



About Us

Established in 2003, Partnership for Strong Families (PSF) is the lead community-based care agency for Florida Judicial Circuits three and eight. PSF is contracted by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to deliver comprehensive child welfare services to children who are victims of abuse and neglect. PSF also works with at-risk families to prevent child abuse and to decrease the risk of children entering the out-of-home care system. PSF serves nearly 5,000 children in 13 counties annually, including Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor and Union Counties.

Mission

To enhance the community's ability to protect and nurture children by building, maintaining and constantly improving a network of family support services

Vision

To be a recognized leader in protecting children and strengthening families through innovative, evidence-based practices and highly effective, engaged employees and community partners

Core Principles

- To provide a safe environment for all children
- To make prevention of child abuse and neglect a community priority
- To individualize services to meet the needs of children and families
- To respect the inherent dignity of children and families with permanency in mind
- To recognize that more can be done with communities and families as partners
- To respect the diversity of all children and families in the community
- To commit to accountability using outcomes to measure performance and improve practice
- To maintain children in their own homes whenever safely possible

Our History

In 1998, the Florida legislature mandated that all foster care and related services be privatized, or provided through contract by private, non-profit agencies across the state. This transition was to begin in January, 2000 and be completed over a three-year period. The concept was dubbed Community Based Care (CBC), with the intent of building a stronger, more effective system through a community-driven process that was to be advocacy-based, locally organized and empowered.

The initial contract between DCF and PSF was signed on June 29, 2003. Since that time, PSF has been the Lead Agency for child welfare services in North Central Florida, though we are by no means the only agency. PSF subcontracts case management services through Camelot Community Care, Children's Home Society, Devereux North Florida, CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services and Pathways Human Services of Florida. We utilize a network more than 60 service providers, including major mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence agencies.

What We Provide

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|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Protective Supervision/Case Management | Neighborhood Resource Centers |
| Foster Home Licensing and Placement | Family Team Conferencing |
| In-Home Services | Wrap-Around Services |
| Adoption Services | Extended Foster Care & Independent Living Services |
| Prevention and Diversion Services | System of Care Development, Oversight & Support |

Statistics

- Approximately 450,000 children per year enter out-of-home care in the United States
- There are 20,000 children in out-of-home care in the state of Florida
- There are approximately 800 children in out-of-home care in North Central Florida
- There are more than 35 children available for adoption in North Central Florida
- Partnership for Strong Families and its partners have helped reduce the number of children entering out-of-home care by 46 percent

Three Pillars

Resource Center Model

A hallmark of PSF's system of care is our belief that child abuse is preventable. We have found that by providing resources and supports to families in need on the front end, many can avoid reaching the crises that lead to formal child welfare involvement. Not only is this best for the children, it is a more cost-effective use of resources. Thanks to Florida being awarded a Title IV-E waiver from the federal government, we are now able to utilize funds formerly available only after a child was removed from the home to provide safety and strengthening services up-front. This has resulted in a dramatic shift in our allocation of resources and one that has proved impactful. In the area surrounding PSF's first resource center, the Library Partnership, the number of children removed from the home as a result of abuse and neglect has dropped by 76%, compared to 46% in PSF's other coverage areas. Since opening the first center, PSF has collaborated on two additional centers, also strategically located in hot-spot areas that have had historically high incidences of abuse and low accessibility to resources.

Each of the resource centers PSF operates are a partnership endeavor with larger entities such as the county library district, county government or grassroots community groups, as well as more than 40 agencies who partner with the center to provide services at no cost to families. Every service offered is tied to one of the five Protective Factors (concrete supports in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, nurturing and attachment, social connections and family functioning and resiliency), which when present in families are shown to reduce the likelihood of abuse or neglect. Each center evolves to meet the specific needs of the community it is located within and strives to involve community members in guiding decisions.

Permanency Roundtable

In collaboration with Casey Family Programs, PSF implemented the Permanency Roundtable process in the fall of 2010. The project is aimed at finding permanent families for children who linger in foster care. PSF is participating in an evaluation project along with two other Florida sites, Duval and Broward counties. The project targets children who have a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), and has since been expanded to include children with an adoption goal without an identified prospective adoptive home and to children identified through the Permanency Staffing process whose permanency plan is uncertain.

The Permanency Roundtable is a professional case consultation that provides support to the caseworker while taking an in-depth look at the child's situation by applying 5 questions: (1) What will it take for this child to achieve permanency? (2) What can we do that has been tried successfully before? (3) What can we do that has never been tried? (4) What can we do concurrently to help this child achieve permanency? and (5) How can we engage the child in permanency planning?

The goal of the Permanency Roundtable initiative is to help change the culture in child welfare to one that demands permanency for every child in out-of-home care. Research tells us those children who achieve permanency fare better than peers who age-out of foster care in the areas of social-emotional development, educational attainment, financial stability and physical and mental health.

Family Team Conferences

Services such as Family Team Conferencing (FTC) reinforce family values, appropriately resolve family conflicts and improve communication among family members in a natural environment, such as the family's home or a local library, church or community center. Our programs strengthen parenting skills and household management, integrate families into their communities and create stable, nurturing homes. Through this supportive process, we equip parents with the necessary tools to cope with the daily stresses of family life.

Almost everyone can identify a time when they formed a team, sometimes involving professional help, to meet a specific need. In a crisis, families need a support network of people they trust who can help in responding to the issues they face. That's where PSF steps in. Trained facilitators work with the family team to learn what the family hopes to accomplish, set reasonable and meaningful goals, recognize and affirm the family strengths, assess family needs, find solutions to meet family needs and design individualized supports and services that match the family's needs and build on its strengths.

As part of a 1.8 million dollar grant from the Children's Bureau, PSF conducted an evaluation of Family Team Conferencing. The purpose of this research project was to test different approaches of FTC. The results of this study were of major importance in helping PSF evaluate the value of FTC in achieving desired outcomes and improving services with children and families.

Initiatives

Family Centered Practice

PSF utilizes services and programs that focus on the family as whole and support its culture, networks and community. As such, PSF partners with families to help define problems and identify solutions customized to the family. We work to ensure that

investigators, case managers and other service providers interact with families in a way that evokes trust, respect and empathy and treats families as partners in the assessment, planning and decision-making processes. The cornerstone of a Family Centered Practice Model is family inclusion, accommodation and participation.

With Family Centered Practice, we engage families in every aspect of care, problem-solving and guided support, treating the family and its support system as a unified team instead of separating the interests of adults, children and service providers. Recognizing that each person is aiming for the same goal enables us to employ proven-effective methods to help establish a safe, supportive and permanent home for children.

Family Support Consultants

PSF's Family Support Consultants (FSCs) are Master's level staff who work very closely with the Department of Children and Families to help promote sound decision-making and the provision of appropriate services and supports. They provide the opportunity to discuss investigations of families where children are deemed safe, yet living in households in which there are significant risk factors related to the likelihood of future of abuse or neglect. As a result of the safe determination, these families do not receive ongoing case management services, and while appropriate services and supports are considered for the families, these are voluntary and require agreement from the parents or caregivers; thus, increasing vulnerability of the children.

In an effort to promote future success for these families by safely preventing the need for further child welfare involvement, the FSCs facilitate multidisciplinary, Family Support Staffings and informal consultations with the Child Protective Investigators and their supervisors. These discussions are designed to promote critical thinking necessary to enhance the assessment and analysis of current family functioning, caregiver protective capacities, identified risk factors and family or individual needs. In addition to Family Support Staffings, these individuals also facilitate intakes for the Family Connections program, an intensive, in-home program designed specifically for safe but high risk families meeting specific criteria.

Utilization Management

PSF's Utilization Management System provides a model in which services delivered to our clients are timely, cost effective and individualized. Services are delivered with discrete units versus a program of service provision as well as from a flexible service array through referral coordination and service authorization. This system allows PSF the ability to tailor services to the unique needs of our clients as well as assess and fill in gaps in the service array.

With a dedicated Utilization Management team of professionals, PSF stands as an organization that has greatly expanded its system of care by shifting its service array to a discrete unit usage system, reducing logistical concerns for providers, developing an ever-growing prevention/diversion program and integrating evidence-based, family-centered practices into the entire model.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Partner Family?

- Partner Families are changing out-of-home care by preserving a sense of connection and permanency in the life of every child, even during the most challenging times. This is done by promoting reunification with the natural family; but if this cannot be achieved, then by parenting the child through the adoption process.

What are the requirements to be a Partner Family?

- Partner Families must have a legal, stable source of income that is sufficient to support themselves. They must attend and graduate from Parent Resources for Information Development and Education (P.R.I.D.E.), a 9-week training program. Often Partner Families will work with biological parents to ensure that the child is in a permanent, safe home.

Do I need to be married to adopt or become a Partner Family?

- No, you do not need to be married to become a partner or adoptive parent.

Is there financial help if I become a partner or adoptive parent?

- Partner Families receive a monthly board rate. Medical care is covered by Medicaid, and subsidized childcare is available for working partner parents. Adoptive parents receive a monthly Maintenance Adoption Subsidy to assist with the additional costs of adding a child to the family.

How long does the adoption process take?

- The timeframe varies from case to case, but the background checks, PRIDE training and a home study can usually be completed in less than nine months.

How much does it cost to adopt?

- When you adopt a child from the State of Florida, you will not be charged an adoption fee or fees related to pre-adoptive training, home studies or placement. There may be expenses related to attorney fees and court costs, but these are usually reimbursed by the state.

Is post-adoption support provided?

- Yes, the local community-based care agency that assisted you in completing the adoption provides support such as information and referral services, support groups, adoption-related libraries, case management and training. To find out what options are available to you in your area, talk with your adoption counselor or contact your regional office of the Department of Children and Families.

What is the Library Partnership and how is Partnership for Strong Families involved?

- In 2007, PSF, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCF) and Casey Family Programs teamed up to develop a concept to reduce the number of children entering the foster care system by targeting vulnerable communities. This research led to the Library Partnership (LP) opening its doors in July 2009. This center opened in the same building as a branch of the Alachua County Library District in order to reduce the stigma people may feel about going into a social service center.

What is the SWAG Family Resource Center and how is Partnership for Strong Families involved?

- After unprecedented success with the LP, PSF was asked to be the operating partner of the SWAG Family Resource Center (SWAG FRC), which opened in June 2012 to serve southwest Gainesville. The resource center is a collaborative effort between the grassroots community organization SouthWest Advocacy Group (SWAG), PSF and Alachua County.

What is the Cone Park Library Resource Center and how is Partnership for Strong Families involved?

- The collaboration between the Alachua County Library District and PSF was so successful that a second joint center, Cone Park Library Resource Center was opened in December 2013. This center serves Southeast Gainesville and is unique as it is co-located with ample indoor and outdoor recreation facilities including the Eastside Recreation Center, a competition-grade track, playground, basketball court and green space.

What is the Tri-County Community Resource Center and how is Partnership for Strong Families involved?

- In March 2015, PSF's fourth center, Tri-County Community Resource Center (TCCRC) opened in Chiefland to serve Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy Counties. The center opened in partnership with the city of Chiefland, FL and Tri-County Community Resources, a group of individuals and organizations who have come together to develop and share available resources in Dixie, Gilchrist and Levy counties.

Key Stakeholders



Stephen Pennypacker

President and CEO

Stephen Pennypacker, Esq., joined PSF as President and CEO in April 2014. Pennypacker has more than 10 years' experience working in child welfare as an attorney and administrator and most recently served as Assistant Secretary for Programs for the Department of Children and Families. In this role, his duties included oversight of policy development, rule-making and maintenance of programs for adoptions, domestic violence, foster care, adult protection, homelessness, child care licensing, background screening, federal compliance, federal grants, quality assurance and contract management for Florida's child protection system. He managed a multi-million dollar budget and worked regularly with the Legislature and the Governor's office.

Prior to this role, Pennypacker was the national president for the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children, served as a Deputy Director for Children's Legal Services and presided as General Magistrate for the Eighth Judicial Circuit. He also worked for the State Attorney's office at the time DCF began to privatize, managing the local pilot project for Children's Legal Services, and spent 15 years in private practice prior to concentrating his career in child welfare.

Throughout the time Pennypacker has served in statewide leadership roles, he has always maintained strong ties to his roots in North Central Florida. He is a graduate of P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School and went on to receive a Bachelor's in Political Science from Duke University. He returned to Gainesville to attend law school at the University of Florida, where he remains an Adjunct Professor today. He and his wife, Teresa Drake, have three children and one grandchild and reside in historic Northeast Gainesville.



Thelma Clayton

Senior Vice President of Programs, Partnership for Strong Families

Thelma Clayton was appointed Senior Vice President of Programs in November 2008, where she oversees all operational programs, including out-of-home care, adoptions, case management and partner family recruitment. Prior to working for Partnership for Strong Families, Clayton served as the Operations Program Administrator for the Department of Children and Families. In 2007, Clayton was presented with Partnership for Strong Families' Shining Star Award. In addition, she has received the Outstanding Performance Award from the Department of Children and Families in 2004 and the Ellen Foster Award and Outstanding Service to Dependent Children, Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Award in 1999. Clayton holds a Bachelor of Arts in

Criminal Justice from the University of Central Florida and a Master of Arts in Adult Education from the University of South Florida.



Pebbles Edelman

Senior Vice President of Clinical and Community Services, Partnership for Strong Families

Pebbles Edelman, appointed Senior Vice President of Clinical and Community Services in 2009, is responsible for the oversight and development of all clinical and family preservation programs within PSF's system of care, as well as provider and community relations. Prior to working with Partnership for Strong Families, Edelman served as the Program Director at Meridian Behavioral Healthcare. She has received numerous awards for her achievements including the Distinguished Service Award for Exemplary Service to the Counseling Profession from the University of Florida in 2006 and a Meridian Outstanding Supervisor Award in 1998. In addition, she was presented with Partnership for Strong Families' Rising Star

Award in 2009. Edelman holds a master's degree and a specialist's degree in counselor education from the University of Florida and has been a Licensed Mental Health Counselor since 1997.



Michael Reneke

Senior VP of Finance and Administration

Michael Reneke was named Senior Vice President for Finance & Administration, assuming leadership for the Information Technology and Finance Departments in addition to his Contract Management and Quality Assurance Department oversight in 2011. Mr. Reneke joined PSF as a Contracts Coordinator in 2005, quickly earning a promotion to the position of Contract Manager. His success in that role elevated him to Contract Manager Supervisor in 2006. He was subsequently promoted to Vice President of Administration and Quality in 2009. Mr. Reneke's prior work history includes public sector experience as a Senior Public

Assistance Specialist with the State of Florida, a grant analyst for the Florida Partnership for School Readiness and Operations Management Consultant with the Department. He also served with the Agency for Workforce Innovation and with Early Learning Coalitions. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of West Florida.



Dr. Michael Bowie

Chairman, Partnership for Strong Families' Board of Directors

Dr. Michael Bowie was appointed chairman of the Partnership for Strong Families' Board of Directors in January 2011. Since joining the board in 2007, Bowie has served as the secretary and treasurer of the board. In one of his primary roles, Bowie served as chair of the finance committee, where he was responsible for financial oversight of the organization, including budgeting and financial planning, financial reporting and the creation and monitoring of internal controls and accountability policies.

In addition to his role on the PSF board, Bowie is an active member of his community. He most recently served as the 32nd president of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, Inc. and the president of the Alachua County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and also serves on the advisory board of One Church, One Child of Florida, a program developed to assist in the adoption of children. Bowie is the director of recruitment, retention and multicultural affairs at the University of Florida.