



Mission & Vision

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.

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, Nassau, Pasco and Pinellas counties, organizations and agencies recognize that child protection is a community responsibility and represents the best interests of all county residents.

Case Management Organizations (CMOs)

Circuit 4

LJD Jewish Family & Community Services

Daniel

National Youth Advocate Program (NYAP)

Circuit 6

Lutheran Services Florida (LSF)
Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services
Youth and Family Alternatives (YFA)
Camelot Community Care

Fulfilling our Mission





SUPPORTED &
STRENGTHENED

8,692



FAMILIES REUNIFIED **8,821**



FOSTER FAMILY HOMES

1,418



FOREVER FAMILIES CREATED

5.828

Celebrating 20 years A note from the CEO



This is a true milestone! Celebrating 20 years of service in the communities of Duval & Nassau counties has been transformative for the children and families who have been served in that span of time. So much so, we were afforded an opportunity to go across the state, into Pasco & Pinellas counties, to partner with the community to strengthen the system of care.

We're a very different organization than 20 years ago...but we've consistently held to our core mission and values. Through numerous government administrations and practice changes, we've remained true to our community and our commitment of making things better for vulnerable children and families.

This past fiscal year, our leadership team, in concert with our board of directors, faced uncharted territory with engrafting Pasco & Pinellas counties into the FSS family. Echoing calls for help inspired us to step forward and wrap arms around a community in need of stability, safety, and support from a new lead child welfare agency.

Despite the enormous task, we saw this as an opportunity to lean into our mission and values and bring our culture of innovation, collaboration and our strong family preservation model to the Suncoast area.

Now, only 12 months into this journey, the collaborative efforts of our teams in Circuit 4 and Circuit 6 have proven we are better together.

Four communities (Duval, Nassau, Pasco & Pinellas counties) look very different today because a handful of community partners and leaders came together to embrace a vision much bigger than ourselves to provide help and spread hope to children and families in need.

Jenn Petion

CEO and President, FSS

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Andrew Park
Park & Eleazer Construction

Shannon Sprowls
Sun Coast YMCA



What we do

Family Support Services (FSS) is the designated lead agency for community-based care in Judicial Circuits 4 (comprising Duval and Nassau counties) and 6 (comprising Pinellas and Pasco counties). In collaboration with trusted local Case Management Organizations (CMOs), FSS improves the circumstances and outcomes for families, provides safe homes for abused and/or neglected children through foster and kinship care, and finds forever families for children through adoption.

In Duval and Nassau counties, FSS partners with Daniel, LJD Jewish Family & Community Services and the National Youth Advocate Program. In Pasco and Pinellas counties, FSS partners with Camelot Community Care, Lutheran Services Florida, Gulf Coast Jewish Family & Community Services, and Youth and Family Alternatives.



FOSTER CARE

Children and teens needing foster care are no different from those who don't, except for one distinguishing factor: they've experienced a negative family situation, often taking the form of trauma, abuse, or neglect. These conditions make living at home unsafe—at least for the time being. FSS works with parents to resolve issues and overcome challenges while placing children in a safe, stable, and temporary place to live.

The goal is to quickly get local children to permanency while keeping them connected to family roots when possible. Whether that means safely reunited with their family or matched with a loving adoptive home, during their transition, FSS ensures that their temporary placement is positive, supportive and impactful.



ADOPTION

When reunification is not in a child's best interest, the courts may terminate parental rights. In these cases, FSS attempts to place the child with a qualified adoptive family. To meet this need, FSS has programs to recruit, train and certify prospective adoptive parents.

Children who become available for adoption are generally between 8 and 17 years old. Dedicated to finding the best homes for kids in care, FSS starts within circles of family, friends and neighbors and then reaches out to the communities in which the children live.

FSS seeks families whose lifestyle and interests will best match children in need of a forever home. They receive personalized attention, with ongoing, child-specific training and support, and guidance and resources throughout the adoption process and for many years to follow.



FAMILY PRESERVATION

Family preservation is a community effort to provide short-term services when a family is faced with financial, physical or emotional challenge and crisis. FSS offers and oversees services that help families get back—and stay—on track. Families referred by the Florida Department of Children and Families or Sheriff's Office Investigative Teams receive assistance through a series of programs provided by local CMOs and FSS itself. The programs help to keep children at home and avoid entering the system of care.



CARING FOR TEENS

Following several years of research, FSS has refocused its vision to "transform to a community where all youth are loved, valued, and connected to a network of supports that empower them to create and achieve success." By shifting from a reactive trauma-inducing system to a proactive trauma-responsive system, focused on relationships, connection, and healing, FSS works to positively help change the future for teens in care through a variety of programs:

- REACHing Teens (Reaching, Empowering, Advocating, Connecting and Healing), a behavioral and training framework implemented in early 2020, is a trauma-sensitive approach to bringing together case management organizations, caseworkers, child advocates, foster parents, the judicial system, the community, and others in the child welfare system who interact with teens, in addition to teens themselves.
- CORE (Critical Ongoing Resource family Education) training equips foster, kinship, and adoptive parents with skills to meet the needs of teens who have emotional and behavioral challenges.
- Extended Foster Care is a voluntary program for 18 to 21-year-olds in foster care or who turn 18 in foster care and are still finishing school or trying to enter the workforce. With help from the case manager, it provides support as the youth transitions to adulthood.
- Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) program provides up to \$1,720 a month funding for housing, utilities, and help with cost of living while former foster youth are enrolled in college.
- Aftercare services provides financial assistance and community resources for eligible former foster care youth, ages 18 to 23, who need emergency resources to mitigate crises or prevent homelessness.

Family turns lives around with the help of 'amazing' foster parent

One late November, the lives of Irene and George Gerson and their two kids spiraled out of control. The parents got arrested, and the children, ages four and seven, were removed from their home and placed into foster care.

The official explanation, Irene recalled later, was that "it was all due to a misunderstanding," but she knew better. In reality, digging deeper, she realized "it was actually because of my terrible habit of sweeping issues under the rug instead of fixing them." The authorities' decision to place the children in Florida's foster care system was also based on "our own bad choices."

Released a few weeks later, the Gersons didn't react well at first. "We got out angry, in denial (it was everyone else's fault) and ready to do the bare minimum to make everyone happy and get our kids back," Irene recalled. So they prioritized the psychological evaluations necessary to arrange for a first supervised visitation with the kids.

When she first saw her children, "they were happy," Irene said. "They looked so great and they raved about how amazing Miss Kirsten was."

Miss Kirsten was the foster mom who was looking after the siblings while the Gersons worked through their rough patch. With an adult son no longer living at home, Kirsten shares her home with her mom, Linda. They were licensed to foster three years ago and have fostered about 12 children since then.

At the end of that first supervised visit, it was hard for the Gersons to see the kids leave. But they got over their initial anger and realized "that was the way that it needed to be" and that things would only improve "through hard

work and accepting accountability on our end."

Irene said they were "assigned to an absolutely amazing caseworker, therapist and parenting instructor." With support from the professional team, the parents said they learned that they couldn't get out of their rut if they didn't start taking responsibility for the negativity in their lives and the effect it was having on their children." It was a lot to take on but was balanced by the empathy and kindness shown by Kirsten and her mom.

"We got to know the parents during the visitation process," Kirsten says. "Even after the kids went back home, we all stayed in touch and even had birthday parties for the kids. The family came for Thanksgiving one year."

"Kirsten was the person we never knew we needed," Irene said. "She was like an extra bit of therapy and encouragement. Once she saw that we were making changes for the better, she became our cheerleader. She loved our kids so much—and still does. She made sure that we succeeded, and never once judged us."

After continued progress, the family was reunited. "At our last court appearance, when our case was closed for good, Kirsten told the judge how proud of us she was, and I cried telling her how incredible this woman is."

"Experiences like this exemplify the outcomes we strive for," said Jenn Petion, CEO and President at FSS. "We meet families where they are, with the sincere hope of helping them strengthen bonds and improve lives."

Kirsten and her mom continue to answer the call for help when other kids come into care, but they've chosen to stay in contact with the Gersons.



To be as supportive as possible, Kirsten and Linda encouraged the kids to draw, send letters and stay in touch, to let them know their parents still loved them and wanted to be with them.

"Staying in touch was not part of the plan, it just happened," Kirsten said. "They really turned their lives around."

Things could've gone differently. But the decision to accept help and services helped make things right—for the Gersons, their kids, Kristen and her mom. "We are all so happy and in a place that we never would have been in" otherwise, Irene said. They also still use the tools and resource that FSS makes available. "That truly has made all the difference in being the best parents we can for our children."

66 Kirsten was the person we never knew we needed."

The Gersons





FSS signs contract with DCF for services.



First Annual Foster Children Academic Awards Program at EverBank Field.



2004 Statewide transition to community-based foster care model begins.

2003

2002



2005 Heart Gallery launched, featuring kids hoping to find a forever home.



2006 Judge David M. Gooding named as an Angel in Adoption by the Congressional Coalition Institute; **STEPS** prevention program was created.



2007 Nassau County office opens; FSS receives Wendy's Wonderful Kids grant.



2004

2007 FSS reaches 2,000 kindergartners and preschoolers in Nassau County through its **Doggone** Good Readers program.

2005

2006



Casey Family Programs joined the foster care redesign partnership to help develop strategies, facilitate trainings and provide approaches for change.

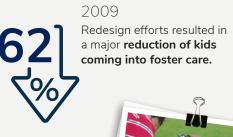
2008



FSS received the national Adoption Excellence Award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for decreasing the length of time that children in foster care wait for adoption.



2008 FSS completed a record **546 adoptions**; Foster Care Redesign was implemented; **FAST** preservation program was launched.





2009 FSS and CBS47 news anchor Dawn Lopez received national recognition as the recipient of the Adoption Exchange Association's prestigious Wednesday's Child Award, honoring local adoption recruiting efforts through Jacksonville's Children television news feature segment.

2008

2007



2010 Passport to Independence launched as the cornerstone of services FSS provides to 17 year olds in foster care.

2010

The Breakfast Learning Series, a monthly forum for social services professionals, foster and adoptive parents and the community, was developed.

2010

SPLASH, a unique, life enrichment program for teens in foster care, was launched; a new Kinship Department was established.

2010

Striving to reduce trauma and its negative affect on children removed from their homes, FSS developed the **Transitional Trauma Therapist** program in partnership with DCF and the Mental Health Resource Center.

Quality Early Education established with QWEEP.



Tour de TRAILS, a life enrichment program that challenges and immerses foster teens in teamwork, interpersonal skills and the benefits of exercise through bicycling, was launched.

2011

2009

FSS was awarded a \$250,000 early education grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to improve the quality of local early education centers, increase the number of foster children enrolled in programs and provide specialized training to educators.

2011

2010

2012

FSS introduced the **Family Coalition** to provide quality support, training, information and events to FSS foster, kinship care and adoptive families.

2012

FSS expanded its community outreach efforts through neighborhood centers with the addition of family preservation staff and programs at the PRINCE Community Development Center.

SPLASH received a Children's Week Community Innovation Award. Only four programs statewide received the prestigious award.

2012

The first annual "Just Like Me" creative arts camp received state and national awards; 5-Star Quality Rating System was created for residential group homes. $\star \star \star \star \star$



2013

2013

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



2015

2014

2014 FSS celebrates 3,000 adoptions; The new **Girls Court** in partnership

with Judge David M. Gooding begins.



2015

2016

THE CHALLENGE, a new teen team-building program, kicks off; FSS hosted the first annual **Family** Reunification Celebration.



2016-17 Safe Baby Court was implemented; Kinship Navigator Program was established.

2017

The Children's Connection (TCC) helps family members prepare to welcome and integrate foster children into their lives. As part of FSS foster care training, TCC provides insights into the emotional trauma and abuse foster children may experience prior to placement. The program is designed for biological children, ages 8 to 17, to help make them part of the process.

2018-2019







2018-2019

Regional Integrated Training Alliance (RITA) Pre-Service Training Program aligns child protective investigators and case managers with best-practice knowledge to help transition from the classroom into the field to ensure successful outcomes.



Center of Hope at Emmett Reed

provide community outreach to

residents in the 32209 Zip code.

Community Center was opened to

2020

2021

FSS was awarded lead agency management in Pasco and Pinellas counties.

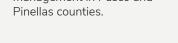
2021

2018-2019

2018

Training House, a dwelling established by FSS, was constructed to enable real-life situation pre-service training for child protective investigators and case management professionals.

2019



2022

2012

More than love. Stability.

"I always wanted a big family," Jennifer Schwaner said. With a direct and permanent influence on the lives of more than 500 children since 2011, she's gotten what she wanted.

Jennifer is a prolific foster mom who provides daytime care for children in her home in Pasco County. Though she's responsible for 14 kids at the moment, she usually averages 10 to 12 on any given day. Depending on individual cases and circumstances, some spend only a short time with her, while others are more long-term.

I take on very difficult kids, and they do well in my home."

If she has an overarching philosophy about fostering, Jennifer is all about providing the elements most foster children lack: stability, consistency and attention to their individual needs. "I hate to see kids, especially those needing extra attention, go into group homes," she explained, "They're the ones who need the least restrictive environment possible."

That doesn't mean chaos reigns in her household. Under her watchful eye, even with all those kids being kids, things don't devolve beyond her control.

Many of the children she fosters keep in contact long after they left the system of care or after she was no longer officially their foster parent. "I'm still the person some of them call when they get upset," she said. When a person who's been traumatized as a child knows you'll be there for them, "for me, that's the positive," Jennifer explained. And it's what keeps her focused.

One girl aged out of the system and needed furniture for her new place, so Jennifer posted on social media asking for donations. The entire apartment was furnished with items people donated.

Another child had failing grades when moved to her home. "He'd been absent from school for 31 of 39 days. Now he's a straight A student" she said

Jennifer's journey started long before Family Support Services (FSS) took on the lead agency responsibility of foster care in Pasco and Pinellas counties last year. "I've had good experiences with FSS. Anytime I've had questions or dilemmas, the leadership has been there for me."

She added that FSS gives her the tools and resources she needs to succeed as a foster parent.

Over the years, speaking with prospective foster parents, Jennifer has corrected numerous false assumptions about fostering. It's not easy work, she explains, and it takes more than good intentions to do it successfully. "When I first started, people would say 'all the kids need is love.' But they need more. Kids in foster care also need stability, not just love." They need consistency, boundaries and clarity, too.

She also places a priority on helping some kids prepare for permanent adoption.

One of the most important things is getting them to an emotional point where they're able to move on to a forever home."

"They have to fully bond with the forever parents. If they have trouble letting go of the past and its traumas, it can lead to adoption breakdowns. They need to understand there's a forever home for them and the parents."

Much of that work comes down to "letting go of what they thought life would be like," she said. "They need to be adoptive-competent before moving on to an adoptive home. Many of them have experienced a lot of trauma that hasn't been dealt with."

If that sounds like the voice of experience, it's also the voice of non-judgmental acceptance from an expert. For those 500-plus foster children who have spent part of their formative years in Jennifer's home, it's the voice of unconditional love.



FSS partners with the community to improve continuum of care in Circuit 6



Family Support Services (FSS) expanded its service area significantly on January 1, 2022, adding Pasco and Pinellas counties (Circuit 6) in the Suncoast region to its responsibilities after Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) did not renew its contract with the lead agency previously responsible for Circuit 6.

The change reflects FSS' strong track record over two decades. "FSS has proven to be successful in caring for children in Northeast Florida while offering a robust continuum of services," said DCF secretary Shevaun Harris in a statement released in 2021. "This is our opportunity to rebuild the system of care in these counties that truly addresses the needs of children and families it serves by engaging the community to leverage all available resources. ...We know that FSS will work diligently to carry this out in Circuit 6."

According to Jenn Petion, FSS president and CEO, success in Circuit 4 has been dependent on "a model that focuses on family preservation, collaboration with the community, kinship support, and timely

permanency. We've been successful in part because of our ability to mobilize available resources in the community and build lasting relationships, particularly with those entities who have a proven record of helping improve challenging systems of care."

As FSS prepared to manage these new responsibilities, Circuit 6 was acknowledged as having the highest child removal rates in the state, differing greatly from Circuit 4 where both Duval and Nassau counties have historically low child removal rates.

FSS commissioned a robust assessment to determine how best to proceed and what operational changes to consider. The study, completed in May 2022, identified key stakeholders in the affected counties and analyzed their input to identify specific gaps and needs. As the assessment noted, taking responsibility for Pasco and Pinellas counties is a chance for FSS "to redesign the current child welfare system in Circuit 6 to create meaningful and sustainable change for staff, children and families."

66 We look forward to walking alongside the partners of Circuit 6 to share our lessons learned and to help strengthen the system of care for Pasco and Pinellas counties."

Jenn Petion, FSS President and CEO

Every family needs a little help sometimes

Many families struggle at times. In fact, they face unexpected obstacles more often than not. Some are financial, some are personal, and some are just not knowing that help is available to make things easier.

Established by Family Support Services, STEPS provides services and resources to assist in enhancing parenting skills to better manage the stressors of daily living. It is built on the Protective Factors Framework, which has been deconstructed to reduce the risk of future abuse and neglect.

For nearly 20 years in Duval and Nassau counties, STEPS has proven to help thousands of families each year through in-home services and connections to community resources. Now available to Pasco and Pinellas County families, STEPS provides referred families with a professionally trained family advocate who provides personal attention and helps identify priorities so services can be determined for each family.

STEPS includes:

Self-care strategies to tap into helpful resources to strengthen abilities to provide a positive home environment for the children.

Stress management offers ways to deal with adversity, unexpected events and personal obstacles.

Listening and emotional support from trained staff helps with everyday challenges.

In-home parenting focuses on techniques to help children successfully develop social, emotional, communication and relationship skills.

In-home budgeting and money management helps to create a budget, plan for unexpected expenses and find ways to increase income.

Social connections to develop positive relationships that provide emotional, informational and spiritual support.

Community resources and services to understand where to go and how to get the needed assistance.

Family advocation to ensure family supports are in place.





Families succeed

When we first encountered Jackie, she was homeless, a single mother of 5, in need of housing, furniture, parenting education and other resources and supports. The STEPS family advocate helped them find housing and donated furniture, and she was able to get the younger kids into daycare. The older kids received preparation to start their new school year, plus donated clothes and supplies. Jackie learned budgeting and how to navigate the public transportation system. Today, she has the tools to communicate and understand her children's needs and can parent more effectively.

We don't want to turn away a family whose children could end up in foster care, so we work within the family dynamic in their home. Our programs follow a curriculum that most families could benefit from. It's more like active parenting skills and ways to deal with daily life."

Kimberlie Tobin, MSW Director of Family Preservation, FSS

During a scheduled home visit, a Pasco STEPS family advocate noted that the Copland family was in dire financial straits, about to lose their access to electricity and unable to afford groceries. After explaining available community resources, the advocate helped them apply for assistance, find local food banks and even helped them apply for food stamps and energy assistance. The Coplands just needed someone to help them navigate the system to access the available benefits. Today, they are no longer in crisis.

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the families.



Kinu Merriweather and son stop by the Hope Street table to make an "engine check" wheel and learn about regulating emotions. They are among the 150 people who attended the 32209 Community Fall Fest 2022 at the Emmett Reed Community Center.

Getting the community involved

Rather than dictate to residents what they need, we valued and sought their lived experience and knowledge of the community. To promote engagement, more than 300 in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted, revealing improvements that community members thought were needed most. Residents helped direct the focus of the initiative, the eventual name and even its logo. Priority areas included youth activities, community togetherness, safety and security, jobs, healthy living, financial support and education, and neighborhood beautification.

Center of Hope zeroes in on 32209

Families thrive when they have access to supports and services in times of need. That's the premise behind an initiative to concentrate social resources in one Jacksonville neighborhood. By improving conditions for residents in general, the lives of those touched by the foster care system can improve too.

The collaborative, called Center of Hope, is led by Family Support Services, and includes a host of funding and operating partners with FSS as the backbone convener. The goal is to reduce the number of children entering foster care in one marginalized community by reinvesting resources there—and eventually in others.

The center's services are positioned to help strengthen communities through a family-led engagement model that addresses four key areas that correlate with high numbers of children entering the system of care:

- Social determinants of health
- Trauma of families and communities
- Individual, family, and community protective factors
- Racial disparities among communities

Why the focus on 32209

A methodical geo-mapping analysis, started in 2020, pinpointed exactly where to focus Center of Hope's efforts: a 3.5-square-mile cluster of vulnerable families within the 32209 Zip code—a target zone located near Jacksonville's urban core.

Compared with Duval County as a whole, 32209 experiences significantly higher rates of poverty, homicides, teen pregnancies, and other social determinants of health (SDoH) indicators. The analysis noted the area is also rich in resources, with a high number of nonprofits and faith-based institutions.

The 32209 community has been historically neglected in terms of resources and policies that would help it thrive. Years of mistrust and unfulfilled promises contribute to the lack of engagement of those still wanting to see change. By listening to residents, FSS has co-created a vision for the center that's based on their experience.



The Christmas on Candy Cane Lane 32209 community event brought residents and families together to celebrate the holidays and included a gift giveaway and a visit from Santa.

The reason behind the name

Phase two of the three-phase plan, included identifying a city-owned building to house a comprehensive family resource center, which would be named Center of Hope at Emmett Reed. Reed was a Jacksonville native and recreation department employee of the City of Jacksonville for over 30 years. Funds are being reinvested into the selected area by hiring community residents with lived experiences and local businesses.



Center of Hope at Emmett Reed



What's to come

Phase three envisions more community members on local, city and state boards and committees to mobilize change; continued advocacy for equitable funding, systems, and infrastructures in marginalized communities; and economic growth and generational wealth initiatives for family and community sustainability.

As phase two developed, it became clear that the community wasn't participating as actively as expected in the development of programs that could address the issues impacting the area. Various dynamics, including resident hopelessness and frustration, contributed to this pattern. As trust has been built, residents are now actively engaging and directing the center's focus.

As the Center of Hope's broad effort unfolds, the partners know patience and flexibility will be key to improving and maintaining high rates of community engagement. But the forward motion is undeniable, and plans continue to take shape.

The path to hope and healing

1 Concrete Needs/Support

- Employment Assistance
- Financial Support and Management
- Emergency Housing/Utilities Assistance
- Diaper Needs
- Food Support



(2) Hope and Healing

- Parenting Support
- Youth and Children Activities
- Social Connections
- Mental Health Support

3 Community Leadership

- Civic Engagement Opportunities
- Parent Leadership Program
- Parent Advisory Council



Funding Partners

Casey Family Programs
City of Jacksonville
Florida Department of

Children and Families Kids Hope Alliance

Prevent Child Abuse

Florida

Ounce of Prevention

Operating Partners

Center for Children's Rights

Diaper Bank of Northeast Florida

Family Foundations

Goodwill Industries of North Florida

Hope Florida

Hope Street

Jacksonville Housing

Lutheran Services Florida

Magnolia Project

Mayor's Community-Based Crime

Reduction Program

North Florida Community Action Agency

Northwest Behaviorial Health Services

Partnership for Children's Health

Preacher in Action

Unified Community Investors











