



The C.C.Kids Connector - *Happy Holidays!*



Lots of new sponsors joined us this year to make the holidays happy for children in foster care and the Circuit 19 dependency system. Florida Highway Patrol, pictured here, joined a team of more than 40 sponsors this year in the Making Christmas Bright annual toy drive. Other sponsors included the [Guardians for New Futures](#), which collected gifts for more than 500 children in Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee counties, and [Minton Law P.A.](#), which collected gifts for all teenagers in St. Lucie County. We've been highlighting our sponsors all month. Please follow us on [Facebook](#) or read our newsletters for a more complete listing of sponsors.

CCKids Chief reviews a year of ups & downs

Our community relations director likes to share a story about a young boy who drew a picture of what home and family meant to him. He drew a beautiful house with bold, black lines, a chimney piping smoke into the sky and colorful flowers out front.



But the picture was missing something: People. When she asked the boy where they were, he said in that matter-of-fact voice that young children have down so well, “There aren’t any people, because “They” came and took them all away.”

I think about that story often this time of year, marked for most of us by the traditions and comfort of family. It gives me pause to stop and reflect on the job that Communities Connected for Kids and the entire child-welfare system in Okeechobee and the Treasure Coast has done in keeping families together, reconnecting them after a removal or finding another forever home through adoption.

These past few years have been exceptionally challenging for us as the Child Welfare Lead Agency as it has for all the other 16 Lead Agencies that serve Florida. The opioid crisis has impacted the children and families in our four-county area in a major way. In the past, we could keep children at home and provide services. Due to the severity of the opioid crisis, more children have been removed than in almost twenty years.

There is an upside.

About 55 percent of the children in our care were reunified with their parents thanks to the excellent services delivered by our provider community. We also found a record number of relatives and family friends to serve as caretakers this year – a 20 percent increase from 2017. When relatives were unavailable, we placed children in foster or group homes, while keeping siblings together at a rate exceeding 75 percent.

Almost 150 foster homes were added to our system over the past few years thanks to our partners; Camelot, 4Kids, Mount Bethel, and Place of Hope. This past year 186 children found adoptive homes thanks to the impressive work of our adoption’s services provider, Children’s Home Society. That measure itself was a whopping 38 percent increase over the previous year, and we expect the trend to continue upward.

This past year we served over 1100 children (from a low in the 800s in 2016), more than half were placed in licensed care, foster and group care. Our continued need for families to foster children who need the nurturing and stability is paramount. Literally we have seen miracles occur in the direction a child’s life can take when love, support and stability is provided.

So what does home and family mean? To me, and I imagine to most of us, it means a safe and stable place where people love us. It’s a concept that sometimes eludes our

system of care. But we can get there through adoption, through foster care and by reconnecting children, when safe, to their healing parents.

That has always been the challenge and privilege of child welfare. And it will be our work in the New Year.



Community partnership unveils Vehicle Scholarship Program

Stuart - Communities Connected for Kids, in partnership with Infiniti of Stuart and the St. Lucie County Roundtable, will unveil a vehicle scholarship program during a special cocktail reception January 18 at Infiniti of Stuart.

The scholarship program, created to improve education outcomes for teens and young adults in the foster-care system, will award a car each year to a young person in CCK's Road to Success program.

Road to Success, which prepares teens and young adults for life after foster care, has had a significant impact on the lives of young people in the community, said Chris Martinez, program supervisor. For example, he said, more teens in foster care are graduating from high school and pursuing post-secondary education.

"We hope to further our efforts by making vehicle ownership more accessible to this same group of young people," Martinez said. "We know that our young people who have reliable transportation are the ones who stay in college and receive a degree."

The idea for the program grew from discussions earlier this year among members of the St. Lucie County Roundtable, which addresses and responds to key risk factors that lead to delinquency, crime and other problem behaviors in children.

"We looked at all the young people in foster care who successfully graduated high school or college and realized they all had reliable transportation in common," said Paul Nigro, Circuit 19 director for the Guardian ad Litem program and Roundtable member. "We knew we needed to make vehicle ownership more accessible to that population."

The program is off to a great start.

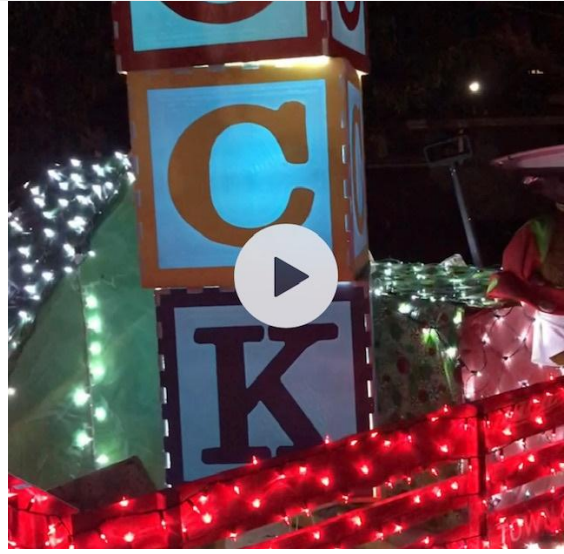
Infiniti of Stuart donated the first vehicle - a 2013 Nissan Altima - and secured commitments from its partners in the community to provide painting, detailing and mechanical assistance if needed.

The car will be awarded during next month's reception, which is invitation-only and made possible by the generous support of Caliber Home Loans, Rothenthal, Levy, Simon and Ryles, and Hoskins, Turco, Lloyd and Lloyd.

Miss us on social media? Here are some scenes from the season



The Junior League of Indian River County continued a long tradition of hosting a Christmas party for foster families. The League has hosted this party for nearly two decades.



The Outreach Committee pulled out all the stops with this Radio Flyer Wagon and rotating alphabet blocks, engineered and created by Michael Kaiser.



We had a convoy of support at all Christmas parades, but none as big as Okeechobee! Thanks to our providers, families and staff who walked with us in Okeechobee, Indian River, Martin and St. Lucie counties, continuing the roll-out of our new name and brand.



St. Andrew's Academy was one of our many Making Christmas Bright sponsors. The school collected gifts for 80 children. More than 40 local sponsors collected a combined 3,300 gifts for children in CCKids' system of care. Thank you to everyone who helped make Christmas Bright!



Miami Dolphins wide receiver Albert Wilson visited families throughout St. Lucie County to deliver special Christmas presents. In November, he hosted a turkey give-away for the community and made sure to include the local foster-care community.