



Emphasis on Family Focus on Prevention



Family Support Services
OF NORTH FLORIDA INC.
SERVING DUVAL AND NASSAU COUNTIES

2021 REPORT
TO THE COMMUNITY

Family Preservation and Prevention

Family preservation and keeping children out of the child welfare system. That's foremost what Family Support Services of North Florida is all about.

Through multiple innovative programs including the Strengthening Ties & Empowering Parents program, the Family Assessment Support Team and many others, FSS works every day to bolster families that are struggling and keep children in homes with their birth parents whenever possible.

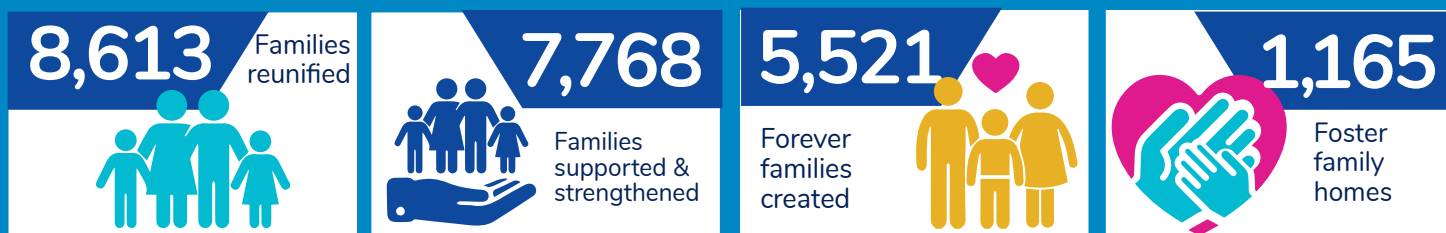
So much of our hard work is about helping: when families are struggling, doing everything possible to keep a child with their family — and when foster care must happen, doing whatever we can to ensure it's a temporary solution that leads to family reunification.

We hope you enjoy this look back at some of the success we've had during the last year with children and families in our community. Thank you for your continued support of the crucial work that we are proud to be a part of.

Our Mission

Our mission is to be the leader in providing safety, stability, and quality of life for all children by working with the community to strengthen the family unit.

Fulfilling Our Mission



Our Vision

Our vision is that children grow up connected to their own families, supported by families and embraced by the community; that children have the opportunity to achieve in school and to learn to be productive citizens; and that citizens of Duval and Nassau counties, organizations and agencies recognize that child protection is a community responsibility and represents the best interests of all county residents.

FROM THE CEO

JENN PETION



When I joined Family Support Services of North Florida last year, I already had deep respect for the organization's reputation for successful outcomes and for innovation. I was eager to better understand what makes FSS such a leader in our state's community-based care system.

Not surprisingly, I quickly learned that it's the support in FSS's North Florida community that makes this system of care so strong – from the partner agencies we link arms with to serve children and families to the businesses that share their talent with our board of directors and the local donors who offset needs state funding doesn't cover.

In the midst of profound challenges, this community has ensured the safety net that FSS provides local children and families holds strong.

As a career child-welfare professional, I've long lived by the principle, "What's right for the child is right for the agency." It's amazing how true this statement rings regardless of whether we are talking about policy, process flow or budget. When we keep the child at the center of our decision-making, we always win.

As we approach a new year, we will continue to challenge ourselves to maintain this focus on the children we serve by leaning into our culture of family preservation. After nearly two years gathering data, engaging partners and most importantly, listening to the community members themselves, we are ready to formally launch our Community Reinvestment Initiative to partner with the 32209 community to strengthen families, enhance protective factors and reduce disparities, with a long-term goal of reducing the number of children entering the formal child welfare system.

FSS has a proud history of this kind of innovation, and we are daring to dream about a future that needs us less. A future where families find support to overcome challenges and become their best versions of themselves. A future where poverty and race are no longer factors in case origination or outcomes. A future where children grow up *"connected to their own families, supported by families, and embraced by the community."* Dare to dream with us.



Jenn Petion
CEO and President,
Family Support Services of North Florida

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

PAUL MADSON



With an emphasis on family and a focus on prevention, FSS continues to create Change for Good.

Working for a global healthcare company with headquarters here in Jacksonville, I am able to see firsthand the positive impact that supporting healthy and strong families can make on our community. At times of global

crisis, the family unit offers the stability our children need, which is why we work so hard to ensure every child in our community has a safe, stable, and loving home to grow up in. We dedicate time and energy to connecting children to family members because we know the outcomes are more positive when kids stay connected to their family roots. In those situations where a family connection is not possible, we support those children through foster parents, ensuring both the children and foster parents have all the resources necessary to succeed. All the while, we continue our efforts on family finding because we know it's a critical enabler of success when we can get children back home.

FSS also believes, before children ever come into care, we must dedicate resources on prevention and family preservation initiatives, helping determine when and where we can safely keep children at home. Prevention efforts allow FSS to provide support to families in challenging situations, leading to long term positive solutions and better outcomes for children.

We offer and oversee services that help families get back on track. Families receive assistance through a series of prevention programs that help keep children at home and out of foster care. Some of those programs include:

- Strengthening Ties & Empowering Parents
- High-Risk Newborn
- Family Assessment Support Team
- Integrated Practice Team

As we expand our offerings, stepping wider into primary prevention and family preservation, we will continue to create Change for Good – one family at a time. Thank you for your continued support of FSS.



Paul Madson
Board Chair,
Family Support Services of North Florida



Fostering Love

Mahryah White discusses her experiences helping preserve and mend one struggling family through foster care with Family Support Services of North Florida.

When Mahryah White began foster parenting, she knew the main goal was to help mend and preserve families. She never planned to permanently add foster children to her small family, much less add their biological mother. Yet today White says she has both helped to reunify a struggling family and, in a way, expanded her own family through the experience.

The then-single Nassau County mother spent much of the last year caring for two young boys whose biological mother was briefly incarcerated. She worked hard during that time to maintain communication between the boys and their mother. Now that the family has been reunited, the bond between the foster and biological families is unique and rewarding, White said.

“When I got the boys, I started taking them to our church, and they enjoyed it,” she said. “Since they’ve reunified with their mom, I invited her to attend and bring them. She still comes to our church. We see them two or three times a week. She even came to my wedding last month. I feel like she’s part of our family now, and I think she would say the same thing.”

White’s first foster parent assignment with the two boys — aged two years old and eight months — began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The jail limited in-person visits

at that time, which made maintaining contact between the boys and their mother very difficult.

White’s extensive training to become a foster parent taught her the importance of, wherever possible, maintaining the connection between the biological parents and their children during the separation.

White purchased teddy bears that could record audio messages and she asked the boys’ mother to record her voice for them using the toys.

“We talked on the phone often,” White said. “But I wanted them to be able to hear her voice every day.”

More than 69,000 U.S. children and teens live in foster care, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most of those children end up reunited with biological parents or other relatives. Family Support Services of North Florida works each day with hundreds of foster parents like White in Duval and Nassau counties to help ensure successful reunifications occur whenever possible.

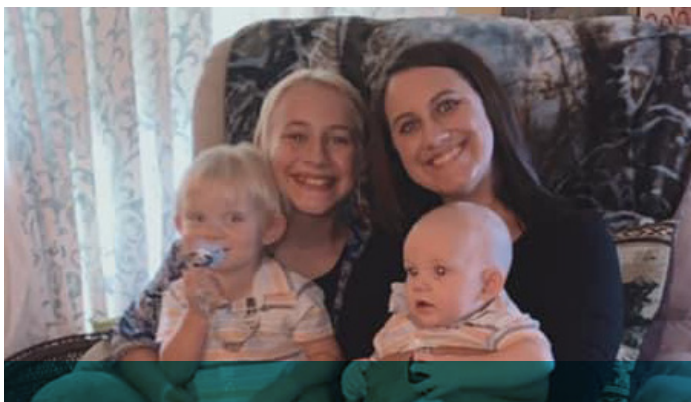
Focusing first on reunifying families is a core principle for the agency, Jenn Petion, president and CEO of Family Support Services of North Florida.

"We know family preservation is usually the best thing we can do for children," Petion said. "When it's possible and safe, helping the biological parents regain custody of their children is always our first goal."

White, who has her own biological teenage daughter, said reunification was always her main message to the mother of her two foster children. "I basically encouraged her," she said. "I told her, 'If you are doing what you can do to get your boys back, I'll do everything I can to help you.' "

White said her love of children has always made her interested in fostering. One day, two of her massage therapy clients both talked to her about their experiences fostering children. Then, on her way home from work, she heard an FSS radio commercial. "I knew it was a sign," she said.

She did her homework, completed the required six-week course FSS provides, received her certification and spoke with everyone she could to help prepare for the experience.



Mahryah White and her daughter with the foster children they care for.

White and her daughter also organized fundraisers for foster children, and even provided short-term respite care for foster infants before they received their first foster care placement. They documented the entire experience on a social media blog called FosteringLoveInFlorida.com. The outlet provided her a platform to champion the importance of foster care.

"People ask me all the time if I'm going to be sad when they leave, and of course I am, but I'm so thankful to have gotten the chance to love them while we did," White wrote on her blog in November 2020. "I went into fostering just to provide a safe place for kids while their parents did whatever they need to do to get them back. I didn't go into fostering to adopt children, so I will always try my hardest to make sure that I help their parents in any way I can."

She says she knows now that when each foster child leaves

her home to go back to their family, it's going to hurt. But she also knows that she is going to learn many things by taking the leap of faith that's required to begin the journey.

One of the things White said she learned is that completing the journey successfully requires a strong system of support from those around you.

"I feel like any parent, whether they are trying to get their children back, or really any parent at all, wants to know how their children are," she said. "Any parent wants to feel like they are doing the best they can for their children. Sometimes you need help, and it's okay to ask for help."

She said she also learned that it was important not to force her foster children into her schedule and her family's routine.

"We kind of let them show us what they needed," she said. "The baby was only eight months old. The older one, he took the lead. We didn't force them into a schedule immediately. We let them decompress and get used to being in a new place. We let them guide it."

Even if White stays close with the boys she fostered and their mother, she knows they won't remember the days when she took care of them. "I know the boys are never going to remember that they lived with me for those eight months," she said. "But I will know. I will know that I gave them a safe place during that time."

As her foster children's biological mother completed the requirements for reunifying with her sons, White knew her time with them was coming to an end.

"Rocking baby bear tonight I can feel my heart breaking a little," she wrote on her blog last December. "We got great news today that they get to start unsupervised visits on Monday and their mama gets to move into her new house in two weeks."

"This is all amazing, and it's what we signed up for; to love on each child that comes into our life until it's time for them to go back home. That doesn't mean that it's easy. This is the part that will literally make you think your heart is going to be ripped out when they go back; but I would do it over and over again, if it means we get to show God's love to these babies and their families and give their parents peace knowing they are being loved and spoiled just a tad until they get to go back home. ... These boys have brought me so much joy, and I couldn't love them more if they were my own. I pray that we always get to be a part of their lives and get to watch them grow up to the amazing men I know they will be."



Kinship Fostering

Your Heart Must Be In It...

For Teresa and Larry Williams, the decision to take on kinship foster parenting for newborn Christopher was the easiest part.

“That decision was really easy,” Teresa said. “It was because I already have the heart for loving kids. Something like this, your heart must be in it.”

The Williamses were already grandparents with two grown daughters when they agreed to foster their Teresa’s young relative Christopher. Initially, they expected the placement to last 12 months, according to the Jacksonville couple who ended up officially adopting the one-year-old child last August.

“We thought it was going to work,” Teresa said. “We thought they (Christopher’s birth parents) were going to do the right thing and get him back. But in the end, it would have broken our hearts if he had not been able to stay in our family.”

Christopher’s biological parents weren’t able to keep the child, said Marissa Hanson, a case manager with Family Support Services.

“The Williamses treated the child as their own from the moment he was placed in their home,” Hanson said. “They worked well with the case management team and were always communicative.

They advocated for the child’s best interest and stayed focused on his health, development and wellbeing. They were able to provide stability physically, emotionally and financially. They worked with the birth family to help them improve their parenting skills while ensuring the child was able to maintain contact with his birth family.”

When a child cannot remain safely at home with their parents, a family or like-family member is the next best alternative.

Kinship placement is preferable to traditional foster care because it helps the child maintain family connections and it provides the least amount of disruption to a child’s normalcy and routine, according to FSS officials who work with kinship foster care placements.

Licensing of these caregivers as child-specific foster

homes is a newer change in the child welfare system and is referred to as Level 1 licensure. It's designed for both relatives and non-relatives who have existing relationships with the child for whom they wish to foster or seek a level 1 licensure.

Whether kinship fostering or traditional fostering, it is important that those interested are aware of the impact of trauma on children and how to support children who have experienced abuse and neglect, Hanson said.

"Our children often come to us with years of traumatic experiences and hardships," Hanson said. "My advice is to be patient and understanding when a child in the system comes into your care. I also suggest that you not be afraid to reach out for help whenever you need it. The case management team is always here to make sure you have the support and resources in place to be successful."

A strong support system is vital to fostering. Larry and his wife rely on the help and support they receive from family members and from FSS. The training traditional foster parents receive from FSS is extensive; Level I caregivers also receive initial and ongoing training resources.

"FSS was very helpful," he said. "Any time our case manager came out she would always offer, 'Is there anything you need? Is there anything the baby needs?' "

The Williamses worked for more than a year to support Christopher's reunification with his birth family, but eventually it became obvious that they needed to adopt him or he would end up in the foster care system.

"(The boy's father) wanted to get his son back," Larry said. "I told him that if they did the right things, they would get him back. He's good with it now. He calls me. We talk. He says, 'I'm so glad that I chose you to get him because I don't think anybody else would have taken care of him like you do.' "

Adopting Christopher was the right thing for Christopher, Teresa Williams said. As long as foster parents focus on what's best for the child, either ending can be successful – reunification or adoption.

"The purpose of us getting Christopher, and him not going to foster care, is to keep him with family and let him build a decent life and to let him be treated just like he needs to be treated," she said.



While adoption was not the intended plan when he was placed in a kinship foster care home, Christopher Williams is thriving in his new family.



Larry and Teresa Williams at Christopher's adoption ceremony in August. While family preservation is always the first objective, they say fostering is all about what's best for the child involved as well as the parents.

STEPPING IN TO HELP FAMILIES HELP THEMSELVES IN HEALING

No matter the crisis or challenge a family may face, the key to family preservation lies in compassionate, proactive prevention – and wraparound support without stigma. Family Support Services helps connect struggling parents to ongoing, tailored assistance that enables them to grow as guardians and blossom into healthier households.

The Strengthening Ties & Empowering Parents (STEPS) program is an in-home intervention program designed to help stabilize families and prevent future problems by providing tailored support to parents.

Depending on risk level, families typically receive between two and four home visits each month, for three months on average. During this time, caseworkers help parents identify and overcome any obstacles that may be holding them back from becoming the best parents they can be.

This support can range from helping parents build a budget to assisting with housing applications and vouchers, said Karen Ziegler, a prevention specialist for FSS's STEPS program who works at Daniel Kids.

"Whether it's helping parents prepare for a job interview or simply lining up reliable transportation to and from daycare," Ziegler said, "we step in to temporarily lighten the load however we can, all while arming these parents with the confidence they need to take control and continue on a healthier path for them and their children going forward."

Support through STEPS also includes parenting classes and financial management classes, which can help address some of the underlying barriers that guardians often face, Ziegler said.

She pointed to the example of a set of parents she has

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES OF NORTH FLORIDA



worked with who had children at a very young age and never learned how to manage their finances and had no parental role models of their own to teach them.

"Many parents simply model what they've seen in their own lives, especially when it comes to finances and disciplining their children," Ziegler said. "We see so many positive breakthroughs for these parents who are ready to build a better family dynamic, but simply didn't have the tools."

Another key is simply helping parents become the best version of themselves so that they can, in turn, be better with their families, Ziegler said.

"As the saying goes, you can't pour from an empty cup," she said. "Sometimes it's as simple as helping someone understand their own value and capabilities."

STEPS families are typically referred by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), with the goal of ultimately keeping children safe at home and avoiding the need for foster care or further intervention.

The lifeline that STEPS offers to parents in need is now even more accessible. Any parent who calls the DCF hotline seeking assistance, not just those who have had a previous case with DCF, will be linked with local resources.

This means more families will have the opportunity to break the cycle simply by picking up the phone.

"Whether it's helping parents prepare for a job interview or simply lining up reliable transportation to and from daycare, we step in to temporarily lighten the load, however we can, all while arming these parents with the confidence they need to take control and continue on a healthier path for them and their children going forward."

STEPS Prevention Specialist Karen Ziegler

Family Support Services' Strengthening Ties and Empowering Parents (STEPS) is a prevention program that uses a strength-based approach to engage and empower families. STEPS uses the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework as a foundation to the program, which is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.



PROGRAM COMPONENTS



PARENT CAFE
- BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & GO-TO SUPPORTS



FAMILY PLAN
- CODESIGNED PLAN WITH FAMILY



CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY RESOURCES & SERVICES
- OFFER CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED



PARENTING TRAINING
- IN-HOME PARENTING



BUDGETING
- IN-HOME BUDGETING



FRIENDS PROTECTIVE FACTORS SURVEY
- BASELINE TO ASSESS PROTECTIVE FACTORS

PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK



KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING & CHILD DEVELOPMENT



SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN



PARENTAL RESILIENCE



CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

VALUES

1) ALL FAMILIES HAVE STRENGTHS

4) PEOPLE, AT ANY POINT IN THEIR LIFE, ARE CAPABLE OF CHANGE

7) ALL PEOPLE SHOULD BE TREATED WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT, REGARDLESS OF HOW THEY ACT

2) ADULTS & CHILDREN RESPOND BEST TO KINDNESS & EMPATHY

5) FAMILIES ARE EXPERTS IN THEIR OWN LIVES

8) CULTURAL DIVERSITY & ETHNICITY ARE ACCEPTED, VALUED & CELEBRATED WITHOUT BIASES BASED ON DIFFERENCES OF ANY KIND.

3) PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION, SHOULD BE CELEBRATED

6) HOPE IS POWERFUL & IS INSTRUMENTAL IN HELPING PEOPLE CHANGE



Family Finding

FSS dedicates a great deal of time and energy on connecting children to family members because they know the outcomes are more positive when kids stay connected to their family roots. In those situations where a family connection is not possible, we support those children through foster parents, ensuring both the children and foster parents have all the resources necessary to succeed. All the while, we continue our efforts on family finding because we know it's a critical enabler of success when we can get children back home.

Family finding specialist positions and positions in FSS's Kinship Support program are important elements of FSS's strategy that focuses on family preservation and reunification.

Family Finding Specialist Sami Horton is responsible for supporting child protective investigators and case managers by working with staff to locate, engage and recommend safe placement of children with relatives and non-relatives. Family finding specialists work to identify family connections for children and support kinship foster care by engaging youth and families in the home study and background screening process.

Horton has been working at FSS since fall 2020. This year, she worked with FSS partner agencies to help spread awareness about the need for creating a "kin first" culture. They are working on this goal by identifying hundreds of families for children in efforts to keep them connected to their kin for best possible outcomes.

By working collaboratively with the Florida Department of Children and Families and local case management organizations, Horton has been able to identify kin for more than 100 children in the child welfare system. This effort has improved kinship placement efforts at FSS.

"I work collaboratively with child welfare staff by utilizing a multitude of search engines to identify relatives and fictive kin as potential placement for children who are either at risk of being sheltered or who are in out-of-home care," Horton said.

"We make concerted efforts to identify, locate, inform and evaluate kin in order to preserve the child's connection with kin when they cannot safely remain in homes with their parents."

Social media is a useful tool in identifying family relations. It provides insight to family backgrounds, Horton said.

"Social media allows me to bridge some gaps by finding information and identifying connections that otherwise may not be visible with traditional search engines," she said. "Other



"Social media allows me to bridge gaps by finding information and identifying connections that otherwise may not be visible with traditional search engines."

Family Finding Specialist Sami Horton

tools that are commonly used are state, law enforcement, and other private databases that facilitate the identification of potential relatives and fictive kin. Interviewing relatives can be another tool when exploring and developing a family tree."

Horton's relative searches are diligent and thorough because she understands the importance of family connections and the positive impact that those relationships have on a child's wellbeing and life. FSS understands that kinship foster care is the best placement type for children.

This strategy is supported by research that shows placement with kin has a significant, positive impact on well-being for children and families, supporting sibling togetherness, permanency and stability.

Family Support Services of North Florida

Fiscal Year
2020-2021

Family Support Services of North Florida's contractual agreement with the Florida Department of Children and Families is a cost-reimbursement contract that sets strict parameters on how funds must be utilized. Administrative costs represent less than 5% of costs.

Revenue

DCF Contract	\$62,072,549	92.7%
Grants	\$2,713,923	4.1%
Donations & Other	\$2,141,857	3.2%

Total Revenue	\$66,928,329
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Expenses

Case Management	\$18,179,470	27.2%
Other Services	\$2,471,996	3.9%
Prevention Services	\$2,455,424	3.9%
Staff & Caregiver Training	\$307,486	0.5%
Fam. Pres., Support & Reun.	\$3,307,552	5.3%
Children's Mental Health	\$553,426	0.9%
Adoption Services & Support	\$1,036,570	1.7%
Administrative Costs	\$1,946,796	3.1%
Room & Board		
Adoptive Care	\$20,985,536	33.4%
Licensed Foster Care & Shelter	\$9,853,548	15.7%
Independent Living/Ext. Foster Care	\$1,760,732	2.8%
Total DCF Contract Exp.	\$62,858,537	

Other Expenses

Grants	\$2,689,332	4.3%
Non-Contract Exp.	\$1,184,383	1.9%
Total Other Exp.	\$3,873,715	

Total Expenses	\$66,732,252
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Community Partners

Florida Department of Children and Families

Daniel Memorial

Jewish Family and Community Services

National Youth Advocate Program

The Children's Home Society of Florida

Child Guidance Center

Lutheran Services Florida

Managed Access to Child Health

180 Health Partners

Community Based Care Integrated Health

CogniTutor

Family First Solution Community Development

The Foster Closet Corp

Hands & Hearts Family Services

Hubbard House

I. M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless

The Sunshine Method

The Healing Playroom

The Performers Academy

Tutoring by City

Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center

Micah's Place

Changing Homelessness

Starting Point Behavioral Healthcare

Center for Children's Rights

Hope Multiplies

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