



BOARD MEETING MINUTES

January 24, 2025

Board of Directors:

Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair; Rebecca Brock, Vice Chair; Michael Lepera, Treasurer; Lois Marino, Secretary; Amy Black, Bill Reicherter, Chelsea Bellew, Donna Korn, Dr. Heidi Schaeffer, Maria Mezerhane, Mark Dhooge, Meghan Russell, Nancy W. Stamper, Paul Adams, Dr. Ronald Ford, Sabria McElroy, Dr. Victoria Thurston

Unable to Attend:

Meghan Russell, Rebecca Brock, Sabria McElroy

Other Attendees:

ChildNet Staff: Larry Rein, Neiko Shea, Donna Eprifania, Julie DeMar, Alcolya St. Juste, Deena Ponto, Tina Lewis, Shanny Tozzi, Diane Rufus, Joanna Neves, Kenia Allen, Lara Cunningham, Nadine Cotterell, Ted Ponto, Alisha Patterson-Major, Krystal Kenison, Kendalese Rose, Samantha Mothersille, Julie Janello, *DCF:* Traci Schweitzer, Adrienne Reid, Isis Williams, *PB County:* Elisa Cramer

CALL TO ORDER – Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair

- Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 8:01 a.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – Lois Marino, Board Secretary

- Roll was taken, and quorum was established.

The November 22, 2024 meeting minutes were reviewed. *A motion* was moved and seconded to approve the minutes. *A vote was taken.* The ayes have it and *the motion was adopted.*

CHILDNET BOARD EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AWARD – Tina Lewis, Director of HR

- The ChildNet Board Employee Recognition Award was presented to the following deserving employees:
 - November 2024 – Alisha Patterson-Major, Education Services Specialist (PB)
Kendalese Rose, DCM Supervisor, Unit D2 and Samantha Mothersille – Lead Dependency Case Manager, Unit D2 (BWD)
 - December 2024 – Nadine Cotterell, Adoption Specialist, Unit A (BWD)

ITEMS FOR BOARD REVIEW AND APPROVAL – Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair

- **Resolution #275 – Signature Authorization for Contract Year 2025** – This resolution provides Larry Rein, CEO and President, Donna Eprifania, CFO, and Neiko Shea, Chief of Staff, signing authority for the contract year. This resolution is signed on a yearly basis.

A motion was moved and seconded to approve Board Resolution #275. *A vote was taken.* The ayes have it and *the motion was adopted.*



- **Board Candidate – Carolina Raineau** - Larry Rein and Josefa Benjamin met with Ms. Raineau. Ms. Raineau is a marketing professional and a partner with Next Point Consulting. They both feel that Ms. Raineau would be a tremendous asset to the Board.
- **Board Candidate – Stefanie Title** - Larry Rein and Josefa Benjamin also met with Ms. Title. Ms. Title is Director of Contracting with Reynolds & Reynolds (software technology). Ms. Title is an advocate for victims of Human Trafficking. Ms. Title also has experience with fundraising. They both feel that Ms. Title would be a tremendous asset to the Board.

A motion was moved and seconded to approve Carolina Raineau and Stefanie Title as the newest members of the Board of Directors. A vote was taken. The ayes have it and the motion was adopted.

DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW

- **Medical Unit** – Kenia Allen, Director of Children's Wellbeing, provided an overview of the medical unit's operations. She detailed the process flow of medical care for children entering the system, ensuring that an initial medical exam is completed within 72 hours of removal. If a child has complex medical needs, they coordinate with nurse and medical coordinators to determine appropriate placement, including medical foster care or skilled nursing facilities.

The Medical Unit, consisting of supervisors, medical coordinators, nurse coordinators, and a billing coordinator, works in both Broward and Palm Beach counties. Responsibilities include scheduling medical appointments, coordinating Medicaid plans, assisting with pharmacy issues, and ensuring children receive annual checkups and immunizations. The billing coordinator handles medical billing, including securing emergency Medicaid for undocumented children. The nurse coordinators focus on screening medically complex children, securing medical history, arranging specialized care, and supporting caregivers in obtaining necessary medical equipment and services. They also serve as resources for case managers, interpret physician orders, and assist in specialist referrals.

COMMITTEE UPDATES

- **Community Engagement Committee – Lois Marino, Committee Chair and Shanny Tozzi, Director of Community Relations**

Lois Marino reflected on a successful 2024 for ChildNet, and highlighted the effectiveness of their approach, "the 3 C's" (Connect, Conversations, and Collaborations), in increasing awareness and fostering partnerships. Ms. Marino noted a strong start to 2025, with growing opportunities for funding and financial support. Ms. Marino also noted that while their committee was initially perceived as a fundraising initiative, its primary goal has always been education, with fundraising as a natural outcome.

Shanny Tozzi provided an update on ChildNet's grant funding and future opportunities. She highlighted that while some grants are short-term, others span multiple years and cover specific regions like Palm Beach and Broward. She mentioned ongoing grant applications, including Honda Classic and Impact 100, with a potential \$100,000 grant under review. Additional funding opportunities include a rolling grant from Memorial Health and support from local organizations like Men Giving Back.

Ms. Tozzi and Ms. Marino also discussed innovative funding strategies beyond grants, such as engaging local businesses and their employees in payroll deduction programs. By partnering with top employers in Palm Beach County, even small employee contributions could generate significant sustainable funding. Ms. Marino further emphasized the importance of creative fundraising approaches for long-term sustainability. She shared an example of successful community engagement: an internal ChildNet employee, Kimberly, connected with Flagler Credit Union, leading to a \$16,000 donation through



employee and customer contributions. This demonstrated how simple conversations, and networking could lead to valuable financial support and long-term partnerships for ChildNet.

- **Vendor Engagement & Giving Back:** Donna Eprifania highlighted efforts to work with vendors, ensuring they contribute back to ChildNet. Some vendors have signed up for matching donation programs, and outreach is ongoing to involve more partners.
- **Luncheon (March 7):** The team discussed the upcoming luncheon on March 7 at Boca West Country Club, with sponsorships already surpassing last year's numbers. Expenses are estimated, and the event is already in a positive financial position.
- **Cocktail Event (May 14):** A separate event, "Cocktails & Cheers," will be held at the Hard Rock Hotel, honoring Cindy Ehrenberg Shelter. The event has secured \$44,000 in sponsorships and is in a good financial position.
- **Holiday Drive Success:** Gratitude was expressed for the successful holiday drive, where all children received gifts, and teens received gift cards without any last-minute shortages.

- **Finance Committee – Michael Lepera, Committee Chair and Donna Eprifania, CFO**

Donna Eprifania reported on the following:

- **Performance Bond** – Efforts to secure a performance bond for the Broward and Palm Beach areas has been difficult due to financial struggles in the past two audits (2023 and 2024). Half of the lead agencies statewide have secured bonds, while the other half are facing similar challenges.
- **Risk Pool & Funding Model** – Lead agencies are requesting \$24 million in relief for projected deficits this fiscal year, but only \$3 million is available. The application process for funds is ongoing, and further details will be addressed later in the meeting.
- **Financial Position** – At mid-year, Broward County is 2% over budget, mainly due to residential group care (6% over budget) and indirect services (3% over budget). Palm Beach is 1% over budget, but its residential group care line is 10% over budget. Efforts to control costs have reduced the residential care census from 119 to 96 since December. Sustainability remains a focus, relying partially on contingency funds.

- **Governance/Executive Committee – Rebecca Brock, Committee Chair**

- **Quarterly Strategic Plan Update – Quarter 4** - Discussion was held on the 4th quarter of the 2nd year of the Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2025, a copy of which was provided to the Committee members. Neiko Shea noted the strategic plan is entering its third year in 2025, and the targets for each goal have been updated accordingly. While action steps for 2025 are still being finalized, the review of 2024's progress shows significant achievements.

- *Evidence of goal progress in Year Two: ChildNet will reduce annual external voluntary turnover to 23%. Evidence of goal progress in Year Three: ChildNet will reduce annual external voluntary turnover to 18%.*

The voluntary turnover rate goal for 2024 was set at 23%, and the actual rate achieved was 20.75%, demonstrating effective strategies. The 2025 target is an ambitious 18%, a significant reduction from the initial 30% in Year One. Some discussions took place regarding whether to adjust the 18% goal, as it is considered a high industry standard. However, leadership decided to keep it unchanged.

- *Goal 2 – Expand the array of appropriate placement and treatment options for children. Evidence of goal progress in Year Two: ChildNet will reduce the percentage of children with stays over 14 days at SafePlace to 28%. Evidence of goal progress in Year Three: ChildNet will reduce the percentage of children with stays over 14 days at SafePlace to 25%.*



Progress has been significant, with Palm Beach County reducing this percentage to 16%, surpassing the Year Three target, while Broward County has reached 27%, meeting the Year Two target. The combined average of 23.5% is the lowest in two years, indicating positive trends.

- Goal 3 – Improve identification and support of kinship caregivers. Evidence of goal progress in Year Two: ChildNet will increase the percentage of children in kinship placements to 61%. Evidence of goal progress in Year Three: ChildNet will increase the percentage of children in kinship placements to 62%.

The target was to increase kinship placements to 61%, but current rates remain about 10% below the goal (Palm Beach at 51.09% and Broward at 52.07%).

The board discussed the increasing target for relative caregiver placements, which started at 60% in year one, increased to 61% in year two, and now stands at 62% in year three. Mr. Rein provided historical context, explaining that the original 65% target set by DCF lacked scientific or data-driven justification. The actual state average remains below 60%, and national figures suggest kinship placements are typically around 30-50%. Originally, the board aligned with the state's 60% target, but DCF has since shifted its approach, favoring incremental improvements rather than a fixed percentage. Under a revised funding model, financial incentives would be tied to local progress rather than meeting an arbitrary threshold.

Given the challenges staff have faced in achieving this target, Mr. Rein proposed modifying the year-three goal to reflect a more practical, incremental approach, preventing discouragement among workers. He suggested revisiting this issue with the board and governance in the coming months to establish a more achievable target while maintaining progress in kinship placements.

- **Board Retreat** – Friday, February 28, 2025, 10:00am-2:00pm. The facilitator, Matt Savarick, is providing his services pro-bono. Col. Benjamin sent pre-work to the full board.
- **Membership Recruitment:** Larry Rein reported that for the first time, the board is at full complement; however, we would like to continue recruitment.
- **Program Quality Committee – Nancy W. Stamper, Committee Chair**

The Program Quality Committee met and reviewed two procedural updates and discussed the DCF Quality Office Annual Report for 2023-24. Julie Demar reported that this report assesses system health and performance. The report now focuses on improvement or decline rather than a numerical rating system. Key sections include performance metrics for Palm Beach (Circuit 15) and Broward (Circuit 17), highlighting overall successes and only marginal declines in some areas. Despite these changes, the team remains optimistic about the system's performance in both counties.

CEO/PRESIDENT REPORT – Larry Rein

- **Risk Pool** - ChildNet has applied for \$4.5 million from the Risk Pool to cover its projected deficit for Palm Beach, which includes cumulative shortfalls from the past two years. The financial strain stems from rising residential group care costs and an increasing number of complex cases, particularly among teenagers and children with developmental disabilities and mental health challenges. However, the legislature has only allocated \$3 million to the Risk Pool, while seven lead agencies, including ChildNet, have requested a total of \$24 million. As a result, ChildNet expects to receive only a small portion of its request but remains hopeful of any additional funding.

Encouragingly, DCF, including its Assistant Secretary for Administration, acknowledges the funding gap and is working with the legislature to find alternative financial solutions beyond the Risk Pool. This shift



in approach marks a positive change in DCF's stance, as their CFO gains a deeper understanding of child welfare funding challenges. ChildNet anticipates departmental support in advocating for more resources during the upcoming legislative session.

- **CBC Funding Methodology** - Larry Rein reported that a new funding methodology has been proposed for allocating money to lead agencies in Florida, with a recent report submitted to state leadership. DCF presented the model to the Senate, and while ChildNet and its leadership support it, there are key concerns among agencies statewide.

The model includes two major benefits: 1) Funding Adjustments Based on Child Population – Agencies would receive increased funding if the number of children in care rises, a change from previous static funding models, and 2) Statewide Child Welfare Funding Increase – A proposed \$57 million increase would boost overall funding for agencies.

However, concerns remain: 1) Unequal Distribution – Funding is based on historical spending, benefiting agencies that have received more funding in the past (e.g., Broward over Palm Beach). This raises fairness concerns, 2) Flexibility vs. Federal Constraints – While state funds would become more flexible, federal funds still have strict spending requirements, and agencies fear potential clawbacks if funds are not spent precisely as allocated, and 3) Future Funding Stability – Since funding is tied to the number of children in care, agencies may lose money if they successfully reduce the foster care population. There are performance-based enhancements proposed to offset this, but their sufficiency is uncertain.

ChildNet remains optimistic, as its leadership has worked closely with DCF on testing the model. However, other agencies seek further reassurance. The next steps involve refining the model to ensure fairness, flexibility, and sustainable funding for child welfare services in Florida.

- **Audit Completion** – ChildNet successfully published its audit on time, filing it with the federal government and the Department of Children and Families. The audit presentation, usually in January or February, will take place in March due to a board retreat.
- **Forensic Audit & Service Procurement** – A competitive procurement process was conducted for independent living and adoption services in Palm Beach County. The existing providers retained their contracts: *Vita Nova* will continue offering post-independent living services and *Children's Home Society* will maintain adoption case management services. ChildNet will work with these providers to update contracts, incorporating innovative ideas from the proposals.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- There was no public comment.

NEXT MEETING DATE

- Board Retreat - Friday, February 28, 2025, 10:00-2:00 – in-person.

ADJOURNMENT

- Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:49 a.m.

Lois Marino

2/28/25

Lois Marino
Board Secretary

Date

(Corporate Seal)