



TO SERVE AND PROTECT

LARRY REIN, CEO OF CHILDNET, IS RELENTLESS IN HIS PURSUIT OF BETTER WAYS TO SUPPORT AND ELEVATE SOUTH FLORIDA YOUTH IN THE CHILD-WELFARE SYSTEM

By Kevin Kaminski

For an organization that deals with some of life's grittiest real-world dramas, ChildNet sure knows a thing or two about circus-like feats. As the lead agency for community-based care in Broward (since 2002) and Palm Beach counties (since 2012), the esteemed nonprofit organization manages to keep hundreds of child-welfare plates spinning at any one time.

In layman's terms, as president and CEO Larry Rein explains, Child-

Net is responsible for every youth in the two counties who's been adjudicated "dependent" by a circuit court—meaning, without proper care—following an investigation of abuse, abandonment or neglect. According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, ChildNet was serving a combined 2,100 children and young adults with out-of-home care needs in Broward and Palm Beach counties as of Feb. 28.

"Essentially, we're the umbrella organization that manages a system made up of other nonprofits and service groups [involved in child welfare]," says Rein, one of South

Florida's most ardent advocates when it comes to community-based care. "We have about 230 case managers between the two counties. We also subcontract with different organizations to recruit foster parents, to train and license them, to operate shelters, to operate group-care programs, to arrange adoptions, to do independent living services, to provide behavioral health-care services, and to prepare kids for when they transition out of foster care at 18.

"We coordinate that entire system."

If it all sounds daunting, it can be at times. But thanks to Rein's

tireless and innovative efforts, ChildNet continues to expand its web of support and services—making a difference, along the way, for countless children and teens. For example, he's responsible for the first local interagency agreement between ChildNet and the Department of Juvenile Justice to better serve dually involved youth. Meanwhile, the agreement he forged with the Children's Services Council of Broward County led to more than \$8 million for prevention and diversion programs.

These days, the challenge that most gnaws at Rein, who has been with ChildNet since its inception in 2002, involves the foster community's most troubled teens, especially the ones about to age out of the system. But Rein is nothing if not a man with a plan.

He spoke to *Lifestyle* about ChildNet's ongoing work on the eve of National Foster Care Month (in May).

What challenges did the pandemic accentuate or create regarding ChildNet's many responsibilities?

The effects haven't been what we would have predicted. We had tremendous fears about what the pandemic would do to our capacity to care for children, about limiting the available number of foster homes, about limiting our group and shelter capacity as people became ill, and several other scenarios.

With only a couple of exceptions, however, we averted the crisis that all of us felt was coming. Foster parents, for example, stepped up tremendously. We lost very few. Occasionally, somebody would become ill and couldn't care for children, but we were able to find another foster home provider to help until those folks were healthy again.

One of the amazing stories is that ChildNet staff—our case management staff, and even the administrative staffers who were qualified and certified to do it—was able to step

up and fill in workforce gaps for our subcontractors on a temporary basis when somebody became ill.

We also had several group care providers that were sharp enough to get prepared early on. Those providers amassed a backup crew of volunteers and workers that wanted to work overtime. So, whenever somebody became ill, they were able to fill in those gaps.

It's a strangely positive story in a way. People met the challenge.

"The support to kids in terms of transitioning out of foster care has improved dramatically over the last 20 years in Florida," Rein says. "Still, we have so much further to go."

What were some of the ways where ChildNet did have to pivot for whatever reason?

The thing that bothers me most is the disconnection from our workforce, because we've been doing so much virtually. Trying to maintain engagement, especially with new employees, has been a major challenge—as well as keeping our veteran employees connected and energized.

Having said that, doing so many things virtually also has been a positive for us. In our industry, it has increased the engagement and involvement of families and staff. For example, prepandemic, if a parent had to go to court, they had to go in person to the courthouse. Now, for almost every court transaction, parents can appear by video—and they've done it. We've also seen it with counseling sessions. Typically, our biggest problem with counseling and therapy is the no-show

rate of parents. That seems to have dropped dramatically, according to all of our behavioral health care providers.

By statute, and by federal guidelines, our case managers must visit a child in their home—whether at a foster parent's house, in a group home, at a shelter, with a relative caregiver, or with a parent under supervision. We have to visit them in that setting every 30 days. Early on, the feds changed that to allow us to only see them face to face every 90 days. The state of Florida followed suit.

We still prioritized the kids on our caseload. If we thought we needed to be on site more often, we followed the 30-day statute. For others, we could be comfortable with every 90 days on site. But I still wanted the case manager to visit every week by video.

Lo and behold, case managers started having better relationships—and were learning more about what was going on with the kids—than they ever had before. Instead of seeing them once a month, they're talking to them four times a month. We've since backed off that to every other week. But, again, increased interaction has been a positive that's come out of a shift in the way we do business.

The transition into adulthood for foster care youth remains a core challenge for the system. What steps can ChildNet take to make an impact?

The support to kids in terms of transitioning out of foster care has improved dramatically over the last 20 years in Florida. Still, we have so much further to go.

I'm in the middle of a project that's focused totally on this. There are a lot of organizations, especially in Broward, that provide services for kids to prepare them to transition to adulthood—for both foster care teens and kids not necessarily in foster care.

We're in the process of trying

to determine exactly how effective these services really are. Are we sending our kids to the right program? And are those programs meeting the unique needs of ChildNet's foster-care children? We just began a deep dive into this issue. This is bigger than ChildNet; it's throughout the social service industry.

I don't think we go deep enough into being sure we're doing the best and the most that we possibly can for these kids. People sometimes assume because they've been doing it one way for years, that's the only way to do it. And I think people get a bit stale. We're trying to be sure that we're giving our kids exactly what they need. If we're not, then we need to figure out what they need—and go create it.

When your head hits the pillow, is that the issue that keeps you up at night?

This isn't true of every foster-care teenager, but there are some who've had incredibly challenging lives. Many of those kids have long delinquency histories, as well as foster-care history. They probably have little, if any, relationship with family at this point. So, their needs are enormous. That's what I'm concerned about. Are the people providing the services up to really doing what we need for these kids?

I feel we've done a good job over the past two decades. But the thing we haven't done as well is to provide for those kids, the most challenging teenagers.

So, we did a little pilot program in Palm Beach, our Oak Street project. It was [an idea] by me and a circuit court judge. We had four of the most challenged young men in the

dependency system—all four have long delinquency records—living in a home with a lot of staff, a lot of community support, and a lot of educational support. Over the past few years, we saw an incredible drop in the number of arrests—to virtually none. An incredible increase in their



attendance at school. A tremendous increase in their performance in school. And a decrease into their admissions for mental health issues and residential treatment.

All in all, it's been a rousing success.

But now, in the last six months, we've had our first "graduates" turn 18. At 18, the system is set up to provide them some support, but they're no longer dependent—and we can only use certain funds provided through the federal government to help support them. There are some programs for them that will provide support, but it's not the same level of support that they're used to.

For all the success we've had in

the last two years in turning their lives around, we're now seeing that they've floundered since they've left the [Oak Street] program.

We do a lot of great stuff for the typical child [in the system]. I think we prepare them for independent living. But for these more challenged teens, we need to start a lot earlier at getting them ready to be on their own. And then, after they leave us, there needs to be far more support for them than there currently is in terms of supervision, and an adult to connect with and really depend upon.

Nobody has been able to figure out a way to serve the really tough cases. We're having these discussions now. We're trying to replicate the Oak Street project in Broward with a home for boys, and soon we're going to open a home for girls.

I've been trying to get legislative appropriation, because I don't have it in my budget to do another home. We got it through the state leg-

islature last year, but the governor vetoed it. Hopefully, it'll work this year.

But the cost is enormous.

When you think about your involvement with ChildNet, what makes you proud?

The Oak Street project, for starters. I'm also hopeful that in my tenure as the CEO at ChildNet the last three-plus years that I've helped to create an organization of engaged, motivated professionals that are striving to do all they possibly can for these children and their families. We've been doing good all along. But we can always do better. We can't become complacent.