

Florida Trend

The Issues, People and Ideas that Define Florida Business

Editor's Page

Children's Voices

[Mark R. Howard](#) | 1/3/2013

Scattered up and down Florida is a small army of children — about 31,500 — living under court supervision. They are not troubled children living in disorderly homes or kids with drug or psychological problems. The count doesn't even include children whose families DCF may be monitoring.

These 31,500 kids have been abandoned, abused or neglected so badly that the state has removed them from their homes and placed them with relatives, foster parents or in group homes. This October, for example, DCF removed 1,198 children from their parents.

Children, as every good parent knows, want more than anything to feel that they're being heard — even more than they want to get their way. And for 30 years, the state of Florida has struggled to give damaged children a voice amid the clatter and din of its child protection bureaucracy.

Since the 1970s, state law has required that courts appoint an independent advocate — a “guardian ad litem” — for each child they remove from a home. The guardian's task is to track the child's condition in foster care and make sure he gets a say as his case is handled in court.

Implementing the law has been a slog. As with many well-intentioned mandates, the program was never funded sufficiently to hire enough paid case managers. Most children continued to go to court alone. Counties experimented with different ways of providing guardian ad litem services, but the program didn't begin to find a real footing until groups including the National Council for Jewish Women and the Junior League in Jacksonville, Gainesville and Miami pioneered the extensive use of lay volunteers.

In 1980, Florida became the first state to use public money for a statewide volunteer guardian ad litem program. By 1990, a volunteer program existed in all of Florida's judicial circuits, but the program didn't have a statewide executive director until 2003. As recently as 2007, only a little more than half of the state's abused children were getting services from a volunteer guardian.

Why volunteers? “Government can't raise a family,” says Alan Abramowitz, the statewide program's executive director since 2010. A trained volunteer guardian serving one or two children can spend more time with them than a paid worker with a 45-child case load, he says. The volunteers, who can develop real relationships with the children they serve, offer the best hope of introducing a semblance of normalcy into young lives in which very little has been normal.

Under Abramowitz, the statewide program developed a scorecard to measure its effectiveness. That process included interviewing children. What they wanted most, he says, was “personal interest” in their cases. “We want that unique relationship” between volunteer and child, he says. “We want the volunteer to know the child better than anybody who’s being paid.”

Results bear him out — children served by volunteers do better at school, get better medical care and other services and return to foster care half as often as others.

“Everybody thinks about an advocate in terms of the courtroom and helping to represent the child before a judge, but most of the advocacy occurs outside the courtroom” — with foster parents, DCF case managers or with school personnel, he says.

Abramowitz has aggressively recruited volunteer guardians and is leveraging the skills of the program’s paid staffers, who each now oversee 38 volunteers and help coordinate support services and partnerships with local non-profits that raise money to support the volunteers’ work. Volunteers are screened, background-checked, get 30 hours of training and typically handle no more than two children’s cases.

So with the same number of paid employees and 10% less money than the program got five years ago, nearly twice as many children are getting services from volunteer guardians.

Of the 21,000 children assigned to the guardian ad litem program, Abramowitz says 74% now have a volunteer guardian assigned to their cases — up from 55% in 2007.

The extensive use of volunteers plays to one of Florida’s great strengths, the presence of so many able, active retirees. Abramowitz says some retiree-rich areas like Manatee County, the tri-county Villages area and Fort Myers have as many volunteers as are needed for the children in those areas. (To see the program’s scorecard of effectiveness measures and explore volunteering, go to guardianadlitem.org.)

It is worth noting in this time of fractious politics that both Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature have embraced the program. In 2012, lawmakers appropriated an extra \$1.8 million to back the effort to recruit, train and support more volunteers. The volunteer count rose by 10% from March through October alone. Abramowitz would like lawmakers to continue that appropriation, with a goal of having a volunteer guardian for each child within five years.

Gov. Rick Scott also signed a law this year that allows volunteers to transport children in foster care, which enables many kids to participate more fully in after-school and other recreational activities — and builds trust between the child and the volunteer.

In a state that generally ranks low on lists of good places to be a child, the statewide guardian ad litem program is an elegant combination of effectiveness and accountability, of individuals joining hands with government to give a voice to innocent kids who are suffering through no fault of their own.



Editorial Exclusive Op-Ed: DCF in SW Florida must not scapegoat good employees

Written by

Richard Wexler

3:26 PM, May. 25, 2011|

In 2007, Alan Abramowitz was sent by then-DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth to take over the DCF region in Palm Beach County, a region then suffering from staff turmoil and low morale.

One of his first acts involved a former supervisor. She was considered among the very best in the region. She volunteered for the toughest cases and her performance reviews always were outstanding. But her workers included one who handled a high-profile, horror-story case. Though she was in no way implicated in any failings in connection with that case, she was fired.

One of the first things Abramowitz did was give her her job back.

Abramowitz would go on to run DCF's Division of Family Safety. But one of his most important acts was rehiring that supervisor in Palm Beach County. Because that one act sent a vital message: We will draw a distinction between accountability

and scapegoating.

That is the message that needs to reach the frontlines now in Circuit 20, if it is to recover from poor leadership by Circuit 20 Administrator Cookie Coleman and some of her subordinates.

The message is especially urgent now. Horror stories from Miami have set off a foster-care panic — a sharp sudden spike in needless removals of children from their home — all across the state. Workers everywhere know that they can take hundreds of children needlessly and while the children might suffer terribly the worker is safe. Leave one child in her or his own home and have something go wrong and they are more likely than ever to wind up scapegoated, just like that supervisor in Palm Beach County.

As a result, in March, the first month after the horror stories made headlines, the number of children torn from everyone they know and love statewide increased by 32 percent — in Circuit 20 it was slightly

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higher, 34 percent.

The panic has jeopardized reforms that dramatically improved Florida child welfare. Even as workers tore apart far fewer families, independent evaluations found that child safety improved. That's because most cases are nothing like the horror stories; far more common are cases in which family poverty is confused with neglect. With fewer children needlessly taken workers had more time to find the children in real danger.

Now Florida risks returning to the chaos that endangered so many children under disgraced former DCF Secretary Kathleen Kearney and her take-the-child-and-run approach.

New leadership in Circuit 20 must understand that in child welfare there is no such thing as winning through intimidation. It doesn't work with families, and it doesn't work with your own staff.

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The Washington Post

Foster-child project recasts picture of a family

Abramowitz, director of the Office of Family Safety in Florida, said yesterday in a roundtable discussion, sponsored by the Casey Family Group, about a new nationwide movement in child welfare: preventing foster-care admissions.

In Florida, Abramowitz curtailed the number of kids in foster care and the money spent on them by putting government funds into fixing their families. Agencies in Georgia, Philadelphia and New Jersey all shared similar stories.

Instead of removing a child from a mom who can't pay her rent, social workers give her counseling and help pay the bills. Rather than take the kids from a homeless family, they find it work and housing. They've stopped taking kids from a mom who is being physically abused and instead get the mom and the child into a hotel, away from the abuse and on the road to their own place. The drug-addicted mom on a waiting list for rehab gets treatment.

The types of human services assistance that have seen the deepest budget cuts in the District are the ones that can keep children out of foster care: homelessness, domestic violence, drug abuse in the parents.

And cutting the programs that can help the most innocent residents is one certain way to kill a mockingbird.

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The Washington Post

Foster-child project recasts picture of a family

and while a court decides whether their parents are fit to take care of them, they are taken from the only family they know.

So in a Mockingbird cluster, they hang out with other kids who are going through the same stuff. And sometimes, there's comfort in that.

Just as the adults are gabbing, a 3-year-old barrels into the room screaming "Daddy!"

He wraps himself around Edward Harris, kissing his face and poking his fingers into his mouth. They cuddle, resting their shaved heads against each other, as Harris tries to continue eating and talking.

This has got to be his biological son, I guess. They even look alike.

"Nah, he's my foster son," Harris tells me. "He came to me when he was 3 months old."

The boy is a motormouth, telling me about the roller coaster he went on with his daddy and going on about how big he is and how much he's growing and he loves SpongeBob. All in one breath.

Harris wants to adopt the boy, but he is worried that there will be difficulties with his birth mother.

I don't know what happened three years ago to bring him into Harris's loving embrace. But even when the foster parents are great,

that doesn't necessarily mean the families these kids were removed from were terrible.

The foster care and family court system is shrouded in secrecy, a world where laws and accountability and decisions are never public and open for scrutiny only when the worst happens: Banita Jacks and the four children she killed, Renee Bowman and the dead daughters she stored in a freezer.

And so these worst-case scenarios scare officials and force kids into foster care at alarming rates. There are about 2,200 children in foster care in the District, a number that has been increasing over the past few years and one many child advocates say is too high.

Removing children from their homes leaves a scar no warm embrace can erase.

"They all remember the day they were taken. They all remember everything about it," Alan

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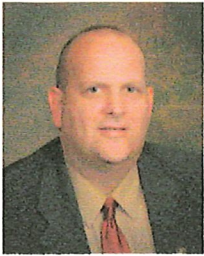
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DCF LEADER SEEKS TO PRESERVE FAMILIES



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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One man's energy moves foster care system

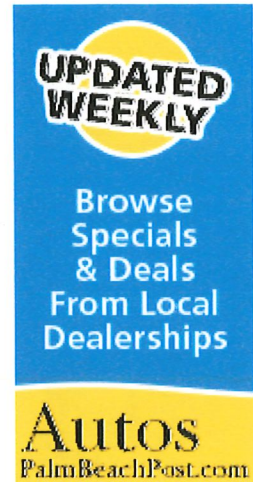
By [KATHLEEN CHAPMAN](#)

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.

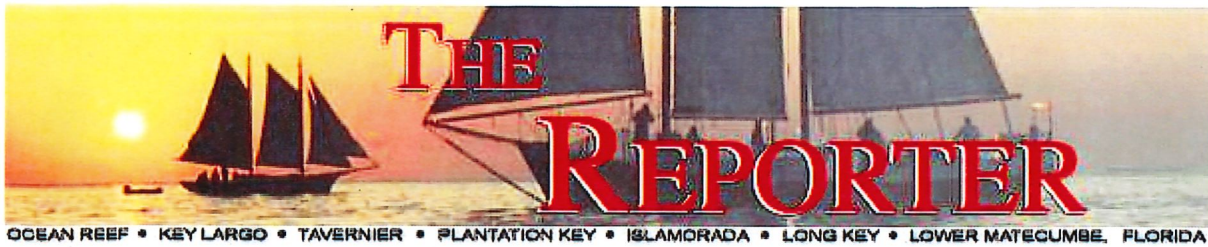
But with a leader such as Butterworth, and a federal policy approved in 2006 that allows Florida to spend money once earmarked for foster care on family preservation, Abramowitz believes there will be major change in the way the Florida treats children and families.

"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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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.



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 his 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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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
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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



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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.

"By the time I get involved in anything, the horrible thing has already happened," Abramowitz said.

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."

Nov. 14, 2007

DCF foster-care crisis team assisting Pinellas

BY CURTIS KRUEGER
Times Staff Writer

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



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.

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.

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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.

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



Elisa Cramer

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

