What is Foster Care?

Foster care is a temporary arrangement where children who cannot live with their biological parents due to abuse, neglect, or other family issues are placed in the care of state-approved foster families. The Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) oversees the foster care system. Foster care aims to provide children with stability and care during a difficult time while working toward a long-term solution for their family.

Foster care is a temporary arrangement managed by the state. Guardianship is often a more permanent solution than foster care.

Foster Care Placement

The court system makes the decision whether to place a child in foster care, usually based on recommendations from DCF. The process to place a child in foster care involved several parties:

DCF. DCF investigates reports of child abuse, neglect, or abandonment. In emergency situations, DCF can make immediate decisions about a child's removal, but all foster care placements must be reviewed and approved by the court.

After removal, a shelter hearing is held within 24 hours. This is a court proceeding where a judge decides if there was sufficient cause for the removal and if the child should remain in shelter care or be returned home. “Shelter” means a placement with a relative or nonrelative, or in a licensed home or facility, for the temporary care of a child who is alleged to be or has found to be dependent, pending court disposition before or after adjudication.

Dependency Court. Dependency judges oversee cases involving child welfare. After the shelter hearing, the court continues to review the case and makes legal determinations about the child's placement based on the best interest of the child.

Guardian ad Litem. A guardian ad litem (GAL) will be appointed by the Court at the earliest possible time, to represent the child's best interests in any child abuse, abandonment, or neglect judicial proceeding, whether civil or criminal. The GAL gives input on whether the child should remain in foster care, be returned to their parents, or be placed in a permanent home through adoption or guardianship.

Case Managers. Child welfare case managers assess the child's safety, work with the biological parents to resolve issues, and coordinate services. The case manager provides verbal and written instructions to a child entering a shelter or foster care to educate the child on how to identify and report abuse, abandonment, or neglect. They provide reports to the court, recommending whether the child should stay in foster care, return home, or transition to another permanent option.

Parents. Parents have the right to present their case in court, often with legal representation, to contest the placement or work toward reunification.

Judges. Ultimately, judges make the final decisions about foster care placement, reunification, or termination of parental rights based on evidence presented by DCF, the child's case manager, parents, and any other involved parties (such as the GAL). The court's primary concern is the child's safety and well-being.

Things to Know About Foster Care

- Foster care is meant to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children until they can be reunified with their biological families, adopted, or placed in permanent guardianship.
- Children in foster care have case managers who coordinate services, such as therapy, health care, and education, and work with biological families to address issues that led to the child's removal.
- The court system is heavily involved in foster care cases. Judges make decisions regarding placement, parental rights, and whether children can be reunified with their families or adopted.
- Foster Parents are individuals or families approved to provide care for children. They must undergo training, background checks, and home studies to ensure they meet the state's requirements.
- Foster families receive financial stipends, access to training, and additional support to care for their foster children.

- If reunification with the biological family is not possible, foster children may become eligible for adoption.
- Children who do not remain in foster care when they turn 18 may age out of the system. Some youth in foster care may qualify for services up to age 21 or 22, depending on the circumstances, to help them transition to independence.

Aging Out of Foster Care

Many youth face challenges as they transition from foster care to independence. Common difficulties include housing instability, difficulty finding employment, and lack of emotional and social support.

In Florida, when children in foster care reach the age of 18, they "age out" of the system, meaning they are no longer legally under the state's care. However, recognizing that many young adults still need support during this transition, Florida provides several programs to assist those aging out of foster care.

Road to Independence Program.

The program offers comprehensive life skills training to help young adults prepare for independent living and connects youth to community resources. The training topics include managing finances, finding housing, job searching, cooking, and maintaining health insurance.

Extended Foster Care (EFC).

EFC provides continued housing support (often with foster families or in transitional housing) and access to health care, life skills training, and financial stipends. Youth can choose to remain in EFC until the age of 21 (or 22 if they have a documented disability). To remain in EFC, young adults must meet certain criteria, such as being enrolled in school, employed, or participating in a job training program. They are also required to meet regularly with a case manager and work toward independent living goals.

Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS).

PESS provides support to foster youth as they work toward obtaining degrees or certifications that will lead to stable employment. The program provides financial assistance to youth formerly in foster care who are pursuing higher education. Eligible young adults can receive a monthly stipend while they attend a college, university, or vocational school full-time.

Aftercare Services.

These services are for young adults who don’t meet the criteria for EFC or PESS but still need some level of support as they transition to adulthood. The program provides limited financial, housing, counseling, and educational assistance to youth between the ages of 18 and 23 who were previously in foster care. Additionally, assistance can be offered for things like housing deposits, job training, health care, and emergency needs.

Additional Resources

- Foster Power