15th Anniversary

Family Support Services
OF NORTH FLORIDA INC.

2016-2017
Report to our Community
From the CEO

It’s hard to believe that Family Support Services of North Florida is celebrating our 15th year as a community-based care provider. Throughout this report you’ll see examples of the many programs and accomplishments of the FSS team—some of which are highlighted on the timeline below. It’s amazing to see how much the child welfare system has changed over the years.

I’m pleased to report that in 2017 FSS met or exceeded 95% of our contract and scorecard measurements, despite an increase in the number of children being served in foster care. We remained fiscally strong, and were one of a few CBC providers that received a positive Fiscal Monitoring report from the Florida Department of Children and Families. Thanks to a strong effort by our licensing, training and community development departments, we licensed a record 101 new foster homes, launched a new Kinship Navigator program, and a new technology trial in our Nassau office to automate a number of case management processes.

The past year was one of intense review: we underwent a COA re-accreditation; we were the pilot for DCF’s new contract oversight process (an in-depth look at our system of care); and a detailed Fiscal Accountability review. FSS also received COA accreditation for network Administration and Mentoring. DCF highlighted a number of our best practices in their Contract Oversight Unit report, all of which are representative of our staff’s great work.

FSS has accomplished quite a bit in our first 15 years, so it’s difficult to concisely highlight...
just some of those accomplishments. After enduring the
growing pains of launching a community-based model,
the pivotal point of our young organization came in 2007,
when, in partnership with DCF, we embarked on the
transformational Foster Care Redesign. The Redesign
was not only a change in practice, but more significantly,
it was a change in the culture of the child welfare system.
We learned to do everything in our power to serve a child
safely in their home. The foundation of this effort was the
creation of our prevention programs, including Family
Assessment Support Team (FAST) and the Integrated
Practice Team (IPT), who both contribute to a sustained
reduction of nearly 60% in the number of children served
in out-of-home care.

The financial savings from this reduction enables FSS
to improve the quality of care by reducing caseloads,
expanding services, and improving training. We also
launched a number of innovative teen programs,
including: SPLASH (Scuba Promotes Life goals And
Supports Healthy Living), Tour de TRAILS (Teaching,
Riding And Interpersonal Life Skills), Just Like Me,
and Passport to Leadership—designed to improve
self-esteem and encourage permanency. In addition
to implementing post-adoption and post-reunification
services, we also introduced programs like Safety
Management, Parent Needs Assistance, Girls Court,
and the Quality Parenting Initiative—to name a few.

Our long-standing partnership with Casey Family
Programs helped us launch the Community of Hope
at Schell-Sweet Community Resource Center, the
PRISM training program, the Permanency Round
Tables, and provided access to some outstanding
program assistance.

As a final note, I would like to thank the FSS Board of
Directors, our Case Management partners and our
employees for allowing me the privilege of serving as
FSS’s Chief Executive Officer for the past six years.
I’m confident, that under the leadership of Bob Miller,
FSS will continue as a leader in the state of Florida.

SPLASH program launched;
Transitional Trauma Therapists 24/7;
and new Kinship Department established

The first annual Just Like Me creative arts
camp, winner of state and national awards;
5-Star Quality Rating System created for
residential group homes

FSS celebrates 3,000 adoptions;
The new Girls Court in partnership with
Judge David M. Gooding begins

Safe Baby Court implemented;
Kinship Navigator Program established

2% reduction in out-of-home care

Established 62% reduction in Adoption
denial the U.S. Department of Services

Quality Early Education established with QWEEP; Tour de TRAILS launched

Collaborative partnership between FSS, Schell-
Sweet Community Resource Center, Casey
Family Programs and Edward Waters College
results in Community of Hope designation

The first of our new teen program,
THE CHALLENGE, kicks off;
FSS hosted the first annual Family
Reunification Celebration

See Notables, page 14
The value of the community-based care system is never more evident than when FSS, case management and local agencies work in partnership to help families be successful, both during and after the process of children being removed from a home.

Despite the longevity or difficulty of their situation, encouraging parents to never give up is no easy feat. So when Lisa was reunited with her children in 2017, it was a long time coming.

Her son and two daughters were removed from their home in the summer of 2016. And while the family is now together, Lisa’s road to recovery was nearly 20 years in the making.

Growing up in North Florida, Lisa, 34, began experimenting with drugs and alcohol at the young age of 12. By the time she was 16, she was pregnant with her oldest daughter, Harley, and was married soon after. Not only was the marriage an abusive one, but her husband was addicted to pills, and soon, he aided in her becoming addicted, too.

“I was doing the mom and wife thing, but I liked the pills because they numbed the pain,” says Lisa, adding that she was hiding bruises from her husband’s beatings.

“It made me forget all our issues.”

As she abused pain pills for years, her tolerance increased and she learned new ways of getting access to pills. She lost a great job in the medical field but still kept dulling the pain with drugs.

Even escaping her abusive marriage and then meeting the father of her two youngest children didn’t stop her from continuing her habit.

“Everything kept getting worse,” Lisa says. “Nothing gets better when you’re using. You don’t see that until you’re outside the bubble.”

Even when she learned she was pregnant again with her youngest son, she still couldn’t stop. He was born in February 2016 with opioids in his system. DCF investigated, but because Lisa had prescriptions to show (one for a pulled tooth, another from a therapist), she managed to make it through the ordeal without losing her kids.

Her luck in escaping the system though, was about to run out. In August, her daughter, Harley, spent the night at a friend’s house during what Lisa remembers as a fun summer for the whole family, “but I just knew something bad was going to happen. I could feel it,” she admits.

Lisa got an emergency call that Harley overdosed after smoking marijuana laced with heroin and fentanyl. Harley survived and was taken to the ICU, where a DCF investigator began asking Lisa questions. After Lisa failed a drug test, she was banned from the hospital. For the next three months, she says, she hit rock bottom.

“I made Ms. Ella chase me all over Jacksonville,” says Lisa of her caseworker from Children’s Home Society, Ella Youte. “I was so angry, and I didn’t know if I was ever going to see my kids again.”
Now, she says, she realizes all the things her caseworker wanted her to do—all the things she fought against—were the things that saved her life.

When Lisa finally agreed to go to a detox facility, her caseworker helped secure her a spot at Gateway Community Services, an inpatient addiction recovery facility, where she stayed for nearly two months. She checked herself out and relapsed that night. But a year ago, Lisa got clean for good.

“Feb. 1 is my sober date. I love that date, and I don’t plan on ever having another one.”

Lisa says she hates that it took her so long to get to this place and that she put her family through so much, “but I’m so much stronger because of it.”

Harley is in physical therapy following her overdose and is talking and walking almost on her own. Lisa’s youngest son will be two in February, and despite her drug use during pregnancy, he is a healthy, happy toddler. She has a job as a housekeeper at an inn near her apartment, a job she’s held for almost a year.

She couldn’t have done it without the support of her caseworker and the other hardworking people in the system of care along the way.

“Ms. Ella is my best friend,” Lisa says, smiling. “I put her through the ringer, but she never gave up on me. I text her every day and ask her about all kinds of things.”

She adds that her post-reunification services counselor through Daniel Kids is “like my diary. I tell her everything.”

The new post-reunification services, a partnership between Family Support Services and Daniel, have helped Lisa stay on track.

With a plan to maintain her sobriety, and improve as a parent, she hopes to use her story to inspire other women and mothers dealing with addiction—to help them get where she is.

“It’s amazing what being sober feels like. It’s like I get to be a new mom all over again.”

And while Lisa has big plans for the future—maybe even going into social work herself—for now she’s embracing her case plan and all the help she’s been given while staying committed to her recovery. One day at a time.
More than a decade ago, while attending nursing school, Tiffany Whiddon worked in the Adoptions Department for Family Support Services (FSS). When she left to pursue nursing full time, she said, “Y’all will need a nurse one day!”

Ten years later, she was right.

A pediatric nurse, Tiffany returned to FSS in 2016 as a Health Care Coordinator with the Family Preservation’s Prevention team. The new grant-funded (reported in last year’s Annual Report) position required a Licensed Practical Nurse to educate families on medical matters, schedule appointments, help with Medicaid registration, and connect families to community resources.

“It’s so important to have a medical professional for our clients,” Tiffany says. “The health care system is extremely difficult to navigate, and there are many issues that arise. It’s a benefit to have a nurse resource to help keep families healthy and successful.”

Never was that more evident than in the case of Renee, a high school student in desperate need of Tiffany’s help.

In January 2016, Renee lost her mother to Type 2 diabetes. Her father had already passed away from cancer. Renee was then living with relatives when she started to feel sick—something wasn’t quite right. She was constantly thirsty and using the restroom often.

“I remember my mom saying when that happens, it’s a sign of diabetes,” Renee said. A trip to the fire department to find out about her sugar levels revealed a result of “high.” A second check at a hospital showed her sugar level at 860 (70–120 is normal).

“Usually, people at that level are in a diabetic coma,” Tiffany says.

After three days in the hospital, Renee was prescribed insulin and sent home. Admittedly, she didn’t take her health seriously and didn’t take her medication as she should have.

When her condition wasn’t improving, DCF got involved. Renee was found to be medically unsafe in her relative’s home because her diabetes was being mismanaged. Renee’s case manager from Jewish Family and Community...
the promise of a future

Services rallied the troops to get her health on track, which included Tiffany.

“When I first arrived at Renee’s home, she did not want to work with me,” Tiffany jokes. “She kept asking when her case was going to be closed.”

Tiffany shared information about the harmful effects of mismanaged Type 2 diabetes with Renee—including how it could cause permanent damage to her pancreas. She also explained that if Renee couldn’t get her diabetes under control, she may be moved into foster care.

That was Renee’s turning point. She completed a diabetes education class, began journaling her blood sugar levels, and taking her medication. Her progress was a “miraculous turnaround,” Tiffany says. Marked improvement in her health was evident after only two short weeks. And three months later, Renee’s A1C blood test showed her levels to be normal.

Because her progress was so outstanding, and despite the fact that Renee turned 18 this year, Nemours’ Children’s Health System agreed to keep her as a patient through June when she’ll transition into adult medical care.

“I feel much better now,” Renee admits. “I’m eating better and eating less. I’m drinking more water, and I can tell when my blood sugar is low.” She even takes her diabetes monitor with her to school so she can check her insulin levels during the day.

Had she not worked with Tiffany to manage her health, Renee acknowledges she would have gotten sicker and faced the likelihood of foster care.

“But Tiffany stayed on me,” Renee says. She also urges other teens with health risks to listen to their case managers—who can help ensure they stay healthy in the long run.

While Tiffany recognizes there are many families in dire need of medical education and resource assistance, she says she’s glad she was able to make an impact on Renee, and see her health improve so dramatically. For Renee, Tiffany was a blessing whose impact will last a lifetime.

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Duval County Health Department

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Vertex Transport, LLC

Brad Thoburn
Jacksonville Transportation Authority

Heather VanPuymbrouck
Donna Lynne Custom Homes
Financials

Casework Services & Related Support  $18.71 million  33.13%
Adoption Promotion & Support  1.03 million  1.82%
Prevention Services  5.85 million  10.36%
Staff & Parent Training  1.18 million  2.09%
Family Support, Preservation & Reunification  1.10 million  1.95%
Mental Health for Child Welfare  0.78 million  1.38%
Other Services  4.39 million  7.77%
Subtotal  $33.04 million  58.50%

Adoptive Care  $16.90 million  29.93%
Licensed Care – Foster Home & Shelter  5.33 million  9.44%
Independent Living/Extended Foster Care  1.20 million  2.13%
Subtotal  $23.43 million  41.50%
Total Expenditures  $56.47 million  100.00%

Annual Community Donations
Cash Donations & Grants  $520,000
In-Kind Gifts  $870,000
Total  $1,390,000

Kids in Care

Children in Care as of June 30
2016  1,529
2017  1,692  ▲ Increase of 10.66%

Children in Out-of-Home Care as of June 30
2016  904
2017  919  ▲ Increase of 1.66%

Number of children in care on June 30 by:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>0–4</th>
<th>5–11</th>
<th>12–17</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kids in care</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racial Profile
- African-American  737
- Caucasian  936
- Asian  5
- American Indian  2
- Hawaiian  3
- Unknown  9

Gender
- Male  882
- Female  804
- Unknown/Blank  6
In Denise Frazier’s home in Fort Caroline, a holiday craft hangs from the door of the room shared by her two foster children. The craft has a handprint turkey with a child’s name scrawled in crayon at the bottom.

“This is our life!” exclaims Denise with a smile.

When the siblings, ages 5 and 3, went to live with Denise in the summer of 2017, the 5-year-old couldn’t write his name. He only recognized two letters from the alphabet, and he was due to start kindergarten in August. Despite his setbacks, he was an excellent match for Denise, who became the 101st licensed foster home in a record-setting year for Family Support Services (FSS).

For nearly two decades, Denise had been licensed to operate a day-care center that accommodated as many as 75 kids. Children in foster care came through her doors over the years, and she often thought about becoming a foster parent.

After her day care closed, the 61-year-old empty nester (she has three adult sons) saw a television commercial encouraging local families to foster. She decided to take the leap.

A Jacksonville native, who came from a large family, Denise used her experience in child care to help the 5-year-old get on track at school. Within a few weeks, she had a meeting with his teacher, and they came up with a plan. Denise would read him a book every morning and help him identify letters. Now he knows the entire alphabet—and he can write his name!

“That’s been the most rewarding part,” Denise says. “Seeing the kids gain confidence in themselves, and how much they’ve grown and developed. I’m so proud of him for being able to write his own name.”

Denise loved seeing the compassion that FSS has for its children as she completed Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (P RID E) foster parent training. Everyone in the class was encouraged to be open-minded, she said, and questions were answered openly and honestly.

And while she was prepared for the worst-case scenario, her experiences fostering have been rewarding from day one.

The children now have a routine. She drives them to school every morning and they sing songs in the car. They say daily grace before breakfast, something the children say they’ll teach their parents when they go back home. The two follow the rules, do their chores and are very respectful.

“Kids don’t see skin color,” says Denise. “They only see love, and they need to be shown that they’re loved.”

And while she has loved her time with the children and will be sad to see it come to an end, this foster story has a happy ending—they will be back home in time for Christmas. Denise has been keeping an album of photos to share with their parents when that day comes.

“I’ll cry for a while, but I’ll be excited to have more children placed in my home. Maybe I’ll have the experience of an older child next time.”

While Denise has felt the calling to foster for many years now, she says she would absolutely encourage families to go through the process, even if it’s something they hadn’t thought much about before.

“There are a lot of kids out there who need somebody. If your heart is in the right place and you think you can make a difference, why not?” she says.
Cynthia Waters was shuffled among relatives, family friends and even her boyfriend’s house before entering the foster care system more than a year ago. She’s flourished since then, and looking back, Cynthia says she can hardly recognize the girl she used to be.

From getting scuba certified and diving in the Florida Keys to making a conference presentation in South Florida and advocating for child well-being in Tallahassee, this young woman has been able to experience things she otherwise never would have, thanks to FSS’ Independent Living (IL) program.

“I’ve learned to face my fears and be open to new things,” says Cynthia. “I’ve met so many new people and listened to their stories. These experiences have changed my life.”

When she was first removed from a family friend’s home and placed in foster care, Cynthia and her five siblings were separated and placed in different homes around the city. She was angry and on the verge of making poor choices.

But she got lucky and was placed in a home where with a foster mom she loves, and says she’ll miss dearly when she goes into extended foster care (EFC) at age 18.

She learned about the IL programs and has thrived since getting involved in them.

Cynthia participated in The Challenge, an “Amazing Race”-style program that familiarizes teens in care with the Jacksonville area and allows them to do all kinds of fun things along the way. She went through the Scuba Promotes Life goals And Support Healthy living (SPASH) program and got scuba certified locally before going on a dive in Key Largo.

“It was the first time I’d ever flown on a plane. And when I got there, I was sailing on a boat in the middle of the ocean, then swimming with sharks just a few feet away from me,” she says.

She also got the chance to go to summer camp where she met people who were dealing with some of the same challenges she was.

On top of all the adventures she’s had through IL programs, Cynthia was referred by Jessica McCrickard, Lead Placement Specialist with FSS, to One Voice IMPACT, an organization aimed at helping young people (ages 13-23) become better citizens and develop their talents.

Cynthia is now the North Florida chapter president of One Voice IMPACT, which comes with its own set of exciting challenges and rewards. At a recent conference in Boca Raton, she practiced her networking and business etiquette, and got to co-present with Sarah O’Neal, FSS Senior Program Support Coordinator, at one of the workshops.

Recently, she went on an advocacy trip to Tallahassee where she spoke with members of the Florida legislature on child well-being issues that are close to her heart—more foster homes for teens, better transportation for teens in care and lighter caseloads for caseworkers.

“My case alone involves nine people, and that’s only one that my caseworker has to manage,” says Cynthia. “I know how hard they work and how much they have to do.”

Focused on finishing high school, Cynthia has her sights set on a college degree in early childhood education so she can become a preschool teacher and help young children at one of the most crucial times in their lives.

She knows entering EFC will pave the way for that. Her mentor through the FSS Mentors Matter program has been key in helping guide her in making the right choices. “The kids I know who don’t go to an EFC program end up on the streets or pregnant—I don’t want to be like that,” says Cynthia. “I don’t want to be struggling my whole life. So I’ll go into this program, get on my feet as an adult, and then I’ll be good to go!”

In the meantime, Cynthia has started counseling other teens in foster care, impressing upon them the importance of making the right decisions, planning for the future, and being open to experiences that could change their lives.
Angie Bradberry and her husband Danny officially became “Mommy and Daddy” to their sons Nathan and Triston on Sept. 20, 2017. But as kinship caregivers, they’d been family long before that.

Angie, who grew up in Clay County, is a board certified behavioral analyst with Duval County Public Schools. She’s been a stepmom to 18-year-old Kaya since she and Danny married in 2008. “We looked into adopting about seven years ago,” Angie recalls. “There were some children we were interested in, but they ended up being adopted by family members, so we’d closed the door on that.”

Then a few years ago, a young blue-eyed boy named Nathan and his pregnant mom became a part of Angie’s life.

You’d need a flow chart to understand the exact relationship between the Bradberrys and the boys who would become their sons, Angie jokes, but they were relatives of Angie’s step-daughter Kaya on her mother’s side. All the family was close, and when Nathan, his mom and dad moved into Kaya’s aunt’s home in late 2014, Angie became close with them, too.

Nathan, became a big brother to Triston, on New Year’s Eve 2014. Unfortunately, because their mother wasn’t able to provide a safe environment for them. The Florida Department of Children and Families became involved and Angie and Danny became their full-time caregivers through the FSS Kinship Care program.

Just over a year later, Angie and Danny officially adopted Nathan and Triston. Their birth mother still has a special place in Angie’s heart. “She’s the one who allowed me to be a mother, and it was a decision based out of love,” says Angie.

The Bradberry’s do as much as they can to keep their sons’ biological family a big part of their lives.

Angie credits the Kinship Department at FSS for helping her family through it. “They make it okay to ask for help,” says Angie. “All that pressure you put on yourself—they help take it off of you.”

They’ve adjusted wonderfully to being a family of five.

“Kayla has been a really great big sister,” Angie says of her step-daughter who will be attending college on a full athletic scholarship. “They play like siblings and they fight like siblings,” she says.

While the Bradberrys had a strong network of support and knew how to access their resources, Angie is interested in legislative advocacy to get more help for kinship caregivers who aren’t as fortunate as they were.

She also has some advice: “Love as wholly as you can. Educate yourself. Trust the people you’re working with, and don’t be afraid to ask them questions.”
The hustle and bustle at the VanZandt home on a Monday night is that of a quintessential big family—everyone pitching in to get dinner on the table, kids playing, and talk of finishing homework before bedtime. You’d never know that the VanZandt crew only became a big family about a year ago.

Rachel and Eric went to high school together in Michigan. Eric was relocated to Jacksonville by the Navy, and 20 years after graduating, the two reconnected. Rachel moved to Jacksonville with her daughter Sage, now 18, seven years ago. When she and Eric married, they talked about expanding their family.

Sage was adamant about having siblings, says the couple, but they didn’t want to have more biological children at this point in their lives, so they decided to adopt. Sage would look at the Family Support Services’ Heart Gallery online, looking at kids to suggest to her parents that she wanted to have as her brothers and sisters.

“We know older kids have a harder time finding homes,” Rachel says. “We wanted to be able to give them a strong foundation through their high school years, get them off to college and give them a permanent place to come home to.”

In his Navy years, Eric was welcomed and taken in by friends from all around the country, given a place to eat and stay. They became family. It was something so important and meaningful to him, he knew he wanted to share the same with others.

After completing adoption training in 2015, the VanZandts were asked if they’d consider adopting a sibling group who had been placed in separate foster homes. At the time, the kids were 11, 9 and almost 2. A toddler hadn’t been in their plan, nor had three kids all at once.

“We completely believed that these kids should have the opportunity to try anything they want to try,” says Rachel, adding that her husband spent days crunching the numbers to make sure the family could take on three kids and still be able to afford sports, band, and college, including day care for the youngest.

They still had some doubts up until the day they met the kids. But after having dinner together at a pizza parlor, they were hooked.

“We truly think they were meant to be our kids,” say the couple.

They met Cortney, Jammie and Randall on June 21. By July 23, the three had moved in, and the adoption was finalized in October. Eric and Rachel say they are very grateful to their employers, Johnson & Johnson Vision Care and Watson Realty, for giving them the time and support they needed when the kids initially became part of the family.

The family laughs now about the early days, but admits that sometimes it “felt like World War III.”

Cortney, the oldest, had been living in a separate foster home from her brothers, and the reunion was tough at first. Plus, the kids had no structure, no routine and had missed dozens of school days before being removed from their home. They were also not where they needed to be physically and developmentally.

“We were surprised by how fast they excelled at everything once they had structure and stability,” says Eric.

All three kids grew between 3 and 5 inches in the first month, they gained weight, and Jammie, who admits he’d never even read a whole book before, proudly shows off the foot-tall stack of books he’s already read this year. The youngest, Randall, who was verbally challenged when he met his forever family, now has skills that are “off the charts.”

Cortney idolizes her big sister Sage, the parents say, and even took up the same instrument in middle school band that Sage plays in high school.

While the siblings are aware of the past trauma that landed them in foster care, they have embraced their new lives—enjoying sports, family dinners and good grades in school.

The VanZandts say even though the thought of adopting an older child didn’t end up as planned, they encourage other families to consider it. As Eric puts it, “Think about what your life would be like if you didn’t have a place to go home to.”

Though their adoption journey hasn’t always been easy, the family of six says they wouldn’t trade a moment of it.

“It’s hard, but it’s a hundred times more rewarding than you could anticipate,” says Eric. Rachel, who wanted to adopt for years, echoes his sentiment.

Not too long ago, they never could have understood how much fun and joy their big, happy family could bring.
Family Preservation

Sixty-two percent of children (1,251 out of 2,011) determined unsafe by DCF were transferred to ongoing in-home case management rather than being removed from their families. Of these, 90 percent remained safely in their homes.

Carlos Cruz, Family Preservation Programs Supervisor, received the 2017 Award of Excellence from the Exchange Club Family Center for his “outstanding commitment to the prevention of child abuse and neglect.”

Staff from the Family Preservation team hosted several child well-being agencies from Florida, Pennsylvania, Iowa and Maryland to meet, observe and discuss our various in-home, non-judicial programs. As a result, the York County, PA agency created an IPT (Integrated Practice Team) modeled after the FSS IPT, with the same goal of changing how families are viewed and supported, and keeping children safely at home and out of foster care.

The FSS Health Care Coordinator position expanded to serve Family Assessment Support Team (FAST) and Strengthening Ties and Empowering Parents (STEP) families. This allows a nurse to work with families whose medical needs have been identified as risks to children. See related story, pages 6–7.

Case Management Organization Partners

The successful development of a new post-reunification services program was implemented after the state of Florida continually struggled with a low score on the federal measure of re-entry of children into care within 12 months. In January 2016, Daniel Kids and FSS entered into a contract to provide post-reunification services to support families who have been reunified with their children. The services are based on being culturally competent and family-centered. The parents are engaged in all aspects of their respective plans to stay strong and to build upon their accomplishments. Program cornerstones include continued case management support, parent education, and life skills development for the family.

FSS awarded a pilot contract to Jewish Family and Community Services to implement a mentoring program for new Family Service Counselors during their first six months of employment. The mentors also coach existing staff members who are struggling with court presentations, court documentation or any other case management skills.

Retrospective: Great moments from last year

New FSS CEO, Bob Miller, with Hon. Judge Steven Fahlgren, Nassau County

Mentor of the Year, Margaret Hastings, with mentee, Cindy

Larry West Jr., VP Case Management, and Stacey West, VP Legal, relaxing at the employee picnic

Foster Parent of the Year, Maria Vasquez, with her daughter
Independent Living

The Keys to Independence program, which became state law in 2017, provides training and resources to teens in foster care to help them learn how to drive and eliminate obstacles preventing them from obtaining a driver’s license. FSS remains as one of the top three agencies in the state, since the program’s pilot, with 100 percent enrollment from youth in extended foster care and 98 percent enrollment from youth in licensed foster care.

Independent Living (IL) participated in the state’s Fostering Success program that allowed for one IL client to gain professional work experience and life skills in a paid internship through the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The Postsecondary Education (PESS) program youth interned in 2016 and was hired.

Adoptions

The FSS Adoptions Department recently developed a new program in response to the high volume of families open to adopting children. Called Pop in for Permanency, planned events provide a casual environment for families to stop in, meet adoption recruiters, learn more about the adoption process and see a complete list of children in Duval and Nassau counties waiting to be adopted. As a result, participation in Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education (PRIDE) classes has increased, with two families being matched with children.

Foster Care Licensing

The Licensing team worked with DCF Northeast Region representatives to update the family profile that is required in the Unified Home Study, which streamlined the efficiency of the overall process. This change has since been adopted by other community-based care agencies around the state.

After surveying new foster parents in the first 30, 60 and 90 days, FSS recognized the need for a professional to help bridge the gap between DCF, the Case Management Organization and new foster families, which resulted in a new Family Resource Advocate position. The objective of the position is to help provide basic immediate necessities, assist in coordinating child care, providing Florida WIC/MC assistance, and link families with important community resources that help smooth the transition for the licensed foster home and the children.

Placement

FSS moved the Education Liaison position into the Placement Department to now immediately assess the child’s educational needs as soon as they are removed to ensure children are able to remain in their current school or put into a program best suited for them. The Specialist works with our high risk population to come up with creative solutions for getting children into school and improve the stability for children coming into care.
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