June 7, 2021

National Association of Counsel for Children
1600 Downing St., Suite 410
Denver, CO 80218

RE: NACC Outstanding Children’s Law Office Nomination:
The Foster Children’s Project of Palm Beach Legal Aid

To NACC Nominating Committee:

I am writing to nominate The Foster Children’s Project of the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County for the NACC’s Outstanding Children’s Law Office award. The year 2021 marks the 20th anniversary of one of the most successful children’s law offices of all time. For over 20 years, The Foster Children’s Project (FCP) has operated with a singular purpose – to get kids out of foster care and into permanent homes quickly and safely. FCP was founded with the goal of getting children into permanent homes within 12 months. The program was designed by John and Jim Walsh, and they have continued to serve as co-directors, quietly achieving unprecedented outcomes for children in Palm Beach County. Their success is the result of an outcomes-driven approach to representation that ensures a sense of urgency for every child, and creation of a model children’s law office with rigorous training, supportive supervision and reasonable caseloads. While offices are often awarded for significant contributions in a given year, honoring FCP is an opportunity to recognize an office with longstanding success that has consistently demonstrated the values of the NACC and a model children’s law office.

When FCP was created, it began with the simple premise of measuring the length of time children were in foster care, and it evolved into an approach that has stood the test of time. When FCP began taking cases in 2001, the average time to permanency was 36 months. Throughout the life of the program, FCP has averaged 12.5 months to get a child into his or her permanent placement. This success has been achieved despite the spikes in children in foster care, changes in law and policy and many, many hurricanes. FCP is one of the few children’s law offices to undergo a rigorous evaluation of their outcomes. The Chapin Hall Center for Children evaluated their work and released a study in 2008 that confirmed FCP’s success in moving kids to permanency more quickly. The study of FCP found substantially higher rates of exits to permanency without negatively impacting rates of reunification. The fact that their clients continue to find permanency in 12.5 months, regardless of spikes in foster care, is nothing short of miraculous.

FCP created a culture where every case has a sense of urgency and developed many innovative ways to move cases more quickly.

- FCP found research that concluded consistent visitation was the best predictor of reunification. Armed with the research, they successfully advocated for visitation three times per week for young children. Due to their work, this is now the presumption for all kids in Palm Beach County.
- FCP focused on case plans as a way to remove unnecessary hurdles for parents. Case plans are now targeted which set the parents up for success. They relentlessly monitor case plans to make sure the agency is making referrals so parents can immediately work towards reunification.
- FCP does not wait for the case plan timeframe to end to ask for reunification or to move in a different direction, if the parents are not participating.
FCP has been so effective at impacting outcomes for children, that the agency that runs the foster care system asked FCP’s funder to provide another attorney to expand their caseload.

John and Jim Walsh were not only successful at implementing effective legal strategies, but they also created a model children’s law office. FCP is a fully functioning law firm for children – with caseload targets of 50 children per lawyer, social workers and funds for litigation expenses. FCP was one of the early offices to adopt a multidisciplinary model of advocacy and their outcomes speak volumes about the efficacy of the model. FCP excels at recruitment and retention, as evidenced by very low staff turnover. When lawyers join FCP, they rarely leave! Of the 13 lawyers on staff, 8 have been employed for 16 to 20 years and 4 have remained for 8 to 14 years. Attorneys are given consistent feedback through at least quarterly case reviews with supervisors on all cases. This ensures attorneys are accountable for their cases and receive the support they need on every case.

In addition to making systemic changes in Palm Beach County, FCP has influenced representation throughout the state and nationally. John and Jim worked closely with the Legal Aid Service of Broward County to create a similar program for representing children. Staff members have served on various bar committees, including as the chair of the Legal Needs of Children Committee of The Florida Bar. One of their attorneys, Tim Stevens is the NACC State Coordinator for NACC. Over the years, they have frequently been involved in advocating for legislative changes needed to advance permanency for children. FCP staff urged the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County to convene a race equity task force, and FCP is an ongoing participant.

The Chapin Hall study is often cited throughout the country to show the benefit of lawyers for children, including a notable reference in the Administration for Children and Families memo on quality legal representation in 2017. John and Jim are also working to get their model out to lawyers nationally through The Children’s Law Podcast, a free resource to children’s lawyers with 33 episodes to date. The Children’s Law Podcast has specifically addressed implicit bias, racism in child welfare, and is currently producing an episode with practical tips for children’s lawyers to advance race equity.

For all these reasons, but more importantly for the work they do every day, I nominate the FCP for the NACC Outstanding Children’s Law Office Award.

Sincerely,

Gerry Glynn
Chief Legal Officer
June 4, 2021

National Association of Counsel for Children
1600 Downing St., Suite 410
Denver CO 80218

To whom it may concern,

As CEO of Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, I am writing in support of the nomination of the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County’s Foster Children’s Project (FCP) for the National Association of Counsel for Children’s Outstanding Children’s Law Office award. Children’s Services Council (CSC) is an independent special district established by Palm Beach County voters in 1986. Today, CSC provides leadership, funding, services and research on behalf of Palm Beach County's children so they grow up healthy, safe and strong. To that end, we have four goals, one of which is that children are safe from abuse and neglect.

Twenty years ago, CSC made the decision to fund the Foster Children’s Project so children who had been abused and/or neglected would have their own dedicated, well-trained, attorney. We wanted this advocacy to be multi-disciplinary in nature, so the office also was staffed with social workers to assist the attorneys in planning for their client’s permanency. CSC is dedicated to spending tax dollars on interventions that work, so it was important that this project be able to show concrete results for the children it served.

In 2008, CSC funded an evaluation of FCP. The results demonstrated that foster children represented by FCP achieved permanency faster than foster children without legal representation. Twenty years later, we continue to fund the Foster Children’s Project, as we remain pleased with the results. FCP has been able to achieve permanency (adoption) for foster children in a timely manner, maintaining a consistent length of stay for their clients for over two decades. Stakeholders, from the judiciary to the state child welfare agency, consistently note: “these advocates are instrumental in getting children safely and quickly into permanent homes.”

Without reservation, I support the nomination of FCP for this award. This achievement would serve as an excellent acknowledgement of the 20th Anniversary of the first and, until recently, only full service, multi-disciplinary children’s law office in Florida.

Sincerely,

Lisa Williams-Taylor, Ph.D, Chief Executive Officer
June 7, 2021

Dear NACC Awards Committee,

It is my pleasure to submit this letter of support for the nomination The Foster Children’s Project of the Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County for the NACC’s Outstanding Children’s Law Office award. Having served as a Florida Supreme Court Justice from 1997 through 2019 as well having been a resident of Palm Beach County since 1975, I have been aware of the amazing work of the Foster Children’s Project from its inception over 20 years ago. In my role as a Justice of the Supreme Court, I headed our Court Committee on Children and Families and specifically studied issues regarding our state’s foster care system.

I can state unequivocally that the Foster Children’s Project model for a children’s law office is without doubt a leader in our state and in my view the country. From the outset John and Jim Walsh trained their attorneys and partner social workers to be excellent advocates for the children they serve, encouraging training and innovation whenever available. I have seen first-hand the impact that the Foster Children’s Project has had on the lives of our most vulnerable children. I am sure that every local judge who has served in the dependency division of our trial court has nothing but praise for the preparation and professionalism and advocacy of the Foster Children’s Project lawyers.

With the guidance of Jim and John Walsh and the encouragement and leadership of Legal Aid Director Bob Bertisch, these lawyers have dramatically improved the lives of thousands of children and families. They have given our children a voice, understand the complexities of representing children of all ages requires active listening and informed advocacy.

They have also changed the foster care system in Palm Beach County and Florida by remaining vigilant of our community-based care agency and when necessary fought the bureaucratic slowness of the Department of Children and Families. As you have read from others, the office gained national attention when they took the initiative in Palm Beach County to reduce the time for our children in foster gain and earned the admiration of everyone.
And most recently, they have added another innovation when they hired trauma informed specialists to deal with the cross-over children who are in both the dependency and delinquency system. Their recognition of the fact that representing a child takes so much more than the legal issues is reflected in these efforts as well as the fact that from the beginning a social worker was part of the team.

For 20 years, The Foster Children's Project has slowly and consistently advocated for better results for children in our foster care system. They should be held up by the National Association of Counsel for Children as an example for others to replicate. Thus, I unhesitatingly and unequivocally support this nomination.

Sincerely,

Barbara J. Pariente

Retired Justice of the Supreme Court of Florida
National Association of Counsel for Children
Outstanding children’s Law Office Selection Committee

Re: Letter of Support for the Nomination of Palm Beach Foster Care Project

Dear Selection Committee Members:

It is a privilege to write in support of the nomination of the Palm Beach Foster Care Project (“Project”). The Project has been a leader in Florida in providing attorney representation for children and youth in foster care. They are celebrating 20 years of successful programmatic delivery of child attorney services of the highest caliber. During its 20 years, the Project has managed its agency practice from a small system outsider into an agency practice which is recognized as an integral part of Palm Beach’s child welfare system of care. The Project consistently adheres to best practices in child welfare advocacy including multi-disciplinary representation; as part of a large legal aid program, they are able to make “in-house” referrals for special education, immigration, housing, or public benefits legal advocacy. Of course, they also have strong working relationships with the other local child welfare providers and stakeholders. The Project works closely with the Palm Beach Chapter of Florida Youth Shine, a youth voice child welfare organization.

Importantly for our Children’s Advocacy Program, the Project, as a state-wide leader in an agency based direct child attorney representation program, has been successful in providing a model which we could use in Broward County to securing funding to build our Program. The Project collaborated with its local Children’s Services Council for funding. We were able to do the same, and now provide 20% of the children and youth in child welfare in Broward County with high quality direct attorney representation. That means that almost 700 children and youth have direct attorney representation because of the Project’s model. The Palm Beach Foster Care Project was the data and outcome supported model which made that possible. The Project showed how Children’s Services Council support along with other private sources of support can give children and youth in child welfare a strong voice and legal representation for the benefit of the entire system of care, including the court system. It continues to be a model for other areas and legal aid organizations through out the State.

Our Children’s Advocacy Program has been providing representation for over 16 years now. I believe that we would not have had the history of success ourselves but for the model created by the Project. While we are colleague programs now, we are indebted to the Project for providing a working and successful model for locally operated model utilizing local funding through our Children’s Services Council for providing direct attorney representation to our children and youth in care.
Therefore, it is with enthusiasm that I offer our Program's support Palm Beach Foster Care Project to be selected Outstanding Children's Law Office from NACC. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

Walter Honaman
Supervising Attorney
June 6, 2021

NACC Awards Committee

To Whom It May Concern:

ChildNet assumed responsibility for managing the local child welfare system in Palm Beach County, Florida on October 1, 2012, when it executed a contract with the Florida Department of Children & Families to serve as the local Community Based Care (CBC) Lead Agency. I served as the agency’s Executive Director in Palm Beach County from that day until becoming ChildNet’s Chief Executive Officer in November of 2017. While preparing to commence operations in Palm Beach, several staff from our predecessor “warned” us about Legal Aid of the Palm Beaches and its Palm Beach Foster Care Project. I had some prior knowledge of the Project having been among several key Broward County stakeholders who met with its managing attorneys several years earlier to learn about the Project and consider its possible replication in Broward. I was, therefore, somewhat confused by these “warnings”. I assumed that Project and ChildNet as the local CBC lead agency would have very similar goals – both seeking to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of the children that we mutually served. Therefore, I thought that if ChildNet does its job well, it should generally be partners with the Project, not adversaries. In addition, I envisioned us working together to advocate for more and better resources for Palm Beach children. I recognized that there might be times where the Project would find fault with ChildNet or identify agency and system challenges, but I welcomed that. Having other competent and knowledgeable professionals available as an additional “set of eyes” seemed a good thing to me, potentially a very valuable asset not a threat.

Today, nearly nine years later, I am thrilled to report that my assumptions were precisely on target and that the “warnings” of my predecessors were misguided and, perhaps, reflected the Project doing its job well while the lead agency was not. During ChildNet’s tenure as Palm Beach CBC lead agency, the Project has been an invaluable resource in every one of the ways that I envisioned, and more. It ceaselessly, consistently, and very effectively, advocates for the abused, abandoned and neglected children of Palm Beach
County. Moreover, it does so in multiple important ways. It very capably and professionally represents the individual children who are its clients, both in formal court proceedings and in the myriad of dependency system processes and meetings that take place out of court. The Project, however, does far more than simply represent individual clients. Rather it has very capably assumed a role as a community leader for changing and improving the entire system of care. It intelligently and effectively injects its voice, and that of the children it serves, into nearly every local project, initiative and group that considers the performance, progress, and challenges of the local dependency system. It also continues to expand its impact in many ways and arenas. The creation of a similar project in Broward in 2017 owes a great deal to the success of the Palm Beach project. After years of failing to access funding for a Broward project, first-hand experience has me convinced that reports of how vital the Palm Beach project was to the success and, at one point, survival of ChildNet and the Palm Beach system of care were integral to Broward finally finding the resources to support its version of the project. More recently, Project leadership has assumed a prominent role in the formation and initial work of a Palm Beach Child Welfare Race Equity Workgroup and also led and supported multiple performance improvement workgroups of the local Community Alliance, the body created in Florida Statute to oversee the performance of each of the state’s Community Based Care initiatives.

Obviously, there will be many candidates worthy of receiving the Outstanding Children’s Law Office award from the National Association of Counsel for Children. Just as obviously, the organization responsible for managing Palm Beach County’s child welfare system believes that the Palm Beach Foster Care Project is as worthy as any. It has for twenty years creatively and intelligently worked to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of Palm Beach County’s abused, abandoned and neglected children. It recognizes and never ceases to seek the most and the best for these children, which is precisely what they need and deserve. It has been, and continues to be, an invaluable leader of and partner with all of us trying to do the same.

Respectfully,

Larry N. Rein
CEO and President