

Op-Ed piece submitted to Tampa Tribune, Oct 6, 2006:

This responds to a series of Tribune opinion pieces. First, the Tribune editorialized (County Double-Crosses Sheriff, Victims, Our Opinion, Sept. 24) about the Hillsborough County Commission's hypocritical actions relating to prevention of family violence. They had cut simultaneously the budget of the Sheriff's Office and that of the Family Justice Center. Next, you published Commissioner Brian Blair's weak excuses for their action (Sep 29). Then, you published a weak appeal for support of the Family Justice Center by its director, Nikki Daniels (Oct 6). On that same day, you published, an article arguing that children's advocates must unite if they are ever to be successful in reducing child abuse in our communities (Debbie Thurman, Oct 6).

As one who has tracked the history of child welfare in Hillsborough County for more than thirty years, I have to warn that it would take several books to provide the context that is missing from all these current news and opinion pieces.

In the 1970s there was unified children's advocacy in Hillsborough County. Old-timers may remember Colleen Bevis, Marion Rodgers, Haven Poe, Helen Davis, and other wonderfully tough child advocates who pushed for the Hillsborough County Study Commission on Children and Youth, out of which grew the Committee for Children's Mental Health and the Hillsborough Constituency for Children. Because of all that energy devoted to children's causes, the Children's Board of Hillsborough County was established, to generate the local revenue that would take care of some of those problems. Some things did improve, on into the 1990s, under the watchful eyes of the Constituency for Children and the local District Health and Human Services Boards that were established in 1992. The latter, composed of citizen advocates as well, had some clout due to their official status granted by a forward-looking legislature of that era.

In 1996 the hypocrisy that we see playing itself out in the current County Commission began to reveal itself at the state level. Florida legislators argued that government was the cause of the problems of families, and that privatization would be the solution. Florida privatized child welfare and called the new system "community based care." They expected that the costs would be shifted down to the local communities. The District Health and Human Services Boards were abolished in the privatization legislation of 2000. State taxes were cut, which sounded good even to local folks who just didn't think beyond their pocketbooks. The Hillsborough Constituency for Children simply dissolved.

Now, so-called "community based care" consists of service providers whose existence depends on contracts from the state and county. The interested parties are all dependent on the system. They, like Nikki Daniels of the Family Justice Center, cannot really speak out. Even the fifty organizations that she claims are coordinated by the Family Justice Center are effectively muzzled as well.

True advocates for children will have to come from independent citizens who care enough to inform themselves.

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