



BOARD MEETING MINUTES

August 23, 2024

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:

Maria Mezerhane, Meghan Russell, Michael Lepera, Ronald Ford

Other Attendees:

ChildNet Staff: Larry Rein, Neiko Shea, Donna Eprifania, Julie DeMar, Susan Eby, Deena Ponto, Nicole Slade, Sheryl Williams, Shatoria Means, Shauna Thomas, Shanny Tozzi, Tina Lewis, Debbie Juliano, Stephen Cook, Nyasha Nedd Wright, Joe Mbwambo, Krystal Kenison, Kaydion Watson, Pablo Monteiro, Nicole Frederick, Demeatria Williams, Traneika Delee, Julie Janello, *DCF:* Traci Schweitzer, *PB County Youth Services:* Elisa Cramer

CALL TO ORDER – Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair

- Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 8:02 a.m.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES – Lois Marino, Board Secretary

- Roll was taken, and quorum was established.

The June 28, 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:
 - June 2024 – Traneika Delee, Dependency Case Manager, Unit 102 (PB)
Debbie Juliano, Administrative Assistant, Youth Services (Bwd)
 - July 2024 – Nicole Frederick, Family Preservations Specialist, Service Coordination (PB)
Pablo Monteiro, MIS Jr. Systems Administrator (Bwd)

DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW

- Intake & Placement Department – Julie DeMar, CPO, reported that the Intake and Placement departments in both Palm Beach and Broward counties are the first point of contact for children and families in need of services. Led by Kezia Stewart in Broward and Lena Blythe in Palm Beach, their teams focus primarily on placing children in foster homes, group homes, or shelters when necessary due to situations of abuse, abandonment, or neglect.



These teams gather detailed information about the children's needs, behaviors, and preferences and communicate with investigators. The departments also provide transportation to school, medical appointments, and court hearings. In addition, they oversee the children's placement transitions, ensure the reduction of group care, and work to keep sibling groups together.

In Broward, the Intake and Placement department operates 24/7 and manages on-call screenings for both counties. They also respond to emergencies and manage weekend staffing. The department supports foster care providers by helping stabilize placements and ensuring that children are placed in family-like settings whenever possible. The departments are also tasked with managing strategic goals, such as reducing group care, maintaining sibling placements, and minimizing placement moves. Finally, the Intake and Placement staff mediate between ChildNet and the providers, ensuring that children receive the necessary care and support during their time in the system.

COMMITTEE UPDATES

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

Lois Marino highlighted ChildNet's recent community engagement efforts, focusing on building partnerships and collaborations. They met with the Museum of Discovery and Science and explored various opportunities, including offering free museum vouchers to families, internships for teens, and summer camp programs. ChildNet also plans to participate in an upcoming family fun day and may set up a booth to raise awareness about foster care.

Ms. Marino mentioned ongoing efforts to partner with companies like UKG, Florida Blue, and Amerant Bank, aiming for collaboration in various capacities. There is also a focus on connecting with colleges, such as FAU, to address the need for more case managers, exploring job fairs, and corporate partnerships for recruitment.

Ms. Marino and Shanny Tozzi discussed fundraising efforts, including the March luncheon at Boca West. They emphasized the need for sponsorships, donations, and participation to raise awareness for ChildNet's mission. The back-to-school drive was successful, serving 500 children in Broward and Palm Beach counties, and upcoming holiday drives will focus on gift cards for teens.

Other ongoing initiatives include meetings with the Pace Center for Girls and CareerSource to explore potential collaborations that could provide internships and job opportunities for young adults. The team encourages attendees to engage in events and bring guests to further introduce people to ChildNet's mission.

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

Donna Eprifania provided a financial update to the board regarding budget approvals and ongoing fiscal concerns. She reported that the approved budgets for Broward and Palm Beach counties were submitted to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) on July 31st, but final approval is still pending. These approvals are crucial for receiving the September advance needed to close out the fiscal year. While Broward has a surplus of \$925,000, Palm Beach is facing a \$2.4 million deficit. The deficit is attributed to rising costs in residential group care, with daily rates increasing significantly due to inflation, housing, insurance, and higher wages for staff post-COVID.

Larry Rein noted that other agencies across Florida are also facing similar deficits, largely driven by the rising costs of residential group care for children, especially teenagers with special needs. The average cost of residential care has surged from \$217 per day to \$282 statewide, but Palm Beach's



rates have risen to \$307 per day. Additionally, the number of teenagers in care has increased, further straining budgets. Despite these financial challenges, DCF is working to review the budgets, and a meeting to address the Palm Beach deficit is scheduled for next Friday. There is concern that Palm Beach receives less funding compared to other counties, and the funding formula has not been adjusted adequately over time.

Larry Rein and board members noted that many service providers, like Kids in Distress, also operate at a deficit and must raise private funds to sustain services. This highlights the broader issue of underfunding in the child welfare system. The board acknowledged that better communication with the legislature is needed to secure adequate funding for these essential services.

- Approval of Resolution #273 – Renewal of Loan Agreement (Line of Credit) - Donna Eprifania discussed the renewal of a loan. The organization operates with a \$2.4 million budget and relies on reimbursement advances from the Department of Children and Families (DCF). ChildNet faces tight cash flow, particularly in June and when waiting for the DCF's approval of the board-approved budget, which can delay advances. To manage cash flow issues, the organization historically used a \$2 million line of credit, but they now seek to increase it to \$5 million and extend the term to three years. The finance and governance committees and legal counsel have reviewed the loan documents. Once finalized, they will include a board resolution for approval. A question was raised about the impact of potential interest rate changes, but Ms. Eprifania clarified that interest rates will only affect the loan if they tap into it. Historically, they have used the line of credit only twice in 23 years.

A motion was moved and seconded to approve Resolution #273 for the renewal of Loan Agreement (Line of Credit). A vote was taken. The ayes have it and the motion was adopted.

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

- Quarterly Strategic Plan Update – Quarter 2 - Discussion was held on the 2nd quarter of the 2nd year of the Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2025, a copy of which was provided to the Committee members.
 - Goal 1 – Improve and sustain ChildNet's workforce by implementing proven and innovative practices. *Evidence of goal progress in Year Two: ChildNet will reduce annual external voluntary turnover to 23%.*

There was a slight increase in turnover this quarter. Tina Lewis reported on efforts to address this, including implementing exit interviews, celebrating employee anniversaries, and organizing events like the Happiness Expo and other employee gatherings. Exit interviews and improved data collection help identify reasons for turnover, leading to targeted improvements.

- 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%.*

Susan Eby reported progress on expanding placement and treatment options. Notable developments include the opening of a new small girls' home in Palm Beach County and efforts to recruit teachers as foster parents for complex teenagers. Collaborations with local high schools are underway to find professionals interested in becoming foster parents. On a statewide level, work is being done to improve the array of treatment options. Notably,



changes to Medicaid reimbursement for residential treatment are being implemented to better address varying needs of children.

- 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%.*

Julie Demar shared that the percentage of foster children placed with kinship caregivers remains between 50% and 52%. A new kinship review tool has been introduced, and a total of 70 cases have been reviewed. The findings will be presented in August. Continuous efforts to improve kinship placements include enhancing family finding processes and updating the Kinship Action Plan to address areas needing improvement.

- **FY 2023-2024 CEO Scorecard/Evaluation** – Larry Rein reported that the Governance/Executive committee is responsible for conducting the CEO evaluation on behalf of the board. In the upcoming weeks, committee members will receive two documents: a self-evaluation from Larry Rein and a quantitative matrix that includes standards like strategic plan goals and performance targets. Additionally, committee members will receive a document allowing them to provide their opinions and ratings of the CEO's performance. This process will unfold over the next month.
- **Membership Recruitment** – Larry Rein reported we have one more vacancy to fill in Palm Beach. Mr. Rein welcomes any board candidate recommendations.

- **Legal/Human Resources Committee – Rebecca Brock, Committee Chair**

Rebecca Brock mentioned the formation of a new Compliance Committee that will meet quarterly and is comprised of 10-12 members. The Risk Management Committee met in April and reported one Level 3 incident in Broward and two in Palm Beach County for the third quarter. There was an employment matter that required outside counsel due to an auto accident, but it was resolved. Additionally, there was one HR case reported with no further updates.

It was also mentioned that Jason Tracy, Chief Legal Officer had left the organization for a new opportunity, and his position is being filled through ongoing interviews.

A board member raised a question about the process for staffing court hearings for children in foster care. It was clarified that ChildNet is not a party to dependency cases, and its legal staff supports case managers, who serve as witnesses for the Department of Children and Families. The discussion highlighted the challenges case managers face and the need for clear communication about their role in court proceedings. There was agreement that further training and clarification, including for service providers, would be beneficial.

- **Program Quality Committee – Nancy W. Stamper, Committee Chair**

Nancy Stamper reported that the committee reviewed reports without the need for policy or procedure updates. Julie DeMar presented the incident reports for fiscal year 2023, noting that most incidents involved children in residential group care with complex needs, primarily due to Baker Acts and arrests, often involving teenagers. Efforts are ongoing to reduce incidents while ensuring proper reporting. Larry Rein presented a census trends report for 2023-2024, highlighting a decrease in the number of dependent children in both Broward and Palm Beach Counties. Broward saw a 12% decline, with an average of 1,415 children in care, while Palm Beach had a 4% decrease, with just over 1,200 children, marking the lowest numbers in both counties' history. However, Palm Beach



saw a 14% increase in children in residential group care. The committee discussed assigning actual numbers to the percentages for clarity.

CONTINUING BUSINESS

- **ChildNet's Anti-Racism Workgroup Update** – Sheryl Williams reported that the Anti-Racism Workgroup took July off but reconvened with a training session facilitated by the Children's Services Council on building an equitable community. The training was well received, with over 40 staff members attending. The next training is scheduled for September 10th, with an in-person session planned for October 25th. Additionally, an Anti-Racism membership survey was conducted in August, with 14 members responding. The Workgroup will review the survey results to set future goals for the group's work.

BOARD CHAIR REPORT – Col. Josefa Benjamin

- **Virtue Medical** – Col. Benjamin reported that about a month ago, the CEO of Virtue Medical reached out regarding funding for entry-level HHA (Home Health Aide) and CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) training. Information was shared with group home providers, especially for teens, to help them transition into the workforce. They are still awaiting data on how many signed up for the training.
- **Sound of Hope** – Col. Benjamin reported that some team members attended the movie *Sound of Hope*, which depicts 22 families adopting 77 children. This event was a source of motivation, reminding the staff of the importance of their work. Sheryl Williams expressed gratitude for the tickets and noted that her team came back re-energized.
- **Team Appreciation** – Col. Benjamin also mentioned team appreciation events where board members participated, helping boost staff morale. A suggestion was made to create a calendar of important ChildNet dates to better coordinate events and support staff.

CEO/PRESIDENT REPORT – Larry Rein

- **DCF Contract** – Larry Rein reported that ChildNet recently signed a contract with the Department, but before it was finalized, amendments were proposed. The lead agencies negotiated successfully, avoiding penalties for not meeting performance targets. However, new statutory requirements mandate penalties (starting at \$25,000) for unreported conflicts of interest between board members and organizations the agency works with. Although the agency has never had such conflicts, vigilance is required to ensure none arise.

Additionally, annual training on topics like conflict of interest and fiduciary responsibility will be required for board members, even though these are already covered in our board orientation. The organization aims to implement this training in a way that is not overly burdensome. There was a discussion about the definition of "family members" in conflict-of-interest scenarios, with clarification needed on whether it applies to immediate family members.

Lead agencies will be required to obtain Performance and Fidelity Bonds, despite prior resistance from agencies and historical reasons against doing so. The bonds are intended to cover conflicts of interest or failures by lead agencies, with Orlando's recent issues influencing this decision.

- **Forensic Audit/Fiscal Examination** – Larry Rein reported that a forensic audit was conducted on multiple lead agencies following past concerns about potential conflicts of interest with related companies. ChildNet, one of these agencies, had no major findings in the initial audit, but subsequent audits included broader issues such as executive salaries and procurement



practices. Three findings were noted for ChildNet, but none indicated significant wrongdoing. Corrective actions are being implemented, including competitively procuring certain contracts and adjusting how executive salaries are allocated. The fiscal impact of these new policies, including bonds, is significant. For example, in Broward, the performance bond alone is estimated at \$1 million, and \$745,000 for Palm Beach. These costs are unfunded mandates, which will likely require budget amendments, as they were not accounted for in the current financial plan.

PUBLIC COMMENT

- There was no public comment.

NEXT MEETING DATE

- Friday, September 27, 2024, at 8:00 a.m. in person and via Zoom.

ADJOURNMENT

- Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:58 a.m.

Lois Marino

Lois Marino
Board Secretary

09-30-24

Date

(Corporate Seal)