

# FLORIDA'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: A ROADMAP TO PROTECTING OUR MOST VULNERABLE

**300,000**  
Florida Abuse  
Hotline Calls

Not Substantiated  
35.3% of cases  
(May or may not have case opened.)

**Investigation**  
**186,504 CASES**  
Department of Children  
and Families  
**137,872 CASES**  
Sherriff's Office  
**48,632 CASES**



Verified  
**17.9%**  
of cases

Services provided to support families not requiring protective supervision.



Community-Based Care Lead  
and Provider Agency  
Involmtment

**Protective Supervision Case  
Opened:**

If a case is transferred for ongoing oversight, the family will receive services (14,190 cases in 2014).



**Court Case Opened**  
(Not all service cases will have a court case opened.)

No Indicators  
46.8% of cases

**Family Reunification**  
48.3% of cases

**Adoption**  
21.7% of cases

**Relative/Permanent Guardianship**  
21.8% of cases

**Extended Foster Care**  
1,066 cases  
(in 2014)



Exit to Permanency

**Judicial Review**  
(every 6 months)

Continue Court  
Supervision

**CBC Lead or Provider Agency Services**

**Placements:**

Safe Harbor  
In-home  
Relative  
Foster Home  
Group Home  
Residential Treatment

**Case Management:**

Preliminary  
Case Plan  
Monthly Visits  
Service  
Coordination  
Documentation

**Services:**

Health  
Mental Health  
Education  
Training  
Substance Abuse  
Domestic Violence  
Supplementary  
Support Services

**Case Plan**

**Child Is Unsafe**

**Child Is Safe**

Shelter Hearing

Arraignment

Case Dismissed

(1 month)  
Disposition  
or Adjudication

\*All data is from 2014 and was acquired via the Florida Department of Children and Families.

**FLORIDA ABUSE HOTLINE CALL-** Florida's Child Abuse Hotline professionals accept calls 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Each year more than 300,000 calls are made to the hotline and 62% are accepted for investigation.

**SCREENED OUT-** If the situation does not meet the state's definition of maltreatment, or too little information is supplied, the report is "screened out" and not accepted for investigation.

**VERIFIED-** This investigative finding is used when a preponderance of credible evidence exists that results in a determination that the specific harm or threat of harm was the result of abuse, abandonment or neglect. In high risk cases where abuse is verified, a referral to the Community Based Care (CBC) Lead Agency is made for services.

**NOT SUBSTANTIATED-** This investigative finding is used when there is credible evidence, which does not meet the threshold of being a preponderance, to support that the specific harm was the result of abuse, abandonment or neglect. High risk cases may be referred to the CBC Lead Agency if the family would benefit from additional services and protective supervision.

**NO INDICATORS** – This investigative finding is used when there is no credible evidence to support the allegations of abuse, abandonment or neglect. No further services are provided.

**INVESTIGATION-** Once a call to the Florida Abuse Hotline is accepted, it is referred to either a DCF or Sheriff's office for a Child Protective Investigator to conduct a thorough investigation that aligns with Florida's Safety Methodology.

**SHERIFF OR DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES-** Hotline calls accepted for investigation are either referred to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Child Protective Investigators (CPI) or to Sheriff's Office Child Protective Investigators (in Broward, Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco, Manatee and Seminole counties).

**COMMUNITY-BASED CARE LEAD AND PROVIDER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT-** When a Sheriff's Investigator or DCF CPI concludes there is sufficient evidence to open a child protection case, the family is referred to the CBC Lead Agency who initiates a services case and assumes all responsibility for the case. If the child is determined by the CPI to be unsafe, the Court may first grant an emergency shelter to place the child in out-of-home care.

**PROTECTIVE SUPERVISION CASE OPENED-** A child protection investigation with findings of "verified" or "not substantiated" maltreatment may be referred to actions such as intensive in-home services to solve problems and build parenting skills. A wide array of services are made available to the family once referred to the CBC Lead Agency. The child may or may not be involved in an open court case while receiving services.

**COURT HEARINGS-** Florida's dependency court system is responsible, after hearing all parties and evidence, for making a decision on the placement of a child as well as any required services to be provided, visitation rights of the parents and any other rulings in the case of special circumstances.

**SHELTER HEARING-** If an investigation discovers evidence of abuse and DCF or the Sheriff's investigator removes a child from their home, a judge can either

agree that the removal is justified or disagree with the petition and order the child returned to the parent(s). This hearing must take place within 24 hours of the child being taken into custody.

**ARRAIGNMENT-** When a Shelter Petition (petition served to the parents and filed with the court removing the child from their care) is granted, Florida law requires that grounds for dependency must be filed and responded to in court within specific timeframes. A Dependency Petition is used (whether or not the child was sheltered) to determine whether the child meets the criteria for dependency and a court case to monitor the child's ongoing safety monitoring is needed. During this hearing the parents are expected to enter a plea to the petition of either Admit (they acknowledge it happened as stated), Consent (they are willing to consent to dependency without admitting fault) or Deny (they disagree with the petition and are willing to go to trial).

**ADJUDICATION-** If a parent denies the allegations at Arraignment, a trial is scheduled. If the parent is found to have perpetrated the abuse, neglect or abandonment, the child is adjudicated dependent. If the parent is found to have not perpetrated the abuse, neglect or abandonment, the court case is closed. The child is adjudicated if the parent Admits or Consents to the petition, or the child is found dependent after an adjudicatory hearing when a parent denies and the case goes to trial.

**DISPOSITION-** A Disposition Hearing is scheduled when a parent admits to the allegations set forth at Arraignment, consents to a Dependency Petition or when the child is found dependent at a trial. This hearing is used to determine case plan goals and for the judge to review the child's placement and plan for permanency.

**JUDICIAL REVIEW-** A court review of every dependency case is required by federal law every 6 months to determine the status of the child and compliance with the case plan. This review examines the need for changes in the case plan and child's placement. If the case reaches a term of 11 months, the Judicial Review is also a Permanency Hearing where the court determines whether a goal change is needed for the child to achieve a permanent, nurturing family. This could mean continuing the goal of reunification with their family of origin or changing the goal to adoption, permanent guardianship or another planned permanent living arrangement.

**COMMUNITY-BASED CARE LEAD AGENCY-** Comprised of 17 not-for-profit organizations, CBCs contract with DCF for all child welfare services in a specific geographic area. These services include child abuse prevention, family support services, placement, case management, health and education coordination, foster care and adoption.

**PLACEMENT-** When a child is determined to be unsafe a decision must be made if the child should be placed in out-of-home care with relatives or non-relatives or placed in licensed foster care (including a family foster home, residential group home or residential treatment facility).

**CASE MANAGEMENT-** The responsibility of a Case Manager is to work with the family and system partners to determine the needs and services that children and families require, achieving a safe outcome for each child. The first task of a Case Manager is preparing a preliminary case plan for submission to the Court. This

includes talking to all parties involved to determine the most appropriate course of action and services needed. The Case Manager is responsible for making at least monthly visits with the child and family, referring the family to service providers, providing updates to the Court at regular intervals and coordinating many aspects of the case.

**SERVICES-** When a child enters the community-based care system the State becomes responsible for all of the child's needs including health, education, dental care, food, shelter, safety and well-being. All needs of the child are documented in the case plan and services are arranged according to these needs.

**CASE PLAN-** A case plan outlines the safety issues identified and what needs to occur for the child to safely return home or achieve permanency by another means. The case plan should be developed with the family of origin. It outlines tasks for the parents and addresses the child's needs through services and permanency. Once the Court approves a case plan it becomes a formal court document that obligates both the CBC Lead Agency and the family/guardians to fulfill their responsibilities.

**EXIT FROM THE SYSTEM TO PERMANENCY-** In order for abused children to not languish in the child welfare system, Congress enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). It requires states to focus on returning children safely home within 12 months or placing them with a permanent family.

**FAMILY REUNIFICATION-** In the case of family reunification the court determines that the parents have met the obligations in the case plan and that it is safe for the child to be returned to them.

**ADOPTION-** When the court determines that a child in foster care will not be reunited with their parents, adoption is the preferred permanency option. In many cases relatives or foster parents adopt these children.

**RELATIVE/PERMANENT GUARDIANSHIP-** The court may consider legal guardianship as a permanent living arrangement if a child cannot be safely returned to their home within the timeframe required by law and adoption is not feasible. Guardianship gives the caregiver (relative or other) permanent custody of the child, but parental rights are not terminated. Guardians have authority over decisions regarding protection, education and care without the involvement of the child welfare system.

**EXTENDED FOSTER CARE-** The laws and rules of the child welfare system apply to persons under the age of 18, but a child who is in licensed care on their 18th birthday can choose to remain in care until the age of 21 (or 22 if they have a documented disability). Youth in extended foster care continue to have the support of the child welfare system while they attend school or a technical program. If a child does not choose to remain in care, they may still be eligible for some aftercare support services upon turning 18 that are designed to prevent homelessness and other poor outcomes historically prevalent in youth aging out of care without permanency. Youth may also opt to return to extended foster care at any time before they turn 21 if they chose to opt out.