



# BOARD MEETING MINUTES

**February 28, 2025**

**Board of Directors:**

Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair; Rebecca Brock, Vice Chair; Michael Lepera, Treasurer; Lois Marino, Secretary; Bill Reicherter, Carolina Raineau, Chelsea Bellew, Donna Korn, Dr. Heidi Schaeffer, Maria Mezerhane, Meghan Russell, Nancy W. Stamper, Paul Adams, Dr. Ronald Ford, Sabria McElroy, Stefanie Title, Dr. Victoria Thurston

**Unable to Attend:**

Bill Reicherter, Chelsea Bellew, Meghan Russell, Michael Lepera, Paul Adams

**Other Attendees:**

*ChildNet Staff:* Larry Rein, Neiko Shea, Donna Eprifania, Julie DeMar, Alcolya St. Juste, Deena Ponto, Nicole Slade, Tina Lewis, Shanny Tozzi, Alica Savage, Sheree Tortora, Samantha Ramsaran, Gail Johnson, Daffodil Otto, Jennifer Leslie, Nyasha Nedd Wright, Dora Garton, Frantzia Thenor, Traneika Delee, Julie Janello, *DCF:* Traci Schweitzer, Isis Williams, Adrienne Reid

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**CALL TO ORDER – Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair**

- Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 8:02 a.m.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES – Lois Marino, Board Secretary**

- Roll was taken, and quorum was established.

The January 24, 2025 and January 30, 2025 meeting minutes were reviewed. *A motion was moved and seconded to approve both minutes. A vote was taken. The ayes have it and the motion was adopted.*

**WELCOME – Col. Josefa Benjamin, Board Chair**

- Josefa Benjamin welcomed new Board Directors Carolina Raineau and Stefanie Title.

**CHILDNET BOARD EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AWARD – Tina Lewis, Director of HR**

- The ChildNet Board Employee Recognition Award was presented to the following deserving employees:
  - December 2024 – Gail Johnson, Dependency Specialist (PB)
  - January 2025 – Alicia Savage, Lead Dependency Case Manager, Unit B1 (BWD)  
Traneika Delee, Lead Dependency Case Manager, Unit 102 (PB)

**NEW BUSINESS**

- **Training on ChildNet Mission, Vision and Values** – Larry Rein noted that this mandatory training on ChildNet's mission, vision, and values for board members is required by Florida law. This training is timely since a review and modification of these principles will be a key focus at the upcoming Board Retreat. The current Mission, established in 2002, is praised for its simplicity and clarity: "To protect abused, abandoned, and neglected children in the communities we serve." While it effectively empha-



sizes child safety, Mr. Rein noted the evolving focus in child welfare, which now includes family preservation. The suggestion for the retreat is to consider incorporating this family-centered approach into the mission statement.

Mr. Rein discussed ChildNet's Vision, which was created by the Board of Directors. The current Vision is "ChildNet will lead every child in our care to safety, permanence, and stability". The vision is praised for its brevity, clarity, and suitability at the time of its creation. However, like the mission statement, it focuses solely on children without mentioning families. Moving forward, the board may consider updating the vision to reflect the importance of family involvement in child safety and well-being, while maintaining its simplicity and memorability.

Mr. Rein also discussed ChildNet's Values, which were established early on by the initial board and leadership team. Unlike the mission and vision, the values may require significant changes. Initially, ChildNet focused on advocacy, with staff called "child advocates." However, the title was later changed to "dependency case managers" to align with Florida statute and better reflect the organization's role. Several values may need updates, such as emphasizing family involvement, avoiding buzzwords, and rephrasing statements to better reflect the organization's goals. While the importance of foster and adoptive parents was acknowledged, Mr. Rein suggested giving greater emphasis to family preservation and kinship care. Another key value emphasized the organization's reliance on community partnerships, which remains essential. Additionally, there was discussion about the commitment to transparency and performance evaluation, referencing an independent third-party evaluation from ChildNet's early years. Maintaining a focus on accountability and continuous improvement was recommended. Mr. Rein suggested to consider incorporating the voices of youth and families with system experience into the organization's values during the upcoming Board Retreat.

- **Annual Compliance Training** – Neiko Shea reported that Board members will need to complete an annual compliance training electronically, like last year. A link will be sent out soon, and the training must be completed by mid-April. Board members can contact Ms. Shea directly with any questions.

## COMMITTEE UPDATES

- **Community Engagement Committee** – Lois Marino, Committee Chair and Shanny Tozzi, Director of Community Relations

The Committee is focusing on two major events: a luncheon on March 7th and a cocktail event on May 14th. A detailed event snapshot has been prepared, covering goals, committee members, deadlines, and strategies.

The March 7<sup>th</sup> luncheon has a fundraising goal of \$150,000, with sponsorships targeted at \$60,000 and donor contributions (tickets, donations, and auctions) set at \$57,000. As of now, we have raised \$97,750 and secured \$84,000 in sponsor money, though donor contributions are currently at 29% of the goal. Attendance is slightly below target, with 234 attendees out of the 280 expected. Event strategies include telling the Silvestri family's foster care story, using QR codes for donations, and promoting recurring giving. Several new sponsors have joined, and there will be a raffle and live auction. The Committee is encouraging board members to bring potential donors to increase visibility and support. Additionally, attendees are reminded to purchase tickets and submit guest lists promptly.

The organization is also engaging elected officials and fostering year-round sponsor partnerships. Board members are encouraged to forward sponsorship leads to the development officer for follow-up.

- **Finance Committee** – Michael Lepera, Committee Chair and Donna Eprifania, CFO

Donna Eprifania reported that ChildNet is still unable to secure a Performance Bond due to negative financial standings over the past two years. We are awaiting a response from the Department of Children

and Families regarding a Risk Pool application, which may provide financial relief. The Discretionary Fund had a balance of \$3.4 million at the end of December 2024, providing crucial cash flow support. January 2025 financials showed Broward County operating 3% over budget due to higher staffing costs, service coordination expenses for high-acuity children, and residential care expenses, resulting in a \$2 million deficit. In contrast, Palm Beach County reduced residential care expenses, resulting in a smaller \$300,000 deficit.

- **990** – A draft Form 990 (tax filing) was reviewed by the Leadership Team and Finance Committee. This was reviewed against the public audit. It reflected improved financial standing with a negative \$600,000 net asset position, significantly better than previous years.

*A motion was moved and seconded to approve the 990 for filing. A vote was taken. The ayes have it and the motion was adopted.*

- **Governance/Executive Committee – Rebecca Brock, Committee Chair**

**Board Director Resignations:**

- Mark Dhooge – non-voting provider representative – effective 02-14-25
- Amy Black – effective 02-28-25

*A motion was moved and seconded to accept the above resignations. A vote was taken. The ayes have it and the motion was adopted.*

- **Legal/Human Resources Committee – Rebecca Brock, Committee Chair**

Rebecca Brock noted there were no new incidents or need for outside counsel, except for contract reviews. Neiko Shea announced the annual compliance training scheduled for the end of April. The Compliance Committee met on January 24th and approved the annual compliance plan and the fraud, waste, and abuse plan, as required.

- **Program Quality Committee – Nancy W. Stamper, Committee Chair**

The Program Quality Committee met and there were no policies or procedures to review. Presentations on census trends showed that the number of children in care continues to decline in both Broward and Palm Beach counties, reaching record lows. Broward is now below 1,300 children in care, and Palm Beach is below 1,000, reflecting successful efforts to keep children safely with their families and achieve permanency faster. While residential group care usage has decreased, further reductions are desired. Additionally, performance metrics presented by the Department of Children and Families showed strong results, with Broward meeting 10 out of 13 metrics and Palm Beach meeting 11 out of 13, both exceeding statewide averages.

**BOARD CHAIR REPORT – Col. Josefa Benjamin**

- **Board Retreat – Scheduling Alternatives** - The Board Retreat has been rescheduled to Friday, May 16, 2025 at a more centrally located venue. The goal is to ensure 100% participation to discuss key matters such as the agency's mission, vision, and future direction. This timing provides more opportunity for preparation and alignment. An official email will be sent out to confirm attendance. The retreat will take place before the annual meeting in June.
- **HANDY Award** – Larry Rein will be presented an award at the HANDY 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Scholar Breakfast on May 23, 2025.

## CEO/PRESIDENT REPORT – Larry Rein

- **Federal Issues** – Mr. Rein provided an update on federal issues affecting child welfare. Despite concerns over federal spending cuts, there are currently no direct cuts to foster care or child welfare. However, the House budget proposes eliminating a block grant that makes up about 10% of state child welfare funding, which could impact foster care funding. Changes to Medicaid are also a concern, especially regarding potential reductions in adult coverage and eligibility, though no immediate cuts to children's Medicaid are anticipated. Mr. Rein emphasized the need to stay alert to these developments, particularly the impact on Medicaid. There have been no direct local impacts from immigration policy changes so far.
- **Risk Pool** – Mr. Rein provided an update where ChildNet applied for \$4.5 million from the Risk Pool to cover its projected deficit for Palm Beach. The review process has been completed, but the decision on allocation is still pending. There is uncertainty due to recent leadership changes at the Department of Children and Families. The new Secretary, Taylor Hatch, is expected to take over in March 2025. The funds from the risk pool are not unrestricted and are meant to cover overspent expenditures like residential group care. Additionally, the Department of Children and Families recognizes a statewide deficit of \$27 million and is advocating for more funding from the legislature to address the shortfall.
- **CBC Funding Methodology** - Larry Rein discussed the funding methodology developed by KPMG, which was submitted to key state officials in December. While the Florida Coalition for Children (FCC) has not yet taken a formal position, it has provided input to a Senate committee. The FCC supports delaying the implementation of the proposed funding model to address flaws, although Mr. Rein disagrees, believing it should be implemented now with improvements made afterward. The delay suggestion stems from the current political climate in Tallahassee, where there is tension between the legislative leadership and the Governor, which might make it difficult for the legislature to accept the proposal. DCF is continuing to work with KPMG on a project to better assess agencies' needs, addressing one major flaw of the initial model: it was based on historical expenditures rather than actual needs. The FCC is working on providing detailed information to help improve the model, and Mr. Rein is optimistic about the outcome, given the good relationship with Department officials.
- **Legislative Update** – The Florida Coalition for Children (FCC) has a legislative agenda for the upcoming session, including two major items. One proposal aims to reduce the required liability coverage for child welfare service providers, a move that could help mitigate the rising costs of insurance premiums, which are expected to increase by 100% for many agencies. Despite strong opposition from certain interest groups, the proposal has received surprisingly positive support from legislators, even some attorneys.

Another key proposal seeks to exempt child welfare workers from public record requests, protecting staff information from being made public. Additionally, the FCC is working on legislation to prioritize foster children for services from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, aiming to address developmental delays and disabilities. This proposal would also extend to children at-risk of entering foster care due to their parents' inability to manage their disabilities.

Lastly, FCC has presented profiles of children with complex needs highlighting the difficulties faced in accessing services for children with developmental disabilities. The FCC is hopeful that these legislative efforts will lead to better support for vulnerable children.

- **Local Special Appropriations Requests:**

1. **Expand Visitation Services in the Visitation Center in Palm Beach** - This expansion is necessary to meet the judiciary's orders for three weekly visitations of children and families, which is a unique requirement in Florida. Despite this, there is still insufficient capacity to meet these orders. The increased visitation is believed to contribute to Palm Beach's success in achieving timely



reunifications of children, making it one of the best counties in the state for this outcome. Senator Holski is sponsoring this request for nearly \$700,000.

2. Improve the physical setting of SafePlace in both Broward and Palm Beach - Representative Daily from Broward and Senator Berman from Palm Beach are sponsoring this request for just under \$200,000.

- **HomeSafe** – HomeSafe is a service provider in Palm Beach County, primarily known for offering therapeutic group care to children with significant mental health problems. They also provide domestic violence intervention services. In Florida, residential treatment for children's mental health is offered in either intensive psychiatric programs (the highest level of care) or therapeutic group homes (a less restrictive setting). HomeSafe specializes in therapeutic group care and has been working with ChildNet for many years. Although ChildNet no longer has a contract with HomeSafe, it continues to purchase individual beds for children there. Recently, a tragedy occurred when a teenage girl from Southwest Florida, placed in HomeSafe's care, died by suicide. This child was not from Palm Beach or Broward counties, as HomeSafe serves children statewide.

The Agency for Healthcare Administration (AHCA) issued a temporary moratorium on placing children with suicidal ideation, self-harm, or suicide attempts at HomeSafe, a therapeutic group care provider in Palm Beach. This moratorium affects all their programs, though existing residents, including 7 children from Broward, remain there. New placements have been put on hold, with case managers reviewing the histories of pending children to ensure they do not have suicidal tendencies. For the children already in HomeSafe, Broward plans to increase case manager visits and monitoring to ensure their well-being. AHCA's moratorium has no set end date, and the situation is being closely monitored. The lack of alternative facilities for these high-risk children makes finding appropriate care difficult, as foster homes and other placements are reluctant to take them.

Mr. Rein discussed his involvement in the Florida Commission on Mental Health and Substance Misuse, where he contributed to a recommendation to improve therapeutic group care in the State. This recommendation aimed to assess the capacity, quality, and need for such services. As a result, legislation was passed to create a statewide group for ongoing monitoring, though it has not yet been implemented. Mr. Rein also highlighted the state's limited capacity for therapeutic group care, particularly for children under 12, with only a few programs available. The decline in capacity was linked to risk and liability concerns, and organizations like Chrysalis and Alternate Family Care ceased their programs. Mr. Rein noted that HomeSafe, which cannot restrain or lock children, faces increasing challenges in managing the population. The issue needs attention, and Mr. Rein proposed a presentation to better inform the board about these challenges.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

- There was no public comment.

#### **NEXT MEETING DATE**

- Friday, March 28, 2025 at 8:00 a.m. in person and via Zoom

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

- Having no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:40 a.m.

*Lois Marino*

2/28/25

Lois Marino  
Board Secretary

Date

(Corporate Seal)