

**2010 Independent Living Services
Advisory Council (ILSAC)
Annual Report**

Table of Contents

The ILSAC is pleased to submit this annual report to Secretary George H. Sheldon, Secretary, Florida Department of Children and Families, in accordance with Section 409.1451(7), F. S. The members of the ILSAC are listed at the conclusion of this report.

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Introduction | Page 2 |
| Recommendations for 2011 | Page 4 |
| Successes | Page 5 |
| Challenges | Page 9 |
| Progress on Prior Recommendations | Page 10 |
| Membership | Page 15 |
| DCF Response | Page 17 |

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, leaders across the nation and the state of Florida have increased their focus on the challenges faced by young people who “grow up in or age out of” the foster care system. Since the original passage of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, we have learned much about what works and where we have failed youth who grow up and age out of our foster care system.

As a result of those lessons learned as well as the growing body of knowledge on adolescent brain development, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed by Congress in 2008 providing states with the option of extending foster care to age 21, supporting kinship caregivers, improving requirements for educational stability, improving oversight of health care, requiring reasonable efforts at keeping siblings together, extending and improving adoption incentives and promoting adoption tax credits.

This focus has been the exclusive task that the Florida Legislature charged to the Independent Living Services Advisory Council (ILSAC) since 2002, to review and make recommendations concerning the implementation and operation of independent living transition services.

As of June 30, 2010, 3,627 youth in foster care ages 13 through 17 were eligible for independent living services and another 5,681 young people ages of 18 through 22 were potentially eligible for services. This represents a decrease from 2009 when there were 4,055 13 through 17 year old youth and 5,735 18 through 22 year-olds. The 2008 figures included 4,048 youth in the 13-17 year old age range and 6,643 ages 18 through 22.

The members of the ILSAC believe that for our youth in Florida’s foster care system; aging out is preventable, permanency is achievable and lack of adequate preparation for their future is avoidable. The members of ILSAC commend the state of Florida with continued improvements in services and youth outcomes over the past 10 years, however offer the following

recommendations to DCF and to the Legislature as we have not achieved the level of positive youth outcomes that we believe are attainable and are our collective responsibility.

We commend the department for their increasing focus on data collection as we have all learned that data must be collected and used to guide decision making, measure the degree to which outcomes show youth are improving and develop the public will and financial commitment to support the successful transition to adulthood of Florida's young people.

This year's report of the ILSAC is shorter and not printed in our usual format in consideration of the financial times that we Floridians face.

This year's ILSAC Annual Report remembers Jan Stratton, a member of the ILSAC from 2006 to 2009. Jan passed away in November 2010 and will be remembered for her commitment to youth and her driving force and resolve in the design of the original Independent Living Services Critical Checklist.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2011

Recommendation to the Florida Legislature

1. Adopt the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act optional provisions regarding extension of foster care, guardianship and adoption assistance as recommended by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Services to Young Adults Formerly in Foster Care Redesign Workgroup.

Recommendations to DCF

1. Adopt and support the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act optional provisions regarding extension of foster care, guardianship and adoption assistance as recommended by the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Services to Young Adults Formerly in Foster Care Redesign Workgroup.
2. Develop a program planning and delivery reporting tool for determining appropriate information regarding independent living services, outcomes and fiscal implications on projected and actual delivery of independent living services for all community-based care lead agencies and providers.
3. Establish permanency planning as a priority for youth aging out of foster care that result in permanent family connections.
4. Ensure that competency based training in life skills, education planning, career path development, financial literacy and other services mandated by Florida Statutes is of the same quality regardless of the “home” of the youth in Florida’s foster care system or the location of the contracted provider.
5. Translate policy into practice consistently across the state.

SUCSESSES

Redesign Work

In collaboration with the Department of Children and Families and the Florida Coalition for Children, a workgroup was convened in December 2009 of ILSAC members, youth, advocates, providers, subject matter experts and child welfare staff from throughout Florida. The purpose was to propose a redesign of the state legislation governing service delivery to young adults formerly in foster care. A diverse workgroup representing multiple perspectives and viewpoints was invited to participate and met through June 2010 with expert consultation from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and The Finance Project based in Washington, D. C. The workgroup was unanimous that the current legislative framework needed to be revised and that the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was a new resource worth serious exploration. The group presented its consensus recommendations to the department leadership in July 2010. At the time of the writing of this legislative report, the department is proceeding with a legislative proposal largely based on this workgroup's recommendations.

National Youth in Transition Database [NYTD]

Florida continues to lead the nation in its commitment to gather, compile, analyze and utilize outcome data specific to teens in foster care and young people formerly in foster care. The department is exceeding the new federal requirement to implement this federal database by October 1, 2010.

As stated by Don Winstead, Deputy Secretary,
"The reason to do NYTD – and to take the most robust approach possible – is not the federal mandate. If we do it only because of the mandate, we're missing the point. We have accepted responsibility for these youth, and everything that we do know says that we need to do better by them. And in order to do better, we need to understand better and develop better ways to meet their needs."

That is why Florida is doing everything possible, even under tough economic circumstances. Although the federal mandate for NYTD is to survey a cohort of youth in foster care at ages 17, 19 & 21, Florida has implemented NYTD Plus, including a survey of every young person aging out of foster care on an annual basis ages 18 through 22. DCF has also contracted with the Connected by 25 Initiative to begin implementation of an annual web-based, self-report survey of youth in the 13-17 year old age range to collect data on the quality and

effectiveness of services being provided from the perspective of the youth in foster care.

The ILSAC as well as the Office of Program Planning and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) have pushed for the collection of data on youth outcomes over the past five years. NYTD Plus implementation in Florida is a refinement of the original Independent Living Services Critical Checklist developed by ILSAC and implemented in collaboration with the Florida Coalition for Children and DCF three years ago.

Community-Based Care Contract Outcome Measures

A collaborative effort with community-based care agencies resulted in the inclusion of the following outcome measures in the July 1, 2010, version of the standard community-based care contract template. Data for these measures will be collected to establish a baseline for the 2010-11 year. This information will inform Florida's continued efforts to improve practice for young people.

The measures are:

- % of youth who have aged out of care completing high school or GED by 20 years of age
- % of youth who have completed high school or GED and are Involved in postsecondary education
- % of youth ages 18 and over receiving independent living services that have a job (including joining the military)
- % of youth in safe housing
- % of 17 year old youth in licensed out of home care who had a transition plan signed by the youth and filed with the court

Youth Voice

Consistent, meaningful engagement of youth at the individual case level and in efforts to improve system performance continues to build in Florida. The voices of youth from their early teen years through young adulthood are a regular part

of the child welfare system in Florida. They are sharing their insights and experiences through participation on the Independent Living Services Advisory Council and its redesign workgroup, the Myron Rolle Wellness and Leadership Academy, Florida Youth Leadership Academy, Connected by 25 Policy to Practice trainings and workshops, administrative rules groups, and representation on the department's child welfare task forces. A plenary speaker at this year's Dependency Summit, Jennifer Rodriguez of the Youth Law Center in San Francisco, California, captured the youth's perspective in her compelling "relentless" parenting presentation. It can be viewed at: <http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/dep10/plenary/wednesday.html>

Florida Youth SHINE, a statewide youth drive advocacy organization, has expanded its membership and its outreach. As of the writing of this report, Youth SHINE is spearheading information sessions for youth regarding proposed changes to legislation governing independent living services for the 2011 Legislative Session. More information about their agenda is available at: <http://www.floridayouthshine.org/index.html>

Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI)

A total of 14 of 20 community-based care lead agencies are participating in QPI. The goal of this initiative is to ensure skilled, nurturing care for every child placed with foster families throughout Florida. Eckerd Family Foundation and Youth Law Center sponsor and deliver technical assistance and training through this unique public/private partnership with the community-based care agencies and the Department of Children and Families. Through the rebranding of foster parenting, these agencies are changing the culture of foster care by redesigning their recruitment, training, and support services to foster families. The expectation is that agencies support foster families in providing care as you would provide to your "own" child. This includes supporting foster parents work with birth families; foster parents work with their children's medical/mental health providers and schools; and foster parents full engagement in the foster care decision-making team. A critical component of this work is the involvement of teens in the workgroups and trainings to encourage more and quality foster family homes for teens. Learn more about QPI at: www.qpiflorida.com

Collaboration with Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) to Support Permanency

In October 2010, DCF and APD signed an interagency agreement supporting permanency through the provision of waiver services. The target is enrollment

of ten children per month with an already identified permanent placement. Since June 2010, a total of 55 children in state custody have been added to the APD waiver through either this new priority enrollment for permanency or through the existing APD “crisis application” process. Youth who are within six months of their 18th birthday are being "flagged" for APD and CBC attention, so that a multidisciplinary team meeting can be scheduled for transition planning purposes to adult disability services. This will include completion of an APD crisis application as a youth unable to provide self or at risk of homelessness at their 18th birthday for waiver enrollment. Data matching and individual case reviews to identify eligible children will continue on a quarterly basis.

CHALLENGES

ILSAC continues to be cognizant of the continuous struggle in consistently translating good policy into consistent practice. Florida has statutes that require DCF and the community-based care providers to deliver services that support education and preparation of our young people with the assets they will need to be resilient and successful adults. Our challenge is to implement the current laws and provide the most effective, age-appropriate, consistent and measurable independent living services to youth in foster care.

The Florida system of community-based care allows for considerable innovation and there are a number of good practice efforts in place. We need to demand that the results of those innovation and good practice be tracked through data collection. We need to make our decisions based on data and not on anecdotal stories. The DCF quality assurance special reviews of independent living have highlighted the strengths and gaps in services from both the provider and the youth perspective.

We must find better ways across the state to collaborate, educate and implement those good practices and innovative strategies so that no matter the “home,” youth can have equal opportunity at becoming successful adults. We need to highlight those strategies that produce youth outcome data and clearly demonstrate their effectiveness so that those services are available to all communities and all youth in Florida.

We need to continue to engage youth as solution builders and problem solvers for those strategies and services that do not work.

PROGRESS ON PRIOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Accountability and Quality Assurance

In 2006 and 2007, ILSAC recommended development of a program planning and delivery reporting tool for determining the appropriate information regarding age, independent living services, outcomes and fiscal implications of projected and actual delivery of independent living services for all community-based care lead agencies. ILSAC also recommended establishment of provider accountability through corrective action as part of ongoing quality assurance benchmarks - not of services provided or youth served - but of outcomes achieved by youth.

In January 2009, Florida's Youth SHINE, an advocacy group for children, youth and young adults; requested Secretary Sheldon review the concerns over inequities and inconsistencies in service delivery systems throughout the state. The Office of Family Safety was directed to conduct a statewide review to assess how well the program was operating. That review was conducted in three separate phases and some of the findings included the following:

1. A wide variation exists statewide in processes for providing independent living Services.
2. Skills training do not meet the needs of the youth and does not promote positive youth outcomes.
3. The training curriculum varies from area to area and there is a gap in training for foster parents and staff.
4. There are unclear roles and responsibilities between case managers and independent living staff.
5. Key statute and administrative code requirements were not being met related to timely judicial reviews, case staffing, independent living assessments, normalcy plans and assistance.
6. There is a lack of coordination with the Department of Juvenile Justice for youth who are jointly served.
7. There is disparity in addressing disability, mental health and substance abuse needs.

The 2009 Independent Living Services Critical Checklist identified concerns regarding:

1. youth completing life skills assessments,
2. youth having an active involvement in age appropriate normalcy plans,

3. youth having educational remediation for below-grade-level educational status,
4. youth having educational and career path plans, and
5. youth involvement and signatures on transition plans.

The 2009 IL Survey also identified:

1. over the past three years, the percentage of youth who have had life-skills assessments and normalcy plans has increased,
2. youth who have safe and affordable housing has increased, and
3. youth educational outcomes have improved; however, youth completing high school or GED has decreased.

As noted in the “Successes” of this report, youth outcome measures have been developed and will be included in community-based care contracts. Quality Assurance work has identified continuing concerns and recommendations for change that should be a focused effort as well as a consistent practice based on Florida Statutes.

The National Youth in Transition Database Plus for youth ages 18 through 22 as well as the “My Services Review” for youth ages 13 through 17 will replace the current Independent Living Services Critical Checklist and provide more robust data to determine our areas of strength and continuing challenges.

Permanency

In 2006, the ILSAC recommended the establishment of permanency planning as a priority for youth aging out of foster care that results in permanent family and supports.

There has been an increasing focus on family permanency for youth. A concerted effort by those involved in the care of foster youth - including the youth themselves - should be undertaken as a matter of course without regard to the age of the youth. A full range of permanency options should be considered including reunification, kinship care and other nontraditional permanency options. The Family Finders Program, implemented in many of the community-based care lead agencies, is a positive step in this direction.

Research has shown that having a permanent family relationship and feeling connected to an adult who will be there for life are key to the well being of young people. We need to change the focus from “aging out” to permanency. We need to send the message that our goal is finding a family and a home. We need to change the focus from the “system providing independent living” to

“quality parenting in the home” if we are to succeed in supporting healthy and successful development.

We must be striving to create relational permanence, a lifelong attachment, a relationship that is an emotional connection beyond a legal relationship. It is not grouping care; it is not identifying their case manager as the only adult connection in their life; and it is not simply a mentor. It is a lifelong attachment that we should seek for every youth in foster care.

Teen Plans for Normalcy

Whenever a group of teens and young adults meet with leaders, they invariably identify being a normal youth as one of their primary issues. “Stop calling us foster kids! We’re just kids.”

Florida’s current and former youth in foster care have continuously rated the ability to engage in age-appropriate activities as crucial to the development of their independent living skills, fostering connections with others and their own sense of normalcy.

We know those adolescents need assistance and safety in risk taking. They need practice in navigating the outside world and space to make mistakes without losing independence. Normalcy guidelines and youth plans developed in partnership with the youth as well as their “parents” are spelled out in policy, rule and statute. The ILSAC noted this issue in the Annual Reports of 2007, 2008 and 2009.

The September 3, 2010, memorandum from Secretary Sheldon clarified the DCF policy: *“Every child in our care is entitled to participate in age-appropriate enrichment, extracurricular and social activities. Caregivers should assess the appropriateness of the activity based on the child’s age, maturity, abilities and interests, but the assessment should be reasonable and avoid intrusive or bureaucratic actions such as ‘background screening’ unless there is a reasonable basis for doing so. Caregivers should know who their kids will be with and make provisions for their safety, but exclusion from an activity should occur only after consideration of less stringent alternatives.”*

In addition, Secretary Sheldon designated Family Safety Program Office Director Alan Abramowitz, as the “normalcy czar”, to help resolve issues that arise and asked each DCF circuit administrator to work with community partners to change practice and urged each community-based care agency to review its own rules and practices using this guideline.

We commend the department for continuing to listen to youth in care and to continue to urge policy be translated into consistent and reasonable practice.

Education and Educational Stability

Statewide, children and youth in foster care often are less successful than other children.

According to DCF, fewer of these youth received a standard high school diploma in 2007 than compared to all youth. In that same year, a DCF survey showed that 55 percent of 17-year-olds in care were below grade level and 58 percent failed the FCAT.

The 13 year old youth group has marginally improved in being at or above grade level from 60% in 2007 to 63% in 2009.

The 17 year old youth group has improved in being at or above grade level from 45% in 2007 to 50% in 2009.

The completion of Grade 12, GED completion, vocational or college education at age 21 has fallen from 75% in 2007 to 68% in 2009.

DCF has kicked off the first of several community meetings that will be held across the state to address obstacles to the educational success of children and youth in foster care and seeks to find ways to ensure that youth receive a high quality education. The statewide “Everybody’s a Teacher” initiative will work with more than 100 members of the community focusing on educational issues affecting children in state care.

“Everybody’s a Teacher” is designed to encourage individuals and communities to become involved in the education of children and youth in foster care and addresses issues that often stand in the way of their doing well in school. The message DCF and others hope to convey. *“Every time a child is moved from a family or foster care home, their lives are disrupted, their relationships are interrupted, and they fall behind in school,”* said Mary Cagle, director of DCF Children’s Legal Services and the lead on the “Everybody’s a Teacher” initiative.

This effort, as well as consistent practice of school stability and other mandatory requirements addressing the educational needs of youth transitioning out of foster care in the Fostering Connections to Success legislation, is a high priority as we know that education is a key to opportunity in the United States for a whole host of positive outcomes.

Life Skills

The 2007 ILSAC Report recommended that life skills training, educational planning, career path development, financial literacy training and other services mandated in Florida Statutes must be of the same quality and competency based regardless of the “home” of the youth. The child welfare focus should shift to reinforcing the learning activities that are a natural part of the youth’s life and that learning occurs where the youth lives whether it is a foster home, group home or even a juvenile justice facility. The 2009 DCF Quality Assurance Reports support this recommendation. This remains a high priority recommendation.

Financial Assets

As the ILSAC identified in 2009, the need for young people currently or formerly in foster care for financial resources and assets to support them through the process of transition to adulthood is more dramatic as they do not have families who will provide that financial support. Individual Deposit Accounts (IDAs) and particularly the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Opportunity Passport has been found to have important short and long term benefits for young people currently or formerly in foster care.

Currently in Florida, 199 youth have completed financial literacy training and opened Opportunity Passport accounts for total savings of \$93,000 which are matched dollar for dollar up to \$1,000 per year through Connected by 25 in Hillsborough and Brevard counties and will soon expand to Pinellas and Pasco counties in 2011.

Youth Engagement

The engagement of youth in foster care in their own planning is now considered a best practice and a variety of approaches that involve youth along a continuum and consistent with youth development and a developmentally appropriate perspective have proven to be key in learning how to support youth in becoming advocates for themselves and others. Florida has continued to excel in involving youth in the planning and implementation of policies and practice in all the systems that affect their futures and we should continue to consider youth as an integral role in the solution building that still challenges our systems of care.

ILSAC Membership 2009-2010

| | |
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| Jane Soltis – Chair | Eckerd Family Foundation |
| Jim Adams | Family Support Services of North Florida |
| Jack Ahearn | Florida Department of Juvenile Justice |
| Denise Arnold | Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities |
| Anna Baznik | Intervention Services |
| William Booth | Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County |
| Chris Card | Providence Management Corporation |
| Glen Casel | Community Based Care of Seminole County |
| Laura Contrera | Sandy Pines |
| Howard Friedman | Ninth Judicial Circuit |
| Gay Frizzell | Florida Department of Children and Families |
| Cecy Glenn | United Way of Charlotte County |
| Gerard Glynn | Barry University |
| Amy Guinan | Florida Legal Services |
| William Hardin | Florida Agency for Health Care Administration |
| Tracy Henningsen | Florida Coalition for Children |
| Kimberley Hernandez | Florida State Foster Adoptive Parent Association |
| Jenay Iurato | Attorney |
| Jon Johnson | Thirteenth Judicial Circuit |
| Marci Kirkland | Florida Department of Children and Families |
| Helen Lancashire | Florida Department of Education |
| Lillian Lima | Florida Department of Children and Families |

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| Bonnie Marmor | Florida Department of Education-retired |
| Shannon Nazworth | Ability Housing of Northeast Florida |
| Sandra Neidert | Florida Office of State Courts Administration |
| Charles Nelson | Florida Guardian ad Litem |
| Derrick Riggins | Florida Youth SHINE |
| Ashley Roulston | Seminole County Youth Advisory Board |
| Diane Schofield | Hands of Mercy Everywhere |
| Deborah Schroth | Florida Department of Children and Families |
| Amanda Spears | Heartland for Children Youth Advisory Board |
| Kele Stewart | University of Miami School of Law |
| Judith Warren | Child and Family Connections of Palm Beach |
| Nancy Wilkov | Eighth Judicial Circuit |
| Diane Zambito | Connected by 25 Initiative |