



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### ***CHILDNET TO FOCUS ON IMPROVING SYSTEM OF CARE FOR BROWARD COUNTY'S ABUSED CHILDREN***

Plantation, FL –Peter Digre, a national child welfare expert contracted by the Department of Children & Families (DCF) to evaluate Broward's child protection system of care recently released his review of Broward County's lead agency. Working closely with ChildNet, Broward's Community Based Care lead agency, and DCF he developed several important and innovative recommendations whose implementation should make Broward's system of care a model for the state and the nation.

Digre's findings highlight a number of areas in which ChildNet, contracted provider agencies and the Department of Children and Families can further improve services to Broward's most vulnerable children and their families. "Digre's report provides valuable feedback that will help both ChildNet and DCF better serve the children and families of Broward County," notes Emilio Benitez, ChildNet's Chief Executive Officer. "The report provides guidance as we [ChildNet] seek to continually improve the services offered and identify areas on which we need to focus our efforts."

#### Summary of Findings, Recommendations and Actions

##### *1. Build a strong working alliance between The Department of Children and Families and ChildNet.*

Digre's report echoes a recent Inspector General's review of other lead agencies in the state by observing that the key to enhancing the timeliness and quality of service for children in the dependency system and their families is for the Department and ChildNet to work as a team. "ChildNet agrees wholeheartedly with Mr. Digre's observation," said Emilio Benitez, ChildNet's Chief Executive Officer. "We are committed to working collaboratively and coordinating efforts to better care for Broward's abused, abandoned and neglected children."

##### *2. Actively engaging parent and families.*

Digre is optimistic about ChildNet's new initiative to improve on their work with parents and families whose children have been removed from their homes. ChildNet recently contracted with four local service providers (Children's Home Society, Henderson Mental Health Center, Kids in Distress and Minority Development and Empowerment) for more than \$2 million worth of Family Reunification and Strengthening services. Each of these

providers is certified in a well researched family engagement model. On each case, the provider will partner with ChildNet staff to develop a comprehensive approach to engage the family. Together, they will assist parents and caregivers in resolving identified problems in order to reunite their children to a permanent, stable, and supportive family environment.

*3. Decreasing the reliance on residential shelter and group care for children under age 12.*

ChildNet concurs with Digre's recommendation to reduce the use of shelter care in Broward and has been working with local stakeholders and contracted providers to move in that direction. To accomplish this, foster home board rates have been increased and enhanced rates and bonuses have been created to stimulate the development of homes that can meet the needs of targeted and special populations such as; siblings, teens and children with medical and behavioral challenges. Furthermore, foster home management contracts have been increased specifically to support more foster home recruitment and licensing staff so that delays in training and licensing new homes can be eliminated. This past year, such efforts have increased the number of local licensed foster beds by 21 percent to over 1,000 foster beds and decreased the number of children in shelters by 33 percent. Despite these advances, Digre and ChildNet acknowledge that further decreasing the reliance on residential shelter care will require building new and widespread support from a community that has in the recent past generously supported multimillion dollar capital campaigns to build beautiful campuses of group and shelter homes throughout Broward .

*4. Reconsidering Licensing Responsibilities.*

Perhaps Digre's most astute recommendation is his challenging the traditional view of licensing. ChildNet welcomes his recommendation to reconsider the role and duties of licensing staff and procedures. "Historically, licensing has been a matter of compliance and meeting well-defined objective standards," notes Larry Rein. "However, Digre has made us realize that licensing also needs to be as he says 'the voice of the child by ensuring that he or she receives quality care in an environment that is conducive to healthy growth and development.'" ChildNet expects that an upcoming initiative to realign and more efficiently use DCF and ChildNet licensing resources will embody this approach.

ChildNet is the private, not for profit organization selected by the state through a competitive process to serve as the local Community Based Care lead agency. As the lead agency, ChildNet manages the local system of services and supports for Broward's abused, abandoned and neglected children and their caregivers. This system of care was developed with extensive input from local stakeholders and its effective implementation depends upon their continued support. For more information on ChildNet, visit the Web site at [www.ChildNet.us](http://www.ChildNet.us) or call (954) 414-6000.

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