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DCF: Fewer kids abused by Erin Ehrlich, Key Noter, 06/22/08

Court: Homeless no excuse to remove child by Carol Marbin Miller, Miami Herald, 07/03/08

Butterworth quits post as DCF chief by Carol Marbin Miller, Miami Herald, 07/29/08

More foster kids are being adopted by Carol Marbin Miller, Miami Herald, 08/01/08

DCF Reunites Families by Renee Michelle Harris, South Florida Times, 10/24/08

Put the 'welfare' in 'child welfare'

8/24/2007

Next time, the kid stays put. That's right, the next time investigators respond after a call to the child abuse hotline, the parents will be the ones taken away by strangers. The parents will be questioned by officers, nurses and caseworkers. The parents will face the fear of not knowing whether or when they ever will return to anything familiar.



Elisa Cramer

Next time, why should the kid have to give up his bed, his brothers and sisters, his toys and his pet?

The two men in charge of child welfare in Palm Beach County know they are fantasizing when they talk about such a system. But that inside joke Alan Abramowitz and Ron Zychowski share highlights their more serious point: Removing a child from a home is traumatic to the child — always — and can lead to problems, often crime and teen pregnancy.

Nowhere is that more obvious than in Florida. Social workers, probation officers and juvenile judges all recognize the pipeline from dependency on the state as a parent to delinquency. The Florida Department of Children and Families too often feeds Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice.

Of the five largest states, Florida has twice the demand for child welfare services but spends half the money. "We see more children in Florida on a monthly basis," Mr. Zychowski said, "than any other state."

Finding out why — and trying to reduce that number — is part of Mr.

Turnaround specialists try to change attitudes.

Zychowski's mission as the interim CEO of Palm Beach County's private foster care agency, Child and Family Connections.

The state prefers the term *community-based care to private*. But it's not a euphemistic idea Mr. Zychowski embraced as a DCF administrator a decade ago. "Over my dead body," he said, was his reaction. Now, on loan to Palm Beach County from the foster care agency he's credited with turning around in Volusia and Flagler counties, he said, "I actually believe community-based care represents our best chance to really do this well."

After 25 years in the Army and eight years in DCF's regional and district leadership, including a stint in St. Lucie County, Mr. Zychowski landed 2½ years ago in Volusia County, where the problems were "strikingly similar" to Palm Beach County's: "People couldn't tell me with any definitive information where we were financially. We weren't producing (positive) outcomes for kids. We had no focus around a mission and what we wanted to do. ... There was no sense of leadership. Staff needed to be trained, and no one was there to train them."

Now, Volusia is one of the few counties where child welfare officials say "community-based care" is working.

That's why Mr. Abramowitz, Palm Beach County's interim DCF administrator, put Mr. Zychowski on

a review team to do a clean sweep of Child and Family Connections, from its \$3 million deficit to its "unacceptable" rate of children remaining in out-of-home care for longer than 12 months. Child and Family Connections' board then hired Mr. Zychowski this month.

The two promise to inject common-sense changes that focus, Mr. Zychowski said, on: "What are you getting done today for children?"

To start, CFC's board needs financial experts, not just do-gooders. Both DCF — with five district administrators in five years — and CFC — with two CEOs and too many CFOs — have had too much instability. Also, more services to families are needed to emphasize literacy, day care, jobs and parenting, not the usual scolding. "People need to be approached to improve their quality of life," Mr. Abramowitz said, "not to be told, 'Don't abuse your child.'"

In a *SuperNanny*-type approach, DCF, CFC, the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County and other truly community-based organizations plan to teach parents how to better cope, then step away and let them try new parenting skills on their own, while keeping a safety net behind them to help them sustain the improvements.

In Volusia, it took just seven months, Mr. Zychowski said, to see significant improvement. It's not as amusing a fantasy as "haul off the parents, not the kids." But this enlightened approach to child welfare is a dream Palm Beach County finally should realize.

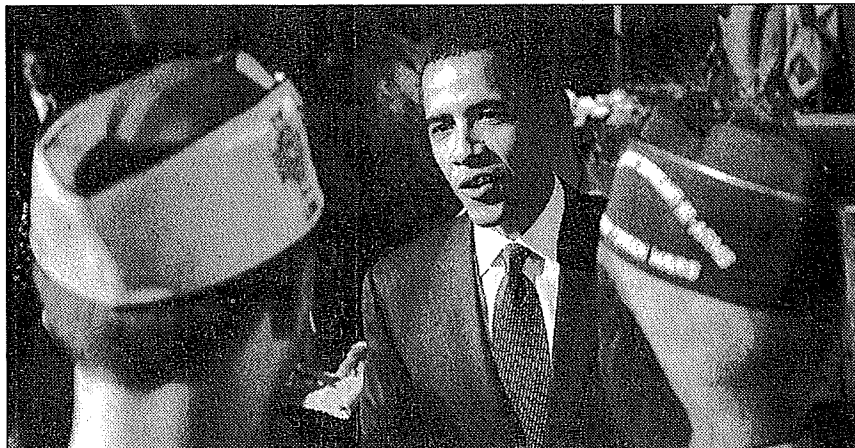
Elisa Cramer is an editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post. Her e-mail address is elisa_cramer@pbpost.com

David Ignatius

Obama ruling foreign policy waters

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Sen. Barack Obama is getting polite applause at best when he tells the delegates at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention here this week that in running for president, "I know I am running for commander in chief." And then he tries to convince this intensely skeptical audience that he's the right man for the job.

Sen. Obama reminds them he opposed the war in Iraq, even though most of the delegates doubtless supported it. He lauds the soldiers fighting there even as he criticizes the civilians of the Bush administration



DCF foster-care crisis team at work in Pinellas

By CURTIS KRUEGER, Times Staff Writer

Published November 14, 2007

LARGO - They call Alan Abramowitz the "firefighter."

He's the guy they call when a local foster-care system flares out of control.

Abramowitz is starting his second week in Pinellas County, where a recent state review concluded caseworkers feel they are "running in crisis mode."

Abramowitz has plenty of ideas about how to whip the foster care system into shape. And for him, one of the best ways to help a foster child is to prevent her from ever becoming one.

Who he is: Abramowitz, 45, came to the state Department of Children and Families not as a caseworker, but as an attorney. The FSU law school grad worked as a prosecutor, public defender and assistant general counsel for the state Department of Juvenile Justice. After seeing the turmoil affecting the child welfare system after the 1998 death of a girl named Kayla McKean, he said, "you start thinking how can I become involved and make things better?" He started working for the DCF in 2000 as the general counsel for a central Florida region. He is currently the DCF's top guy in Brevard and Seminole counties, and acting administrator in Palm Beach County.

What he's doing here: His team is designed to give extra support to local workers and ease their feelings of crisis. He brought in experienced case managers to act as coaches for Pinellas' relatively inexperienced staff and to help license more foster homes, which are in short supply.

His take on the Sarasota Family YMCA: The DCF announced last week it will seek another agency to run foster care work in Pinellas and Pasco counties on the heels of a report critical of the agency's performance. Abramowitz said he's impressed that Sarasota YMCA officials who supervise foster care in Pinellas and Pasco are doing all they can to work with the team and strengthen the system even though they're on their way out.

His philosophy: Parents, even those struggling with drugs, poverty or neglect, still probably provide the best home for their children, except in severe cases. Caseworkers should think carefully before removing them. He cites a recent MIT study that found that children taken out of neglectful homes and put into foster care are more likely to get pregnant as teenagers and suffer other problems than children who stay with their families in homes that are just as neglectful.

What's next: Abramowitz's team will remain in Pinellas for at least a month. At least one local nonprofit, Eckerd Youth Alternatives, is considering applying to take over the \$49-million foster care contract by July 1. The YMCA's subcontractors, who actually employ the case managers, are expected to stay on a year after that.

Curtis Krueger can be reached at

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The Palm Beach Post

Monday, November 19, 2007

Final Edition

Views split on foster-care drop

The upside is intact families and DCF efficiency; the downside is worry about kids in danger.

By KATHLEEN CHAPMAN
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

After a push to return children to their birth parents, local leaders have reduced the number of children in Palm Beach County foster care to the lowest level in at least six

years.

The number of children living in foster care or with relatives after reports that their parents abused or neglected them dropped from 1,503 in June to less than 1,200 this month. Between August and October alone, 123 children went home to their birth parents. Others were adopted or left in the permanent custody of relatives.

For the first time in nearly two years, workloads are more manageable, foster homes have room, and the county's foster care agency is pulling out of a budget crisis

caused by a glut in the number of children. But some fear that children are being left in abusive and dangerous homes.

The county has been in care, more through a similar cycle at home, 17A before. In 2002, the Department of Children and Families took so many children that it had no place to put them but hotel rooms, where girls were caught partying and smoking marijuana with older men.

New DCF leaders helped lower the number. See FOSTER, 17A

ber of children before the private foster care agency, Child and Family Connections, took over in 2004.

But three children with previous records died of abuse or neglect in 2005. And in 2006, at least five children who had records with DCF were killed by abuse or neglect, including 9-month-old Charles Edward Tyson Jr., who was banged on the hood of a car before being tossed in a canal to die.

The number of children in care skyrocketed again, and the foster care agency went millions of dollars in the hole to cover costs. Overwhelmed caseworkers quit at alarming rates, and children were sent to shelters as far away as north Florida.

Alan Abramowitz, who helped reduce the number of children in 2003, came back to Palm Beach County to manage the crisis as interim head of DCF here. Now deployed as a troubleshooter to fix problems around the state, he also is helping in Pinellas and Pasco counties after the meltdown of a foster care agency there.

John Walsh, who represents children in court as head of the Foster Children's Project of the Legal Aid Society, agrees with Abramowitz that removal is not to be taken lightly and that too many kids probably were being separated from their families.

But taking about 80 or 90 children a month under one leader, then suddenly dropping that number to 30 is too drastic a change, he says. He believes children are being left in danger.

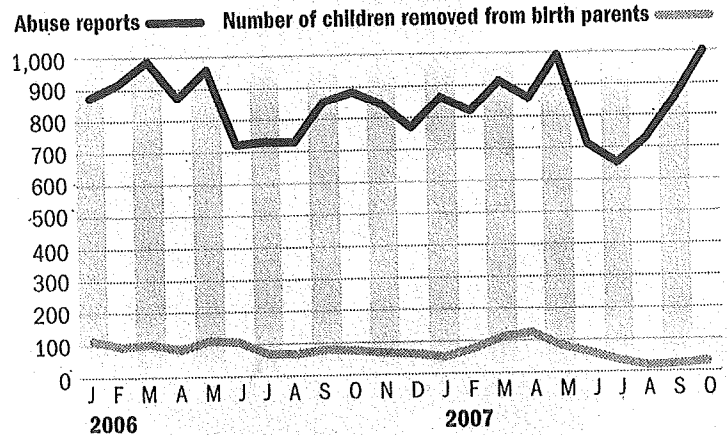
Though he likes Abramowitz and believes his intentions are good, Walsh questions why state leaders send him to Palm Beach County only when they need to reduce the number of children for financial reasons.

"I thought that was risky business then (in 2003), and I think it's risky business now," Walsh said.

Walsh and Abramowitz agree, however, that it is diffi-

Fewer children coming into care ...

The Department of Children and Families has slashed dramatically the number of children removed from their birth parents since June. Fewer than 40 children were removed during each of the past four months.



... And more children going home

More than 300 Palm Beach County children removed after reports that their parents abused or neglected them have left the foster care system since June. The number of children living apart from their birth parents, which includes those in licensed foster homes and shelters, as well as those living temporarily with relatives, dropped from 1,503 in June to 1,175 this month. Some of those were adopted or turned 18. But from August through October, 123 were reunited with their birth parents.

	Licensed foster care	Living apart from birth parents	Total under supervision
June 30, 2001	473	1,448	1,948
June 30, 2002	661	1,880	2,458
June 30, 2003	664	1,992	2,607
June 30, 2004	594	1,411	1,951
June 30, 2005	591	1,315	1,883
June 30, 2006	602	1,553	2,246
June 30, 2007	615	1,503	2,217
July 31, 2007	612	1,468	2,154
Aug. 31	557	1,342	1,961
Sept. 30	502	1,271	1,861
Nov. 12	491	1,175	1,721

Source: Child and Family Connections

STEVE LOPEZ/Staff Artist

cult to predict which parent is capable of hurting a child.

At one end of the spectrum are parents who are almost certain to lose their children and unlikely to get them back. Those cases include sexual abuse, extreme violence around a young child, or severe or repeated physical injuries. At the other end are good parents who may simply be struggling to get by or made a one-time mistake.

The majority of cases fall in between, Walsh said.

Most of the parents are addicts. By the time they lose their children, many have

been reported more than once for neglecting them, he said. Maybe they passed out, and their kids burned themselves while trying to cook, or they got too close to a busy street.

In most cases, the parents love their children and don't want to lose them. They go on a binge, but then are able to hold down a job for a while. They work on their case plans. They relapse. They ask for more time.

It is hard to tell what anyone is going to do when addicted to drugs such as heroin, cocaine or crack,

It is difficult to predict which parent is capable of hurting a child.

Walsh said. Some addicts are able to function. Others, "I wouldn't let walk my dog."

Abramowitz points to a pioneering MIT study that followed 15,000 children in Illinois and concluded that school-age children are better off with marginal parents than in foster care.

The study, which was published this year and may be the largest of its kind, focused on the children whose cases could have gone either way.

It separated children who were assigned to workers with higher-than-average removal rates, and found those kids fared worse than those assigned to people who tended to leave kids with their birth parents. The children sent to foster care had higher rates of teenage pregnancy, unemployment and arrest.

Abramowitz reminds workers how scary it is for children to be plucked from their homes, not knowing whether they will go back.

"When you remove a child, you hurt that child," he has said often.

He removes the burden of those decisions from individual investigators by bringing in a team of managers who look at alternatives to removal, such as help with drug abuse,

parenting skills and housing. By helping make decisions on individual cases, Abramowitz makes it clear that there will be no scapegoats: The responsibility for a difficult choice rests with him.

He is confident that he is doing the right thing for children, and he says he sleeps soundly every night.

Barbara McMillin, CEO of the children's shelter KidSanctuary in Royal Palm Beach, says the sharp fluctuations in foster care have been hard on organizations such as hers. The shelters get paid per child, so when the number of children drops, they have to pay workers for far fewer hours.

"They can only do that for so long until they have to get full-time jobs," she said.

Ron Zychowski, interim head of the county's foster care agency, Child and Family Connections, is considering paying shelters a flat rate instead of per child so they won't lose workers.

McMillin, who worked with struggling families in previous jobs, also is frightened when she sees the number of children in care plummet despite high numbers of abuse reports.

She agrees that too many children probably were taken in the past, but wonders whether families now allowed to keep their kids are getting any of the diversion services meant to keep them safe.

"It's disquieting," she said. Juvenile Court Judge Ron-

ald Alvarez, who oversees cases of children in state care, shares that concern. Help for families whose children are under state supervision is still spotty, he said.

That makes him wonder whether the families he does not see — those who are allowed to keep their children without state supervision — are getting any of the help they are promised.

Zychowski said those concerns are valid, and the agency is working hard to train its workers on community resources and link families with services.

The drop in the number of children in care is helping the agency keep workers and do a better job, he said.

A full 70 percent of case-workers in Palm Beach County have been employed for less than a year. But the number of workers carrying 30 cases or more has dropped from 38 people to 25.

It is clear, Zychowski said, that the state was removing too many children last year.

"We know that 130 is not the right number," he said. "Whether or not 30 is the right number is something that we are going to watch very, very carefully."

It is important, he adds, that leaders follow families to see whether the diversion programs really worked or failed to prevent children from being abused again.

"Unfortunately, only time will tell," he said.

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Nov. 14, 2007

DCF foster-care crisis team assisting Pinellas

BY CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writer

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DCF’s Alan Abramowitz leads a team trying to help the struggling foster-care system.

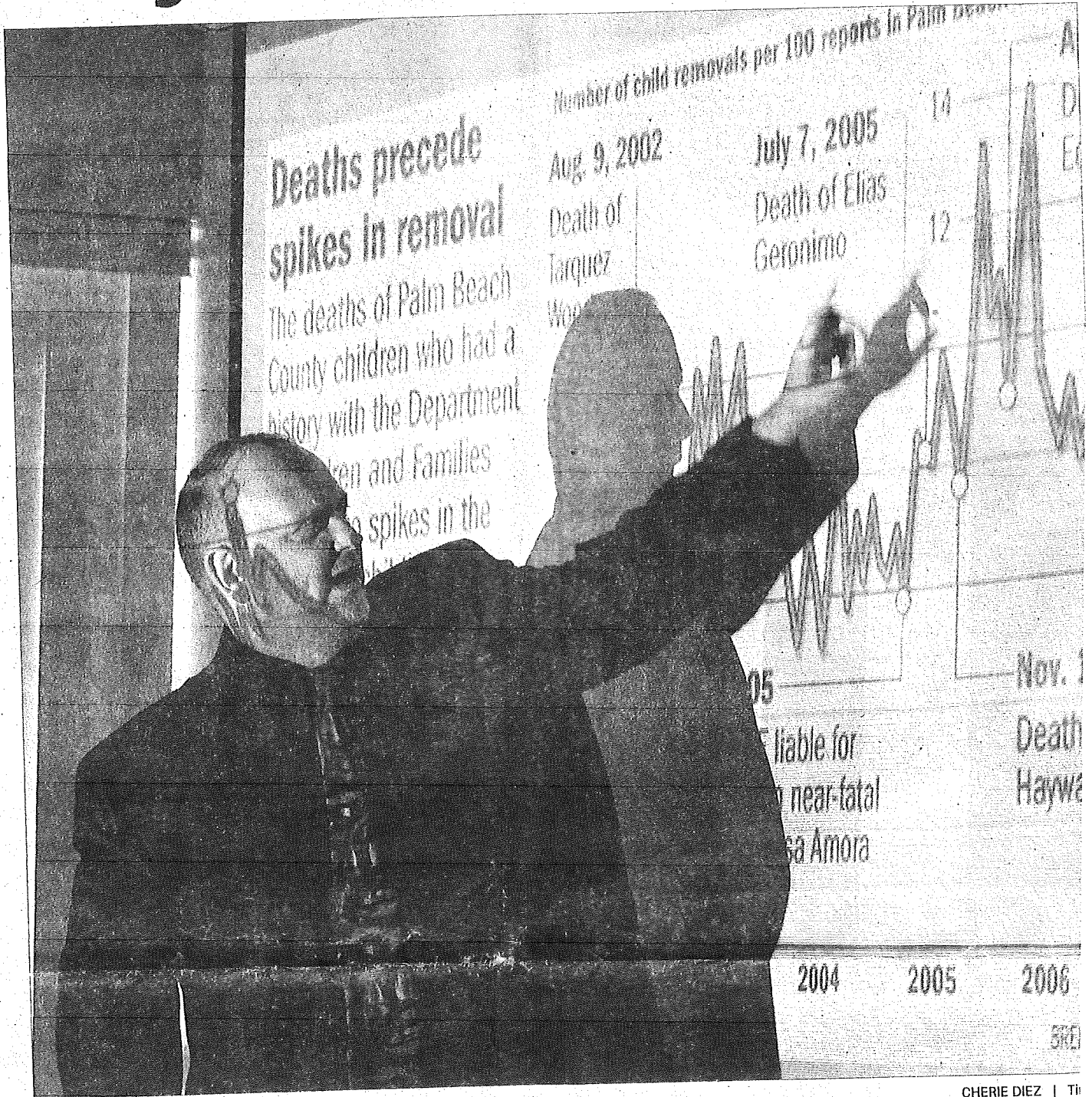
seek another agency to run foster care work in Pinellas and Pasco counties on the heels of a report critical of the agency’s performance. Abramowitz said he’s impressed that Sarasota YMCA officials (who supervise foster care in Pinellas and Pasco) are doing all they can to work with the team and strengthen the system even though they’re on their way out.

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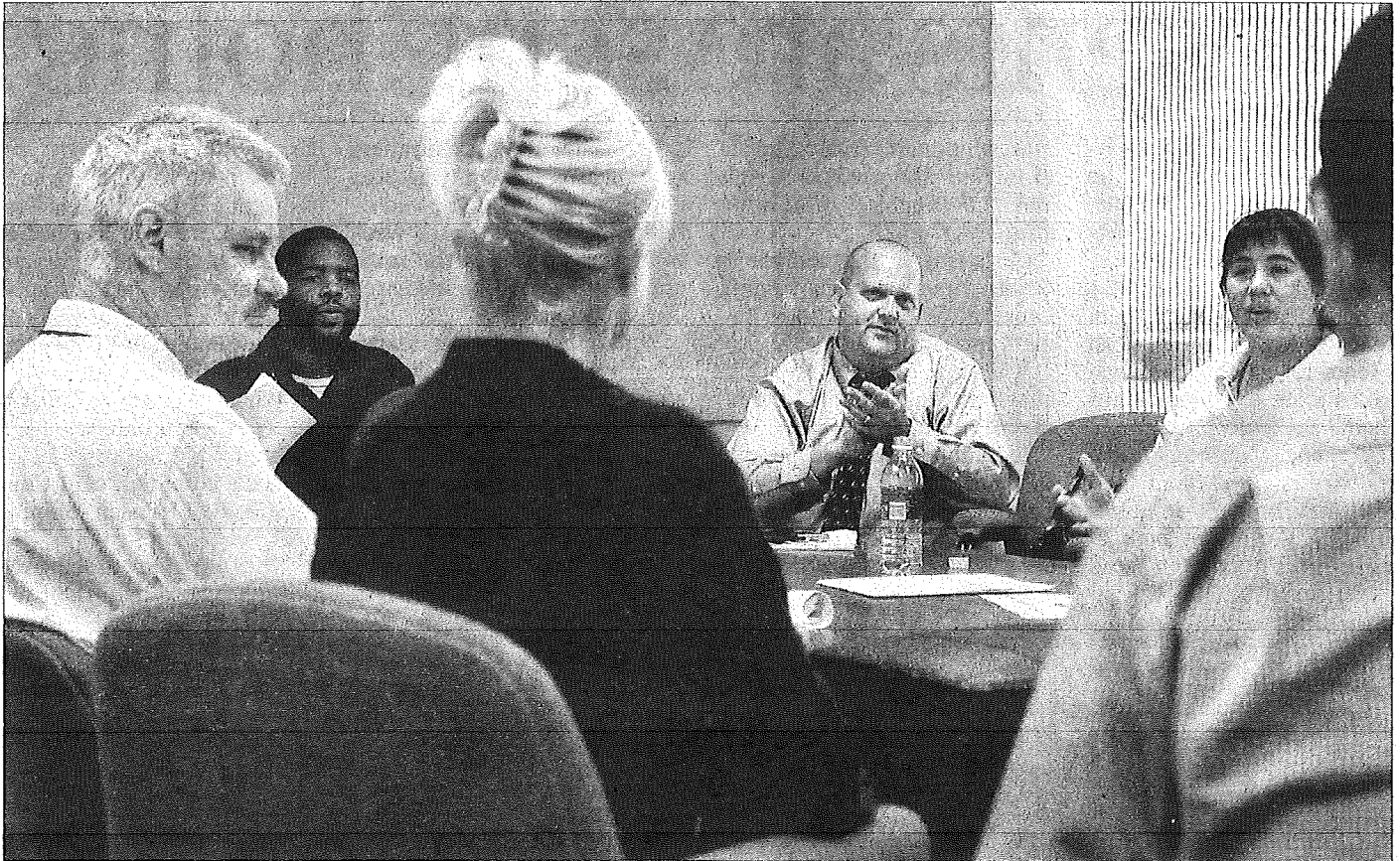
Curtis Krueger can be reached at ckrueger@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8232.

Eckerd youth program may bid on foster care



State Department of Children and Families administrator Alan Abramowitz leads a team trying to help the struggling Pinella foster care system. DCF said this week it will not renew its \$49-million foster care contract with Sarasota Family YMCA. CHERIE DIEZ | THE TIMES

A picture story | A weekly feature



Reuniting families for holidays

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY **CHERIE DIEZ** | *Times Staff*

It was the middle of last summer when she lost the right to be a mom. Authorities had found her passed out at home when she was supposed to be caring for her two young children.

She has been sober now for six months.

She and her husband, seated to her right, were commended recently during a "Home for the Holidays" reunification at the Sarasota YMCA's Safe Children Coalition.

"We celebrate adoptions, but the true success is what you guys did," said Alan Abramowitz, a Department of Children and Families administrator.

The couple's elementary-age children were put in protective custody after the incident. Family members' names are being withheld to protect their privacy.

Because the father is frequently out of town on business, relatives kept the chil-

dren while the mother, her back to camera, completed an alcohol abuse treatment plan.

To help put families back together, caseworkers meet to decide whether children in foster care should be home with their families for the holidays. This also reduces the number of cases for each caseworker. "It's all about the caseloads, and doing what's best for the child," Abramowitz said.



Foster care turnaround prompts contract renewal

**UPDATED
WEEKLY**

By

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Saturday, January 05, 2008

The sharp drop in the number of children in Palm Beach County foster care is a success that leaders will replicate across the state of Florida, Secretary Bob Butterworth said Friday.

Autos
PalmBeachPost.com

Six months ago, the county's foster care agency, Child and Family Connections, was swamped with children and had racked up a deficit of \$3.7 million. There weren't enough foster homes to take in all of the children removed from their parents after reports of abuse and neglect, and some children were sent to shelters as far away as North Florida.

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The state brought in a new management team this summer that reduced the number of children in care by 500 - a drop of 25 percent. More children are living with their

birth parents or relatives, and the agency has closed the adoptions of 100 children in the six months since July 1 - on track to far exceed the contracted goal of 120 for the whole year.

Child and Family Connections now expects to repay the remaining deficit and break even at the end of the fiscal year in June. That remarkable turnaround has earned the agency another year on its contract, Butterworth said.

"If you would have told me four, five, or six months ago that we would be extending this contract, I would say to you, 'I really don't think so,'" Butterworth said at Friday's news conference.

But the turnaround orchestrated by Alan Abramowitz at DCF and Ron Zychowski at Child and Family Connections "shows what good management can do with everybody working together," Butterworth said.

Child and Family Connections' current annual contract of \$35.7 million was set to expire in June. DCF's extension will now give the agency until June 2009, Butterworth said.

One of the most dramatic changes in Palm Beach County is the number of children living in temporary

shelters because there are no relatives or foster parents able to take them. Under Abramowitz and Zychowski, the number dropped from 103 children to 22.

That sudden plunge has upset some of the people who run shelters and group homes for children, which are paid per child, per day. Some have had to close buildings and lay off workers, and they have voiced concerns about whether the children are really safe and well cared for by unstable birth parents.

Zychowski said the agency is working on a plan to change its payments, so that shelters can be paid a fixed amount of money to keep beds available, even if they aren't always full.

Abramowitz passionately believes that the state should spend more of its money helping birth parents and less on expensive shelter care. Children are better off with their families whenever possible, he said, because a growing body of research shows they can also be badly damaged when they are taken from parents they love and are sent to live with strangers.

New federal rules allow the state to move its money from foster care to intervention programs that rehabilitate birth parents, and Florida will begin to do that more aggressively, Butterworth said. "This experiment kicked off in Palm Beach and will be taken to the rest of the state."

But it is important that the change be made in the right way, DCF leaders said Friday. It isn't good enough to leave a child with unstable birth parents when caseworkers visit the home only once a month. Daily visits may be needed.

Zychowski said the drop in the number of children in care will allow Child and Family Connections to expand programs meant to keep families together.

But most of those future plans will happen under new leaders, as the interim team of Abramowitz and Zychowski moves on. On Friday, Butterworth introduced Perry Borman, who leads the Palm Beach County Community Food Alliance and will take over DCF in Palm Beach County on Jan 14.

The board of Child and Family Connections is still considering CEO candidates.

Find this article at:

http://www.palmbeachpost.com/search/content/local_news/epaper/2008/01/05/s1b_foster_0105.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

MiamiHerald.com

Posted on Wed, Jan. 09, 2008

Mr. Fixit for DCF

Given his track record for successful trouble-shooting for the Florida Department of Children & Families, Alan Abramowitz's newest job assignment is most welcome. DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth, something of a Mr. Fixit himself, has appointed Mr. Abramowitz to head the agency's newest regional office in Miami-Dade County. In making the appointment, Mr. Butterworth split Miami-Dade and Monroe counties off from a much larger DCF circuit that included Broward and Palm Beach counties.

DCF's record in Miami-Dade has been a mixed one for years, with the worst problems stemming from the agency's failure to meet its child welfare responsibilities. Mr. Abramowitz has righted other DCF offices with similar problems in Palm Beach and Pinellas counties.

Mr. Abramowitz told The Miami Herald's Carol Marbin Miller he believes that, if at all possible, keeping troubled families intact and giving them help to cope is preferable to putting children in foster care. In the Palm Beach DCF office under Mr. Abramowitz, the number of children entering foster care dropped by 25 percent with no apparent ill effects on children's welfare overall.

Local child welfare officials seem pleased with Mr. Abramowitz's appointment and in the way Mr. Butterworth handled it. Mr. Butterworth checked with local people who know what's what in the child-welfare scene here before making up his mind whom to put in charge. Good for both of these Mr. Fixits.




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CHILD WELFARE

Miami gets new child-welfare chief

Florida's child-welfare agency tapped a new leader to run the Miami district's operations.

Posted on Tue, Jan. 08, 2008

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BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER
cmarbin@MiamiHerald.com

State child-welfare chief Bob Butterworth, long hailed as "Mr. Fixit" after several stints cleaning up troubled local and state agencies, has appointed his own troubleshooter to help reorganize social services in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.


The new chief of the Department of Children & Families in Miami, Alan Abramowitz, will oversee a program with a higher profile than before: Abramowitz will preside over DCF's newest regional office. Until now, the Miami circuit was administered out of a large South Florida region based in Fort Lauderdale.

The Miami posting will be the fourth time a DCF secretary has tapped Abramowitz to return a local district to an even keel following some meltdown. He served in West Palm Beach when the private foster care agency, Child & Family Connections, had more new foster children than it could handle, and had racked up a \$3.7 million deficit.

He was then sent to Pinellas County when the private foster care agency in St. Petersburg, the Sarasota YMCA, lost its contract with the state following a report that was critical of the group's performance. Most recently, Abramowitz was dispatched to head DCF operations



The Miami posting will be the fourth time a DCF secretary has tapped Alan Abramowitz to return a local district to an even keel following some meltdown.

 [Audio](#) | [Interview with Alan Abramowitz](#)
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in Seminole and Brevard counties.

"He's our firefighter," DCF Deputy Secretary George Sheldon said of Abramowitz. "We're excited about this. We think he's the right person at the right time."

Abramowitz, 46, has had an eclectic career since lettering in football at Kansas State University: He served in the Judge Advocate General Corps, was a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand from 1990-92 and has been both a prosecutor and an assistant public defender.

Abramowitz said he's not sure the "firefighter" label fits exactly, but he's looking forward to helping reorganize DCF operations in a region that long has been beset by intractable problems such as poverty, a reluctance of some families to reach out for help, and internal strife between the state and contracted foster-care providers.

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LEADERSHIP

The Miami district has been led on an interim basis for about two years by Gilda Ferradaz, a longtime food-stamp and public-assistance administrator who had said early on that she had no ambition to lead Miami in the long term. Before that, the district chief was businessman and early-learning administrator Chuck Hood.

Sheldon said Abramowitz is expected to begin work in Miami on Monday.

Abramowitz's first priority after setting up shop in Miami will be to restore confidence among employees who sometimes feel as if they're navigating from one crisis to another. Especially in child protection, where a mistake can lead to the injury or death of a child, stakes are high, he said.

"You start losing confidence in yourself when leadership loses confidence in you," Abramowitz said. "We can't make mistakes. We've got to get it right. We're not allowed bad days."

In the longer term, Abramowitz said he wants to take advantage of a new state policy that, for the first time, allows Florida to spend federal child-welfare dollars to help preserve struggling families, rather than placing children in foster care when their parents hit a rough patch.

DELICATE JOB

Foster care, Abramowitz said, should only be a last resort for children who cannot be safe living with their birth families. Being separated from their parents, and sometimes their siblings, can be extremely traumatic for children, he said, and investigators need to be as sensitive as possible.

"When you remove a child, you must understand that is the most important day in the child's life," Abramowitz said. "You have to treat it as such. You cannot be cavalier."

In Palm Beach County, after Abramowitz took over the reins, the number of children entering foster care dropped by 25 percent, with 500 fewer children entering state care, said Al Zimmerman, DCF's spokesman in Tallahassee. The safety of children in the area was never compromised, Zimmerman added.

"Alan really spent a lot of time improving services to homes so children did not have to be removed," Zimmerman said. "He said it was all about doing what it takes so that children are safe in their own homes."

Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Jeri B. Cohen, who also heads Miami's Community-Based Care Alliance, which oversees Miami's private foster care program, said children's advocates are not only pleased with Abramowitz's appointment but with the way Butterworth handled it.

INCLUSIVE PROCESS

Butterworth dispatched his top deputy, Sheldon, to meet with Cohen, Miami's top juvenile court judge, Cindy Lederman, and other advocates before the appointment and to seek their input and advice, Cohen said.

"He came down. He spoke to us. He asked our opinion on several things," Cohen said of the deputy secretary. "He is working very well with us."

As for Abramowitz, Cohen added: "He really will be able to shake the place up. That's what we need."

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TUESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2008 | EDITOR: MANNY GARCIA magarcia@miamiherald.com | 305-376-3638

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CHILD WELFARE

DCF gets a fix-it specialist

Florida's child-welfare agency tapped a new leader to run the Miami district's operations.

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER
cmarbin@miamiherald.com

State child-welfare chief Bob Butterworth, long hailed as "Mr. Fixit" after several stints cleaning up troubled local and state agencies, has appointed his own troubleshooter to help reorganize social

services in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

The new chief of the Department of Children & Families in Miami, Alan Abramowitz, will oversee a program with a higher profile than before: Abramowitz will preside over DCF's newest regional office. Until now, the Miami circuit was administered out of a large South Florida region based in Fort Lauderdale.

The Miami posting will be the fourth

time a DCF secretary has tapped Abramowitz to return a local district to an even keel following some meltdown. He served in West Palm Beach when the private foster care agency, Child & Family Connections, had more new foster children than it could handle, and had racked up a \$3.7 million deficit.

He was then sent to Pinellas County

• TURN TO ABRAMOWITZ, 2B



ABRAMOWITZ

CHILD WELFARE

Miami DCF gets new leader

• ABRAMOWITZ, FROM 1B

when the private foster care agency in St. Petersburg, the Sarasota YMCA, lost its contract with the state following a report that was critical of the group's performance. Most recently, Abramowitz was dispatched to head DCF operations in Seminole and Brevard counties.

"He's our firefighter," DCF Deputy Secretary George Sheldon said of Abramowitz. "We're excited about this. We think he's the right person at the right time."

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Miami Herald.com Hear an

interview with Alan

Abramowitz at Today's Extras.

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CENTRAL FLORIDA The Area In Brief

DCF transfers its 'firefighter'

January 11, 2008

SOUTH FLORIDA - The Florida Department of Children and Families' go-to guy, Alan Abramowitz, is leaving his post at the helm of DCF's Seminole and Brevard office to head up the new South Florida region.

Dubbed a "firefighter" for his dispatches to the state's trouble spots, Abramowitz, 45, has won considerable praise for his openness and efforts to keep kids from languishing in foster care.

"I'm going where I'm needed," Abramowitz said. "I feel uncomfortable with the [nickname], because our investigators are really the ones on the front lines. I'm really just a manager. I just think I give staff confidence because I truly believe in them."

Abramowitz ran the DCF office for Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Brevard counties -- an area recently split into two, at which time he took over the Seminole and Brevard office. During this tenure, he was sent to Palm Beach and Pinellas counties to shore up operations there.

Over the past year, the department has restructured its service areas to align with the state's 20 judicial circuits. It also created six regions, including the new southern region that Abramowitz will lead.

Bianca Prieto, Rich McKay, Kate Santich and Amy L. Edwards of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. Wire services also were used.

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Wednesday, February 20, 2008 ♦ Volume 21, Number 25 ♦ 72 pages



CHILD WELFARE

**New DCF director
stresses local solutions**

New DCF director emphasizes preventive services, local input

BY ROBERT SILK

Free Press Staff

TAVERNIER — The new leader of the Florida Department of Children and Families region that includes Monroe County made his first on-the-job visit to the Keys last week, promising more community decision making, an increased emphasis on preventive services and greater transparency within the agency.

DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth appointed Alan Abramowitz as the first director of the department's newly created Southern Region last month. He is based in Miami and will oversee DCF programs in Miami-Dade and the Keys.

Previously Monroe was part of DCF's Southeast Region, which also included Broward and Palm Beach counties.

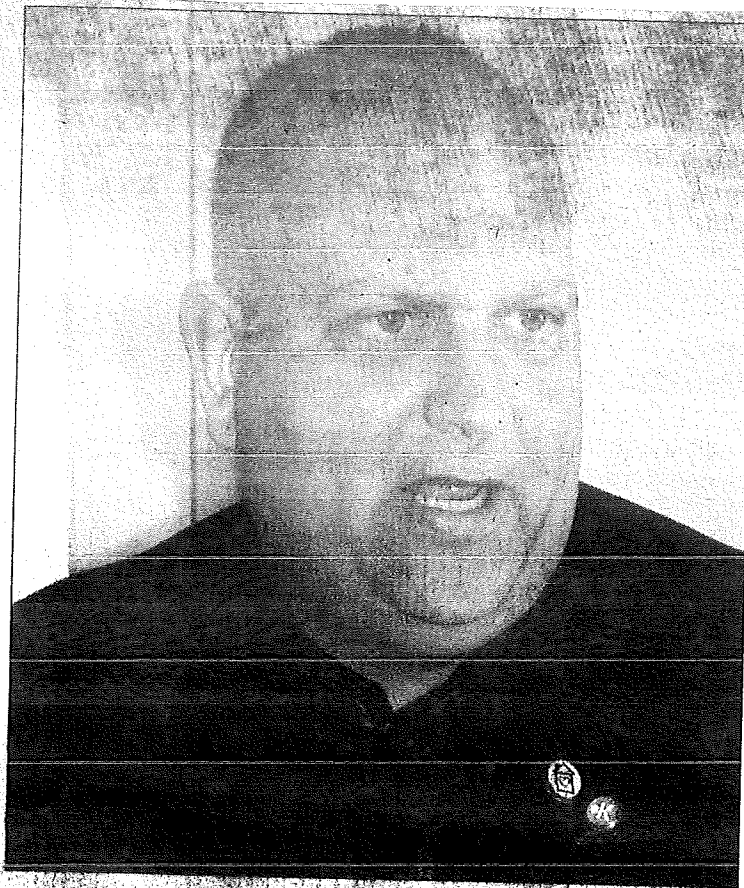
The move is part of an agency-wide effort to decentralize decision making. Abramowitz says it will increase both accountability and efficiency within the Keys DCF office.

"I am going to be listening to community stakeholders. This community will make decisions," he said.

A DCF employee since 2000, Abramowitz has previously been based in Pinellas and Palm Beach counties, as well as the department's District 7, which encompasses Orlando and other central Florida communities.

As Florida's welfare agency, the DCF is tasked with a wide range of responsibilities, including awarding food stamps, licensing foster homes and mental hospitals and processing Medicaid applications. But it is the department's removal of children from abusive families that gets the most attention.

In a sit-down interview with the Free Press last week, Abramowitz said he wants the local office to do less of that and instead to rely more on preventive services, such as counseling, parental education and more



STEVE GIBBS/Free Press

Alan Abramowitz has been named the first director of the Florida Department of Children and Families' Southern Region, which includes Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

intensive case management, to keep families together.

He pointed to a recent Massachusetts Institute of Technology study in which researchers found that children from families that are investigated for abuse and neglect who are never removed from the home are far less likely to be arrested or become teen parents.

During Abramowitz's stint as interim administrator of the Palm Beach DCF office in the second half of 2007, the number of children placed in foster care was down 56 percent from the previous six months, DCF records show.

He hopes to use a new Florida law, which allows federal money to be allocated based upon needs rather than foster care placement numbers, to affect similar reductions in Monroe, where 80 child abuse cases are opened in an average month, according to

DCF spokeswoman Flora Beal.

Abramowitz also stressed that it is important that child investigators don't become too cautious, especially in reaction to a child death.

"When we look at the evidence-based research and don't make decisions based upon gut reactions, it is obvious we are going to have to move heaven and earth to keep families together," he said.

In Monroe County, Abramowitz is taking control of a DCF sub-district that has faced its fair share of problems in recent years. In September 2006, baby Jasmine Thomas starved to death in the home of her mother Amy Stephenson at a time when the home was under DCF investigation. Stephenson was convicted of aggravated manslaughter in a Key West courtroom last

DCF

Continued from page 10

month.

Earlier that year, Upper Keys investigator Stephen Schwarz resigned amid allegations that he unzipped his pants and grabbed his genitals in front of a woman and her 3-year-old son. Schwarz later testified that he unzipped his zipper only half-way and did not reach into his pants or touch his genitals.

Monroe County also faces substantial welfare issues as a result of its transient population, the high cost of living, its related lack of community-based social service organizations, and substance abuse.

Abramowitz said the southern region has already begun a systematic review of all employee files to make sure the proper background checks have been completed. In the

future he would like to implement cross training of Monroe's 10 child investigators and three adult investigators as a way to improve efficiency while providing the opportunity for salary bumps. And he is also looking into the feasibility of providing video medical consultations in order to increase the availability of child protection services.

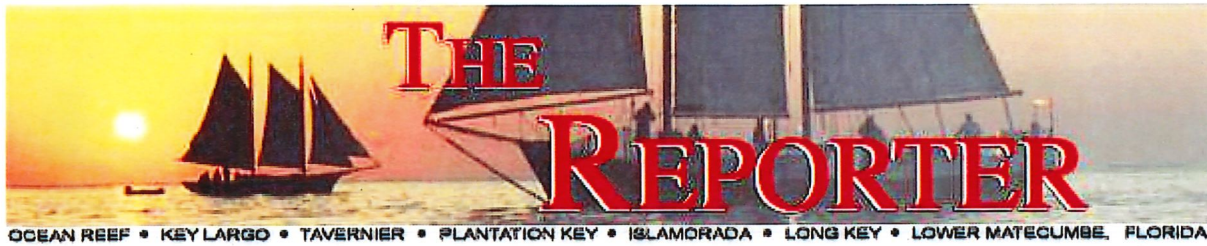
Despite his desire to reduce the number of children in foster care, he hopes to encourage more local families to become foster parents so that children don't have to be relocated to Miami-Dade for placement. And he would like to see county voters authorize an independent taxing district, known as a Children's Services Council, which would be a dedicated funding source for children's programs.

Finally, Abramowitz said that he will do what he can to make sure the local DCF sheds the vestiges of its old reputation for

secrecy.

"The only way I am accountable to the community is if the community knows what we are doing," he said. "The foundation of community based care is transparency. You will never hear me say 'no comment.'"

rsilk@keysnews.com



DCF official takes on Keys, Miami region

BY DAVID GOODHUE, dgoodhue@keysreporter.com

Alan Abramowitz spent his professional life adapting to unfamiliar settings.

He taught domestic-violence prevention on the Thai/Laotian border for the Peace Corps, interviewed refugees from the Rwandan massacres in Nairobi in the early 1990s and worked throughout Florida on behalf of troubled families.

Now, as the new chief of the newly created southern region — consisting of Monroe and Miami-Dade counties — of the Florida Department of Children and Families, Abramowitz feels well-suited to take on what he calls one of the most unique areas of the state.

“I treat it like a military job. Where [DCF secretary Robert Butterworth] wants me to go, I go,” Abramowitz, 45, said.



Alan Abramowitz

He should know what that’s like too. Abramowitz did a stint in the U.S. Army’s Judge Advocate General, or JAG, Corps, following graduation from Florida State University law school.

He’s been with DCF since 2000, serving in Pinellas and Palm Beach Counties and as district administrator of what used to be District 7, which was made up of Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Brevard counties.

Abramowitz also served four years as assistant general counsel for the Department of Juvenile

Justice in Orlando. He has also worked as a public defender and as a state attorney's lawyer.

DCF recently realigned its service areas from districts to regions that coincide with the state's 20 judicial circuits.

Focus on prevention

Abramowitz was in Monroe County this week promoting the new alignments and a policy of trying harder to keep families together, and taking children from troubled homes only as a last resort.

"We're focusing on in-home prevention. We found there's an adverse impact on children when we take them out of the home" compared with working with families to find solutions, he said.

He cited DCF statistics that 56 percent of teenage girls in foster care end up pregnant, compared to 33 percent of girls being monitored by DCF but remaining at home.

"That's still not great, but you have to look at the big picture," Abramowitz said.

Once the DCF begins an investigation and the child is taken from the home, the goal of the agency is to reunite the family within a year, Abramowitz said.

The DCF's image in Monroe County has been sullied recently by the case of Jasmine Thomas of Key Largo. The 13-month-old's mother, Amy Marie Stephenson, was found guilty in January of aggravated manslaughter of a child for reportedly starving Jasmine. The conviction carries with it up to 30 years in prison and has a recommended minimum sentence of 12 years.

Jasmine died 36 days after DCF got involved with her case. She was the size of a 3-month old when she died, and a county medical examiner said her stomach "was empty of food and liquid."

Though Jasmine, who was born premature, starved to death, a DCF investigator never reported how thin she was, never arranged for therapy and never contacted doctors, a DCF management review stated. The investigator also stated in her report that although Jasmine was living in a house where people took illegal drugs on a regular basis and smoked heavily inside, her risk level was "low."

Abramowitz did not defend the investigator, who is no longer with DCF, but said the case overshadowed the good work being done by other investigators in the county.

"We have 80 calls alleging child abuse [in Monroe County] a month. We have 10 investigators. There's good work being done now," Abramowitz said.

Despite the goal to keep families together, Abramowitz realizes that there is still a strong need for foster parents, which are especially in demand in Monroe County.

"We need more foster parents here. A lot of people left after Hurricane Wilma," he said.

The DCF has duties other than investigating allegations of child abuse. It is also responsible for distributing Medicaid, food stamps and temporary cash assistance.

DCF spokeswoman Flora Beal said there are 4,020 Medicaid cases in Monroe County, 3,376 families receiving food stamps and 200 people receiving temporary cash assistance.

This report was supplemented with information from The Miami Herald.

PalmBeachPost.com

 PRINT THIS

Number of Florida children taken from birth parents drops sharply

By [Kathleen Chapman](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

The number of Florida children taken from their birth parents after reports of abuse or neglect is dropping dramatically for the first time in a decade, an advocacy group said Wednesday.

Fewer than 18,000 children were taken into state foster care in 2007, down from 21,587 in 2006, according to a report by the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

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One of the steepest drops was in Palm Beach County, where abuse investigators removed 757 children from their homes in 2007, compared to 1,083 the year before.

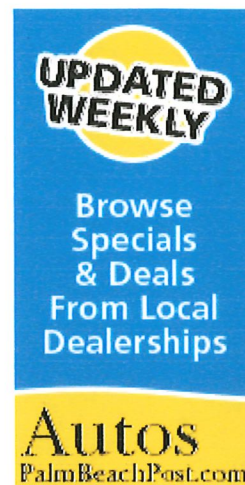
The number removals was also down in the four-county Treasure Coast region, where Department of Children and Families investigators removed 514 children last year. That compares to 715 in 2006.

It is too early to conclusively say how the drop in 2007 has affected children's safety. The state tracks how many children reported for abuse were hurt again within six months, but those numbers will not be available until later this year.

"A low rate-of-removal can be accomplished either by embracing safe, proven programs to keep families together, or by ignoring children in real danger," the report said.

Under Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida became the first state in the nation that is allowed to divert federal money earmarked for foster care to programs meant to keep struggling families together.

Department of Children and Families Secretary Bob Butterworth has said in recent months that his conversations with teens who grew up in foster care have led him to believe that the state should try to keep more kids at home with their parents.



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In Palm Beach County, and other parts of the state, local leaders like former interim DCF administrator Alan Abramowitz pushed his employees to treat struggling parents as partners, not adversaries. He asked them to help the parents find drug treatment, rent assistance and counseling, rather than uproot the children.

Richard Wexler, who heads the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform and is one of the country's most ardent supporters of family preservation, believes all of those factors contributed to the steep decline.

Wexler believes that children are safer when investigators remove fewer from their homes. Low caseloads give workers time to make good decisions, he said.

After years of removing more children than the national average, Wexler said, Florida is now near the middle.

Find this article at:

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/localnews/content/state/epaper/2008/03/05/0305children.html>

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NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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For release

Thursday, March 6, 2008

For further information, contact:

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FEWER CHILDREN TORN FROM THEIR FAMILIES IN FLORIDA

First significant decline in nearly a decade, national child advocacy group says

The report discussed in this release is available online at
www.nccpr.org/reports/floridaror03062008.pdf

For the first time in nearly a decade, Florida has seen a significant reduction in the number of children torn from their families, according to a national child advocacy organization that closely monitors child welfare in the state.

“The fever of family destruction that has gripped Florida child welfare since 1999, and done so much harm to the state’s vulnerable children, finally may have broken,” said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform.

Wexler released NCCPR’s annual *Florida Rate-Of-Removal Index* today. The index shows that statewide, the Department of Children and Families and county sheriffs’ offices removed 17,446 children from their homes, a 19 percent decrease from 2006, and the lowest figure since 1998, when just under 14,000 children were taken.

In 2006, Florida was taking away children at a rate 30 percent above the national average. In 2007, the rate fell to roughly that average “though that still is much higher than systems across the country widely regarded as, relatively speaking, models,” Wexler said.

“And once again, the data prove that child removal does not equal child safety. Once again, districts taking proportionately fewer children often performed better on key safety outcomes. In contrast, in the one region that bucked the trend, the Fort Myers area, child safety dramatically worsened even as removals soared.”

NCCPR ranks regions by comparing the number of children taken from their parents over the course of a year to the total number of impoverished children in the region. NCCPR also looks at two key safety outcomes used by the federal government to compare states: the proportion of children reabused within six months and foster care recidivism (the proportion of children sent home from foster care who must be placed again within a year).

Wexler cautioned that the data are incomplete and may contain errors due to DCF switching to a new computer system. DCF itself has warned that figures for the second half of 2007 should be viewed as preliminary. In addition, data on entries into care are missing entirely for one county, Flagler. Some of the safety data also are missing for 11 very small counties. “While this is unlikely to change the overall results, it suggests that the entry-into-care numbers for these counties also might be incomplete, so the total number of children taken from their parents may be understated by, perhaps, several hundred,” Wexler said.

He also noted that the safety outcomes often reflect decisions made in the first half of 2007 or, in the case of foster-care recidivism, even 2006, something that should be kept in mind in regions where leadership has changed only recently.

“Nevertheless, The trend suggests that the promises of change from Bob Butterworth since he took over DCF have not been just talk – it looks like he is backing the words with action.”

Butterworth’s approach is consistent with what Wexler called “a mountain of research on the harm of foster care.

“A Massachusetts Institute of Technology Study compared outcomes for 15,000 children and found that children placed in foster care fared worse than comparably maltreated children left in their own homes. A second study, in Minnesota, produced identical results. A third study, of foster care alumni, found they have twice the level of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and only one in five could be said to be doing well. That study also found that at least one in three of the alumni reported being abused by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home. The study didn’t even ask about one of the biggest sources of abuse, foster children abusing each other.

“And a University of Florida study of children born with cocaine in their systems found that even these children did better when left with birth mothers able to care for them. For the foster children, the separation from their mothers was more toxic than the cocaine.

“Butterworth understands that, for the overwhelming majority of children caught up in the system, it is contrary to their best interests, indeed it is unsafe, to throw them into a system that churns out walking wounded four times out of five.

“In changing direction, Butterworth is showing great courage. In order to do what’s right for children, he’s willing to, in effect, paint a target on his own back,” Wexler said. “That’s because now, those wedded to a take-the-child-and-run approach will try to smear Butterworth’s reforms by scapegoating them for the next high-profile tragedy. In effect, they’ll be making a cynical bet – wagering that Floridians will forget all the horror stories, and the surge in deaths of children ‘known to the system,’ that occurred during Florida’s years of panic, from 1999 through 2006.

“The data also suggest that the one good move in child welfare during the entire Jeb Bush administration is paying off,” Wexler said. Bush made Florida the only state in America to accept a “waiver” from federal funding restrictions. “In exchange for accepting a fixed amount of money, instead of an amount that escalates when more children are taken away, more than \$100 million per year that used to be limited to funding foster care also can be used for safe, proven programs to keep families together. In one move, the waiver both took away a perverse incentive to tear apart families and provided new resources to keep those families together. The data suggest that some districts, at least, are taking advantage of it.”

Wexler said data from individual districts and counties also show “the profound impact of strong, courageous leadership.”

He cited Hillsborough County, where cooperation between the privatized “lead agency” Hillsborough Kids, and the county sheriff’s office has cut removals of children by 41 percent in 2007 and by nearly half over the past two years. “Yet of all the counties in the Suncoast Region, Hillsborough has the best record on avoiding reabuse and the second best record on avoiding foster-care recidivism.

“Hillsborough’s success stands in stark contrast to Manatee County,” Wexler said. Though removals declined slightly, were it a separate district, Manatee would have the second highest rate of removal in the state. Wexler attributed Manatee’s problems to “poor leadership from the privatized lead agency, and a county sheriff’s office that seems to revel in scapegoating families for anything that might happen to their children. And when that office responds to these data with the usual nonsense equating child safety with child removal, they’re going to have to explain why Hillsborough is doing a better job of keeping children safe.”

Wexler also cited Palm Beach County, which had been in turmoil in 2006, with removals of children up 60 percent in two years.

“New leadership changed all that,” Wexler said. “In 2007, fewer families in Palm Beach County were torn apart than in any year since 2004 – and just as the panic did not improve child safety, there is no evidence that taking fewer children compromised safety.” Wexler noted that one of the leaders who brought reform to Palm Beach County, Alan Abramowitz, also worked to turn around Pinellas County in 2007 and now is running the Miami DCF region.

Wexler said that districts taking fewer children often have better safety outcomes because workers are not inundated with as many false reports, trivial cases, and children needlessly removed from their families – so they have more time to evaluate each case more carefully.

In contrast, child safety deteriorated sharply in the one region still in the throes of foster-care panic: the Fort Myers area. In Circuit 20 (formerly District 8), the foster care panic is well into its second year. The number of children torn from their families has soared by 50 percent. “Workers are terrified of being pilloried on the front page of the local paper if they leave a child in her or his own home and something goes wrong – but they can take scores of children needlessly and, while the children will suffer terribly, the workers will be safe. Other workers are fed up with being scapegoated, and are quitting at an astounding rate, further overwhelming those who remain.

“The panic, and the lack of leadership to bring it under control, are so bad that Fort Myers has become a burden to the entire state, forcing DCF to send in teams of workers from elsewhere to clean up the mess in Circuit 20,” Wexler said.

“But worst of all, the children of greater Fort Myers are far less safe than they were before the panic. Workers are so overwhelmed they don’t have time to figure out which children can safely remain in their own homes and which cannot, so they’re making more mistakes in both directions. Even as hundreds more children were torn from everyone loving and familiar, reabuse of children left in their own homes increased by 15 percent and foster-care recidivism – reflecting, in part, decisions made when the panic was at its height in 2006 – soared by 50 percent.

“And then, just last month, still another child ‘known to the system’ died in Circuit 20. In this case, all of the warnings came during the panic over the previous cases – so it’s no wonder no one paid enough attention. Yet so far the response, from DCF and from the local newspaper, is only more of the same. Their behavior is the perfect illustration of the dictum that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

“Lately leaders in Circuit 20 have finally started mumbling platitudes about bringing the panic under control. But their latest monthly ‘progress report’ reads like something out of *Dilbert* – it’s filled with descriptions of meetings to make plans to hold

more meetings to make more plans. And the report shows that efforts to curb the panic are the farthest behind and have the lowest priority.

“If they want to save children, the leadership in Circuit 20 is going to have to do a lot more than mumble.

“Indeed, their failure to make a real effort stands in contrast to the work of the new Circuit Administrator for the Jacksonville area, which has the worst rate of removal in the state. “She’s made a loud, clear, public commitment to reverse her circuit’s record, and won the support of her region’s largest newspaper,” Wexler said. “And she’s backed up the words with action. Though she is not moving as quickly as we’d like, at least she’s moving in the right direction. She may not succeed, but she seems to know how to try.”

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From: **Alan Abramowitz** (jodialan@msn.com)
Sent: Mon 3/10/08 11:21 AM
To: (Unknown)

NCCPR Child Welfare

By Richard Wexler, NCCPR Executive Director

March 10, 2008

FLORIDA: THE FEVER BREAKS

For most of this decade no problem in child welfare seemed more intractable than Florida. In 1999, then-Gov. Jeb Bush named Kathleen Kearney to run the state Department of Children and Families. Kearney is a profoundly tragic figure in American child welfare. A former Broward County judge she really cared about the children and really wanted to do the right thing. But to her, the right thing was pretty much always to tear apart the family. Indeed, Kearney was so fanatical about tearing apart families that one of her first acts was to change the name of DCF's Division of Family Safety and Preservation. She erased the last two words. "I don't dare say 'reunification' in her presence," one DCF official said.

At the same time, Gov. Bush embarked on a massive privatization scheme that seemed to have one primary purpose: to decentralize blame. Apparently, the idea was to create so many different players in so many regions that blame for the next tragedy would be unlikely to make it all the way to Tallahassee.

In 1999, the number of children torn from their homes soared by 50 percent over the previous year – from about 14,000 to more than 21,000. It was the worst statewide foster care panic I've ever seen. NCCPR warned that if Kearney did not change course and abandon her take-the-child-and-run approach to child welfare, the entire system would collapse. Three years later it did, the collapse symbolized by the fact that a young foster child, Rilya Wilson had disappeared for 15 months before anyone in the agency even noticed. Some reporters and, privately, even some within the system began to wonder if that small group from Alexandria Va. that predicted all that had happened might be on to something.

But though the Rilya Wilson case forced Kearney out, Kearneyism had taken root. Year after year, statewide, the number of children torn from their parents would stay at the same high level, somewhere between about 19,000 and 22,000.

The panic had all the usual dreadful effects. Not only were the lives of thousands of children destroyed by needless foster care, workers were so inundated with false reports, trivial cases, and needless removals that child safety also deteriorated. Deaths of children "known to the system" shot up, and more reliable indicators of child safety, notably reabuse of children left in their own homes, soared. It's all documented in a series of

NCCPR reports on Florida child welfare, available on our [State Reports](#) page.

Then a regional director in a relatively small DCF district got fed up. Alan Abramowitz had been sent to Volusia and Flagler Counties to fix a major mess. Privatization had gone particularly badly there, and there was a huge spike in removals. Abramowitz soon saw how much harm the misuse and overuse of foster care was doing to children. So did the new head of the privatized "lead agency" in the district, Ron Zychowski. They worked together to turn things around, reducing removals with no compromise of child safety.

They were so successful that Abramowitz was transferred to the Orlando district, where he began a similar transformation.

Meanwhile, another gutsy leader, Jeff Rainey, took over the privatized "lead agency" in Hillsborough County (metropolitan Tampa). He, too, saw the enormous harm of needless foster care. He partnered with the Hillsborough County Sheriff, David Gee, whose office handles child abuse investigations in the county, to dramatically reduce entries into care. The Tampa area has some of the best safety outcomes in its region.

Then, in 2007, a new Republican Governor, Charlie Crist, named one of the state's most respected former public officials, former Attorney General Bob Butterworth to run DCF. Butterworth is a Democrat and the joke at the time was that Crist wanted to be sure that when the state's most hopeless agency failed, the other party was blamed.

Butterworth's first move was to end the obsessive secrecy at the agency. No more stonewalling. When the agency made mistakes they'd own up - fast. When reporters went to court to get records about botched cases, Butterworth didn't fight them - he joined them. And then there was the matter of lawsuits filed on behalf of children the agency had harmed horribly and who would need a lifetime of care. Previous policy was to fight them for years and try to outlast the plaintiffs. Butterworth said the state did, indeed, owe these children care, and he moved to settle - sometimes for millions of dollars.

Now, I was a reporter for 19 years. The really smart government officials know that when they actually play straight with reporters, it throws us off our game; we don't know how to cope. Butterworth's candor bought him time - time to learn child welfare without being blamed for every new crisis. And he learned well.

He didn't do everything right. In a Miami case much like the case of Elian Gonzalez, he pandered to the Cuban exile community, needlessly prolonging the case. And in a tragic case involving Florida and Wisconsin, he washed his hands of the case when the child was found in Wisconsin, even though she'd probably be best off placed with a grandmother in Florida.

But mostly, Butterworth has gotten it right. The more time he spent listening - especially to current and former foster children - the more he realized what a terrible mistake the Kearney take-the-child-and-run approach had been. So he began turning more and more to Abramowitz, dubbing him the agency's "firefighter." Over the

past year, he's run the DCF district in Palm Beach County, effectively been in charge in Pinellas County for a short time, and now he's taken on what is always the toughest challenge in the state, Miami.

Even as leadership was changing direction, districts were gaining a new tool to allow the change to work: Money. Not more money, not in a state as stingy with basic human needs as Florida, but more flexibility with the federal money they've got.

In all his years as Governor, Jeb Bush did exactly one thing right in child welfare. He probably only did it as a favor to his brother, but nevertheless he did it: He made Florida the only state in the nation to accept a "waiver" from restrictions on federal funding for child welfare.

In exchange for accepting a fixed amount of money, instead of an amount that escalates when more children are taken away, more than \$100 million per year that used to be limited to funding foster care also can be used for safe, proven programs to keep families together. In one move, the waiver both took away a perverse incentive to tear apart families and provided new resources to keep those families together. (Michigan almost took advantage of a similar waiver, but that state chickened out at the last minute.)

The results of all this can be seen in NCCPR's latest [Florida Rate-of-Removal Index](#), released last week.

For the first time in nearly a decade, the state saw a significant reduction in the number of children torn from their families. Removals were down 19 percent, to under 17,500.

In every district where it is possible to compare (in some districts the boundary lines have changed) fewer children were taken in 2007 than in 2006. Even in the district with the worst record this year, the Jacksonville area, the new administrator in charge of DCF in the area, Nancy Dreicer, is making moves to reverse course and embrace safe, proven programs to keep families together.

The fever of family destruction that has gripped Florida child welfare since 1999, and done so much harm to the state's vulnerable children, finally may have broken.

The main reason is that the state now has some leaders so committed to children that they are willing to paint targets on their own backs in order to do the right thing. And that's what Butterworth, Abramowitz, Zychowski, Rainey, Gee and Dreicer have done.

That's because there are plenty of people in Florida, in government, media and the advocacy community, still wedded to a take-the-child-and-run approach – a kind of Kearney Government in Exile. They'll try to smear the reformers by scapegoating them for the next high-profile tragedy. In effect, they'll be making a cynical bet – wagering that Floridians will forget all the horror stories, the surge in deaths of children 'known to the system,' and

the general decline in child safety that occurred during Florida's Years of Panic, from 1999 through 2006.

And even now, things are not going well everywhere. Jeb Bush's strategy of decentralizing blame has paid off. The panics that follow high-profile tragedies now tend to be confined to one region.

So what would happen if, in one region such a tragedy caught the eye of the local newspaper? And what if, in that region, the leadership at DCF and the privatized lead agency was particularly weak? And what if, in that very same region, you had a newspaper columnist who publicly declared that the role model for his approach to covering child welfare is a demagogue, and a fictional one at that?

That story in a future post.

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One man's energy moves foster care system

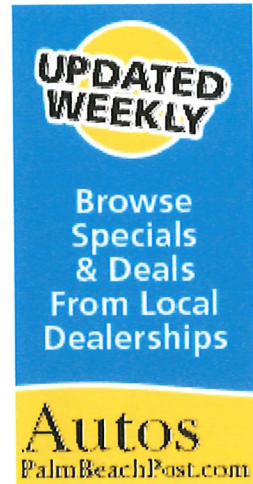
By [KATHLEEN CHAPMAN](#)

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Sunday, March 16, 2008

When a single mother of six was killed in Belle Glade, it was up to Alan Abramowitz, then the second-in-command of the county's Department of Children and Families, to help decide what would happen to the children.

As Robert Barker, then head of Palm Beach County's foster care agency, Child and Family Connections, remembers it, the father of the four older siblings offered to take in all six, including the two who weren't his.



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A foster care supervisor who visited the father's home thought he seemed earnest, but on short notice, no one could be sure that he was capable of parenting six kids.

If something went wrong, Abramowitz could have to face bosses, judges and possibly even the media, all demanding to know why he had taken a gamble on the man. But few would blame him, Barker said, if he sent the kids to a shelter.

The decision Abramowitz made on that day several years ago shows how he became one of the most influential proponents of a revolution in Florida's foster care system.

The six children were sad, scared and alone. They should go to the one parent they had left, Abramowitz decided.

Since 2003, when Abramowitz accepted his first management job at the Department of Children and Families in Palm Beach County, he has become one the state's most passionate salesmen for the idea that Florida needs to fix foster care by having a lot less of it.

That view, though still controversial, is gaining momentum. After DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth's first year on the job, he said his conversations with young adults who were in foster care has convinced him that many of them would have been better off with their parents.

In 2007, the number of children removed from their birth parents after a report of neglect or abuse dropped significantly for the first time in a decade, from 21,000 a year to fewer than 18,000.

Though Abramowitz is far from the only state administrator intent on reversing the tide, he may be the most outspoken. And wherever he has gone, the number of children in state care has dropped.

He left Palm Beach County in 2004 to run the state agency's operations in Flagler and Volusia, then moved to the region around Orlando. In 2007, Butterworth sent him back to Palm Beach County to deal with a crisis at the county's foster care agency.

During the six months he spent here, about 400 kids, a quarter of Palm Beach County children in state care, were returned to their parents or found new homes with relatives and adoptive families. In January, Butterworth dispatched him to lead DCF in Miami-Dade County.

The dangers of leaving a child with ill-equipped, drug-addicted or potentially abusive parents are clear. But less publicized are the dangers of taking children into foster care, where there is also a risk they will have unstable and chaotic lives, being yanked from their neighborhoods, separated from siblings and repeatedly disappointed by caregivers who say they intend to keep them, then don't.

Abramowitz said a recent MIT study confirms what he has long felt. It shows that children taken by workers who tend to remove more children than their colleagues have higher rates of pregnancy, arrest and unemployment.

"There are monsters," Abramowitz says, "on both sides."

'Just protect the child'

Abramowitz, 46, grew up in a close-knit military family. His brother Sid Abramowitz played offensive tackle for four NFL teams in the 1980s. Another brother, Col. Dave Abramowitz, oversees Iraqi soldiers as chief of staff for the Iraq Assistance Group.

Alan Abramowitz served in the Army Reserves and National Guard, and still wakes up around 3 a.m. on weekdays. His resume matches his restless energy. He served the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1990 to 1992. After graduating from law school at Florida State University, he worked briefly as a prosecutor, then as a public defender in Central Florida.

In 2000, Abramowitz left his job as assistant general counsel for the Department of Juvenile Justice to take a position as an attorney for DCF. There, Abramowitz saw firsthand the dysfunctional cycle that had gripped the department for years.

High-profile murders of children triggered public outrage. Experienced investigators quit under the strain and withering criticism from the media.

Fearful of another death, workers took more children into foster care. Overwhelmed new hires had no time to discern which parents could be helped, and which were potentially dangerous. And more children were hurt.

In that climate, a siege mentality set in. DCF leaders routinely hid behind spokespeople, refused to turn over documents and hunted for scapegoats.

Abramowitz remembers one seminar for DCF workers. In order to protect yourself, the instructor told the workers, protect the child. That focus on self-preservation was dead wrong, Abramowitz said: "Just protect the child."

Leaped at job in 2003

In 2003, when Abramowitz was still an attorney for DCF, the state wanted new leaders in Palm Beach County.

Vern Melvin, the Treasure Coast DCF administrator who agreed to serve as interim leader in Palm Beach County, knew Abramowitz from their days working at the Department of Juvenile Justice. He asked whether he would be interested in the No. 2 position.

Melvin told him he would have to clear the move with his supervisors. The next morning, Melvin's phone rang at about 5:30 a.m. It was Abramowitz, calling about the job. Melvin suggested he try back at a reasonable hour.

From the time Abramowitz got his formal offer and immediately accepted, he knew that, to change the agency, he needed to change the public perception of it.

In March 2003, a month after Melvin tapped Abramowitz, the pair took the unusual step of issuing a news release to announce embarrassing news. Crews were working on an old DCF office when they found missing child abuse files dating back to 1998 squirreled away above the ceiling tiles.

The cases were old, the worker was gone and the kids were safe, but still, they decided to preempt negative coverage by alerting local news organizations.

Abramowitz has called reporters to notify tell them about child deaths, allowed them to sit in on internal discussions about individual cases and asked the courts to release closed records. He has responded to public records requests within minutes.

His likability comes from the fact that he is the ultimate extrovert: completely unguarded and without reserve, said Children's Services Council Executive Director Tana Ebbole. You can rely on Abramowitz to say what he thinks and do what he says, Ebbole and others say.

"What you see is what you get," Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Ronald Alvarez said.

Abramowitz loves to work a room, usually cracking jokes at his own expense. When he walks into a meeting, colleagues often jump up to hug him.

Many have pointed out that his boundless energy borders on hyperactivity. Abramowitz says he considered that possibility, and asked a doctor whether he might qualify.

The verdict was negative for attention deficit disorder, but he still wonders whether he might have obsessive compulsive disorder. Abramowitz doesn't mean that in the sense of tics or hand-washing but rather, in going over and over a problem in his mind, until he can find a solution.

Too far, fast, some say

At DCF, much of his thinking has centered on one theme: What can be done to turn the tide of

removals?

To help change the way his workers think, he encourages them to treat birth parents as allies instead of suspects and use mediations instead of court hearings in some cases. Decisions about whether to remove a child are made as a group, instead of by individual investigators.

Some in Palm Beach County, including some attorneys who represent foster children in court, have misgivings about Abramowitz's fervor.

They believe he went too far, too fast here, leaving children in marginal homes before there was time to develop the intense supervision and rehabilitation programs that keep kids safe.

Answers about whether Abramowitz succeeded here may be in data that measure how many children were abused again by their caregivers within six months of the initial report. Those numbers are not yet in for Palm Beach County.

But with a leader such as Butterworth, and a federal policy approved in 2006 that allows Florida to spend money once earmarked for foster care on family preservation, Abramowitz believes there will be major change in the way the Florida treats children and families.

"There is no going back," Abramowitz said.

Find this article at:

http://www.palmbeachpost.com/state/content/local_news/epaper/2008/03/16/s1c_abramowitz_0316.html

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PROGRAM HELPS FAMILIES REMAIN INTACT



BY RENEE MICHELLE HARRIS



MIAMI – Although she was often under the influence of cocaine-laced marijuana, Chartina Askew considered herself a good mother.

But after she had an argument about school with her curfew-defying, teenage son a year and half ago, the Department of Children and Families removed him from the home.

The Neighborhood Partnership Program (NPP), a small Liberty City agency at the Belafonte Tacolcy Center – a non-profit dedicated to helping young people – is working to keep families like the Askews together by dismantling negative misperceptions about inner-city families. The organization helps families become self-sufficient. It has partnered with DCF to help change its relationship with poor, black families.

Although black children represent 15 percent of the United States population, they comprise at least 37 percent of the children on the foster care rolls.

In some states, like New York, more than 90 percent of the children in foster care are black.

In Miami, black children comprise roughly 12 percent of the child population, but more than 70 percent of those in foster care.

Sherree Harrington is the program's supervisor and one of its biggest cheer leaders. As a part of the program for the past three years, Harrington has learned that despite appearances to the contrary, families living in Liberty City share many of the same values and goals as those living in the suburbs.

"The misperception is that people in Liberty City don't want to do anything. They just want everything from the government," she said, begging to differ. "A lot of people in this community want to live self-sufficiently. They want better for their children. They want a better education for themselves and their children and they want better jobs. We're able to help."

The nation's child welfare system began with a singular focus to protect children from abusive parents. The first set of federal laws governing child welfare were enacted in 1935, with the passage of the Child Welfare Provisions of the Social Security Act.

Ironically, because of legalized racism in the country, black children facing the same kinds of "abusive" situations as their white counterparts were ignored by the child welfare system.

Today, many argue that the nation's child welfare system has gone from ignoring poor, black families to paying too much attention to them.

Programs like the NPP have been cropping up for the past decade to reverse the trend of black children being disproportionately placed in foster care. The program is funded by \$250,000 from Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Inc., a local non-profit contracted by the state to provide foster care services throughout the area.

Although Askew said she sees the DCF intervention as a "blessing in disguise," (she was not a part of the program when DCF intervened), the NPP program is able to use a case management process called the Family Team Conference (FTC) and strong collaborations with local businesses, schools and other service programs to keep families like hers together.

During the FTC, vital, often pivotal details about the family are revealed. Details like Askew's ability to abstain from drugs during the entire time she was pregnant with her three-year-old son might not surface during a traditional child abuse investigation that primarily seeks to substantiate suspicions of abuse.

The FTC is a "strength-based meeting" in which the family is in charge of identifying their problems and, more importantly, ways to resolve them. Team members may include immediate and extended family members, DCF employees, service program workers or other people whom the family deems supportive – and can help the program hold the family accountable.

"The people around the table set ground rules for the meeting; and we start off by identifying the family's strengths," Harrington said. Harrington said the process works.

"Last year, we preserved 114 families," she proudly announced.

DCF agrees. Bruce Baskin is the DCF program administrator in charge of several protective investigative units, including the one that partners with the NPP. The 18-year DCF veteran and former child abuse investigator is sold on the program's effectiveness.

"It needs to be expanded," Baskin said, adding that the program helps DCF to prevent removals in many cases. "Some things are kind of like a borderline, if we didn't have the NPP and other services, we'd have to remove."

Flexibility in how Florida uses federal dollars also factors into the program's success.

Alan Abramowitz, who was recently appointed the regional DCF administrator for Miami, said that in the last year alone, the number of children removed from their homes has been reduced by 22 percent because of the funding waiver that "allows the money to follow the child, instead of the placement."

Abramowitz, a strong proponent of family preservation, said "The only way we'll have success is if parents are our partners."

The criteria used to select the program locations include communities with high rates of social maladies (high crime, poverty, drop-out rates, etc.) and consequently, high child removal rates. Although NPP statistics for the past three years are not yet available, Baskin said he is certain that the removal rate has gone down in the area.

"People expect that that area will have a high number of abuse reports, but they don't," he said. "Compared to my other areas, the number of removals in the NPP area [is] down," he added.

Having people who live and work in the area employed with the NPP makes a huge difference, Baskin said.

For example, he said, "A family of five [is] living in a one-bedroom, but that might be all that they can afford. Does that mean that it's an abusive or neglectful situation?"

His incredulous tone implies that the answer to his question is no.

Said Baskin: "Depending on who's looking at that, they might see it as not proper living conditions. We try to go in with an open mind [and] focus on one thing: Is this situation a threat or risk to the child? If the evidence reveals that it's not, then we let the community take care of itself."

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Photo by Khary Bruyning. Sheree Harrington, supervisor of the Neighborhood Partnership Program.

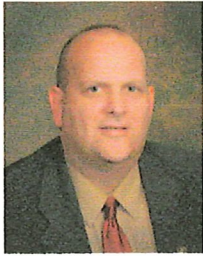
Last Updated (Friday, 09 May 2008)

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DCF LEADER SEEKS TO PRESERVE FAMILIES



BY RENEE MICHELLE HARRIS



In some child welfare circles, 'family preservationist' is a dirty phrase.

Many within the complex system have scoffed at the idea that "abused and neglected" children, especially if they are poor and black, belong with their families.

These comments come despite growing evidence that children who grow up in the foster care system are more likely to be homeless, dependent on public assistance and incarcerated than their non-foster care raised counterparts.

"I think whenever you can keep a family together, it's a victory," said Alan Abramowitz, Miami's regional administrator for the Department of Children and Families, and a proud family preservationist.

During an interview at Miami's Afro in Books Café, he told the *South Florida Times* that coming from a military family with strong public service beliefs shaped his career choices.

After two people he knew committed suicide, he worked for a crisis hotline "doing suicide intervention for years," the former criminal defense attorney said.

His tenure at DCF began similarly after the highly publicized 1998 death of six-year old Kayla McKean at the hands of her father.

"That day, I sent a letter to [then] Secretary Kearney and they hired me to be the chief legal counsel for DCF," he said.

Abramowitz, however, soon decided to move beyond the legal arena.

"I realized that giving legal advice is good, but I really wanted to be the decision maker. I thought I could make more of a difference if I was the one to implement my philosophies," he explained.

ROVING CRUSADER

For the past five years, he has been implementing those policies wherever he is needed.

"I've always made that offer to whoever is the secretary. I'll go wherever I'm needed. I consider this public service," he said.

Abramowitz said Robert Butterworth, the current DCF secretary, shares his beliefs about families. Of Abramowitz, Butterworth said, "We have seen his leadership excel in Pinellas, Palm Beach and Brevard counties and I expect he will work to keep families together here in Miami-Dade and Monroe as well."

Abramowitz's success in those other districts is already being repeated in Miami. "In Miami, the first three months of 2007, we averaged removing 130 children a month. So far the first three months of 2008, we have averaged removing 89 children a month...a reduction of about 32%," Abramowitz said.

"[DCF] Secretary Butterworth believes in family preservation, and believes that the state cannot make a good parent," Abramowitz said, acknowledging that DCF's top brass has not always been so pro-family. "There are so many families that could have been kept together that we have failed."

He recognizes that some families are incapable of providing a safe place for their children without state intervention.

"We will still have to remove some children from families, unfortunately. But it's not as many as we do," he said.

One of his philosophies includes partnering with parents who have come to the state's attention because of suspicions of child abuse or neglect.

"We've got to meet with parents, we got to find out what they need and we've got to partner with them," he said.

Abramowitz, 46, balks at the system's tendency to paint the parents it encounters as monsters who do not care for their children.

"The majority of the time, they love their children," he said.

He is also mindful that many children enter the system due to poverty-related issues that the system classifies as "neglect," noting that, "We should see it as a poverty issue and not an abuse or neglect issue."

RELYING ON THE EXPERTS

He has implemented an effective approach to keeping families with serious problems – like drug addiction – together.

When a child abuse investigator encounters a mother battling substance abuse, for example, Abramowitz said that instead of an investigator deciding on her own to remove a child, "You've got to get the substance abuse treatment people that understand recovery to get at the table with the family to come up with a solution to keep that family together."

It's an approach he has tried in other areas, with significant results, "In Palm Beach County, we reduced children in out-of-home care by 33 percent," he said. In Volusia County, he said, the area had a severe substance abuse problem.

"We came up with a crisis response team. When [investigators] go out in the middle of the night, within an hour, we can get people there who are expert," he said.

His belief in the strategy's effectiveness proved true. According to Abramowitz, "We were able to keep more families together. The numbers were astonishing."

Those numbers included a decrease in the amount of children in out-of-home care from 1200 to 1040; and a reduction in the number of children involved in the dependency system from 2000 to 1515.

The married father of two has widespread support. Miami's administrative judge for dependency court, Cindy Lederman, said in an emailed statement, "Alan Abramowitz has been a gift to this community."

When asked to elaborate on why Abramowitz is a gift, Lederman replied, "He has extensive knowledge and experience in the child welfare system and he REALLY cares about our children and families."

Richard Wexler, a former award-winning journalist who now runs the Virginia-based National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, agreed.

"When it comes to understanding how important it is to children to keep their families together, everybody in child welfare talks the talk. Alan Abramowitz walks the walk," Wexler, an outspoken family preservationist, told the *South Florida Times*.

In his book, *Wounded Innocents: the Real Victims of the War against Child Abuse* (Prometheus Books: 1990, 1995), Wexler describes the devastation the child welfare system has wreaked upon families across the country, "under the guise of child protection."

Many of the more than two dozen awards Wexler won during his 19 years of reporting were for stories about child abuse and foster care.

For Abramowitz, walking the walk has meant impressing upon his investigators the trauma that removal inflicts upon children.

"The studies have come out over the past few years to show we have actually been doing a disservice to families," Abramowitz said.

One such study, the March 2007 Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Measuring the Effects of Foster Care, looked at outcomes of more than 15,000 children and concluded that,

"Those placed in foster care are far more likely than other children to commit crimes, drop out of school, join welfare, experience substance abuse problems, or enter the homeless population."

Abramowitz wants to change the department's role in these outcomes.

He said, "We can develop that reputation of being there for families, to help families."

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Photo: Alan Abramowitz

Last Updated (Friday, 20 June 2008)

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DCF: Fewer kids abused

By ERIN EHRLICH eehrlich@keysreporter.com
30 removed from Keys homes this year

The May report for the Department of Children and Families shows an overall decrease in the number of children being abused by their parents or guardians in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties.

Specifically, it shows a decline in the number of children being taken away from abusive households.

Between January and May of 2007, 53 kids were removed from their households in Monroe County, according to Alan Abramowitz, director of DCF's southern region, which takes in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. Between January and May this year, 30 were removed.

"This clearly represents the fact that we are working with families as partners," Abramowitz said. "One indicator that's interesting is when a child goes [back] home after they get removed, the child will rarely come back into care. We're the best in the state."

The rate of re-abuse is less than 1 percent while DCF services are in place; the statewide goal is 5 percent.

"This means our foster parents, group homes, shelters and relatives are keeping children safe while we engage the family," Abramowitz said.

DCF services include investigations of families reported to be abusive, and linking families and children with programs dealing with mental, physical and emotional problems. DCF also connects appropriate child care to kids who are removed from their households.

Abramowitz said he's proud of the report's numbers, emphasizing that DCF's southern region surpassed all of its goals but one. The report states DCF representatives saw 99.65 percent of children under supervision. The goal is to see 100 percent of the children on a monthly basis.

Flora Beal, communications director for the southern region, said this particular goal is often unattainable but that DCF needs to strive to reach it.

"Sometimes that .4 percent, if we know there's a child that's out of town on vacation with foster parents, which sometimes happens, or out of the country or at summer camp, that could affect that you can't see them," Beal said. "Sometimes it's explicable and we know who they are and why they haven't been seen. It's the goal that needs to be there because that's what we need to strive for to ensure our children are safe."

Beal and Abramowitz said DCF aims to return every child removed from his or her abusive home when it's safe to do so.

"It goes along with philosophy that children are better off at home whenever they can be safely kept there," Beal said.

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Thu, Jul. 03, 2008

Court: Homelessness no excuse to remove child

By CAROL MARBIN MILLER

A Miami appeals court rebuked the state child-welfare agency Wednesday for removing a 12-year-old boy from his mother because she was homeless, ruling that not having a home for a child does not by itself constitute abuse.

A three-judge panel of the Third District Court of Appeal, in an opinion reversing a ruling by Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Valerie R. Manno Schurr, said being homeless is not sufficient cause to take children from their parents. Under Florida law, children can be taken from parents by the Department of Children & Families if there's evidence of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

"Homelessness, derived solely from a custodian's financial inability, does not constitute the kind or level of abuse, neglect or abandonment necessary to justify removal of a child, unless [the state] offers services to the homeless custodian and those services are rejected," the court wrote.

Alan Abramowitz, who took over as head of DCF's Miami operations last year with a reputation for preserving troubled families and reducing foster-care caseloads, hailed the ruling.

"If we removed a child because of homelessness we should be reversed," Abramowitz said. "We are obligated to offer services to keep families together."

Abramowitz said he intends to use the appeals-court opinion as a teaching aid as the agency refines the way it trains child-abuse investigators. "The opinion is basically what I've been preaching," he said. "This is an important case for us in training."

Under the ruling, DCF will have to return the boy to his mother unless a new investigation turns up any evidence that would justify keeping him in state care.

DCF is continuing to investigate the case of the mother, identified in court papers only as M.B., and agency administrators are "reviewing our options" before deciding how to proceed, Abramowitz said, adding that new information about the family emerged after the hearing that was presided over by Judge Manno Schurr in April.

"These investigations are complex and change as we are able to gather more information," he said. "We agree with the ruling and will be sure that future petitions give just cause for removal, not citing poverty or homelessness alone."

Mark Graham Hanson, an assistant regional counsel for the state's court-appointed defense program who represented the mother, also praised the decision, which was signed by Judges Richard Suarez, Alan Schwartz and Juan Ramirez Jr.

"The law says that just being homeless doesn't rise to the level where you can take someone's kids away," Hanson said. "The court seems to have agreed with us on that."

'GREAT CONCERNS'

According to Wednesday's opinion, M.B. moved from New York to Miami earlier this year "without any money and without any place to go."

"M.B. said that she had been told that if she moved to Florida, she would be given funds to move into an apartment, and that this was why she came to Florida," the appeals-court opinion states.

In a petition to the judge, DCF said it had "great concerns for the child as the mother has no means to support her child and cannot provide shelter as well." The 12-year-old boy, identified as D.B., "faced imminent danger and could not be protected from this danger."

'DRAGGED AROUND'

Hanson, the mother's lawyer, said M.B. called 911 in the middle of the night after realizing she had nowhere to stay after arriving from New York with only \$300 in her purse. "She called for help," Hanson said. Instead, a police dispatcher turned the mother over to DCF, which almost immediately took custody of the boy.

At a hearing on April 30, Manno Schurr agreed with DCF's lawyer and ordered the state to shelter the boy. "We're not going to have 12-year-old children sleeping, not sleeping, getting dragged around the city of Miami," she said during the hearing, according to court records.

MONEY AVAILABLE

With an eye toward reducing the number of children in state care, DCF received approval from the federal government in 2006 to use millions of dollars in foster-care money to improve services for struggling families that remain together.

The money can be used for rent or mortgage payments, utility bills, car payments, child-care bills, groceries -- virtually anything to help keep a struggling family together if the alternative would be foster care, and the children can be kept safe.

Since the program began on Oct. 1, 2006, DCF has reduced the number of children in state care from close to 30,000 to almost 24,000 as of May, according to DCF records. Administrators insist that at-risk children have remained safe as the agency has maintained oversight of the families.

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Butterworth quits post as DCF chief

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER, MARY ELLEN KLAS AND ADAM H. BEASLEY

Bob Butterworth, former Broward County sheriff, prosecutor and law school dean, abruptly resigned Tuesday morning as secretary of the Department of Children & Families, two years after taking the post amid hopes he would reform Florida's long-troubled social services agency.

In a lengthy resignation letter given to Gov. Charlie Crist, Butterworth reprised some of the themes he sounded during an at-times bitter legislative session that saw many of Butterworth's long-term goals and projects derailed by dire economic news and shrinking government coffers.

"For people who are in crisis during these economic times, for children who suffer abuse or neglect, for adults slipping into the frailties of old age or suffering from mental illness or substance disorders, the 13,000-plus people of DCF and our community partners often are their last hope."

He added: "It is time to pass the torch to a new secretary. It's not that all the problems are solved. . . . We can only look at the accomplishments of these past 19 months and say, 'Keep it going.'"

Crist said it was "with mixed emotions" that he accepted Butterworth's resignation. Butterworth is one of three Democrats holding agency secretary jobs in Crist's administration. Crist said Butterworth told him he would serve for 18 months when he took the job and Crist said, "I squeezed another month out of him."

"This department has never had better leadership," Crist said, as Butterworth stood at his side at a morning news conference.

He described Butterworth as "the longest serving attorney general" in Florida history and someone whose commitment to public service was unwavering. "It's probably the toughest job in government. It's probably why some people think I appointed a Democrat. . . . General Butterworth cares deeply about the people."

Crist said he has no plans yet for a replacement, though a Miami Herald source said Butterworth is recommending the governor choose a new agency chief from in-house, possibly including longtime Deputy Secretary Don Winstead, who already is being considered to head the state disabilities agency, or Assistant Secretary George Sheldon, a longtime Butterworth confidant.

Butterworth said at the news conference that he intends to return to private law practice, something he has not done in decades.

He called his nearly two-year term at DCF "one of the great adventures of my life."

Alan Abramowitz, who heads DCF's Miami-Dade operations and had been dubbed Butterworth's "Mr. Fixit" for his ability to parachute into department crises and patch together coalitions to resolve them, said Butterworth is leaving behind a solid foundation for the next secretary to build upon.

'When [Butterworth] came here, I remember him talking about this being an `action agency' and being transparent," Abramowitz said. ``That's the foundation of what we do. He has done what he said he would do."

Abramowitz also credited Butterworth with adjusting the state's child welfare policies to reflect the wishes of the teenage foster children with whom he came into constant contact. Butterworth met regularly with aged-out or older adolescent foster kids who told him the department often made decisions contrary to their needs and goals.

"He actually listened to the children," said Abramowitz. ``Everyone in leadership roles met the children who were really impacted by how we make decisions. He says a lot that they have to have a seat at the table because it will be their table."

In recent months, however, the lifelong Democrat voiced displeasure with the budget produced by the Republican-led Legislature back in August, calling it the "meanest" he's ever seen, and suggesting deep cuts to social welfare programs were misguided at a time when vulnerable Floridians most needed a safety net.

Miami Herald staff writer Erika Beras contributed to this report.

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More foster kids are being adopted

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

Florida child-welfare administrators set a new state record for the number of children adopted from foster care in the past budget year at a time when dwindling state revenues have threatened to derail a program that helps subsidize families wishing to adopt children with special needs.

Department of Children & Families administrators oversaw the adoption of 3,674 children during the budget year that ended Thursday, the agency said at a Thursday morning news conference. The previous state record occurred in 2004, when 3,389 children were adopted from state care.

"This is a historic moment in the life of our state, but more important, it is a life-altering moment for 3,674 children," said DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth, who announced Tuesday he would leave the agency in August.

"Thanks to thousands of adoptive families across the state, these children can finally say, 'I'm home,' and know the love and support they deserve," Butterworth said in a prepared statement.

Included in the 2008 adoptions are 320 in Miami-Dade County and another 228 in Broward, said Flora Beal, a DCF spokeswoman in Miami.

Almost 40 percent of the Miami-Dade adoptees exited foster care within two years of being sheltered by the state; about 47 percent of the Broward children left state care within a year, said Alan Abramowitz, who leads DCF's Miami region. Under federal law, 32 percent of a state's foster children must find a permanent home within 24 months.

NATIONAL AWARD

Miami's privately run foster care agency, Our Kids, performed so well at finding permanent homes for children in state care that the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute awarded the group a 2008 Angels in Adoption Award, which recognizes people or groups that help find homes for abused and neglected children.

"It is an endless gift we give when we open our hearts and homes to a child by giving them a 'forever family'," Abramowitz said. "But the real winners are the parents whose new children will bring them a lifetime of countless joys. They will find they get so much more from their children than they could ever have imagined.

"As we celebrate, we must not forget there are still hundreds of children waiting for a mom and dad they can shower with love," Abramowitz added.

The record number of adoptions is due in part, administrators say, to the success of a new state campaign called Explore Adoption, a program that seeks to debunk the myths associated with public adoption. One such myth says that adopting foster kids is expensive, but the state shoulders most of the costs of a public adoption.

The adoption campaign nearly was crippled by stagnant state revenues, as lawmakers considered cutting \$16 million in subsidies for families that adopt foster children. After strong lobbying by Butterworth and Gov. Charlie Crist, the money was restored to the new budget.

ADOPTION HOT LINE

A new state adoption hot line, 1-800-96-ADOPT, has received a record number of calls since the adoption campaign began two months ago, DCF said.

And though administrators are thrilled with the number of recent adoptions, they warn that finding permanent homes for foster children will only become more difficult as the proportion of foster kids with disabilities, mental illness and behavioral challenges grows.

"The campaign focuses on the children who wait the longest for homes," state Chief Child Advocate Jim Kallinger, who is helping spearhead the program, said in a prepared statement.

"Our hope is that the list of children waiting to get adopted will decrease each and every day."

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DCF REUNITES FAMILIES



BY RENEE MICHELLE HARRIS



MIAMI — It was not your typical Florida Department of Children and Families press conference. The agency that usually faces the press to either tout its adoption success or answer to yet another mistake instead asked members of the media to help celebrate children being returned from state to parental custody.

On Monday afternoon, Oct. 20, staff and administrators from DCF, The Village substance abuse treatment facility, the media, birth parents and their children jammed into a small meeting room to recognize four women who battled drug addictions to reclaim their lives and the ability to provide for their children.

DCF's regional administrator, Alan Abramowitz, led the brief press conference, presenting certificates and colorful toy gadgets to each woman.

"On behalf of the community, we really appreciate what you have done. You are truly an angel for child. Thank you very much," Abramowitz said in what represented a significant departure from the community's perception of the department as "child snatchers."

Abramowitz, who has been dispatched throughout the state to beef up the department's family preservation and reunification efforts, has cut the agency's child removal rate in Miami by more than 30 percent in the past eight months.

Audra Williams, 29, who has been clean and sober for two years, said of DCF's recognition, "It was an honor."

The mother of two said, "I was willing to do whatever it took to get my life back and to get my kids back. I also wanted to get me back. Whatever I was going to do had to be better than what I had been doing."

What she had been doing was abusing alcohol, marijuana and cocaine, leading to her child's premature birth. The little girl arrived weighing only one pound. Williams, who is employed at a Marshall's clothing store, said her daughter is healthy today and that the family now has a house with a back yard for her two children.

Matthew Gissen founded The Village 35 years ago, and its Families in Transition (FIT) program 15 years ago. Gissen, who retired last year, said the FIT program was one of eight across "the United States that allowed families...to come into treatment together," referring to the concept as the "best treatment dollars we can spend."

The program offers residential treatment programs that last from 30 days to 12 months, depending on the severity of the client's drug addiction, their support system and the number of previous attempts at rehabilitation. There is no limit to the number of children that each family can bring into treatment.

In addition to the substance abuse recovery program, clients are also provided assistance in seeking employment, housing and other support services to help make their transition back to the "real world" as smooth as possible.

Gissen agreed that DCF has changed: "You know they're so quick to take children away from family. The difficult task and more important task is to keep families together as productive members of our society."

He commended Abramowitz for the celebration and new family-centered philosophy.

Frank Rabbitto, a former administrator with DCF who is now CEO of The Village, said he is keenly aware of the department's former image.

"The state was more inclined to remove children from home and focus almost essentially on adoptions, which in and of itself is not a bad thing," he said. "But also it is the mission of the state as well as our mission here at The Village to reunify children with their natural parents, their biological parents, and we do a heck of a job at it."

Angela Oria, 35, has been clean for 67 days following a three-year drug addiction. Although her eight-month-old twins are still in foster care, she anticipates regaining custody prior to Thanksgiving.

"If you work it, it works with you," Oria said.

Rabbitto is especially proud of the women whose successes were celebrated.

"A lot of hard work these moms in particular put into their recovery," he said. "All of the work that has gone into keeping drug free, finding a place to live, finding a job, doing everything that a mom needs to do, a parent has to do to support their children. They've done that. Their children are back at home with them and it's all good."

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