



Connections - January 23, 2020



Xander Bunny is here, and his mission is to comfort children in foster care who have experienced trauma. Michigan-based Lavender Life Company donated to CCKids 300 Xander Bunnies – soft, lavender-stuffed bunnies that can be warmed in the microwave. “We are really moved by this donation,” CEO Carol Deloach said. “These beautiful stuffed bunnies are remarkably soft and soothing, and I think they will be a true comfort to children in foster care.”

CEO annual address

ST. LUCIE WEST - Mission work is never easy. Hours are long. Weeks, months, and sometimes years pass before the effort involved is recognized or bears results. The same is not true of commitment.

Commitment, dedication, passion – these are the quiet engines of our work, and they hummed without pause in 2019.

I am very proud of the work we do at Communities Connected for Kids and of the staff's level of commitment.

Caseloads are getting higher because of the challenges we face with opioid abuse, and the number of children coming into care is outpacing our ability to license new foster homes.

But our commitment never waivers, and the 2019 improvements to our system of care is evidence of that:

Our safety support teams kept more than half the children it reviewed out of foster care last year.

Nearly 170 children – more than our adoption goal for the fiscal year - celebrated the holidays with new adoptive families.

Fewer children lived in group homes, more lived with relatives and fewer had to be removed from home to begin with.

We created efficiencies, forged relationships and created opportunities.

And the community is beginning to pay attention.

More people are following our stories on social media and responding to our Forever Family segments.

In fact, a sibling group of six brothers and sisters found a home after their adoptive mother followed their stories on the news show last year, and another sibling adoption is underway thanks to the same program.

Commitment, dedication and passion are the quiet engines of our work. They created a momentum in 2019, and they will carry us through 2020.



Inside the mission



Connections is proud to present the latest installment of "Inside the Mission".

From time to time, we share internal communications in an effort to give you a more intimate understanding of our work.

The following is a text sent from a former youth in CCKids' Road to Success program to his counselor, Litty Summers. He sent the text and the adjoining picture the evening before starting a new job:

"You're a wonderful person, filled with laughs and love. You're the best ever, from us going to the Placita to get tacos or...(understanding) one of my little tantrums. But most of all, you've been the biggest mom figure in my life. For the longest time, I had no one, and had to fight my own demons. But you were there when no one was.

The good, the bad - the year in review

Communities Connected for Kids celebrated many wins in 2019 despite a growing concern over opioid abuse and its impact on the local foster-care system.

Those wins include fewer children removed from home, more children adopted and a growing number of youth in foster care graduating high school and enrolling in college.

"These successes mean the services offered through our provider network are working," said Christina Kaiser, CCKids community relations director.

For example, CCKids saw a 22 percent reduction in the number of children removed from their own homes last year.

"Under stress and without the proper tools, parents and caregivers often revert to how they were treated as a child, which in some cases can lead to abuse or neglect," said Kaiser, explaining the cyclical nature of abuse. "But there are degrees of mistreatment, and many children can remain at home while their families receive services that both protect and teach."

We know these services are working when fewer children are removed from home for services, she said.

Also during 2019, adoptions continued its years-long trend of exceeding expectations.

Children's Home Society, working with case management teams across Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee and St. Lucie counties, found permanent homes for 167 children.

"More over, 78 percent of children still available for adoption have identified pre-adoptive placements -- another record for our community," said Kaiser, attributing the success to recruitment efforts and new tools like the [Forever Family](#) program, which leverages the power of the media and the [Selfless Love Foundation](#), which uses cutting-edge technology to identify potential adoptive matches.

That's especially important considering the number of children entering care is growing, Kaiser said.

"[Opioid addiction](#) is behind most of it," she said. "It's getting harder to keep up, but we're managing so far."

Other 2019 achievements include:

- 252 families reunified
- 55 new foster homes licensed during fiscal 2019, and another 29 from July to December
- 30 youth enrolled in college
- An increase in clinical referrals, resulting in more children receiving mental health care
- Support services and licensing expanded to include relative caregivers
- Expedited re-accreditation
- Several large sibling groups adopted together

A thorough review of outcomes is available in the 2019 Annual Report, which will be available to the community in February. Keep checking back at www.cckids.net.



In the Clinic with Nurse Lisa

Get a healthy start to the New Year, by following these simple, but eternally effective steps:

Move more, sit less

Get at least 150 minutes of exercise weekly. The added activity will keep you limber as you age, keep your heart and lungs strong and help you sleep better, too - another essential ingredient to healthy living.

Eat a healthy diet

Opt for more whole-food, plant-based options. Get the tools, resources and information you need to make a plant-based lifestyle easy and enjoyable at www.forksoverknives.com.

Rethink your drink

Substitute water for sugary drinks. Most people don't realize just how many calories beverages contribute. Be sure to read labels, and drink water as much as possible. In many cases, removing sugary drinks from a diet can lower calorie intake by more than 500 and lower your chances of developing serious health problems.

Get enough sleep

See, I told you it's important! Aim for at least seven hours a night. A full night's sleep will help prevent sickness, maintain a health weight, lower your risk of diabetes and heart disease, and maintain a good mood.

Don't use Tobacco

Two words: Cancer and emphysema. Call 1-800-QUIT-NOW for help.

Be sun safe

Wear sunscreen with at least SPF 15. Done regularly and from an early age, wearing sunscreen will reduce the risk of sun cancer and reduce the discoloration and wrinkles caused by the sun's damaging rays.

Schedule your annual well visit

When it comes to your health, it's best to be an early bird. Having an annual wellness visit early in the year is a great first step to managing your health. Understanding your health status can bring peace of mind and help you avoid surprises.

Be kind to yourself

Schedule relaxation and recharge time. Remember - the mind is part of the body. Mental health is part of your overall physical health. Don't take it for granted and don't be ashamed to ask for help.

I wish you all peace, happiness and a very healthy New Year!

Lisa McBride, RN, BSN, is a nurse care coordinator at [CCKids](#).

Foster a Dream renewed for another year

More local youth in foster care are graduating high school and heading to college – and the [Kathryn A. Basile Foster a Dream Foundation](#) is helping to make those academic dreams come true.



The foundation – established in 2010 to help meet the unfunded needs of youth aging out of foster care – awarded Communities Connected for Kids \$10,000 late last year to help youth pay for high-school graduation expenses, college campus visits and other costs associated with making the transition into independence.

A record 30 youth in foster care attended college last year, said Christina Kaiser, community relations director for CCKids.

The number of foster youth who graduated high school last year, though not as robust as college entry levels, also was strong at 14. That number holds steady from 2018 but represents a slight decrease from 2017, which was an all-time high for local teens graduating high school.

“It’s a small number, but important,” Kaiser said. “It’s a barometer of our system’s overall health and a credit to partners like the [Foster a Dream Foundation](#) that help create a stable environment for young people transitioning out of foster care.”

The foundation helps them meet expenses that ordinarily would be handled by family. That helps normalize the foster-care experience, she said.

Since it was created in 2010 in memory of child advocate Kathryn A. Basile, Foster a Dream has contributed more than \$70,000 and helped 134 teenagers and young adults in foster care.

To learn more about Communities Connected for Kids, visit www.cckids.net or go to www.fosteradreamfoundation.org.

Pictured above is the late Kathryn A. Basile, a local child advocate who served as the executive director of the St. Lucie County Children's Services Council for 10 years.