

# Devereux

COMMUNITY BASED CARE OF OKEECHOBEE & THE TREASURE COAST

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## News & Media

### Local youth advocate for change

**Tallahassee** – Banners of small, brightly colored hand prints draped the rotunda of the State Capitol this week in celebration of Children's Week.

Hung Sunday during the traditional Hanging of the Hands ceremony, the banners remained throughout the week as a gentle reminder to legislators and all who passed that children are - or should be - the state's priority.

Thousands of children's advocates came to the Capitol during the annual event, which included story telling in a Storybook Village, a teen town hall meeting and a news conference to talk about the health and well-being of all children.

Miracle Thomas - a St. Lucie County representative for Florida Youth SHINE, a youth-run organization that empowers current and former foster youth to become advocates in their communities - was among those attending the event.

"The main issue for our group was Family Finding," said Ms. Thomas, referring to an evidence-based model used to identify more relatives or neighbors, friends or teachers willing to care for children who have been removed from home due to abuse or neglect. "A lot of kids come into care and are placed in foster homes or group homes when there are people around them who love and support them and might be willing to give them a home."

Locally, 66 percent of children in care are living with relatives or non-relatives with whom they have existing connections.

Keeping children with people they know and trust is a priority, said Christina Kaiser, Community Relations Director for Devereux Community Based Care, the organization that oversees the child-welfare system in Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties.



Miracle Thomas, left, and Maria Batista traveled to Tallahassee to advocate on behalf of children.

"Permanency Round Tables and Out-of-Home-Care Reviews, for example, are infused with a philosophy that all children need permanent connections," she said. "They help identify and remove barriers to permanency on a child-by-child, family-by-family basis."

Youth SHINE also advocated for more educational support for former foster youth attending college.

"Kids coming out of foster care need extra support, so that when they go to college there are people checking on them or helping them find scholarships," Ms. Thomas said.

She said her experience as a youth transitioning from foster care into independence was excellent but believes consistency and greater accountability are needed throughout the state.

To learn more about youth advocacy, visit [Florida Youth SHINE](#).

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