



Connections - Jan. 24, 2024



From left, Florida Senator Gayle Harrell, R-Stuart, meets with CCKids Director of Community Relations Christina Kaiser during a recent trip to Tallahassee. Kaiser made the trip to advocate on behalf of a special funding request that will help prevent children from being removed from home.

Special Funding Request Will Keep More Children at Home

Port St. Lucie – A proposed program to keep more families together as they navigate the dependency system is receiving support among Florida legislators.

Special funding requests for the program - the Early Services Engagement Program - have been sponsored in the senate by Sen. Gayle Harrell and in the house by Rep. Dana Trabulsy.

But Harrell cautions that the requests have a long and hard road to go before being approved.

In fact more than 2,500 special appropriations requests have been submitted by legislators on behalf of local initiatives, and fewer than 10 percent will likely see funding, Harrell said.

That's because many of those requests would be more appropriately funded by local governments, she said.

The Early Services Engagement Program is not one of those. That's because the state is ultimately responsible for children in Florida's network of 20 dependency/child welfare systems.

So what is the Early Services Intervention Program?

"It's designed to prevent children from being removed from their home," said CCKids Chief Operating Officer Cheri Sheffer.

There are two major parts to the child protective services system. There's child protective investigations, which is handled by the state Department of Children and Families. And there are dependency case management services, which is provided by Communities Connected for Kids.

CPI's have a complex job identifying risk and providing immediate safety actions to prevent removals, Sheffer said. Sometimes, the number of diverse and complex investigations makes it challenging to move each case expeditiously to case management services.

"The early engagement program will allow us to engage more immediately in this extremely high risk scenario, and provide more comprehensive oversight of the families that are most at risk of removal while the CPI finalizes the required elements of their investigation."

CCKids' program is based on a successful model in Jacksonville that has already received considerable support among legislators.

"Keeping children in home by helping their families with early access to intensive services reduces trauma and improves outcomes for children and families and for the community of care," Sheffer said.



Communities Connected for Kids' advocacy team divided and conquered last week; Christina Kaiser, community relations director, met with legislators in Tallahassee while the rest of the team - CEO Carol Deloach, COO Cheri Sheffer and CFO Lauren Hahn - remained at home on the Treasure Coast to meet a state deadline for our system of care's contract renewal. Pictured above are Rep. John Snyder, R-Stuart, Christina Kaiser, and Sen. Erin Grall, R-Vero Beach.



Amparo Gomez is lovingly referred to as the Christmas Queen by volunteers and colleagues at Guardians for New Futures.

New Online Drive, More Sponsors Make it a Bright Christmas for Children in Foster Care

Port St. Lucie – A boisterous “Yahoo!” rang out from behind a makeshift desk

full to brimming with toys, packages and stacks of paperwork.

The 2023 Making Christmas Bright/Guardians for New Futures Angel Program had just reached 100 percent of children matched with toys – and Amparo Gomez, lovingly referred to as the Christmas Queen by her volunteers and colleagues, was excited.

“We did it!” she cried. “All children on the list are taken care of!”

The list in reference is long, composed of all children in the Communities Connected for Kids’ Circuit 19 dependency system and another 251 from the community – all told, 1,169 children.

“It was an amazing year – one of the best,” said Christina Kaiser, community relations director for CCKids. The project, a partnership between CCKids and Guardians for New Futures, got a boost this year from an infusion of new sponsors and the addition of an online toy drive.

The online component alone, collected nearly 500 toys.

“It was a last-minute addition, but it was an incredible success because it gave people who are homebound or who prefer not to shop in stores to contribute,” Kaiser said.

Those toys were sent directly to CCKids service centers to help fill the need for children who entered the dependency system after individual toy-request forms were turned in earlier in the fall.

New sponsors – 16 onboarded this year - also helped the program reach its goal.

The Month in Pictures



Dependency Case Managers pick up their gifts and get ready to deliver them to families throughout the circuit.



Many new sponsors joined the toy drive in 2023, including Keller Williams, which sponsored 100 children in its first year!



The Florida Highway Patrol, Fort Pierce Unit, has become a very loyal sponsor. Thank you for your service all the way around! This year, 16 sponsors were added to the project, but it's the ones who come back year after year that are the backbone of the Making Christmas Bright Toy Drive. Thank you to everyone!



The Mark and Terri Young Family, with CCKids Resource Coordinator, Jordan Bebout out front, helped us wish the Vero Beach and Okeechobee communities a very merry Christmas.

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