

October
2009

A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs

Contents

- 1 Caregiver Oversight
- 1 Stimulus Dollars for Homeless Families
- 1 Panel on Safe Families
- 2 Sex Offender Laws
- 2 Rules of Juvenile Procedure
- 3 DJJ Annual Report
- 4 Sex Offenders at Halloween
- 4 Gubernatorial Appointments
- 4 Early Learning Coalition Appointments
- 5 Domestic Violence Awareness
- 6 Faith Forum on At-Risk Kids
- 6 Student Achievement in Math
- 6 Swine Flu Information
- 7 Cybersafety Landmark
- 7 Gang Reduction Website
- 7 Charter Schools Conference
- 8 School Lunches
- 8 Childhood Lead Poisoning

CAREGIVER OVERSIGHT

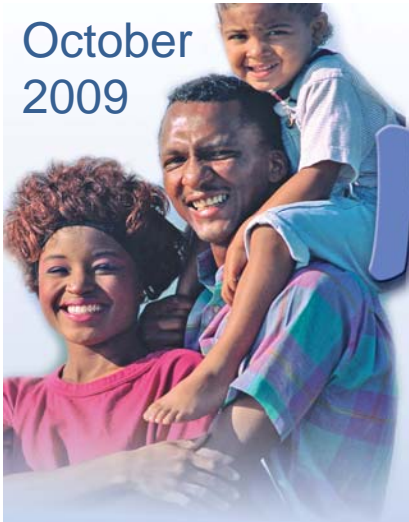
Following a series of newspaper articles on caregivers with criminal records, Governor Charlie Crist convened a working group of state agencies to review the legal requirements for screening individuals to work in facilities that care for children, elders and persons with disabilities. The news stories found inadequacies in regulations that require limited background checks for certain employees of child day care centers, nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other residential care settings. The agencies began reviewing the use of criminal background checks, the process for granting exemptions and the process that allows employees to begin working before background checks are completed. The Governor has indicated that this issue will be one of his top legislative priorities in the coming year.

STIMULUS DOLLARS FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES

Children who are homeless or who, along with their families, are at risk of becoming homeless received a boost when the state received more than \$65 million from the federal government for housing assistance. Grants will be available in every county of Florida to eligible individuals and families who are homeless or are about to lose their housing because of eviction or foreclosure. The housing aid is available through designated local agencies for households that have incomes below 50 percent of an area's median income. Renters owing back rent and facing eviction can also receive a share of the federal stimulus money for rent and utilities to remain in their rental units. Families that are already homeless can get money for rent and utility and security deposits in order to get into rental housing. The grant money cannot be used for home mortgage payments. The Department of Children & Families identified about 57,700 people as homeless in Florida, although the department acknowledges that the count is incomplete because many individuals and families find refuge living with family members or friends or make other temporary living arrangements.

PANEL ON SAFE FAMILIES

In an effort to safely reduce the number of children in foster care and ensure successful permanency for foster care children, Department





A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs

of Children & Families Secretary George Sheldon formed a special Subcommittee on Safe Families. The group, to be chaired by Circuit Judge David M. Gooding of Jacksonville, will serve as part of DCF's Task Force on Fostering Success. Sheldon said the subcommittee will help make sure DCF stays true to its primary goals of protecting children while strengthening families so that, when possible, children can remain safely in the care of their own parents. DCF's "50 by 2012" initiative aims to reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2012. The effort contributed to a 32 percent reduction of children in foster care compared to December 2006. In addition, over the past three years DCF has successfully completed more than 10,000 adoptions. More information on the Task Force on Fostering Success is available at www.dcf.state.fl.us/admin/childSafety.

SEX OFFENDER LAWS

Florida's laws governing sex offenders and predators are not so pervasive that they preempt local governments from imposing even tighter restrictions on such things as where sex offenders can live within their communities, a Miami judge ruled. The judge rejected a legal challenge by two convicted sex offenders who challenged the validity of a Miami-Dade County ordinance prohibiting convicted sex offenders from living within 2,500 feet of a school. The judge noted that the Legislature has passed laws designed to protect children, for example by outlawing sexual molestation of children and prohibiting offenders from living with 1,000 feet of schools, day care facilities, parks or playgrounds. However, he concluded, these laws are not sufficiently far-reaching to conclude that the Legislature intended these statutes to be the final word on restrictions. "Florida's sexual offender laws are not sufficiently pervasive to support a finding of clear legislative intent to preempt local ordinances," Circuit Judge Pedro Echarte Jr. wrote. A copy of the judge's order is available through the Attorney General's Office website at [www.myfloridalegal.com/alerts.nsf/e9db6e3a14425e1085256642005da529/094a93f63639023e8525765c0049dd90/\\$FILE/Exile.pdf](http://www.myfloridalegal.com/alerts.nsf/e9db6e3a14425e1085256642005da529/094a93f63639023e8525765c0049dd90/$FILE/Exile.pdf).

RULES OF JUVENILE PROCEDURE

The Florida Supreme Court, conforming to recent actions by the Legislature, adopted a series of amendments to the Florida Rules of






A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs

Juvenile Procedure. The new rules, which took effect immediately, are designed to further protect the legal rights of dependent children and relatives of certain children. The new rules: create a procedure for appointment and discharge of a surrogate parent for a dependent child with educational disabilities; add to the list of a court's responsibilities at a shelter hearing by requiring the court to request that parents provide access to a child's medical and educational records when the child is being placed in shelter, allowing the court to grant access to those records in certain circumstances, and ordering the parents to provide medical information to those granted access; require the court to appoint a surrogate parent or refer the child for such appointment, if the child has a disability; and add provisions notifying relatives who provide out-of-home care for children of their rights under the law. A copy of the amendments to the Rules of Juvenile Procedure is available online at www.floridasupremecourt.org/decisions/2009/sc09-1266.pdf.

DJJ ANNUAL REPORT



The Department of Juvenile Justice, releasing its 2008-09 annual report, touted its successes in reducing the number of children assigned to commitment, providing new services for girls in custody, and improving stability in staff who work directly with youth. For the first time, the report includes an update on the department's strategic plan, which emphasizes the agency's efforts to prevent children from entering the juvenile justice system in the first place. According to the report: more than 4,000 fewer children were admitted to secure detention than was expected; the department exceeded projections for transitioning from large institutional models to smaller programs with specialized treatment services; gender-specific services designed to address girls' special needs are now provided at all of the Regional Juvenile Detention Centers across the state; and the agency recorded a 28 percent reduction over five years in the number of individual youth assigned to residential commitment. In addition, the department had an 8 percent reduction in the turnover rate among employees who work directly with youth, although the agency acknowledged that may be partly due to the elimination of jobs and the overall statewide job market and economy. The DJJ annual report can be viewed online at www.djj.state.fl.us/AboutDJJ/DJJ-Annual-Report.pdf.

A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs



SEX OFFENDERS AT HALLOWEEN

The state prison system may not seem to have much to do with trick-or-treat, but this year the Florida Department of Corrections dispatched probation officers on Halloween to make sure sex offenders did not participate in the annual rite of childhood. Through surprise home visits and increased surveillance, probation officers worked closely with local law enforcement agencies throughout Florida to keep Halloween safe for children. The officers warned probationary sex offenders against giving out candy or other treats to children, attracting kids with outside decorations, answering the door to trick-or-treaters, from dressing in costumes or masks, or attending Halloween parties where children would be present. Florida currently has more than 9,000 sex offenders on state supervision.

GUBERNATORIAL APPOINTMENTS

Governor Charlie Crist made the following children-related appointments: **Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Advisory Group:** Leonard Thompson of Gainesville, a college student; **Board of Trustees, Florida Virtual School:** Suzanne O. Martin of Tallahassee, vice president and director of sales for Affiliated Computer Services; **Broward County School Board:** Kevin Tynan of Pembroke Pines, and attorney with Richardson and Tynan (filling a vacancy created by a suspension following criminal charges).

EARLY LEARNING COALITION APPOINTMENTS

Governor Charlie Crist made appointments to 12 Early Learning Coalitions around the state. Appointed were: **Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region Inc.:** Lawrence "Larry" DiPietro of Tallahassee, financial advisor with Capital City Banc Investments; **Early Learning Coalition of Palm Beach County Inc.:** Kathy Adams of West Palm Beach, president and chief executive officer of MediaReach Inc.; **Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida:** John Remington of Naples, president of A. Vernon Allen Builders Inc.; **Early Learning Coalition of Brevard County:** Michael "Mike" Durante of Melbourne, senior manager with Berman, Hopkins, Wright and LaHam; **Early Learning Coalition of Clay, Nassau, Baker, and Bradford Counties Inc.:** Gloria "Lynn" Meares of Orange Park, a self-employed insurance agent; **Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County:** Leona Bailey of Pensacola, a self-employed small business






A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs

owner; **Early Learning Coalition of Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee Counties Inc.:** Jacqueline Crighton of Palm City, business manager with Dr. Kathy Santoriello Gynecology; **Early Learning Coalition of Lake County:** Hugh Brockington of Umatilla, president and chief executive officer of the Brockington Group, and Jeanie Rowin of Tavares, vice president of Regions Bank Leesburg; **Early Learning Coalition of Manatee County:** Wanda Read-Burke of Bradenton, community relations representative with Florida Blood Services; **Early Learning Coalition of Nature Coast (Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, Citrus, and Sumter Counties):** Debbie Lattin of Inverness, a retired bank manager; **Early Learning Coalition of Pinellas County Inc.:** Cynthia “Cindy” Seletos of Tarpon Springs, an account executive with Apple Inc.; **Early Learning Coalition of Polk County:** William “Brian” Yates of Winter Haven, banking center manager with Center State Bank.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS



During the period proclaimed by Governor Charlie Crist to be Domestic Violence Awareness Month in Florida, state Attorney General Bill McCollum created a statewide domestic violence fatality review team to help develop policy recommendations to prevent domestic violence homicides. Both announcements were hailed by the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which advocates for victims and administers state funding of 42 abuse shelters around the state. In their separate actions, each official noted the impact of domestic violence on children, who are present in a large portion of homes in which domestic violence takes place. The statewide fatality review team created by McCollum will review selected cases and will also review the data from local fatality review teams to find trends and gaps in the system. The panel is expected to issue a final report by next September. In his declaration of the awareness month, the Governor noted that 94 percent of the state’s Domestic Violence Program budget is used for community-based statewide programs that reach disadvantaged women and children. The Governor noted that children who witness violence in the home are at a greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems and are at a higher risk of becoming victims and perpetrators of domestic violence themselves.

Kids Briefs



FAITH FORUM ON AT-RISK KIDS

The Department of Juvenile Justice kicked off a series of regional “Our Children, Our Future” Faith Forums throughout the state when it hosted a forum for faith-based organizations in St. Petersburg. The event provided formal training for DJJ’s Faith and Community Network and Volunteer Chaplaincy Program, which works to help children turn their lives around. One of the goals of the network is to connect families with faith-based services and resources that might be able to help with troubled youth. The department plans a total of seven regional forums, with the goals of raising awareness of issues impacting at-risk youth and their families, educating faith communities about the juvenile justice system and training participants in how to serve as liaisons to connect faith resources with the at-risk youth and their families. The Department has not yet announced the full schedule for the remaining regional forums.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN MATH

Florida fourth- and eighth-graders maintained their long-term academic gains in math achievement, according to the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. According to the state Department of Education, the results indicate that since 2003 Florida’s fourth- and eighth-grade students have increased their overall math scores by 8 points each, better than the five-point gain nationally. Florida’s minority children and those with disabilities also continued to outpace their national counterparts. The average math score of Florida fourth-graders held steady from last year, three points higher than the national average. The NAEP, often referred to as the “nation’s report card,” is a congressionally mandated project to continuously monitor the knowledge, skills and performance of the nation’s children and youth. More information on Florida’s 2009 NAEP math performance is available online at www.nationsreportcard.gov.

SWINE FLU INFORMATION

With a continued focus on immunizations for select population groups including children, the state Department of Health issued a new Vaccine Information Statement, including a Spanish-language version. The statements are information sheets produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that explain to vaccine recipients, their parents or their legal representatives both the





A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication

Kids Briefs

benefits and the risks of the H1N1 vaccine. The Bureau of Immunization said it will offer the statements in other languages once the CDC completes the translations into a number of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Haitian Creole and Russian. The statements can be found online through the Bureau's website at www.immunizeflorida.org/h1n1.

CYBERSAFETY LANDMARK

On October 13, the state's CyberSafety Education program reached its 1,000th Florida school. The program, started in 2007 by the Attorney General's Office, features a 50-minute interactive program that has been presented to more than 482,000 middle school and high school students statewide. The benchmark was reached during a presentation at Freedom High School near Orlando. According to an Attorney General's Office press release, that school's principal called the internet a valuable resource but said "it is imperative that children are aware of the dangers of releasing too much personal information online."

GANG REDUCTION WEBSITE

The state Attorney General's Office, which has made a priority of efforts to reduce the impact of gangs in the state, unveiled a new website designed to help Florida parents, law enforcement and others combat gang activity in their communities. The website describes the office's gang reduction strategy, offers tips on how to recognize gang activity and prevent youth involvement, and fosters communication among participants in regional task forces that are part of the statewide strategy initiative. A secure portion of the website will enable law enforcement officers to share key information about gangs in their area, while another section lists known active gangs by region and illustrates gang-related signs and tattoos. The website can be viewed at www.floridagangreduction.com. The site includes a "Parent Information" section, linked from the site's home page.

CHARTER SCHOOLS CONFERENCE

Charter schools have been touted as a better way to education Florida's children, and charter school administrators, teachers and experts will gather in Orlando for a two-day conference around the





A Florida Coalition For Children Monthly Publication


Kids Briefs

theme of “Charts – Not Just Another Public School.” The conference, which begins November 16, will give charter school authorizers, administrators and teachers the opportunity to network, share best practices and gather information during breakout sessions. Exhibitors will offer goods and services designed for the charter school community. More information is available at www.charterschoolconference.com.

SCHOOL LUNCHES

The state Department of Education used sports themes in celebrating this year’s National School Lunch Week, introducing activities and contests to promote the significant health benefits of eating a wholesome school lunch. The National School Lunch Program has been serving lunches and educating students about healthy eating since 1946, and last year Florida schools served more than 260 million lunches to students. The state’s efforts also emphasized the connection between eating and exercise habits and good health.

CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING



The Department of Health urged Florida parents to take steps to protect their children from the dangers of lead paint, during Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Week. The agency held daily recognition activities to point out that lead in paint has a “lifetime guarantee” and can do damage for generations. The department noted that each year more than 300 new cases of lead poisoning are identified in children younger than age 6, and said all children under that age are potentially at risk for lead poisoning. The agency said the best way to protect children is to have a doctor conduct a blood lead test. The department also recommended that parents maintain healthy housing conditions to protect children, and said more information on healthy home principles is available online at www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthyhomes.htm.

www.FLChildren.org