



PARTNERSHIP FOR
**STRONG
FAMILIES**

Partnership Connection

APRIL - JUNE
2020

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Featured Story

Read about our amazing community partners who have supported us during COVID-19 on page 5.

NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

By Sara Lind, Outreach Recruitment Specialist

National Foster Care Month is a time to celebrate our Partner Families (foster families) and to advocate for our youth in foster care. Our community thrives when we take care of each other, and that is what our Partner Families do each and every day - work to ensure children have a safe and loving place to call home. We are seeing generations change and families work toward reunification with the support of our local Partner Families. We hope our Partner Families feel especially seen, supported and encouraged this month as we continue to partner together to see change.

National Foster Care Month is also an opportunity for our community to realize the part that they play in foster care. Whether it is serving as a Partner Family or helping a foster family with meals or babysitting. There is always something that we can do to invest in the next generation.

This month, we will be sharing all of the ways that individuals and families can get involved through the #WeFosterHope #WeFosterLove #WeFosterCare campaign, which highlights different levels of advocacy. #WeFosterHope by supporting our local youth in foster care through our Normalcy Fund, which supports their participation in important extra-curricular activities. Donations can be made at www.pfsf.org/donate. #WeFosterLove by supporting local Partner Families by offering support such as a home-cooked meal or childcare. If you don't already know a Partner Family, contact us and we'll connect you! #WeFosterCare by taking that first step to learn more about becoming a Partner or Adoptive Family (visit www.partnerfamily.org to learn how!).

The possibilities are endless. Something as simple as putting our agency's recruitment material at your place of business or church may just inspire someone to pick up the phone and call to learn more about what fostering could look like for their family. No matter what you have to offer, it is enough to make a big difference in the life of a child. We all want to see our community thrive so tune in during the month of May to learn how you can make a difference.



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MESSAGE FROM THE CEO



Stephen Pennypacker
President/CEO

Dear esteemed community members, partners and friends,

I hope this letter finds you and your family in good health. Over the last two months, our agency like many around the world are feeling the impacts of COVID-19. In early March, we were brought face-to-face with a new reality that presented significant challenges and demanded changes to our system of care. While navigating this transition has not always been easy, we are dedicated to supporting our families and children and everyone who joins us in fulfilling that mission.

Our team is following protocol from health authorities to ensure the health and safety of those we serve as well as our own staff. Staff who can work from home are doing so while we maintain a small team at each of our offices. All visits that can take place virtually are doing so, while face-to-face visits are being conducted to ensure as little contact as possible. In addition, our Resource Centers are employing health screenings and other safety measures so that needed services and supports are being delivered to families in a safe environment. You can read more about these measures on page 8 of this issue.

With all these changes in procedure, I must commend our staff, caregivers and families and our network of partners and providers who are setting the best example of what our community of care is all about. Individuals from our internal staff are stepping up to assist colleagues who now have additional responsibilities or are working outside of their normal job duties to help keep our Resource Centers open and operating to families in need. Our caregivers and Partner Families are stepping in to provide childcare for foster parents who are providing essential services through their jobs, and many caregivers have even expressed their willingness to accept a COVID-positive placement, should the need arise. Biological families are patiently working with our staff and caregivers as we all adjust to new visit procedures to ensure the health and safety of all parties involved. And through it all, our network of providers have continued to provide their services, using tele-health options to keep connected with the children and families in our care. I am grateful for the outstanding individuals who choose to collaborate with us on a daily basis.

PSF will continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic and provide consistent updates as they are available. For more information, please visit our website at www.pfsf.org/covid19. Again, we cannot thank individuals like you enough who support our agency, especially during challenging times like these.

Stephen Pennypacker
President/CEO

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK: Community Relations and Recruitment Update



Patty Carroll
Director of
Communications and
Engagement

I hope this newsletter finds you and your families safe and well. During these uncertain times, I find myself in awe at how much can change in a day, week or month. As we started 2020 and began plans for our agency's annual events and fundraisers, we never could have expected our plans to shift so dramatically.

COVID-19 has changed the way we do so much, yet our mission has remained to keep our local children and families safe and strong. As you'll see in this issue, we have been able to carry forth our efforts at our Resource Centers, our case management services, our recruitment initiatives and much more.

Our Community Relations team has quickly realigned many of our campaigns and planned events to continue in a more virtual world. We are working together with our fellow Community-

Based Care agencies throughout the state, the Florida Coalition for Children and the Department of Children and Families to share best practices and learn from one another. I've been most excited about the opportunities for innovation we have seen recently, resulting in virtual Foster Care and Adoption Info Nights, use of technology that allows for face-to-face interaction over a computer or phone and, sometimes, increased communication with our partners and teammates to make up for interactions lost through social distancing. Yes, times are hard, but from challenge springs opportunity and hope.

As we look forward, our team will continue to keep the safety of children in our care and throughout the community our top priority. Thank you for the opportunity to share our initiatives with you through this publication. I wish all of our readers and partners the best as we adjust to new ways of living and connecting.

MY INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

By: Vanessa Gomez, Community Relations Intern

As my time with Partnership for Strong Families comes to an end, I have been able to reflect on everything I have learned throughout my journey. First and foremost, I will say that I have learned a lot; not just about the child welfare system, but about different skills that I will be able to use in my career moving forward.

One of the significant highlights throughout my experience would definitely have to be the Rally In Tally event. During this time, I was given the opportunity to travel with other PSF employees and foster families to Tallahassee. While there, we were able to speak with state representatives about children in our care and initiatives that should be discussed moving forward. This day allowed me to learn about legislation that PSF was advocating for, and their current efforts to strive for positive change for the children and families in their care. To hear both foster parents and PSF employees express their passion to state representatives was something extremely special that I will remember for a long time.

Something that was also stressed through out my internship was the idea of normalcy. Throughout my time here, I was able to create many graphics involving normalcy. Normalcy is the idea of providing resources for children in PSF's care that children would typically have: school field trips, prom dresses and extracurricular activities. Prior to working with PSF, I did not truly know how impactful it can be. Normalcy doesn't just mean providing these experiences, but also includes providing other things such as: toiletries, underwear, backpacks etc. I had never thought about how children in the child welfare system may not really have access to things that others would. Learning about the idea of normalcy opened my eyes to much more.

Partnership for Strong Families has taught me beyond what I expected, and my experience here will forever hold a special place in my heart. I will carry skills that I have learned moving forward, and hope to be equally as passionate as those surrounding me during the time of my internship.

HEART GALLERY FEATURE: MEET OUR AMAZING YOUTH AVAILABLE FOR ADOPTION



JAVAUN - 16 YEARS OLD

Javaun is a teen who is optimistic about his future and strongly desires a forever family. He is active and enjoys a variety of outdoor sports, especially basketball. He also enjoys music and playing the drums. Javaun has an easygoing personality and is described as funny and playful by friends.

Javaun desires to be adopted by a traditional and active family who will be able to share new experiences with him. Javaun would benefit from a family with a positive male figure who can be a helpful role model for him. He would do well in a family that can offer him stability, guidance and unconditional love as he transitions into the journey of adulthood.

Please contact Seanetta Robinson at Seanetta.Robinson@pfsf.org or 386-243-8812 for additional information on this youth. Javaun's adoption ID is 12664157.

CODDY - 16 YEARS OLD

Coddy is a laid-back and easygoing teen who wishes to be a part of a close family unit. Coddy describes himself as adventurous, funny and athletic. In his free time, he enjoys swimming, playing basketball, football, board games, interactive video games and listening to a variety of music. Coddy is a typical teen, and he enjoys helping others and considers himself as hard-working. He enjoys building things with his hands and desires to learn to cook as he is considering being a chef or police officer when he grows up.

Coddy desires to be adopted by a traditional family in Florida who is active, enjoys family time together, and celebrates traditional holidays. He desires a family that is kind, loving, and family-oriented who are willing to help guide him into adulthood. Coddy would love to have family pets such as cats and dogs as he enjoys animals. Coddy appreciates nature and the rustic scenery a country setting offers and desires to live in this type of environment.

Please contact Seanetta Robinson at Seanetta.Robinson@pfsf.org or 386-243-8812 for more information. Coddy's adoption ID is #10763541.



CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

By Jacob Clore, Community Engagement Specialist

An important part of our mission here at Partnership for Strong Families (PSF) is preventing child abuse and neglect, and making sure caregivers have the tools to keep their children safe. Child Abuse Prevention Month, which is nationally recognized in April, is an important time to recognize everyone's role in keeping children safe. The COVID-19 pandemic presents many challenges to both caregivers and PSF as many of our efforts during this month revolve around meeting face-to-face with individuals across our 13 county area. However, we did not let that stop us from continuing our efforts in April. We quickly adapted our plans for the month, continuing our family-strengthening efforts across our network of Resource Centers while also advocating for children and families in a virtual setting, ensuring they receive much needed support and care during these challenging times.

While Child Abuse Prevention Month is nationally recognized in April, celebrations that have historically consisted of community-wide events for children and families were brought to a halt due to the impacts of COVID-19 and social distancing. Despite the need for social distancing, our team worked to remind individuals of their role in strengthening families and preventing abuse and neglect. This is especially important as our state began to prepare for the closure of schools for the remainder of the year, resulting in fewer eyes on our community's youth during a time when parental stress levels are perhaps at their highest. It is more important than ever for neighbors and friends to use virtual tools to check in on each other and offer support.

Our Resource Center team continued to celebrate the month as they adapted their services to meet the needs of patrons impacted by COVID-19. From financial burdens resulting from unemployment to health crises brought on by the pandemic, our patrons' needs continue to be met thanks to our network of partners at the Resource Centers who make the work that we do possible. You can read more about how we are adapting this work to meet the evolving needs of patrons on page 5.

Likewise, our Children's Partnership Councils continue to work to fill service and need gaps across our 13 counties. These Councils, made up of professionals, advocates and community members, collaborate to determine how to best meet the needs of children and families. Each Council has made it a priority to make child safety items available to families while also working together to meet the needs of families impacted by COVID-19.

As pictured below, our team also kept some of the important icons of Child Abuse Prevention Month throughout April. While we couldn't be together for our usual group photo, many of our staff donned their best blues for "Wear Blue Day," helping us all to feel a little more connected in a more distant work environment. Our offices, including the SWAG Family Resource Center pictured below, also kept pinwheel gardens at the entrances - a symbol of the happy, healthy childhood every child deserves.

Child Abuse Prevention Month reminds us all that working together, we can ensure families are strong and children are safe. While the month may have ended, our efforts will never cease. Thank you to everyone who celebrated this month with us!

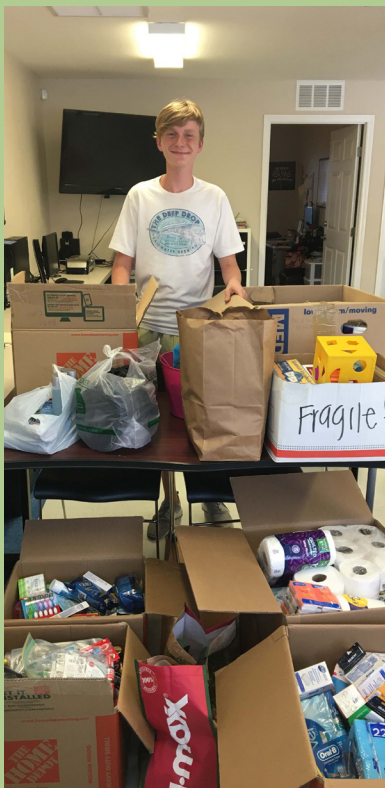


IT TAKES A VILLAGE: SERVING OUR PATRONS DURING A PANDEMIC

By Stacy Merritt, Director of Resource Centers

With so much uncertainty and fear raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, PSF's Resource Centers continue to act as a place of hope for local community members. PSF appreciates the front-line staff who continue to work diligently and creatively to safely provide for the needs of local children and families. We also want to thank the many community partners who make our work possible. From donating masks to making meals available to our patrons, so many community partners have stepped up over the last weeks, and we could not do our work without them. We would especially like to thank the individuals and organizations listed below.

- The **Alachua County Health Department** provided reusable bags for our emergency food pantry.
- **Bread of the Mighty** continues to provide food for distribution.
- **Central Florida Electric Company (CFEC)** offered volunteer support.
- The **Chiefland Chamber of Commerce** helped the Tri-County Community Resource Center coordinate food donations.
- The **Child Advocacy Center** donated snacks for children.
- **Farm Share** has provided pre-packaged food for families in the tri-county area.
- **Fehrenbacher's Artisan Sausages, Mildred's Big City Foods** and **Adam's Rib Co.** provided adult lunches and family meals.
- **Hidden Oak Elementary School** helped ensure Hidden Oak families received their Weekend Hunger Backpacks to eliminate food insecurities during non-school days.
- The **NewboRN Home Visiting Program** donated diapers and wipes - items that are especially needed for our patrons.
- **Queen of Peace Catholic Church** provided food for family dinners and for the emergency food pantry.
- The **Rural Women's Health Project** translated information for Spanish-speaking patrons.
- The **School Board of Alachua County** provided meals through each Gainesville Resource Center for Spring Break (a special shout out to Gator BTW, who provided amazing lunches for two of our sites!).
- The **Southwest Advocacy Group (SWAG)** supplied emergency food and adult lunches.
- **Tri-County Community Resources, Inc.** provided volunteer and monetary support.
- **Trinity United Methodist Church** donated hand-made face masks to help keep staff safe.
- The **United Way of North Central Florida** shared safety supplies such as hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies as well as provided support through microgrants to serve patrons at our Resource Centers.
- **Wal-Mart** in Chiefland donated non-perishable food items.
- **Working Food** is providing prepared family-style meals once per week at three of our sites



NATIONAL REUNIFICATION MONTH

By Samantha Cowan, Recruitment Specialist

Here at Partnership for Strong Families, it is our hope that every child who comes into care can be safely reunified with their biological families. Our staff works diligently and passionately to accomplish this, and our team is made stronger by our wonderful Partner Families who support reunification!

To celebrate National Reunification Month, which is nationally recognized in June, we spoke with Partner Family Lyn DeKold about her experience. Lyn and her family have been fostering for nearly 37 years, and during that time, she has welcomed over 60 children in care into her home and heart. A nurse by training, Lyn often fosters children who have medically complex needs. Decades ago, she read about a fellow nurse who was volunteering her time to foster. Lyn saw the article and thought, “I could do that!”

Lyn knows that it in the beginning, when a Partner Family learns why a child is placed in care, it can be very difficult to imagine reunifying the child with their biological families. “However,” says Lyn, “over the years I have found that we really can make a difference. There are individuals who are more than eager to try and get things straight in their life and get their child back in their world. It’s a matter of being a guardian to the child and a mentor to the family.”

“We’ll work on this together. We’re going to build her trust in you, together.”

Lyn recalls one young child, who, when she arrived at Lyn’s home, didn’t display any signs of attachment. Over time and with special attention, the child bonded with Lyn. When the two families would meet for visitation, Lyn was careful to speak kindly and respectfully to the child’s biological mother, letting her know that Lyn was on her side. “I would say to her, ‘Don’t be threatened that she wants to be in my lap most of the time. We’ll work on this together. Your daughter is so little and she needs to know that she can trust people. We are going to build her trust in you, together. The more consistent you are with coming to your visits, the more this will work!’”

Lyn knows that trust between a foster parent and a bio parent doesn’t always happen immediately. “I’m very much about giving the relationship time to build, both for their comfort and for mine.” She remembers one mother who, at first, was not allowed to have visits with her child. So, Lyn suggested that the two of them write letters back and forth until they could meet in person. The letters from the biological mother really helped Lyn understand where the mom was coming from, and that helped Lyn best support her in her journey to reunify her family. “Once we started meeting in person, I was able to teach her how to care for her child’s medical condition. To this day, we are the dearest of friends.”

For our newer Partner Families, Lyn has this message: “We’ve got to be very open minded going into this. We are not the bio parents and we need to work with them if they are willing to work with us and with the system.” Lyn knows how important her own family has been to her, and so she works tirelessly to help other families stay together.

Once a child is reunified with their biological family, Lyn says that one of the most important things a Partner Family can do is not crowd them. “Once a transition has been accomplished, I’m available to them via phone or email, and I’m always open to hearing from them, but I think it’s smart to hang back for a while. At some point in the future maybe we run into each other, but for now it’s best to pull back and let them know that you’re there if they need you.”

“It can be difficult for some families to believe that I’m really on their side, but I just try to be who I am: honest, frank, and caring.”

Over the years, many families have kept in touch with Lyn, even ones who she thought would never want to hear from her again! “It can be difficult for some families to believe that I’m really on their side, but I just try to be who I am: honest, frank, and caring. What you have to look at is this: things can change. Family is very important, and when a family sees that they can’t yet provide what their child has needs for, and they seek to change that, I really applaud that.”

And we here at Partnership applaud our Partner Families, like Lyn Dekold, who are outstanding supporters of reunification!

Perhaps like Lyn, you are reading this article thinking, “I could do this!” If so, or you would simply like to find out more, I encourage you to call our agency to learn more about what this process looks like. Contact us today at 352-244-1500 or you can simply visit, www.partnerfamily.org. We look forward to hearing from you and starting this journey together.



In 2019, Lyn Dekold won the Caring Hearts Award.

LEARNING FROM PREVENTION SUCCESS ACROSS THE NATION

By: Patty Carroll, Director of Communications and Engagement

As part of the Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families grant, our team was given the opportunity to travel to three select prevention sites across America, as well as welcome members of our own cohort at our Gainesville Resource Centers.

So far, our team has enjoyed learning from successful models of primary child abuse prevention in San Antonio, Texas at the Good Samaritan Center and in Hagerstown, Maryland at the Bester Community of Hope (both pictured below). Plans to visit the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation in Lincoln, Nebraska were unfortunately postponed due to the impacts of COVID-19, but we hope to find alternative ways to connect with this site in the coming months. We also had the opportunity to welcome visitors from Ohio and Indiana wishing to learn more about our Resource Center Model as they work toward implementing similar structures in their own communities.

These experiences have already served as an invaluable resource to our planning and implementation. We are very fortunate to connect with these partners in prevention. If you would like more information or are interested in becoming more involved in the process, please email Toni.Spoliansky@pfsf.org.



Resource Center team visiting Good Samaritan Center in San Antonio, Texas in February 2020.



Resource Center team visiting Bester Community of Hope in Hagerstown, Maryland in March 2020.

EDUCATION INCENTIVE PROGRAM RETURNS THANKS TO GENEROUS DONATION

By Deborah Rubin, Community Relations Assistant

In January, PSF staff and Board members had the honor of accepting a generous donation from the congregation of Trinity United Methodist Church, who donated their 2019 Christmas Eve service offerings to our agency. These contributions totaled over \$28,656.60! This donation will be used to provide Normalcy experiences to children in care and will help to bring back our Education Incentive Program, which rewards children in care who are working hard and excelling in school. This donation is just one of the many ways Trinity has come alongside us over the past few months, sharing our need for more foster and adoptive families and graciously allowing us to host several Info Nights on their campus.

The Education Incentive Program (EIP) is a grades-based reward system for children in our care who have been sheltered and placed in out-of-home care. EIP provides monetary incentives for grades earned in the four core classes: language arts, math, science and social studies. Based upon receiving an A, B, or grade improvement, youth can receive a Walmart gift card or a check (if in High School). For the 2018/2019 school year, we were able to reward over 200 children with over \$7,000.

Especially since the school board has recently moved to distance learning, the Education Incentive Program can be a great tool to encourage and motivate youth to do well in school despite having to work from home! This program is one of our favorite programs we have to offer, and we are extremely thankful that Trinity allowed us to reinstate it for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year and several years to come.



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RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS) PANDEMIC

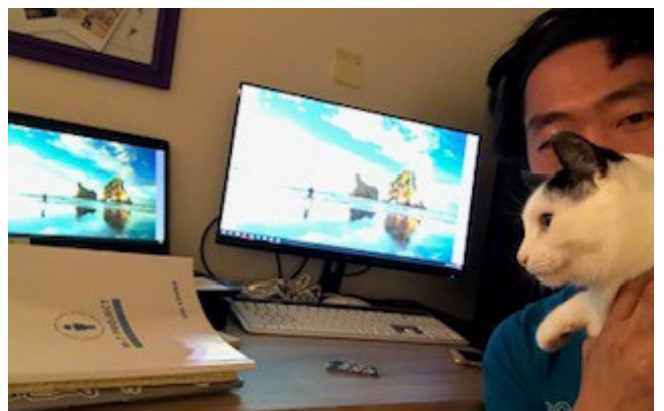
By Patty Carroll, Director of Communications and Engagement

Over the past months, efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 and keep the children and families we serve healthy have resulted in drastic, yet needed shifts in the way we carry out our work. Given this unprecedented time, our management team has been working diligently with the Department of Children and Families, our case management agencies, the Office of Child Welfare and the Florida Coalition for Children to share best practices, stay aligned with new mandates as they arise and learn innovative, key approaches to conducting our work on a more virtual platform. We are committed to keeping our clients, staff, partners and the community at-large updated on important changes to our system of care as things change rapidly for all of us in the midst of a global pandemic.

Our offices in Gainesville, Lake City, Live Oak, Starke and Trenton remain open with limited staff capacity. Staff who have the ability to do so have been working from home since mid-March, and our case management agencies are continuing their work with modifications to ensure the health of their staff and the children and families we serve.

Our network of Resource Centers continue serving the needs of our community, working alongside a long list of partners who allow us to provide critical resources and supports to our patrons. Each of our Resource Center sites are following CDC guidelines to ensure the safety of all parties.

Things are changing rapidly. For the most up to date information, please visit www.pfsf.org/covid19.



PSF Staff advocating from home.