



Fostering Florida's Future

2012 Achievements

David E. Wilkins, Secretary, Florida Department of Children and Families

Tanya Wilkins, Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption,
Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection

FosteringFlorida.com



New initiative will build stronger foster families and ensure that our children have the opportunity for success

By David E. Wilkins, Secretary, Florida Department of Children and Families

Our society believes deeply in the value of family. Unfortunately, some children are unable to live with their birth families because of abuse, neglect, substance abuse and other situations.

At the Department of Children and Families, we are committed to helping all of Florida's children in foster care grow up healthy, happy and safe. Our foster parents are highly committed, well-trained, patient and persistent. They are working miracles in the lives of our children and are respected partners in raising these children to be successful. Foster parents have the ability to change a child's life in a positive and lasting way. The love and respect they give to the children in their homes are critical to each child's healthy growth and well-being.

In 2012, DCF and our partners launched a new initiative aimed at better retaining, recruiting and supporting foster parents and also providing more social and educational activities for our children in foster care. We unveiled a new website at www.fosteringflorida.com that gives information for potential foster parents and highlights successful stories of foster families and children in foster care across Florida.

While we have done some things well, we have room to improve. This **Fostering Florida's Future** initiative is a partnership with our 18 community-based care agencies around the state, the Guardian ad Litem program and foster parent associations, among others. Our goal is to recruit at least 1,200 new foster families in the coming year. This collaboration will help increase the number and quality of foster homes in Florida, build stronger foster families for our children and ensure that our children have every chance at becoming successful adults.

The goal is simple: Supportive, loving foster parents will raise these children to become independent, successful, contributing adults.

I announced this initiative at the 2012 Florida State Foster/Adoptive Parent Association's annual conference in Daytona Beach. The room was filled with hundreds of foster parents and children currently in foster care, along with some who have already aged out of foster care. They were so excited to hear about the changes we are making.

When foster parents know they have support and clear guidelines, and when children in foster care realize they are not alone and that so many people are working to help them succeed, the future is brighter for every child and for our entire state. These changes include working more closely with foster parents through the investigative process, streamlining paperwork during licensing and allowing them to reasonably parent the children we have placed in their care.

In addition, our children should be able to safely experience what every other child experiences -- school proms, date nights, slumber parties with friends, learning how to drive a car. We are doing a disservice to them if we don't find a way for them to live like our own children live.

All children in foster care should have the same expectations at educational success as other children. As part of this effort, DCF began tracking the school attendance and graduation rates of children in foster care on a monthly basis to identify ways to increase school participation and ensure that children in foster care have the opportunity to graduate high school and move on to future studies.

A new, K-12 report card looks at an array of measures for each child so that our community-based care partners can work with them on an individual basis and provide the tools that are needed to help them succeed.

These children are the next generation of Florida's parents, workers and leaders. In small and big ways, you can help give them the opportunities they deserve. Please help us Foster Florida's Future.

(Adapted from an editorial submission to Florida's newspapers, July 2012)

The *Fostering Florida's Future* Initiative

Florida needs foster parents as diverse as the children served by the Florida Department of Children and Families and our community-based partners. We need individuals and families who can provide a safe and loving home to a child in need in every community in this state. We need committed adults who will help ensure educational success for children in care.

The *Fostering Florida's Future* initiative is designed to recruit and support foster parents and promote the success of children in foster care. Our vision: Supportive, loving foster parents will raise these children to become independent, successful, contributing adults.

The action plan for this initiative, launched in the summer of 2012, has been focused on the following:

- **Awareness Campaign** - Fostering changes lives and helps children become successful adults
- **A Family for Every Child** - Recruitment and retention of foster parents
- **Quality Parenting Initiative** - Training and support for foster parents
- **Letting Kids in Foster Care be Kids** - Extracurricular activities, social media, time with friends
- **Promising Futures** - Attending school, graduating and pursuing further education

The Florida Department of Children and Families kicked off this new initiative with our 18



community-based care agencies across the state, the Guardian ad Litem program, the Florida State Foster/Adoptive Parent Association, local associations and many more.

"This partnership will help increase the number and quality of foster homes in Florida, build stronger foster families for our children and ensure that our children have every chance at becoming successful adults," said DCF Secretary David Wilkins.

This report highlights some of the achievements of the *Fostering Florida's Future* initiative in 2012, under the leadership of Secretary Wilkins and his wife, Tanya Wilkins, the statewide Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption through the Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection.

AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Paxton Zancker was 13 years old when she was removed from her home and placed in foster care. She admits there were a few rough spots as she learned how to live with more structure and rules in her new home, but she credits her foster parents with helping her make positive choices to put her on the right path.

Paxton, now 15, has been living with Bill and Kim White for two years. She has improved her grades in school and gives most of the credit to her foster family and the pride and trust they had that she would overcome her struggles and be successful. "They are the parents I never had," she said at a June news conference announcing the new **Fostering Florida's Future** initiative in Florida.

The Department of Children and Families launched the **Fostering Florida's Future** Initiative at the Florida State Foster and Adoptive Parent Association Annual Educational Conference in Daytona Beach in June 2012. Secretary Wilkins kicked off this comprehensive initiative with a statewide news conference on June 22. Speaking along with the Secretary were his wife, Tanya Wilkins, Child Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption, as well as youth formerly in foster care, foster parents, and leaders from community-based care agencies and the Guardian ad Litem program.

*"They are the
parents
I never had."*

15-year-old Paxton Zancker said
of her foster parents,
Bill and Kim White

The Department of Children and Families launched a new website at www.fosteringflorida.com to highlight stories of successful foster parents and children in foster care or young adults who have aged out of foster care. This website gives information to anyone in Florida who is interested in fostering a child. A video page shows foster parents talking in their own words about how meaningful being a foster parent is to them. Videos posted at fosteringflorida.com/fosteringvideos.shtml feature pep rallies, as well as individual interviews with former foster youth and with foster parents ("Faces of Foster Parents").

The Department also regularly hosts blogs from foster parents at <http://blog.myffamilies.com>. The launch of the new initiative featured a blog post from foster parents ESPN reporter Michael Wallace and his wife, LaShaun.

A FAMILY FOR EVERY CHILD

There are more than 4,200 licensed foster homes in Florida and about 8,000 children in licensed out-of-home care. They have been removed from their homes through no fault of their own; they have been abused and neglected and are not able to safely remain with their families. Through the **Fostering Florida's Future** initiative, the Department's community-based care agencies and the statewide and local Foster and Adoptive Parent Associations have teamed to recruit 1,200 new foster families during 2012-13. Secretary and Mrs. Wilkins have spurred recruitment during visits to various cities and towns, sharing their personal experiences as sponsor parents and discussing the changes they've led at the Department of Children and Families.

As of January 2013, more than 600 new families have been recruited. “That means more homes for children,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “Each new foster home means a home for a child.”

DCF’s Partners for Promise initiative (FLPartnersForPromise.com) recognizes “Foster Friendly Businesses” – companies that encourage foster parenting, support their employees who foster and recognize foster parents as valuable members of the community. The Florida Division of Recreation and Parks is one example, showing their support of foster families by offering them free admission to all state parks for one full year.

Individual community-based care agencies, case management organizations and local Foster and Adoptive Parent Associations have partnered with Guardians ad Litem and other foster parent supporters to garner public awareness about fostering. Eckerd Youth Alternatives, Inc., in Pasco and Pinellas counties has distributed buttons with the number “124” to prompt inquiries about those communities’ recruitment goals. (Eckerd plans to recruit and license 124 new foster homes by June 2013.)

Recruitment efforts will continue for children by age (infants and toddlers, teens) and special circumstance, including children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and those who have siblings also in out-of-home care.

QUALITY PARENTING INITIATIVE

The specific job of the foster parent is to provide high-quality parenting, consistent with the needs of the child, when appropriate to mentor the bioparent , and to maintain a lifelong commitment to the child wherever he or she lives.

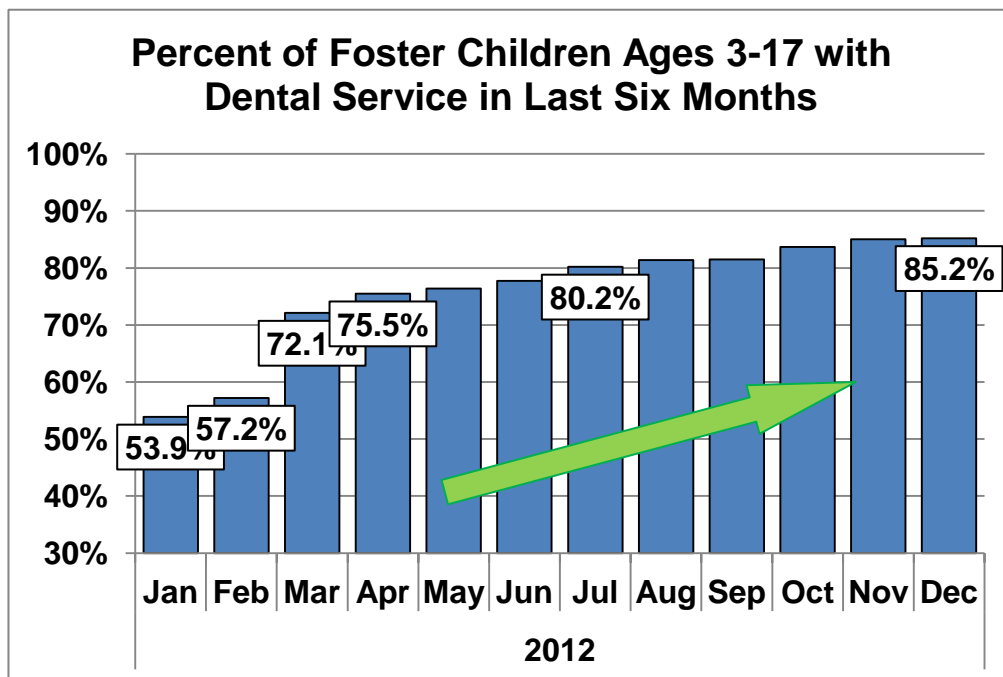
Using the model of the Quality Parenting Initiative, foster parents will know that they are our partners in deciding what is in the best interest of the children in their care. Improved support of foster parents at every agency and every level will increase retention and recruitment.

A foster parent is a full partner in a team supporting the healthy development and achieving permanency for children who cannot live with their parents.

Mrs. Wilkins has served as chairperson of a statewide workgroup of foster parents and DCF and community-based care staff to address recruitment and retention concerns. This group has continued to guide implementation of the multiple activities of the **Fostering Florida’s Future** initiative through 2012. Below are some of the highlights.

✓ **Simplified Licensing:** Family foster homes in good standing may now be eligible for a license valid for up to three years, instead of one year. To be considered for the extended license, a family that has been fostering for three years or longer must meet specific criteria, including a recommendation by the assigned Child Placing Agency and the lead agency, clear background checks, no performance improvement or corrective action plan, and no findings of maltreatment.

- ✓ **Improved Communication:** The Department of Children and Families conducted a quality assurance review on the abuse/neglect investigations of foster parents and foster care referrals for the period July 1, 2011, through June 30, 2012. Based on the findings of the review, a workgroup was formed to recommend policy and practice changes. A new Operating Procedure and training materials for child protective investigators and dependency case managers have been issued, aimed at improving communication with foster parents, eliminating law enforcement involvement in licensing referrals and maintaining sensitivity to other foster children in the home.
- ✓ **Improved Home Study:** In an effort to streamline licensing processes, the Department of Children and Families redesigned the Home Study format for prospective foster families. The new, Unified Home Study is more focused on the “job” of fostering, less intrusive, and more family-friendly. The Unified Home Study also is 25 pages shorter and applies to all types of placement, whether an emergency shelter, a licensed foster home or adoptive home.
- ✓ **Additional Training:** Just in Time training is available at www.qpiflorida.com. This DCF-funded Web site, operated by the University of South Florida Center for Child Welfare, provides a comprehensive training resource to foster parents.

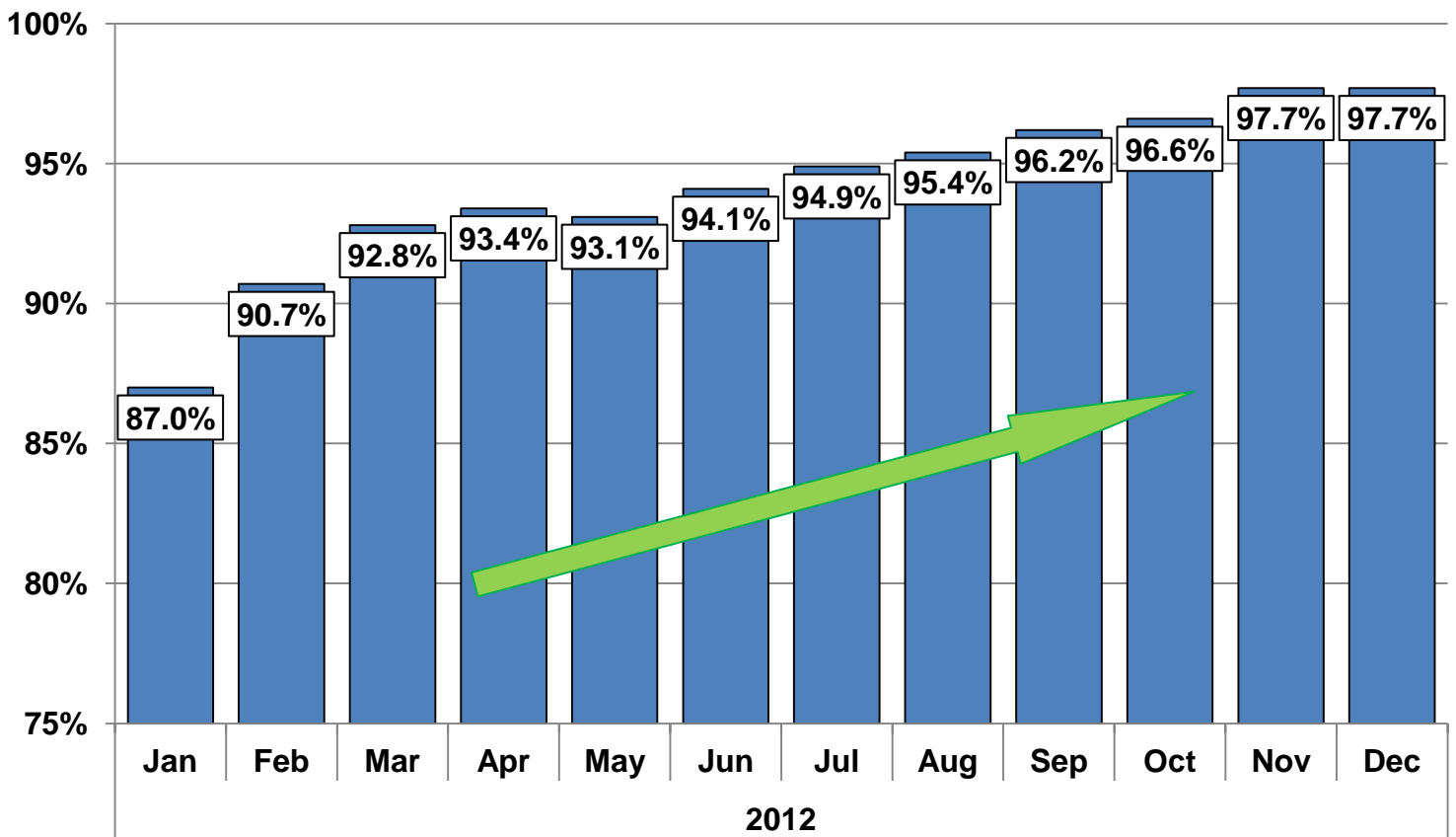


**MARKED
PROGRESS IN
WELL-BEING OF
FOSTER CHILDREN**

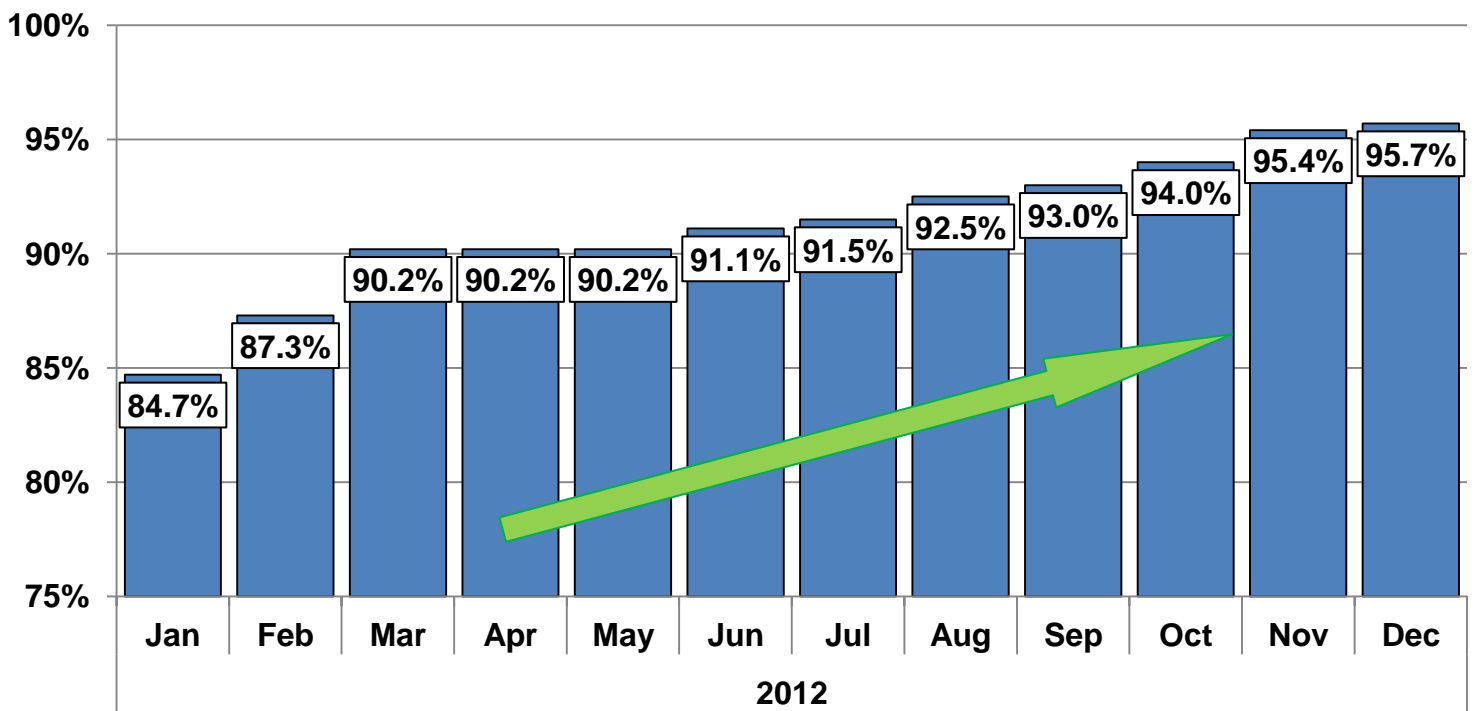
Through a monthly Community-Based Care Accountability Scorecard, the Department measures services provided to children in foster care by its contracted, lead community-based care agencies and their network of service organizations. Those measures include such well-being metrics as dental service within the last six months, up-to-date immunizations

and medical service within the last 12 months. The graph above and the graphs on the next page show month-to-month improvement in the provision of services.

Percent of Foster Children with Immunizations Up to Date



Percent of Foster Children with Medical Service in Last 12 Months



LETTING KIDS IN FOSTER CARE BE KIDS

Children living in foster care deserve the same opportunities as any other child.

Emphasizing his support for normalcy for children in foster care, Secretary Wilkins issued memos in January and March 2012 and has continually encouraged practice changes throughout the system of care toward this goal.

The Fostering Florida's Future initiative included the design and dissemination of posters featuring young people engaged in "normal" activities. PDF versions of the posters are available at:

www.fosteringflorida.com



A Youth Bill of Rights was developed and is also available on the website. It cites the following:

1. To be treated with respect, love, kindness, patience, understanding, and to be reminded regularly of your potential and ability to succeed.
2. To achieve your full potential in education, to graduate high school and complete any education or training you desire afterward.
3. To live in a safe, healthy and comfortable home with the freedom to be a child, the encouragement to grow and develop, and the reassurance of a positive future through respectful relationships.
4. To eat well, dress well and to have things to call your own.
5. To regularly visit your doctor, dentist or specialist as needed and to receive prompt care when you are sick, injured or need medical attention.
6. To understand your case entirely, to have resources and people available to answer all your questions, to have copies of important documents and to be an active influence on the outcome of your life.
7. To have those who are responsible for your care continuously work to find you a permanent family.
8. To visit and contact family members regularly unless it threatens your safety.
9. To attend religious services of your choice.
10. To enjoy the milestones of maturity such as driving, school sports and clubs, time with friends, managing personal finances, getting a job, social networking and becoming an independent and contributing member of society.

PROMISING FUTURES



EDUCATION: All children in foster care should have the same expectations for educational success as other children. As part of this effort, DCF began tracking the school attendance and graduation rates of these children on a monthly basis to identify ways to increase school participation and ensure that children in foster care have the opportunity to graduate high school and move on to future studies. A new report card will begin looking at an array of measures for each child so foster parents and our community-based care

partners can work with them on an individual basis and provide the tools that are needed to help them succeed.

TRANSITIONS: The Department also is enhancing planning toward each child's transition to another home. Children who have been the victims of abuse or neglect have experienced severe trauma. Their foster parents and the child welfare professionals supporting their lives must remain mindful of the trauma each child has faced and continue to focus on ensuring children are moved back to their parents, to relatives, to adoption or to another foster family in a planned and sensitive manner.



DCF's Children's Legal Services has teamed with foster parents and other child welfare staff to develop tools for the sensitive transition of children from one family to another. The goal is to ensure that each child in the dependency system under State supervision not suffer any additional harm as a result of any change in physical placement. Children's Legal Services attorneys work together with all involved to avoid, minimize or manage feelings of loss, abandonment, insecurity, uncertainty or other emotional harm felt by the child.

Foster parents change lives of children all over this state every single day.

"Our society believes deeply in the value of family. At the Department of Children and Families, we are committed to helping all of Florida's children in foster care grow up healthy, happy and safe. These children are the next generation of Florida's parents, workers and leaders. In small and big ways, you can help give them the opportunities they deserve. Please help us Foster Florida's Future."

- Secretary David Wilkins

To support children who have been abused, neglected or abandoned, and to support foster parents who are caring for them, go to FLPartnersForPromise.com

To find out more about becoming a foster parent, go to FosteringFlorida.com. An interactive map will lead you to the community-based care agency in your county.

Visit FosteringFlorida.com today!

