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Florida Shifts Child-Welfare System's Focus to Saving Families

By ERIK ECKHOLM

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — After her daughter and a daughter-in-law were each jailed on drug charges last fall, Sylvia Kimble, 46, poor and with a deeply troubled history of her own, struggled to care for six grandchildren.

Only a few years ago, officials here say, the safest path would have been to split up the children in foster care. Yet here they are, rambunctious children wrestling in her living room, Ms. Kimble encouraging her daughter's out-patient drug rehabilitation while also arranging for summer camp and a family trip to a water park.

Ms. Kimble hardly seemed like an ideal anchor for the children, three of whom have psychological problems. She had spent 20 years on the streets herself, using drugs and without receiving treatment for bipolar disorder. Clean for 11 years now, she nonetheless admitted she had little experience with parenting, having left her own children in her mother's care.

But Florida's radical transformation of its child-welfare system, marked by a wholesale shift in spending, allowed officials to take a chance on Ms. Kimble. Instead of spending large sums for foster care, it provided in-home counseling, therapy for the children and cash aid to help the makeshift family stay intact and even thrive.

While the focus on preserving families has taken hold in several states, here it has been backed by a federal waiver that allows the state to use foster care financing for prevention and mental health, an approach that advocates of the program hope will become standard nationwide.

In another move, popular with both conservatives and liberals, the state outsourced most child-welfare services to nonprofit foster agencies that have an incentive to preserve families.

In less than three years, Florida has reduced the number of children in foster care by 32 percent. Here in Duval County, essentially the city of Jacksonville, the number has declined by more than 50 percent since 2006. And the smaller number of children taken from homes deemed dangerous are more quickly reunited with parents or adopted.

The transformation, outside experts say, is remarkable for its speed — and was achieved without the protracted takeover by federal courts common in other states.

“Florida has quickly joined the top ranks of states that are turning around child welfare,” said Cari DeSantis, an executive vice president at Casey Family Programs in Seattle, which promotes family preservation. She cited Alabama, Illinois and New York City as other leaders in the movement.

Only six or seven years ago, there was a crisis mentality at Florida's Department of Children and Families. The system was criticized for removing children too often and yet failing to protect them, including those in foster care. In one notorious case, it took the authorities two years to discover that a 5-year-old girl in foster care had disappeared in 2000; she is presumed to have been murdered.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican, led the transfer of many child services to nonprofit agencies. State officials remain responsible for investigating charges of abuse and neglect, and deciding when to ask a judge to remove a child from the home.

In addition, Florida in 2006 was the only state to take full advantage of an experimental waiver offered by the Bush

administration. Ordinarily, federal aid is determined by how many children are in custody. Florida asked to receive a flat fee that it could spend on counseling and other aid instead of foster care when it wished. The shift was seen as fiscally risky — an increase in foster children would not bring more money — but it has paid off.

“The new system is not only better for the children but it also saves money,” said George Sheldon, secretary of children and family services.

Investigators felt they could gamble on Ms. Kimble because for the first time they could offer extensive help as they kept close tabs on the home. “Family services has been a blessing,” Ms. Kimble said of the private agency that sent social workers to her home to teach about parenting, arranged needed therapies for the children and provided Wal-Mart vouchers for buying Christmas gifts.

To be sure, some critics say that in Florida and other pioneers of family preservation, flaws remain in child protection — illustrated recently in Florida by the suicide of a foster child who received psychiatric drugs without adequate oversight, and by reports that some social workers had falsified reports of family visits. The push to save families in many states and cities has often been set back by highly publicized deaths of neglected children.

Marcia Lowry, director of Children’s Rights, an advocacy group based in New York, said that keeping children with their parents was best but only if measures were in place to help the families and ensure safety.

“It worries me when people say the rate of children in care should be reduced by 50 percent,” Ms. Lowry said, referring to Florida’s statewide goal for 2012. “I don’t think you can do it that way. You need to look at the quality of decision making and services.”

A disquieting indicator in Florida, she said, was an overall rise in child deaths because of abuse and neglect in recent years.

But Alan F. Abramowitz, director of Florida’s family safety office, said the comparison was misleading because in 2006, deaths attributed to neglect rose after the definition was expanded to include more drownings. According to an independent university report, Mr. Abramowitz added, the rate of re-abuse of children within six months after their cases were closed was cut in half from 2006 to 2007.

For front-line social workers, a welcome change is an ability to work with parents who have not been formally charged with abuse or neglect. “We’re serving so many more families now, with a lot fewer kids in foster care,” said Nancy Dreicer, regional director for child welfare based in Jacksonville.

Bipartisan support has allowed the child-welfare system to preserve its state financing even in the current budget crisis.

As part of the privatization, a nonprofit group in Jacksonville, Family Support Services, is helping Ms. Kimble and her family.

“At first I didn’t think I could take on the challenge,” Ms. Kimble said.

She just gets by on federal disability payments for herself and the three of the children who have psychiatric problems, providing a total of about \$2,700 a month. With its new flexibility, family services last fall gave her cash aid to pay utilities and muster a \$500 down payment toward a subsidized house.

Ms. Kimble expects to close on the house at the end of July, and the group of eight will move in together. She knows that she is still learning how to be a parent, as is her daughter in the home.

“The thing I can share, though,” Ms. Kimble said, “is that I’ve got all the love in the world.”