



Communities Connected *for Kids*

Connections - May 22, 2024



More than 300 people attended this month's Foster Family Appreciation Pizza & Pool Party, including the Dawes Family, pictured here. They are among CCKids' many relative caregiver families who are licensed to foster specific, usually related, children.

Pool Party is All Splash, No Rain

Communities Connected for Kids celebrated its local foster families May 11 with a special takeover of Stuart's Sailfish Splash Waterpark. More than 300 caregivers and their families attended the event, a private pizza and pool party where local foster families have the run of the Martin County park.

A generous donation from Seacoast Bank ensured that families attending could celebrate the day in privacy, with similar families experiencing the challenges and joys unique to foster care.



The event is an annual celebration of National Foster Family Appreciation Month, recognized each year in May. The pool party is usually held in June to accommodate busy schedules around Mother's Day.

"This was the first year the event was not impacted by heavy rain – we had a great turnout, and families reported they really enjoyed themselves," said Jerra Wisecup, licensing and caregiver support specialist for CCKids.

This year's event was part of CCKids' #25by2025 campaign to add 25 foster homes to Judicial Circuit 19 – Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties – by January 1. The campaign will continue into subsequent years with new themes and recruitment goals.

"We have far more children who need foster homes than actual foster homes," said Christina Kaiser, CCKids' community relations director. "When that happens, we often have to place children in group care or in homes outside of their community."

The #25by2025 campaign is designed to start bringing them back home and to keep future children coming into care in Okeechobee and the Treasure Coast, she said.



For information on how to become a foster parent, or for ways to get involved in #25by2025, visit www.ckkids.net and click the campaign portal at the top of the page. Or, call (772) 873-7800, and ask for Jerra.

Pictured in the above images are CCKids staff and volunteers who helped make the 2024 pool party a successful event. Top picture, from left, are Denise Natalizio, Jordan Bebout, Caryn Toole and CEO Carol DeLoach. Pictured in the bottom right image, from left, are Christine Winter, CCKids finance director; Jerra Wisecup, CCKids licensing and caregiver support specialist; Karen Margh recruitment specialist from 4Kids of the Treasure Coast; Tricia Curl, also a caregiver support specialist from CCKids; and Licensing and Caregiver Support Program Director Jill Poole.

Get Ready to Wear Your Blue May 25

CCKids urges all community members to don blue the last Saturday of the month as part of its ongoing campaign to increase awareness for local foster families and to add new foster homes by January 2025.

If you attended last month's 1K for Kids & Story Stroll, you're halfway there!



That's because those who attended the event received a free CCKids shirt designed to tie into a yearlong series of #WearBlue days. The first #WearBlue day is scheduled for Saturday, May 25. Just wear your shirt everywhere you go, snap a selfie and post to Facebook and Instagram and tag CCKids at @connectedforkids.

If you don't have a CCKids event shirt, just wear any kind of blue! Post and tag us, and use the hashtags #WearBlueDay and #25by2025.

Dad's Roundtable is the Next Stop on the #25by2025 Itinerary

Port St. Lucie - Just in time for father's day, the next community event scheduled for #25by2025 is a roundtable discussion about being a dad in the foster-care community.

Scheduled for 7 p.m., June 10, the roundtable will be live-streamed on Facebook and composed of local foster fathers and representatives from the Healthy Start of Martin County's Fatherhood Initiative.

The fatherhood initiative is a program designed to maintain connections between children in care and their fathers.

The event will take place on Facebook and is part of CCKids' recently launched #25by2025 campaign; audience members will be able to ask questions of the panel through a moderator.

#25by2025's goal is to recruit and license a minimum of 25 foster homes by January 1, 2025 - homes that will help reverse a downward trend in the number of foster homes being licensed since the COVID pandemic.

Since 2020, the community has experienced a 58 percent decrease in homes in Okeechobee and the Treasure Coast, said Christina Kaiser, CCKids community relations director.



Inside the Mission: *Profiles in Foster Care*

Port St. Lucie – Communities Connected for Kids, the organization responsible for the local child-welfare community, unveiled its Profiles in Foster Care series this month in recognition of National Foster Care Appreciation.

The project, which will introduce local foster parents to the community through a series of short bios and pictures, is also a product of CCKids' #25by2025 campaign to add 25 foster homes by 2025.

“We hope that by sharing these foster-care stories and experiences, others may be inspired to consider their own foster-care journey,” said Christina Kaiser, CCKids community relations director.

The first profile released is a feature of Kristen West, a single foster mom in Port St. Lucie.

West has opened her home to 22 children since she was licensed in 2016. She has one biological daughter, three adopted children and one foster child in her home now, and she has two adult children, ages 29 and 26.

“I originally became a foster parent to give children a safe home and my daughter a sister,” West said. “I quickly learned that the latter is the wrong reason.”

That’s because children in foster care have their own families, and the goal is to restore the family unit.

“I got to know the families of the children in my home; I saw the generational brokenness and become a huge supporter and advocate for co-parenting and reunification,” she said.

In fact, co-parenting is a very important part of foster care, in which foster families and biological families work together to ensure the best transition and experience possible for children.

West encourages anyone who has ever considered foster care to reach out and learn more.

“It may not always be easy, but watching a child thrive and heal is one of the most beautiful stories you will ever be a part of,” she said. “We live in a beautiful community of people who want to help and support foster care; You will not be in it alone, but you will forever be changed.”

If you are interested in being a foster parent, call (772) 873-7800, and ask for Jerra.

Communities Connected for Kids | 549 NW Lake Whitney Pl. Ste. 204 | Port St. Lucie, FL 34986 US

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