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COMMUNITY BASED CARE OF OKEECHOBEE & THE TREASURE COAST

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News & Media

Innovative program turning life around for kids

Port Saint Lucie – Sometimes, an idea just needs to be crazy enough to work.

A local team of child-welfare specialists are finding this to be true as they approach the three-year mark of a grand experiment known as the Permanency Roundtable.

The Roundtable, established along the Treasure Coast in 2014 with the help of Casey Family Programs, brings together important decision makers in a foster child's life to identify and remove barriers to permanency.

Cases that come to the Roundtable are the most complex and often represent children who have languished in the system for years due to behavior or mental health issues.

"We look at each case, we talk about it, ask questions and then the brainstorming begins," said Sara Topmiller, who coordinates the Roundtable on behalf of Devereux Community Based Care, the organization that oversees the child-welfare system in Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties. "No idea is a bad idea, and some of them have been way outside the box."

Like the one to place a teen back with her mother, whose parental rights had long been terminated.

"It just hadn't been done before," said Cheri Sheffer, Devereux CBC Chief Operating Officer, who sits on the Roundtable. "But mom had gotten herself together and had established a support network, and the child was struggling emotionally and was alone in the world.

"It just made sense to try."

Everyone on the Roundtable agreed that returning the girl to her mother was in her best interest and the best way for her to find permanency.

"It was a revolutionary idea, but that's the case that everyone talks about and holds up as an example of success," Topmiller said.

Since the Roundtable began taking referrals, the cases of 77 children have been reviewed through the process. Of that, 16 cases have been successfully closed -either through adoption, reunification or permanent guardianship - and 11 more are nearing closure.

Success is measured in two ways: Either the youth finds permanency with a family or, if the youth is about to become an adult, makes a permanent connection.

A permanent connection would be someone like a counselor or a mentor - someone the youth can call when things are rough or visit for Thanksgiving.

"All it takes is one positive, permanent connection for a youth to turn everything around and be successful in life," Topmiller said. "We don't just stop because a child is almost 18."

The Roundtable meets once a month and reviews 3-4 cases at each meeting for about two hours per case.

Core members include the Devereux CBC Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer, leadership from the Guardian ad Litem program and Children's Legal Services.

Case specific membership includes the child's case manager, guardian ad litem, program and adoption specialists, Department of Juvenile Justice and mental health providers.

Members brainstorm ideas, develop action plans and assign one another tasks that are reviewed in 30-minute follow up meetings until the case closes.

In every case, the team finds something that has not been tried before to establish permanency and connections.

"These are really, really tough cases," Topmiller said. "But those 16 cases that closed - those are 16 kids who found permanency who otherwise might still be in the system and written off as impossible."

One of those cases tells the story of a teen girl who had been removed from her home because of sexual abuse.

"She was determined that she was going home when she turned 18, and we only had four months to work with her," Topmiller said. "Everyone on the Roundtable circled around, tried to make her understand that she had other options and connected her with some ladies from her church."

It didn't matter that she was about to age out of the system.

"No one said, 'Well, she's turning 18...problem solved,'" Topmiller said. "It doesn't matter - if they have one connection before they turn 18, maybe they go to college, maybe they find a way to stay out of trouble."

The Permanency Roundtable model is finding success throughout the country, Sheffer said.

"This is a skilled and studied process that identifies barriers to permanency and addresses them," she said. "It has inspired our circuit to take a fresh look at children for whom permanency is a challenge and to use creative and practical steps to ensure we have done our absolute best for that child."

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