

Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc.

A Not-for-Profit Organization founded in 2001 for putting "Community" into Community Based Care
17920 Burnside Road, Lutz, Florida 33549
(813) 949-4673

<http://www.fhhsb.org> fhhsb@tampabay.rr.com

December 31, 2008

The Honorable George Sheldon
Secretary, Department of Children and Families
1317 Winewood Blvd.
Building 1, Room 202
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Dear Secretary Sheldon:

This matter concerns the role of community citizens in relation to child welfare, child protection, prevention of abuse and neglect of children, and early intervention relating to children at risk of abuse and neglect.

Prior to 2000, District Health and Human Services Boards were the official mechanism through which citizens of local communities had meaningful input into the planning and evaluation of HRS services for children and families.

In 2000, Governor Bush and the Legislature privatized child welfare, and replaced the District Health and Human Services Boards with "community alliances." The legislation that accomplished that replacement, Florida Statutes 20.19(6)), provided no mechanism for articulation between the alliances and the Department of Children and Families, so that the ability of the alliances to perform those planning and evaluation functions was seriously impaired.

Whereas the District Boards and the Statewide Health and Human Services Board reported annually to the Department, presently there is no requirement of periodic reporting for the alliances, no requirement that the Department seek their advice on a continuing basis. The only exception was that the community alliances were to provide initial certification that their communities were ready for "community based care."

In response to what we saw as weak community involvement, "alumni" of the pre-2000 experience formed the Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc. as a voluntary association by "alumni" of those former district boards in order to advocate for a more meaningful role for a wide range of stakeholders in what had come to be called "community based care."

In the course of the past eight years we have seen no advancement of the community alliance concept, no increase in the amount of participation by citizens of local communities. In fact, during the brief tenure of five or six different secretaries of the Department of Children and Families the role of concerned citizens has diminished. At this point, in late 2008, there seems almost no Departmental communication with anybody except parties with financial interest in state contracts.

In the "*Long Range Program Plan Fiscal Years 2009-2010 through 2013-2014*," released in September 2008, there is no mention at all of community alliances. When the word "community" appears, it is undefined, as in "building community partnerships," or it refers specifically to "community-based care lead agencies," the corporations that hold major state contracts.

We, the Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc., would like to know how it is possible to so ignore requirements of Florida Statutes (20.19(6)) which clearly require community alliances and specify the following duties in words very much like those once prescribed for the District Health and Human Services Boards:

1. Joint planning for resource utilization in the community, including resources appropriated to the department and any funds that local funding sources choose to provide.
2. Needs assessment and establishment of community priorities for service delivery.
3. Determining community outcome goals to supplement state-required outcomes.
4. Serving as a catalyst for community resource development.
5. Providing for community education and advocacy on issues related to delivery of services.
6. Promoting prevention and early intervention services.

We are aware that some counties/communities do have active community alliances, but we have been unable to find documentation that the Department has made use of their “needs assessments,” “community priorities for service delivery” and “community outcome goals,” all of which are mentioned as duties in the statutes.

If the Department of Children and Families has received such reports, they should be reflected in your *Long Range Program Plan*. We see no evidence of them there. In any event such reports should be available to the public.

Secretary Sheldon, the main concern of the Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc., is that all the children in our Florida communities be protected and cared for. The 2000 Legislature must have hoped they could improve that protection and those services by going to “community-based care.” Unfortunately, the Department implemented only that part of the legislation that calls for contracting out the services, but failed to implement the part that calls for community planning and evaluation.

During the last eight years we have been hoping to see evidence that the community alliances are up to the tasks that once were those of the health and human services boards. Now, the deteriorating economic situation is putting additional strain on society, on our communities and on our families, so that more and more children are being put at risk. We seriously doubt that our child welfare system as currently structured is up to the coming task.

We look forward to your response, and to the responses of Governor Crist and of the relevant legislators who are receiving copies of this letter.

Alvin W. Wolfe, Ph.D.
Chair, Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc.

Copies to:
Governor Crist
Senators Ken Pruitt, Charlie Justice, Ronda Storms and Nan Rich
Representatives Juan Zapata, Gary Aubuchon, Yolly Roberson, Ed Homan, Doug Holder, and Luis Garcia.
Members of the FHHSB Board of Directors: David Buby, D.O.; L. David de la Parte, Esq.; Marietta Mischia, E.D.