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Howard Talenfeld: Foster kids need a voice to speak for them

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By Howard Talenfeld
June 5, 2013

It can be so easy to overlook Florida's medically fragile foster children. They don't have much of a voice. Few adults advocate on their behalf. They often wallow in silence, waiting for someone to listen.

Now, they will be heard.

During this last session, the **Florida Legislature** approved \$323,000 to provide legal representation to these children. Appropriation 744, as part of Senate Bill 1500, provides recurring general revenue funds for the Justice Administrative Commission to contract with attorneys selected by the Guardian ad Litem Program to represent dependent, foster children with disabilities in, or being considered for placement in, skilled **nursing** facilities.

Attorneys and their experts, both covered by the appropriation, can help present the child's or foster family's case in administrative hearings and appeals.



It's been a crisis situation for medically fragile foster children with no parents or legal guardians.

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In the past year, children in nursing homes and private residences have suffered cuts to funding for vital nursing care. Without representation, these children could spend their childhood in nursing homes without any chance of living with a family.

The need for such legal representation has been supported by the Florida Bar for more than a decade. As former chair of the Bar's Legal Needs of Children Committee, my committee helped draft proposed legislation that would allow attorneys to represent certain groups of foster children who are stuck in care.

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In fact, on June 12, Florida's Children First will hold an event in **Miami** honoring the work of the Legal Needs of Children Commission, which was formed in 1999 by Florida Bar president, Edith Osman.

Allowing children to live in the community with skilled nursing care often costs less than if they were institutionalized. The message is clear. All they needed was a voice to help tell it.

Thanks to the Florida Legislature, now they have one.

Howard Talenfeld is president and founder of Florida's Children First, the state's premier child advocacy organization.

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