



**FLORIDA'S
CHILDREN
FIRST**
FIGHTING FOR
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

2023 Annual Report



A Welcome From Our Executive Director

Dear Supporters,

Helen Keller famously said “*alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.*” This past year has illustrated just how much we can make a difference in the lives of children when we all work together.

After reaching our 20-year milestone in 2022, we began 2023 by embarking on an intensive strategic planning process to provide a long-term roadmap for the years to come. The final Strategic Plan report outlines innovative and exciting ways to continue growing and adapting to the evolving needs of Florida’s children. Partners, sponsors, supporters, colleagues, and friends came together to offer their input, guidance, and expertise. Their efforts resulted in a bold blueprint ensuring the health, sustainability, and impact of the organization for the future. Many priorities have already been achieved during 2023, which you will read about in the pages that follow.

Highlights include:

- **Capacity Building**

One of the most exciting highlights of the year was expanding our capacity to reach more youth in need. To better meet our mission, provide a stronger platform for youth voices to be heard, and remain a potent force for child advocacy for decades to come, we created two new positions and welcomed two new incredible additions

to our team: **Staff Attorney, C. Christine Smith**, and **Florida Youth SHINE Community Engagement Manager, Kaya Lee**. With their extensive experience they hit the ground running and have already made significant contributions, including offering legal representation to a limited number of children and expanding our Florida Youth SHINE chapter network.

- **Resource Development**

Committed to equipping youth and professionals with the knowledge to be advocates and champions for protecting the rights of Florida’s children, a record **12 new publications and resources** were created this past year. Additionally, a **new website**, that was under development in 2023, will soon make our entire resource library easier to access and utilize. It will also allow us to update publications and fact sheets as needed to keep them accurate and relevant.

- **Education & Training**

Dedicated to providing free, accessible training to industry professionals to equip them with the knowledge they need to be strong champions and advocates for Florida’s children, we reached record numbers of people through our training workshop series on topical issues, integrating youth experience and perspective at every juncture.

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• Elevating Youth Voices

Once again this year, we provided **more than 100 advocacy opportunities** for the voices of the youth themselves to be heard, valued and respected. This included:

- **12+ presentations at forums and conferences** throughout Florida, Washington DC, California, and New Mexico.
- **10+ trips youth made to Tallahassee** to successfully advocate for the *"Education for Youth in Foster Care Bill."*

• Monumental Change

After five years of working to ensure youth are educated about their rights, I am ecstatic to share that legislation has now passed requiring youth to be educated about the laws and resources in place for children in care. This life-changing bill will now have a profound impact on youth for years to come and is a true testament to the power of youth voice, and the work we do.

Turning awareness into action that can affect meaningful change lies at the core of all our endeavors.

It has been quite a year for our organization. I am inspired by our donors, partners, and staff who have risen to unprecedented challenges and worked alongside us, united in our mission to fight for children's rights.

Thank you for your steadfast support and for joining us in our quest to continue putting Florida's children first. Working together, we can and will continue to reach new heights as we endeavor to enlighten, empower and ensure a brighter tomorrow for all Florida's children.

Sincerely,

Geori Seldine

Executive Director





A Word From Our Board Chair

To our Community Partners, Supporters, and the Youth of Florida,

As a long-standing advocate for children's rights, I was honored to work together more than twenty years ago with some of Florida's most passionate child advocates who, like me, were committed to making enduring, systemic improvements to the system of care and the lives of children in Florida's child welfare system. From this groundbreaking collaborative effort, Florida's Children First was conceived, created, and launched.

I have been humbled and grateful each year since to see how this spirit of commitment to our cause has inspired advocates, industry professionals, care providers, decision-makers, funders, and the resilient, amazing youth themselves to continue the journey of working together toward a united goal of upholding the rights and improving the lives of Florida's children. It is only through this collaborative connection of coming together that we have been able to have such a profound impact on the policies, practices, and most importantly, the lives of Florida's most vulnerable children.

This year, as this report illustrates, we continued our journey of impact, progress, and passion. As our talented Executive Director, Geori Seldine, noted in her introduction letter, "together, we can reach new heights," and these pages are a testament to that ideal. From professionals we've educated and families we've assisted, to the stories of resilient youth who have become successful, thriving adults living meaningful lives,

the catalyst for achievement has been working together with our "village" of like-minded colleagues and supporters.

We are forever grateful to those who continue to rally together with unwavering support for our organization and our mission. THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

Yet, as we celebrate each success, we are mindful that there is so much more work to do. We cannot rest until all children within Florida's systems of care have the same opportunities for a nurturing childhood, for a quality education, for dreaming, achieving, finding stability, and reaching their fullest potential.

As we keep the momentum going and embark on the next phase of our journey, we invite you to join us on this transformative march to the future. There are so many ways for caring and compassionate people to help us realize our vision and make an impact on a child's life. The work we do leaves an enduring legacy that continues to help future generations of youth have a life of promise and possibility. I encourage you to reach out to us and become part of the Florida's Children First family.

With sincere gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Howard M. Talenfeld".

Howard Talenfeld
Board President

Our Mission, Vision, and Work

Our Mission

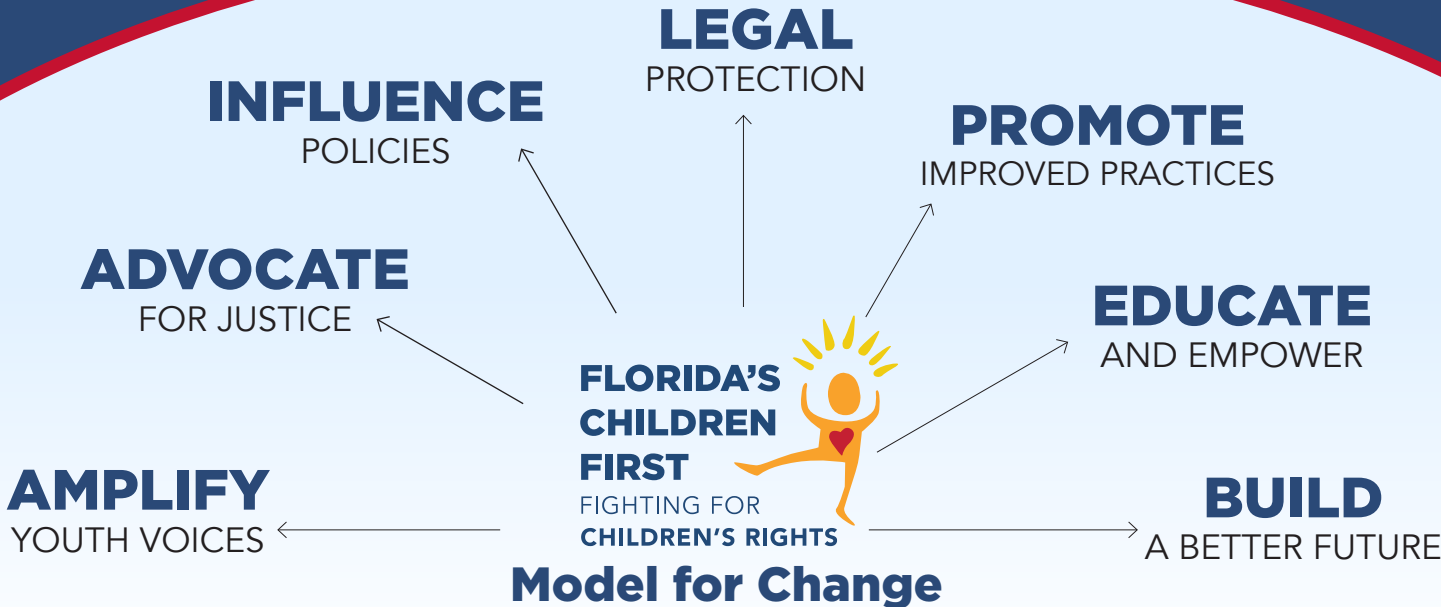
Florida’s Children First is a non-profit, nonpartisan, independent advocacy organization committed to protecting and advancing the rights of children and youth impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and disability systems through systemic reform, education, youth voice, and promoting high-quality legal representation.

Our Vision

Florida’s laws, policies, and practices respect, prioritize, and protect children and youth impacted by the child welfare, juvenile justice, and disability systems.

Our Work

We impact the lives of Florida’s children, advocating for their rights and creating an environment where they can soar.



Overview of Organization Programs

For over two decades, Florida's Children First has maintained a commitment to addressing the complex maze of challenges faced by youth, especially those within the dependency system.

Our unique collection of programs has been created to fill voids in the system, complement existing services, and specifically address the needs of this population.

We offer programs that champion the rights and protection of children. Programs that support their journey through the system to independent living. Programs that advocate for and support high-quality legal representation for children to ensure their safety. Programs that drive educational success, enlighten those who work and interact with youth, and provide a platform for impactful youth leadership and empowerment.

Above all, programs are conceived and implemented to reinforce our core belief that every child deserves to be safe, nurtured, housed, and heard.



Professional Training & Workshops

Every year, we offer a new series of free training workshops that keep those who interact or care for youth in the system informed and up-to-date on current issues and changes in benefits, policies, and practices. CLE credits for professionals are provided and sessions are accessible on our website's "resource center" for future reference.



Publications

We produce, update, and distribute free fact sheets, guidebooks, charts, and other informational tools on critical issues industry professionals and youth alike need. Publications are also written and designed to be youth-friendly so youth can better understand the content and access benefits and services. All publications can be found on our website: FloridasChildrenFirst.org.



Youth Education & Leadership Training

From leadership and life skills training to empowering self-advocacy, our youth training programs are crafted specifically for the needs of youth in care. Through our innovative Florida Youth SHINE program, which is led by a team with lived experience in the system, youth find an environment that nurtures genuine peer connections and motivates participation. We equip youth with the tools and confidence they need to reach high and become confident, fearless leaders they were born to be.



Florida Dependency Law Center

Through our FloridaDependencyLaw.org web portal, we support lawyers who represent all parties in child welfare cases and help build an available pool of pro bono legal services to assist those in need.



Professional Support

The Florida's Children First team of experts offers guidance, training, technical assistance, and ongoing support for lawyers, judges, case workers, and frontline professionals in the child welfare arena. We keep them abreast of evolving laws, regulations, benefits, and best practices and provide a range of resources and daily troubleshooting.



Information, Brief Advice, and Referrals

Regarded as the "go to" source for information on child welfare issues, programs, benefits, and related topics, Florida's Children First staff and attorneys promptly respond to inquiries submitted via email, phone and our website.



Advocacy Initiatives

Advocacy drives our activities at all levels. On a legislative level, we propose, draft, and comment on new legislation, providing comprehensive documentation on the potential impact of proposed bills. We file amicus briefs to assert children's rights and aid in the appointment of attorneys for them. We also serve as advisors to the Executive branch, offering insights on new rules, and participate on task forces, panels, and forums that shape policy.



High Quality Legal Representation

We provide independent, personalized guidance, brief advice, and quality representation to ensure more youth receive the representation they need and deserve and to be sure they have a voice in the proceedings that shape their lives.



Florida Youth SHINE Program

The award-winning Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) program offers leadership, mentorship, and advocacy opportunities to youth aged 13-26 in the child welfare system and that experienced homelessness. Through leadership training, engagement with positive mentor role models, a curriculum crafted to address their unique needs, and one-of-a-kind opportunities, youth conquer challenges, gain confidence, and emerge as goal-oriented, accomplished young adults. Emboldened by their experiences in Florida Youth SHINE, these young change-makers drive positive change by elevating and amplifying their voices and leading their peers in care.



Florida Youth SHINE Youth Action Hours

Each month, our open forums bring Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors together in a virtual space to process issues, topics, and solutions for local and statewide advocacy needs.



Florida Youth SHINE Local and Statewide Advocacy

Florida Youth SHINE chapters are at the forefront of advocacy, both locally and statewide. At the local level, youth members spearhead training in their communities, fostering public awareness while honing essential life skills and shaping effective solutions. On the statewide front, FYS champions change with youth-led training sessions. Their potent personal narratives and astute recommendations spotlight the challenges faced by youth in care, driving significant improvements throughout the care system.



Florida Youth SHINE Statewide Conference

Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors convene annually in Tallahassee for Children's Week. They engage with legislators and agency officials as they advocate for vital child welfare issues. Prior to each state capitol visit, FYS members undergo intensive training covering teamwork, leadership, public speaking, legislative processes, advocacy skills, and more. Four times a year, Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors also come together for intensive advocacy and leadership workshops. Held around the state, these quarterly meetings allow youth to interact with peers in care from other areas to bond and bring attention to the issues and solutions affecting youth in care.



Florida Youth SHINE Policy & Initiatives Program

Nearly 20 youth meet virtually twice monthly, playing an active role in researching issues, advocacy work, learning the legislative process, and implementing youth-led projects to impact effective policy change. This vital program hones youth leadership and organizing skills.



Florida Youth SHINE Peer Connection Events

Each month, our open forums bring Florida Youth SHINE members and mentors together in a virtual space to process issues, topics, and solutions for local and statewide advocacy needs.

2023 Program Impact

For more than twenty years, Florida's Children First has been here to inform, educate, advocate, legislate, and empower. In 2023, our efforts resulted in profound achievements that significantly impact children, families, and industry professionals, and will help improve long-term outcomes for children who have had a challenging start in life.

Advocacy Impact

12

12 New Publications created with direct youth input on children's rights and benefits, distributed throughout Florida.

5,948

5,948 Individuals trained, including many forums co-led by Florida Youth SHINE sharing their personal experiences in care to offer a candid youth perspective.

28,449

28,449 youth this year, and thousands more each year after, will now be educated on the rights and benefits available to them in care with passage of the "Education for Youth in Foster Care" bill.

1,823

1823 Pro Bono hours donated to helping children, which equates to \$298,860 in professional services generously donated.

17,500

17,500 parents supported by FCF's Florida Dependency Law Center who are current on law and policy and have access to resources to address their specific legal needs.

Florida Youth SHINE Impact

In 2023:

36

36 Youth met with 85 decision makers and testified in 6 legislative committee hearings to successfully advocate for legislation requiring that the state educate youth about existing laws that protect them, charting a new course for youth in care.

250

250 Youth discussed their experiences in foster care, sharing insights on what helped, or could have helped, them thrive. Responses were categorized by FYS' Policy & Initiatives committee and compiled into a comprehensive 16-page policy report and action plan for FYS advocacy priorities.

450

450 Youth previously precluded from getting a driver's license and insurance assistance through the state's driving program for former foster youth are now eligible for that support due to the "fix" we successfully obtained. (SB 272 - 2023)

6,150

6,150 hours of youth education, advocacy, empowerment opportunities, emotional healing, leadership/skills training, and connection events provided that nurture personal growth and development.



Through 2023, our impact includes:



\$8,184,732 in donated professional services



32,297 people trained statewide on child welfare topics.



18,577 pro bono hours donated to children.



52 publications on children's rights distributed statewide.



102,697 hours dedicated to youth advocacy and training.



40 amicus briefs filed & **41 child protection bills** supported or passed.

Major Impact in Training & Education

- Florida Children's First developed a nationally recognized, best-practices model for youth advocacy inclusion.
- Educated thousands of children about self-advocacy and their rights. Educated thousands of children about self-advocacy and their rights.
- Produced materials for youth & adults to understand rights and complex policies.
- Continuously ensured accountability in child welfare entities.
- Prioritized children's needs in DCF's policymaking.
- Led partnerships in Florida's child advocacy for sustainable child-centric solutions.

For more than two decades, Florida's Children First has championed the rights and well-being of the state's children, especially those navigating the complexities of foster care. This offers a glimpse into the transformative milestones and dedicated advocacy that have marked our 22-year journey to ensure every child in Florida is **safe, heard**, and has the **opportunity to flourish**.

By Impacting Laws & Policies We Have:

- Secured the option for youth to remain in foster care until age 21.
- Paved the way for FREE in-state college tuition until age 28 for youth from foster care, relative care, or those experiencing homelessness.
- Made obtaining a driver's license and insurance possible for youth in foster care.
- Enhanced youth representation in court decisions.
- Removed barriers to normalcy, allowing participation in activities like sports and sleepovers – becoming a national model.
- Spearheaded laws to support sibling unity.
- Reduced overmedication and unnecessary psychotropic drug prescriptions.
- Fought for rights of sex-trafficked children, ensuring they receive appropriate services.

Standout Moments of 2023

Organizational Growth

After completing a robust strategic planning process launched during our milestone 20th anniversary year, in 2023 we began rolling out priorities highlighted in the plan that reinforce our core and expand our horizons. Strengthening our small but mighty staff of five to meet the needs of more youth and create greater community impact had long been an organizational goal. **In 2023, we proudly added two new staff members to the Florida's Children Family.**



C. Christine Smith | Staff Attorney

An attorney with years of experience in family law and providing legal representation for abused, neglected, or abandoned children, joined the staff team to provide a new program: quality legal representation to children in care.


“Addressing an ongoing needs-gap in the system, I will be representing children around the state in dependency court and related proceedings. I will focus on updating and expanding our library of educational resources and tools offered for both youth and practitioners, and play an active role in advocacy efforts statewide. I look forward to working with fellow child advocates as we continue striving to make a difference in the lives of children” - **C. Christine Smith, Esq.**



Kaya Lee | FYS Engagement Manager

Kaya Lee is a seasoned child welfare professional with experience as a family support worker, case manager, and quality management specialist. A mentor with the Florida Youth SHINE Southwest chapter for the past five years, Kaya is uniquely positioned to help increase the reach of Florida Youth SHINE statewide, enrich the program's activities, and opportunities available to youth in the child welfare system.

“I am excited to play a pivotal role in expanding the Florida Youth SHINE statewide chapter network and strengthening programming, content, and outreach locally. I look forward to working with mentors and youth leaders to provide them with a heightened level of resources and support. Most of all, I am committed to offering our youth new leadership and mentorship opportunities locally because I believe every young person is just one connection away from obtaining the support they need to reach their full potential.” - **Kaya Lee**

A group photo of five people in an office setting. In the center is Representative Stan McClain, an older man with a grey beard, wearing a white shirt and a red patterned tie. To his left is a man in a light blue checkered shirt and a dark tie, with his arm around McClain's shoulder. In the foreground on the left is a woman with glasses and a name tag, wearing a dark jacket over a red top. To McClain's right is a young man in a dark suit and tie. On the far right is another young man in a light blue short-sleeved button-down shirt. The background includes a framed picture of a legislative chamber, a window with blinds, and a red decorative object on a table.

Pictured: Representative Stan McClain with Florida Youth SHINE members

A BIG WIN!

Educating Youth in Foster Care Bill Passes in 2023, After 5 years of Florida Youth SHINE Advocacy

A highlight of 2023 was passage of the landmark **“Educating Youth in Foster Care Bill”** after five years of Florida Youth SHINE advocacy. Though Florida has many great laws to protect and benefit children, it doesn’t help them if they are never made aware of them until they have aged out of care. Sadly, it was common flaw in the system that FYS members worked to correct.

Over the years hundreds of Florida Youth SHINE members traveled to Tallahassee to advocate for this legislation. Many testified to legislative committees on the importance of this bill, sharing intimate aspects of their lives with decision-makers to impress on them the urgent need for this knowledge. Many spoke out even though they could no longer benefit from the legislation, to ensure future generations did not miss out on opportunities, as they had.

In 2023, their efforts paid off when SB 272 & HB 1101, The Education for Youth in Foster Care Bill, became law throughout Florida!

What This Bill Does:

- Requires the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to educate foster youth on their rights every six months, in an age-appropriate manner.
- Codifies the Office of Ombudsman as a DCF position, so youth have a safe space to reach out to register complaints when their rights are being breached or they are endangered.

In short, it ensures kids are educated on the laws, and case managers know about them, for improved implementation of laws and rules in place to protect our children.

What This Bill Means:



“No kid goes into foster care knowing about the system or what our rights are. It’s up to adults to educate us. Sometimes that doesn’t happen. Passing a bill educating youth on their rights will help us stay on track to succeed.”

Rebekka Behr

Florida Youth Shine Statewide Chair, 2023



“I experienced first-hand the consequence that lacking knowledge of available resources to children in foster care had. It is awe-inspiring to witness how lives can transform in positive ways when kids are educated on programs and opportunities out there for them.”

Isaac Cedeno

Florida Youth Shine Board Delegate



“If youth are educated when they enter foster care, they will know about the protections that will help them fight against any injustice, pain, or hurt they may experience in care. We know that youth know how to be resilient. They shouldn’t have to be. But if they need to be, this bill gives them the opportunity to do so.”

Brian Thompson

Florida Youth Shine Vice Chair



“Youth in foster care aren’t aware of laws that can benefit them. By educating them they CAN have a better experience in foster care. FYS has advocated for this for a long time. We paid attention to the legislative process, learned a lot along the way, and worked with legislators. This showed us that change is a process, and dedication and passion can influence change. It’s an amazing feeling to know our voices made change.”

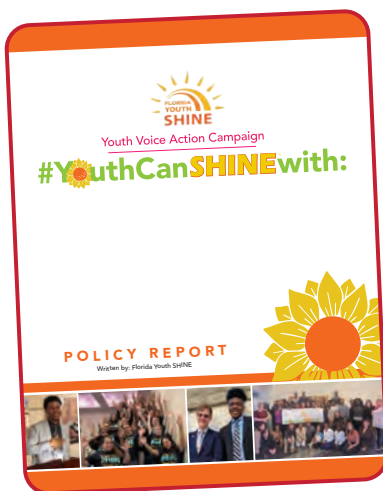
Selena Rose

Florida Youth Shine Administrative Chair

Passage now empowers youth in foster care, setting them on a path to a brighter future. THANK YOU to all who have been on this journey with Florida Youth SHINE, listening as they passionately described why they need this education. THANK YOU for making educating youth a priority.

Program Expansion: High Quality Direct Legal Representation

Quality legal representation is a fundamental cornerstone of Florida's Children First's mission. Yet, direct representation of youth was not offered despite hundreds of inquiries FCF received each year. That changed in 2023. Adding a staff attorney to team now allows FCF to provide independent, personalized guidance, brief advice, and quality representation to ensure more youth receive the representation they need and deserve. Though Christine Smith, the staff attorney hired to launch the new program joined the team late in 2023, her impact was immediate and impressive. The organization was able to provide advice and counsel to 193 clients, a 370% increase in the limited number of clients we could address the prior year.



#YouthCanSHINEwith Action Campaign

Every 2 years Florida Youth SHINE engages in a "Youth Action Cycle" to determine their top policy objectives to focus on. After surveying over 250 youth statewide for input, the FYS Policy & Initiatives Team (*Pi Team*), comprised of nearly 20 FYS youth, culled through all the response data. With so many critical issues raised, the Pi Team synthesized all the feedback into a 20-page policy brief of recommendations in 4 key areas that will help youth in care obtain better long-term outcomes. In addition to showcasing youth stories that illustrate why policy change is needed, each focus area offers actionable solutions that do not require legislative change, along with ones that do.

Armed with this bold blueprint for changing children's lives, FYS decided to expand their Youth Action Cycle into a powerful, multi-tier "Youth Voice Action Campaign" called: #YouthCanSHINEwith. The Pi Team shared the report with their peers at meetings statewide and sessions and workshop practitioners throughout the year throughout Florida and nationally.

Since the campaign launched, a remarkable **6 recommendations** from the report have been implemented in the inaugural cycle, including a major legislative win with powerful, positive implications for youth in care.



Florida Youth SHINE Educates & Advocates at DCF Statewide Summit

For the annual "Department of Children and Families Summit" in Orlando, 40 FYS members attended and 7 presented on a powerful panel entitled "#YouthcanSHINEwith Your Help! A Youth-led Action Session by Florida Youth SHINE" focused on ways child welfare professionals can help youth truly shine. FYS also had a breakfast with DCF leadership, discussing needs and priorities in a more intimate setting. Several youth on panel were featured on Orlando news station, WFTV 9, showcasing their advocacy journey.

Outstanding Child Advocates and Youth Honored in 2023

The annual “**Outstanding Advocates for Children Awards**” fundraisers once again celebrated the remarkable contributions to the well-being of children being made by some of Florida’s most passionate and dedicated child advocates and organizations. Nearly 700 people participated in 5 awards events across Florida, generating more than \$350,000 for the organization. Individuals, non-profits, and companies from around the state were honored along with 6 youths from foster care who were recognized for their resiliency, passion for helping their peers, and courage to lift their voice to improve conditions for future generations of youth in care.

2023 Outstanding Advocates for Children

Broward

- **H.O.M.E.S. Inc.** – *Outstanding Non-Profit Champion for Children*
- **Robert C. Lamarche** – *Outstanding Foster & Adoptive Parent*
- **Joshua Mincey** – *Outstanding Youth Advocate*

Miami

- **Esther Jacobo** - *Outstanding Champion for Children*
- **Florida Foster Care Review** – *Outstanding Non-Profit Champion for Children*
- **Dominique Rosario** – *Outstanding Youth Advocate*

Orlando

- **Universal Orlando Resort** – *Outstanding Corporate Champion for Children*
- **Lucas Daniel Boyce** - *Outstanding Child Advocate*
- **Valery Guzman** - *Outstanding Youth Advocate*

Palm Beach

- **Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County** - *Outstanding Champion for Children*
- **Junior League of the Palm Beaches** - *Outstanding Champions for Children*
- **Friends of Foster Children** - *Outstanding Non-Profit Champion for Children*
- **Sophia Coffey** - *Outstanding Youth Advocate*

Tampa

- **Foster Power** - *Outstanding Non-Profit Champion for Children*
- **Kelley Parris** - *Outstanding Child Advocate*
- **Aheim King** - *Outstanding Youth Advocate*
- **Eric Perry** - *Outstanding Youth Advocate*



Stories Behind Florida Children's First

Aheim King

Florida Youth SHINE Member

After Aheim's mother struggled with schizophrenia and experienced a mental breakdown, Aheim and his brother were separated and placed into foster care. Aheim required some medical assistance, and he was ultimately placed into relative care with an Aunt. Entering foster care, he said, felt "like being dumped into another world."

When Aheim turned 18, he was still in his senior year of high school. While his Aunt allowed him to stay with her until he went off to college, he had to pay her rent. Now technically, out of the system and on his own, he struggled to cover rent and transportation. He worked two jobs while trying to maintain his GPA, lost sleep and the juggling act added enormous stress.

Aheim's Independent Living Director and other mentors introduced him to other youth in foster care going through similar experiences. They encouraged him to participate in Florida Youth SHINE and there, he found another family of sorts with his peers in foster care. He found an outlet to open up about challenges he was facing in care, a support system that could help him address them, and a passion for advocating for himself and for others.

Aheim shared his story with decision makers when Florida Youth SHINE visited the Capitol during Children's Week. In addition to preparing his own talking points for these meetings, Aheim spent time helping other FYS members write and fine-tune their presentations for Children's Week to advocate for a key bill, participate in a DCF



workshop to explain the findings in the "YouthCanSHINEwith" Policy Report, and was featured in an Orlando TV news story on FYS advocacy.

"In Florida Youth SHINE I discovered peers who wrestled with emotions when facing judges, as I did when asked to speak out about my mother or living in the system. Many of my peers were also moved around to multiple placements. While I was fortunate to be reconnected with my siblings, many of my peers, I learned, were not as lucky. FYS helped me realize how fortunate I was in many ways, so I was glad to have the chance to speak out on these issues, using my voice to advocate for systemic change to help improve the system and change things for other youth."

Georgina Rodriguez

FCF Board Director & FYS Alumni

Georgina Rodriguez has spent her professional life immersed in child welfare issues. She has held roles in direct service, direct care, or direct support in Florida's child protection system for the last 15 years. She has held roles in Dependency Case Management, Independent Living Services, direct care in residential group homes, law enforcement, homeless services, and administrative support within CBC agencies and Children's Legal Services on behalf of DCF. Currently, she works as an analyst to prevent child sexual exploitation and safeguard children from harm.

But her expertise in the child protection arena runs deep. You see, Georgina spent 12 years in Florida's foster care system where she experienced hardship and maltreatment, was separated from her brother, and lived in nine different foster care placements. Upon aging out of care at 18, she was determined to build a life she could be proud of— one filled with love, healing, passion, and purpose.

Today, she has fulfilled her dream of becoming a social worker, giving back to the community, and impacting lives by serving children and families. Her resiliency comes from her faith in God and those who have supported her along the way. She credits Florida's Children First, and years spent as an active Florida Youth SHINE member, for her commitment to child advocacy and being a champion for the voiceless.

In Florida Youth SHINE, Georgina rose from Chapter Representative to Legislative Chair to Statewide Chair. She bravely shared her lived experiences with stakeholders in industry workshops to better educate and train child welfare professionals. She met with legislators and testified numerous times on behalf of legislation to improve the foster care system for future generations of children and families.



Indeed, she helped steer passage of some of the most groundbreaking bills and laws FYS ever championed, including the landmark "Normalcy" bill. In Washington D.C. she provided research, analysis, and direct experience on child welfare issues and testified in Congress, offering recommendations for enhancing child welfare systems across America.

Along the way, Georgina has encountered a "family" of caring individuals, positive role models, and supportive peers. Now in a position to ensure more youth like herself continue to benefit from all Florida Youth SHINE and FCF offer, she has stepped up to serve on Florida's Children First Board of Directors.

"When I found Florida Youth SHINE (FYS), there were no other groups of youth in foster care making the impact that FYS does. In a system where youth were once dismissed, FYS created a space where their voices are heard and decisions are made with them in mind. For over 20 years, FYS has led the way, making youth advocacy the norm. Their dedication inspired me to join the board of Florida's Children First, and I am honored to use my experiences to help protect Florida's most vulnerable children."



Taylor Sartor

*Attorney at Law & Creator of FosterPower
at L. David Shear Children's Law Center*

When FosterPower, a statewide movement to improve the lives and futures of youth in care was in the process of creating a unique, youth-friendly app and website that consolidates all the information on benefits, protections, and legal rights available to youth in one place, they needed feedback from the primary user base: The youth actually in foster care.

To obtain that input, they reached out to collaborate with Florida Youth SHINE. As Florida's premier child advocacy and youth voice organization for youth in the child welfare system, it was a natural choice. The organization was well-known for providing incisive input, candor, and professionalism. Foster Power's founder Taylor Sartor, expanded on her experiences working with Florida Youth SHINE and the value they brought to the project:

"Florida Youth Shine has been instrumental in ensuring youth voice is at the forefront of FosterPower. We held two user research sessions with FYS members to discuss their thoughts and opinions surrounding what type of information they would like to see in the app. Their feedback was pivotal in the overall design, content, and language of the final product. They even provided line-by-line feedback on specific sections. FYS members were also featured in our "FosterPower Youth Video Series" showcasing former foster youth who discuss their own experiences in foster care. As the first app of its kind in the state and the country, we have done presentations and trainings on the FosterPower app locally and nationally on the Florida Bar News, Stetson Law News, LawNext, LSC Law and Justice Podcast, the ABA, Annie E. Casey Foundation blog, and NPR, to name a few. Florida Youth SHINE has participated in many of these interviews."



Elevating Youth Voices



Eric Perry

2023 Outstanding Youth Advocate

“Sitting in front of a legislator and telling them the real deal of what it’s like in the foster care system was a bit easier for me, because I was just telling it like it is - and doing it for a good cause: So changes can be made to try to prevent other kids from experiencing some of the really bad stuff that my peers and I lived through. Now, I HAVE been through a LOT - some bad stuff no human being should go through. But some great people are always there for me, like my Florida Youth SHINE family. Florida Youth SHINE accepts me for who I am - even on my bad days! I’ve learned a lot by being part of it. And sharing my personal experiences to advocate for change has made a difference - including the major bills we got passed this year.”

Valery Guzman

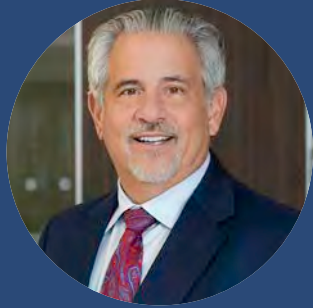
2023 Outstanding Youth Advocate

“Florida Youth SHINE members have become a supportive family to me. I am grateful for programs like Florida Youth SHINE where kids like me can learn with their peers how to be strong advocates for ourselves and for others. Thank you so much for this opportunity and for providing a platform for our voices to be heard. It’s exciting to see how we can make a difference.”



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CHILDREN
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FIGHTING FOR
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



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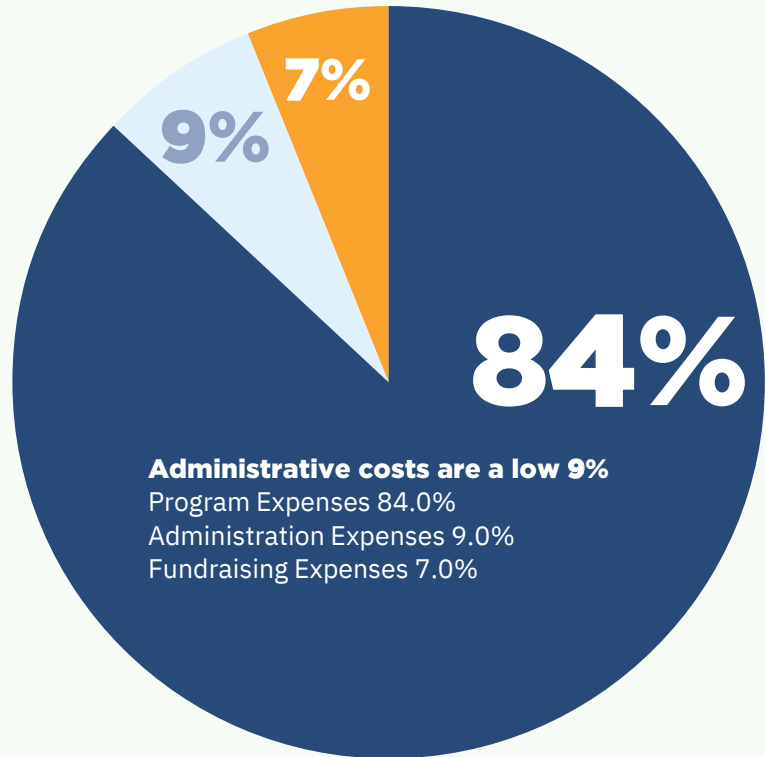
Isaac Cedeno
Statewide Board
Delegate



Denise Dorman
Statewide Board
Delegate



Our 2023 Financials



INCOME

Grants	\$651,374
Contributions	\$693,648
Investment/Dividend Income	\$17,664
Total Income	\$1,362,686

EXPENSES

Legislative Education	\$ 39,824
Salaries	\$384,741
FYS Operating Expenses	\$207,332
Occupancy	\$30,770
Events	\$64,000
Training	\$5,627
Fundraising	\$6,800
General Operating	\$328,878
Total Expenses	\$1,161,845



Accountability & Finance Score: **100**

“This beacon provides an assessment of a charity’s financial health (financial efficiency, sustainability, and trustworthiness) and its commitment to governance practices and policies. Scores are assessed on three consecutive years of data.”

- *Charity Navigator*





2023 Supporters

Our heartfelt thanks for the generous contributions of our supporters. Your extraordinary act of giving has enabled us to provide education, training, advocacy, empowerment, and hope to thousands of children, families, and professionals across Florida. Because of you, their path to a brighter future is possible. Thank you!

\$25,000 & above

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\$500 - 999

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Looking Ahead

As we approach the threshold of another new year, we look forward with hope and anticipation to tackling new challenges and creating more impact. With our new strategic plan as our guide, we are setting goals that stretch further and uplift more children and families in Florida's foster care system. Here is a snapshot of what lies ahead as we advance into the new year.

• **Implementing New Strategic Plan**

With a robust new roadmap for the future developed through our strategic planning process, we are poised to move into the implementation phase. Our efforts will be focused on helping children, strengthening our governing board, diversifying funding sources, and creating a cohesive and well-communicated brand. Moreover, this plan will guide Florida Youth SHINE as we embark on the next phase of our journey, ensuring we remain well-positioned to pursue our invaluable advocacy work.

• **Expanding FYS Chapter Network**

Active community engagement is central to our mission of supporting youth in care across the state and strengthening our advocacy efforts. With our new FYS Community Engagement Manager now on board, we look forward to expanding our reach across Florida, launching new chapters, and amplifying the collective voices of Florida Youth SHINE so they resonate powerfully throughout the centers of influence.

• **Elevating Youth Voices and Prioritizing Their Needs**

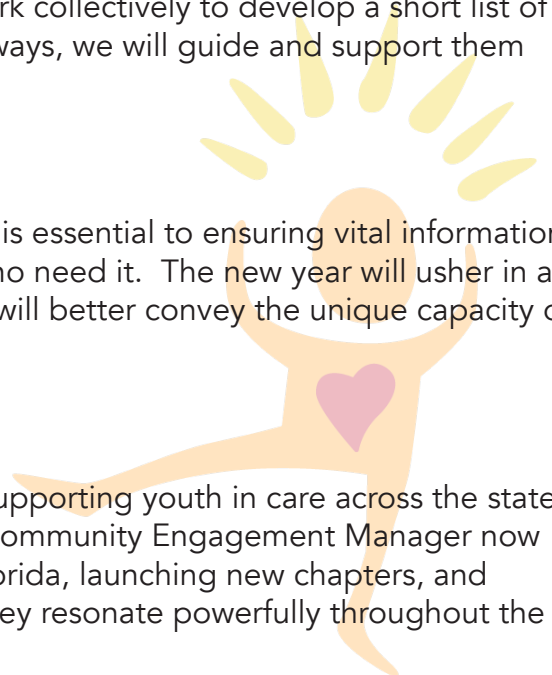
With a key Florida Youth SHINE priority for over half a decade finally achieved after passage of the "Education for Youth in Foster Care Bill," we turn our sights on identifying the next FYS priority. A new youth "action cycle" will begin again. Florida Youth SHINE will query youth in care statewide to find out what their needs and key concerns are. They will work collectively to develop a short list of topics and select their focus areas for future advocacy. As always, we will guide and support them through the process.

• **Enhancing Communications Tools**

A relevant, easy to access and comprehend online presence is essential to ensuring vital information and resources are available to the youth and practitioners who need it. The new year will usher in a revamped website and enhanced communication tools that will better convey the unique capacity of Florida's Children First to serve Florida's vulnerable youth.

• **Publications and Educational Tools**

Active community engagement is central to our mission of supporting youth in care across the state and strengthening our advocacy efforts. With our new FYS Community Engagement Manager now on board, we look forward to expanding our reach across Florida, launching new chapters, and amplifying the collective voices of Florida Youth SHINE so they resonate powerfully throughout the centers of influence.



- **Strengthening Partner Collaborations & Lived-Expertise Opportunities**

Experiences shape expertise. Those closest to a problem typically offer great insights into solving it. By deepening our partnerships with so many valued collaborators, we will expand opportunities for youth to share their lived experiences to educate, inform, and be an integral part of decision-making processes.

- **Championing High-Quality Legal Representation**

We remain resolute in our commitment to ensuring that young people in care have a top-tier legal advocate who stands by them, guides them, champions their rights, and supports them on the complex road to excellence and independence.

♥ **By raising public awareness, building partnerships, and fostering coalitions, Florida's Children First will fight to protect children's rights and make opportunities for children a top priority in the consciousness of every Floridian.**



Your Support Makes A Difference



 **Join Us
In Shaping
Brighter
Futures**

Your donation isn't just a gift – it's a declaration that children's needs come first.

Today, you can transform a child's trajectory toward a brighter tomorrow. With our 4-star charity rating, rest assured your donation directly funds programs that significantly uplift youth.

Donate today – be the catalyst for change in a child's life.

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Confidence
TO A 4-STAR
CHARITY!



Charity Navigator **99**
OUT OF **100**

Get Involved!

- VOLUNTEER
- ATTEND
- CONNECT
- DONATE 
- CONNECT



There is more work to do!

All of us working together can create a future that shines bright for youth.
Join us on our journey to transform the lives of children.



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