existing child welfare system (i.e., the Department) can become dangerously unstable due to the departure (and pending departure) of staff.

2) The privatized child welfare system starts at a disadvantage for one or more of several possible reasons. These reasons include the privatized system inheriting many cases that have not been adequately served over a period of months during which the Department system lost workers to other employment; the privatized system not having the benefit of the child welfare experience and knowledge of key veteran Department staff; and the strained relationship within the local community that can result from a negative transition experience.

Regardless of whether a person is a supporter of privatization or a supporter of a government-run child welfare, a well-planned and successful transition process is in the best interests of all involved, particularly the children and families receiving services.

**Transition Issue #1:** The destabilization of the existing child welfare system due to the departure of Department of Children and Families’ staff prior to implementation of privatization.

Allowing the existing (Department) system to diminish without the privatized system being sufficiently developed to assume responsibility for children and families in care is of utmost concern. It is critical that key Department staff be encouraged to remain in their positions throughout transition. Once identified, it is vital that these persons be assured of their value and importance in making sure that the transition to privatization does not produce dangerous gaps in services/protection and that they are a foundational part of the new child welfare system.

Achieving a balance between 1) safeguarding Florida’s child welfare knowledge and experience that largely resides within the Department and 2) ensuring that the new privatized system is not simply a
replication of the Department is critical. This is a balance that must be struck. It will help ensure a safe transition, and it will help to ensure that the privatized system does not have to spend needless time and energy re-inventing the wheel.

Diminishing one system, without yet sufficiently developing the new system is a dangerous way to transition to privatization. An approach to transition that does not increase the exposure to risk on the part of children and families in care is necessary. A component of any such approach should be ensuring that veteran Department staff, who are competent and desire to work in the new system, have a place in that system.

**Transition Issue #2:** Development of, and adherence to a sufficiently detailed transition plan for each local area.

Prior to any actual cases being transferred from the Department to a private entity, it is imperative that a comprehensive transition plan be in place. A sufficient transition plan should detail the resources necessary to perform the various child welfare tasks being assumed by the private sector, it should describe how resources will be allocated, and the timeframes for the accomplishment of specific transition tasks. Adequate capacity must be tangibly discernible in the plan.

**Transition Issue #3:** Successfully addressing operational issues related to the fragmentation of the child welfare system. Communication and procedural problems can be harder to correct when all of these functions are not under the responsibility of one entity.

The re-shaping of the child welfare system in Florida is effectively fragmenting the system between at least three entities. Each of the entities is responsible for one of three major components of a child welfare system. These three components are protective investigations, legal services, and ongoing services (comprised mainly of shelter care/foster care, protective services, and adoptions). The need for coordination and effective communication between these three components is great, even when all three are within the same agency. In essence, co-locating these components is useful in facilitating communication and enhancing coordination between these components. Moving the protective investigations and legal functions to agencies other than the agency responsible for the ongoing component of child welfare can increase the potential for communication and coordination problems.

Communication and coordination problems present between the protective investigations and legal functions remaining with the Department and the privatization projects can be exacerbated by any lingering animosity between remaining Department employees and private sector employees. Co-locating the protective investigations and legal functions with the ongoing child welfare function could facilitate the development of constructive and more efficient relationships among these three major components of child welfare. Staff, both Department and private, who are working on the same cases, need to be able to readily access one another to facilitate timely intervention and case planning. Co-locating can further help staff of these various program components to learn to appreciate each other on an interpersonal basis, thus helping staff to view other staff as people and not sources of problems/confusion.

**Transition Issue #4:** Risk to the private sector, most notably the lead agencies as a result of assuming the role and function of the Department of Children and Families.
There are two significant types of risk that the private sector is exposed to by virtue of assuming the role and function of the Department of Children and Families. These are fiscal and legal risk (or liability). The fiscal risk to the private sector is potentially significant as privatization of child welfare in Florida presently exists. The private sector has no control over the number of children and families it must serve. However, the private sector is limited by the amount of dollars allocated to it, along with whatever other funding it can raise, such as community contributions. Clearly, there are differences in the extent to which individual Florida communities can help support the child welfare function in the form of financial support.

The Department of Children and Families also operates under the same set of constraints - a responsibility to serve all who enter the system, and with a limited set of resources. However, the Department is able to work to balance deficits within individual districts by taking funds from other districts. This helps to mitigate some of the fiscal risk associated with the responsibility to serve all who enter care. It is less likely for all or most of the regions of a state, particularly one as diverse as Florida, to experience a dramatic increase in new cases of abuse/neglect than it is for an individual district or community to experience increases. Thus, within a given year, certain areas of the state will have significant increases in the number of children and families served, while other areas of the state will not. Funds in those areas that do not experience increases (at least not of the magnitude of other areas) can be used in the adversely affected areas to cover deficits. Privatization, as it presently operates in the small number of sites in the state, does not afford the community-based child welfare systems that option.

An observation that may underscore the need to address this area is one of the process of selecting and installing a lead agency in District 5. Devereux, selected by a majority of providers within the local child welfare community for recommendation to the Department as lead agency (i.e., a recommendation for the Department to negotiate with Devereux), once informed that it would be exposed to virtually unlimited fiscal and legal risk in the role of lead agency, expressed concern about becoming the lead agency. Devereux staff indicated that Devereux’s Board of Directors (located out of state) was particularly concerned about the fiscal and legal risk associated with getting involved in the privatization of child welfare in Florida.

This is in contrast to what occurred in the initial phase of privatization in Florida. Most notably, neither the Lake County Boys Ranch in District 13 nor the Sarasota County Coalition surfaced issues during negotiations that, if not resolved, could/would lead to the termination of their interest in becoming the lead agency. Rather, the leaders of these programs, with a political mandate to privatize as directed by the privatization legislation, pressed on in a determined effort to establish privatization, and then address problems/barriers as the initial privatization efforts gained experience. While privatization in District 5 was specifically mandated by legislation, a lead agency was not. What took place in District 5 was a potential lead agency entity displayed a desire to become a lead agency, but not a willingness to do so at the price of jeopardizing their entire business. Therefore, the role of lead agency, while it may not have to be “attractive,” must not be so onerous and dangerous from a business perspective that few if any community agencies will seek the lead agency role.

**Transition Issue #5:** Ensuring adequate start-up dollars are available for successful implementation of the new child welfare system.

Not providing for some amount of start-up dollars for the implementation of privatized systems of care has the potential to negatively impact system performance at least in the first year of operations, and possibly for several years beyond. There are going to be some amount of start-up expenses associated
with designing and implementing a new system of care. Unless specific start-up dollars are available, these costs will reduce the amount of money left to spend on what the organization is being asked to do better than its predecessor - serve children and families. During its first year of operation, the Sarasota County Coalition was successful in raising between $400,000 and $500,000 for start-up costs. However, Sarasota is one of the state’s most affluent communities. How reasonable is it to expect that other communities, particularly those in rural areas, will be able to generate start-up dollars from the local community? Start-up dollars could dramatically improve the ability of privatization projects to “hit the ground running,” and could be considered an investment toward helping to ensure performance success.

**Transition Issue #6:** The relationship between the Department and the prospective lead agency.

The privatization efforts that follow may not experience some of the relationship difficulties that previous privatization efforts have experienced. For example, at least some of the relationship problems experienced in the privatization of Sarasota County may have been due to key staff of the YMCA in Sarasota County (i.e., the lead agency in that county) being significant contributors in developing the legislation that mandated Sarasota County be privatized. Certainly, some level of difficulty is not unusual in the replacing of one system with another. However, difficulties in relating can translate into operating inefficiencies. This is especially true when the former system does not entirely go away, but remains, largely in an oversight/contract management capacity. The present process calls for all future lead agencies to be selected. This may reduce the possibility of relationship difficulties between the lead agencies and the Department. In effect, if lead agencies are more in the role of respondents, rather than initiators, lead agency staff may be viewed in a more positive light. Such a situation would help to facilitate district support of lead agencies/privatization, communication between the Department and the privatization efforts, and most importantly the lead agencies and the Department as partners at the local level.

**Transition Issue #7:** Need for guidance from DCF/the Legislature on the process of privatizing.

Interviewees from the provider community in District 5 reported that there was insufficient guidance provided by the Department during the process of identifying a candidate for the lead agency role. Interviewees also noted that the Legislature had not provided sufficient guidance within the privatization legislation to aid in the development and implementation process; e.g., how to facilitate key veteran Department staff remaining in child welfare rather than staying in a government job outside the child welfare field in order to not lose retirement benefits.

**Transition Issue #8:** Adequate amount of time for transitioning to a community-based system of care.

This may not be as significant an issue for those communities who have yet to formally begin the process of privatizing as it was for those communities who have already been specifically mandated via legislation to privatize (e.g., Pinellas and Pasco Counties in District 5). Depending on the unique characteristics of individual communities, varying lengths of time may be required to fully transition from a Department-run child welfare system to a privatized system.
**Recommendations**

**Transition-Related Recommendations**

**Workforce**

**Stabilize the Department Workforce During Transition:** Address the key underlying factors that lead to the destabilization of the existing child welfare system due to the departure of Department of Children and Families’ staff. A factor that appears to be significantly reducing the commitment to remaining in child welfare on the part of veteran Department staff is uncertainty regarding the status of their retirement plans. Thoroughly consider ways that the retirement plans of desired Department staff could be maintained. Retaining these people could have a long-term cost savings benefit due to their bringing their child welfare competence to the new system, and particularly their mentoring of younger, in-experienced staff.

**Co-Locate Child Welfare Functions:** Fragmentation of the child welfare system is occurring where the ongoing child welfare function is being privatized, and to an even greater extent in those areas where the ongoing child welfare function, protective investigations, and the legal function are being removed from the Department of Children and Families. The possibility of communication and coordination problems between these can be increased as a result of system fragmentation. These types of problems can increase the amount of time and energy spent on individual cases, thus decreasing the overall efficiency of the entire system. Co-locating the protective investigations and legal functions with the ongoing child welfare function could facilitate the development of constructive and more efficient relationships among these three major components of child welfare. Efforts should be made to co-locate these functions wherever possible and appropriate (with consideration given for any circumstances unique to a particular community/situation that would indicate that co-location is not appropriate).

**Planning**

**Develop Detailed (Local) Transition Plans:** Development of, and adherence to a sufficiently detailed transition plan for each local area must occur. A sufficient transition plan should 1) detail the resources necessary to perform the various child welfare tasks being assumed by the private sector, 2) should describe how resources will be allocated, and 3) should identify the timeframes for the accomplishment of specific transition tasks. Adequate capacity must be clearly demonstrated in the plan.

**Identifying Communities Desiring to Implement Community-Based Child Welfare:** In determining which communities will be the next to implement community-based child welfare systems, consider the willingness to change child welfare systems on the part of the community. This willingness should be evidenced by steps taken by the local community to ready itself (the child welfare community in particular) for community-based child welfare. The energy and commitment needed to help ensure successful transition can be difficult to amass, even when all are in agreement on what should be done and how do it. A great deal of energy and focus can be lost when an underlying resentment or disagreement exists. Communities not desiring to transition to community-based child welfare at this time may subsequently change their perspective based on the experiences had in other areas of the state.

**Develop “Transition Management Teams” at the Local Level:** Develop local mechanisms to help ensure that the relationship between the Department and the lead agency does not deteriorate into an adversarial relationship. In-depth partnering is going to be necessary to achieve the success the system must achieve. One such mechanism would be to develop the capacity at the local level to mediate/arbitrate Department/private sector disputes.
Ensure Department Involvement in the Planning and Development Phases: Regardless of the role the Department will play in the process of selecting lead agencies, determine how it can be an active participant in the planning and development phases of privatization. The Department simply has too much experience in child welfare to not be a significant contributor in the early stages of transitioning to privatization. There are (currently) operating constants in child welfare (such as requirements and restrictions associated with federal funding) that the Department has had experience with for years. Another source of input and feedback should be the Legislature.

Provide Sufficient Time for Transition/Implementation: Depending on the unique characteristics of individual communities, varying lengths of time may be required to fully transition from a Department-run child welfare system to a community-based system. Therefore, provide for flexibility in the transition process with respect to timeframes to help facilitate a thorough and successful transition.

Risk

Find Ways to Manage/Limit Risks to the Private Sector: Approaches to (fiscal) risk sharing between the Department of Children and Families and lead agencies must be developed if the role of lead agency (in effect, the role and function of the Department) is to be considered worth seeking by private entities. Consideration should be given to finding ways to extend benefits of sovereign immunity to the private sector entities taking on the role and function of the Department.

Resources

Provide Adequate Start-Up Resources: Ensure that adequate start-up dollars are available for successful implementation of the new child welfare systems. Unless specific start-up dollars are available, start-up costs will reduce the amount of money left to spend on what the organization is being asked to do better than its predecessor - serve children and families. Start-up dollars should be considered an investment toward helping to ensure long-term success with respect to performance.

Broad-Based Recommendations

Data Information Systems

Assess the Data Linkages Between the Community-Based Programs and Department Data Systems: Thoroughly examine the approach to linking data on children listed in CIS to reports of re-abuse/neglect while in care to determine why no cases of re-abuse/neglect are showing up across six community-based and Department-run child welfare systems. Note that, as of this writing, the Department’s administrative services office had recently been working closely with the private sector (namely, the Sarasota County Coalition) to help ensure that ICWSIS data are being effectively and timely inputted.

Ensure Coordination in the Development and Management of Local Information Systems: The potential exists for numerous diverse data systems to be developed and implemented within individual community-based systems. While information system diversity is not, in and of itself a cause for major concern, ensuring that similar data are being collected, effectively managed, and reported on is a concern. Sufficiently broad coordination and oversight needs to be provided to help ensure that the various data systems are able to collect, manage, and report on key data indicators necessary for state level management of performance data on the various community-
based child welfare systems. Ensure that all information system development by the projects takes into account the eventual implementation of the State Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS).

The Child Welfare Worker

**The Specialization of Department Workers:** Throughout much of the state, the Department has specialized positions for protective services and foster care, while the community-based systems have one worker/team that transitions with a case throughout a child’s stay in the system of care (e.g., from protective services to placement in a foster home). One approach places a premium on expertise and the other on continuity of care/relationship. In the opinion of the independent evaluator, the benefits that result from maintaining continuity in the worker/client relationship likely outweigh benefits related to specialization. Therefore, it is recommended that the Department examine the benefits of this approach in those districts where the Department is implementing it (e.g., three counties in District 8 and St. Johns and Clay Counties in District 4). If the “consolidation” approach is found to be more effective, encourage other districts to consolidate protective services and foster care into single worker positions.

**Exhaust All Efforts to Limit Caseload Size:** Efforts must be made to ensure that caseload size does not grow, except in unusual and acceptable circumstances.

Technical Assistance/Department Oversight

**Consider Increasing Capacity at DCF Headquarters for the Provision of Statewide Technical Assistance (TA) to Existing and Emerging Community-Based Programs:** Consider developing a statewide TA function to the privatization projects and their respective districts within the Department’s central office. TA to the current and any future privatization projects and their respective districts could be enhanced significantly by developing the Department’s central office’s capacity to deliver timely TA. To accomplish this, staff dedicated to providing TA related to privatizing the child welfare function would have to be added. A dedicated TA function can better research problems/barriers and subsequently develop solutions that do not violate existing federal and state guidelines that all projects and districts must follow. Furthermore, a centralized TA function for privatization would likely prove to be more cost effective than establishing a full-fledged TA function in individual districts. It is not envisioned that a central office TA function would preclude the privatized projects and their respective districts from implementing community-based solutions to local problems.

**Striking A Balance with the Oversight Function:** The oversight mechanism is a key way that the community-based systems can benefit from the Department’s years of experience in performing the child welfare function. However, a balance must be struck so that the Department functions as a resource to the private sector and does not simply alter the way the community-based systems conduct their operations because that is not how the Department formerly operated. The oversight role should function as a facilitator of improvement. Important to note is that the oversight function needs to take on more of a quality assurance/improvement function than a traditional monitoring function. By virtue of being more or less new approaches to child welfare, some of what a privatization project does may not be accurately addressed or understood via monitoring. Therefore, a quality assurance/improvement approach, that is carried-out in conjunction with the provider, is a necessity.
Stakeholder Involvement/Community Support

**Stakeholder Involvement as A Facilitator of Broader-Based Community Support:** District 8’s experience with an active and concerned stakeholder advisory group can serve as an example to the other districts/projects. It can also serve as an example to districts, other than those currently operating a child welfare privatization pilot, who are considering some type of privatization of services effort. The implementation and ongoing operation of the Sarasota County Coalition for Families and Children has been well served by a stakeholder advisory group comprised of community representatives. These representatives appear to embrace the additional responsibility for the care of children and families in need that the project brings with it. While the other community-based programs have had community involvement/representation to varying degrees, the extensiveness of the involvement in District 8 being applied to the other districts could produce beneficial results.

Communication

**Communication:** District staff and community-based staff need to continually emphasize the need for positive, effective communication between the Department and the respective community-based systems.

*Project-Specific Recommendations*

**Ensure Follow-Through on Specific Measures Taken by the Bridges Program to Address Over Capacity Issues:** The transition of the remaining 300 or so children on the Department’s caseloads in Lake and Sumter Counties from 9/98 through 11/98 appears to have been an event that outstripped the capacity of the Bridges Program. At the time, management resources were stretched thin as the person with direct oversight/management responsibility for the Bridges Program had taken a job out-of-state. In 1/99, the Bridges Program was able to hire a person in the Bridges’ program manager’s position. Correspondence from the new program manager to the independent evaluator identified a number of areas that are being/are to be addressed. Among those areas are co-locating with Department legal staff, implementing a newly established assessment team, assigning lead case coordinators, implementing a full-time operational (i.e., hands-on) trainer, and establishing a fully operational team in Sumter County. (Sumter County is the smaller, more rural county of the two for which Bridges is responsible.) In the opinion of the independent evaluator, the steps identified above, if taken and successfully implemented, should help the Bridges Program to operate more effectively.

**Focus the Necessary Attention on the Relationship Between the Bridges Program and the Department in District 13:** The relationship between the Department and the Bridges Program in District 13 has been under immense strain since the death of the six-year-old girl (allegedly at the hands of her father) in Lake County in 11/98. The child welfare system as a whole in Lake and Sumter Counties suffers as a result of this strained relationship. Steps must be taken, such as a local oversight group (preferably composed of community stakeholders) to help facilitate an improved relationship between the two entities, each of which is vital to successfully protecting children and serving families in Lake and Sumter Counties.

**Consider the Extent to Which the Bridges Program is Effectively Interfacing with Other Members of the Child Welfare Community:** Ensure that the Bridges Program and community child welfare entities such as the GAL are effectively working together.
**Fiscal/Resource-Related Recommendations**

**Address Specific Funding Issues:** Ensure that the annual allocations to the community-based child welfare systems receive the same (if any) annual legislatively mandated Department staff salary allocations. This is a possible area of inequity between the private and public child welfare systems in that the private sector could be at a competitive disadvantage with respect to staff salaries.

**General Revenue Options/Estimating Conference:** Consider providing a one-time amount of general revenue to get community-based systems onto stable financial ground. For example, these general revenue dollars could be used for making advance payments to the projects. The general revenue dollars expended could possibly be reimbursed by Title IV-E dollars that the projects subsequently are successful in claiming. Including child welfare in annual estimation conferencing might better help to ensure adequate child welfare funding.

**Consider Innovative Payment Methods:** The case rate formerly employed by the Bridges Program was discontinued in 1998. Case rates, as a managed care tool, have the potential to be an effective administrative tool in child welfare. Department (state and local) staff and community-based staff should work together to determine what, if any innovative payment methods would be useful in child welfare.

**Title IV-E Dollars:** Support Department efforts to better track and manage Title IV-E dollars. In addition, do not wait on a response from the federal funding agency regarding Florida’s Title IV-E waiver before considering what other alternatives may exist to addressing funding issues.

**Department Participation in Medicaid:** Consider amending the state Medicaid plan to allow the Department to claim Medicaid reimbursement for appropriate/eligible expenditures. This maximizing of Medicaid dollars by the public child welfare agency is being done in other states.

**Evaluation-Related Recommendations**

**Evaluate the Manatee County Protective Investigations Demonstration Project:** Two things need to be accomplished, from an evaluation perspective, with respect to the shifting of protective investigations to sheriffs. First, these efforts must be evaluated to assess their effectiveness and better understand the attendant dynamics. Second, evaluation activities addressing the protective investigations function need to be coordinated with evaluation activities for the continuing community-based child welfare programs. The protective investigations function is basically the feeder into the ongoing child welfare system, and how this function operates when operated by a sheriff must be understood in order to better manage the overall system for success.

**Tracking Case-Specific Costs:** For future evaluation activities related to assessing costs, investigate the feasibility of determining the costs of a set of randomly selected cases that have been closed for a sufficiently long period of time.

**Exit Interview Data:** Ensure that exit interview data for all current and future community-based child welfare programs are collected and available for analysis.