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# BOARD MEETING MINUTES

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**September 27, 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:**

Amy Black, Lois Marino, Mariz Mezerhane, Meghan Russell

**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, Daffodil Otto, Frantzia Thenor, Sheree Tortora, Lara Cunningham, Amy Geissler, Falon Gillespie, Julie Janello, *DCF:* Traci Schweitzer, Adrienne Reid

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**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 August 23, 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:
  - August 2024 – Amy Geissler, Dependency Case Manager, Unit 108 (PB)  
Frantzia Thenor, Dependency Case Manager, Unit B1 (Bwd)

**DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW**

- Continuous Quality Improvement Department (CQI) – Sheree Tortora, Director of CQI in Palm Beach, introduced her team and outlined their responsibilities. She has two CQI managers in each county (Palm Beach and Broward), and they work to support case management teams, improve outcomes for children and families, and collaborate with DCF on reviews and performance enhancements. The CQI Department also conducts internal reviews, develops tools, and provides training. Ms. Tortora emphasized the use of tools like the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for assessing safety, permanency, and well-being. The CQI team performs internal reviews focused on specific areas such as supervision and kinship care, often at the request of leadership.

Additionally, the CQI team facilitates weekly report card meetings to track and improve performance metrics. These meetings are well attended and often start with team-building activities. Ms. Tortora also discussed current projects, including the development of an internal SharePoint site and ongoing kinship



initiatives. Larry Rein praised the team's dedication, noting the commitment of long-serving staff members and Ms. Tortora's leadership in creating a positive environment for performance tracking. Mr. Rein also highlighted the team's contributions to improving the State's child welfare reporting and quality systems.

## NEW BUSINESS

- **Florida Sunshine Law – Larry Rein, CEO and President and Shatoria Means, Legal Counsel**

A concern arose about the need for training on Florida's Sunshine Law, as it had not been conducted during our annual meeting as usual. Instead, board members were provided with a YouTube video, which in retrospect was seen as inadequate. As a result, it was decided to show the video during the current meeting and have legal staff provide a summary to ensure everyone fully understands the Sunshine Law. Additionally, a PowerPoint version of the video was distributed.

The Sunshine Law ensures access to governmental proceedings, requiring any discussion between board members on matters to be public. Private discussions about board business, even through electronic communication, are prohibited. Staff members cannot function as liaisons between board members for such discussions. The law also applies to advisory boards but not typically to staff meetings unless part of decision-making. Public meetings must allow non-disruptive recording, and the Public Records Law ensures access to documents from state and local governments, including electronic communication, unless exempt by statute. Public records must be disclosed regardless of the requester's identity or purpose.

The office of the Attorney General annually publishes a Sunshine Law manual, which this year is 369 pages long. The legal department reviews it each year to check for updates, though changes are rare. Court rulings consistently favor Sunshine Law's application, emphasizing that when in doubt, transparency should be ensured. The board was reminded of key Sunshine Law guidelines:

- Any form of communication (in person, email, phone, social media) that relates to board matters must be treated as subject to the Sunshine Law.
- Public notice, a quorum, and transparency are necessary for all board discussions.
- When attending other board meetings, board members must not discuss, or debate matters that could foreseeably come before their own board.
- Sharing information, such as reports, before meetings is allowed, but there can be no discussion or interaction among board members outside of public meetings.
- Informal discussions about board-related issues during breaks or social events are also prohibited.
- Violating the law can lead to criminal penalties, legal action, and invalidation of official decisions.

Board members were advised to be mindful of social media interactions and were reassured that staff communication is not a violation, as long as it does not involve multiple board members.

## COMMITTEE UPDATES

- **Adolescent Services Committee – Susan Eby, Chief Clinical Quality Officer**

Discussion focused on the Adolescent Services Committee and their initiatives, especially the role of Adolescent Care Coordinators (ACCs) in supporting youth in foster care. The committee reviewed data on caseloads, Baker Act incidents, academic performance, and special projects. Key points included:

- ACCs provide stability and support to youth, significantly reducing Baker Acts, arrests, and improving school performance.
- ACCs are increasingly recognized in the community, with group homes contacting them for assistance.



- The program currently serves 15- and 16-year-olds in licensed out-of-home care due to resource limitations, but the goal is to expand with additional funding.
- The focus on 15- and 16-year-olds is to prepare them for aging out of foster care successfully. Expanding this support is a priority, but financial resources are needed.

A question was raised about the definition of adolescence, with the response explaining that adolescence typically spans ages 12 to 17, but the program started with 15- and 16-year-olds due to capacity constraints.

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

Shanny Tozzi reported on the following:

**EVENTS:**

- Palm Beach Care for Kids Luncheon – Friday, March 7, 2025, at 11:00am, Boca West Country Club honoring the Silvestri Family.
- Broward Care for Kids Cocktail Event – Wednesday, May 14, 2025, at 6 PM at the Hard Rock Hotel, honoring Cindy Ehrenberg Seltzer from the Children's Services Council of Broward.

**GRANTS:**

- A new \$8,000 grant from UKG for tutoring services. This grant from UKG is seen as the beginning of a promising partnership.
- A \$75,000 grant from BBX Capital over three years to support employee engagement, housing, family needs, tutoring, and group homes.

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

At the Finance Committee meeting, the following key financial updates were discussed:

1. Line of Credit: It was increased to \$5 million, with a three-year extension until May 2027. This line of credit is reserved for potential cash flow issues.
2. DCF Budget: The Department of Children and Families (DCF) budget was fully approved without changes.
3. Contingency Fund: The fund has been operationalized, holding a balance of \$3 million, which is crucial for maintaining operations amidst potential cash strains.
4. Performance Bond: Early discussions are underway regarding requiring agencies to provide a performance bond.
5. Residential Group Care Expenses - Residential group care expenses remain a significant financial burden, consuming over 70% of the budget in both Broward and Palm Beach counties.

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

- Board Retreat - Discussion was held that the Board Retreat is tentatively scheduled for February 28, 2025, in Fort Lauderdale. Details will be finalized soon.
- CEO Scorecard Evaluation: Data is being gathered, with distribution expected by early October. Although the final DCF performance data is still pending, preliminary data has been provided for evaluation.
- Membership Recruitment: There is still a vacancy for one member from Palm Beach. Suggestions are welcome.



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

At the Committee meeting, discussion was held on foster home recruitment data, highlighting higher referral rates in Broward than Palm Beach and reviewing the performance of agencies managing the licensure process.

## **BOARD CHAIR REPORT – Col. Josefa Benjamin**

- Board Retreat – Col. Benjamin reported that she is glad to see that a good amount of the Board Directors will be able to attend the retreat in-person. More details to follow.

## **CEO/PRESIDENT REPORT – Larry Rein**

- DCF Contract – Larry Rein provided updates on the DCF contract and related legislative amendments. The first amendment to the DCF contract was signed recently. This amendment aligns with recent Florida Statutes and involves extensive collaboration among lead agencies. While penalties remain for issues related to conflict of interest and procurement, there are no performance penalties for child welfare performance, which was a significant concern. The amendment requires lead agencies to purchase a performance bond, a requirement that has not been enforced in the past. Discussions are ongoing to clarify the specifics of the bond and what it protects. The intent is to ensure that if a lead agency fails, there is financial protection for the Department, particularly considering past issues with service provider payments. The requirement for a fidelity bond was successfully challenged, leading to its removal from the amendment after extensive research and collaboration. New requirements for board training have been introduced. The Department has specified various topics, and training will be incorporated into the upcoming board retreat. Overall, the discussions were constructive, with a focus on ensuring operational clarity and compliance with new legislative mandates.
- Forensic Audit/Fiscal Examination – Larry Rein reported that the response to the Forensic Audit was submitted, and ChildNet believes it has strong arguments similar to those successfully used by other Community-Based Care (CBC) agencies. We have not yet received feedback from the Department regarding the three items identified as findings. However, there is optimism that the Department will accept our explanations, as at least one lead agency received favorable consideration for similar issues related to procurement and CEO salary.
- CBC Funding Methodology – Larry Rein reported that for the second consecutive legislative session, the legislature is directing DCF to collaborate with lead agencies to develop a new funding methodology. DCF has hired a new consultant, KPMG, replacing the previous consultant, Mercer, whose model received widespread resistance. KPMG has actively engaged with lead agencies, seeking extensive information to inform their model, but there have been tensions regarding the quality of these interactions. The lead agencies felt that their input was not sufficiently considered, prompting them to prepare a document outlining their perceptions, which led to a more productive meeting between the Secretary, KPMG, and the lead agencies. The Secretary emphasized that the current funding does not meet the needs of lead agencies and acknowledged the importance of formal data collection, as KPMG currently relies on manually gathered data. DCF is also working on a new information system to meet federal requirements, which is expected to improve data collection for future funding methodology. There is cautious optimism that the new funding methodology might lead to increased funding for community-based care in Florida, though the timeline for implementation remains uncertain. The lead agencies are hopeful that they will receive advance drafts of reports before they are submitted to legislature, addressing past communication issues.
- National Center for Community Based Child Welfare – Larry Rein reported on the National Center for Community-Based Child Welfare, which was officially established within the past year. This organization



aims to promote community-based care models nationwide. ChildNet has joined as a founding member, and Mr. Rein serves on its board of directors. The organization includes representatives from lead agencies across various states, such as Texas and Michigan. Recently, they held an annual symposium in Detroit, which featured a more interactive format than typical conferences, focusing on small group discussions. Mr. Rein expressed enthusiasm about ChildNet's involvement, highlighting the need to leverage national data to reinforce the effectiveness of community-based care, particularly in Florida. The symposium showcased advancements in child welfare, including a keynote address by Craig Fields, who discussed artificial intelligence applications in the field, with much of his presentation centered on ChildNet's initiatives. Another presentation highlighted Hope House, a program in Broward County that replicates a successful group home model for challenging teenagers. Mr. Rein emphasized the pride in ChildNet's work being recognized nationally and credited the collaborative efforts of the Board of Directors and staff for this success.

- Chief Clinical Quality Officer – Larry Rein reported that Susan Eby, Chief Clinical Quality Officer, announced her departure from ChildNet. She accepted the position as Chief Operating Officer at an agency on the west coast of Florida. The board acknowledged her contributions and expressed their understanding and support for her decision, wishing her all the best in her new role.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

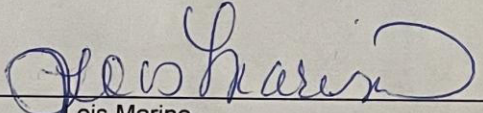
- Brunch on Purpose – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Brunch on Purpose, sponsored by Col. Benjamin's agency Born on Purpose, is scheduled for Saturday, October 5, 2024, in Pembroke Pines.

#### **NEXT MEETING DATE**

- Friday, October 25, 2024, at 8:00 a.m. in person and via Zoom.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

- Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:20 a.m.

  
Lois Marino  
Board Secretary

10/25/24  
Date

(Corporate Seal)