

Eighth Judicial Circuit Family Law Advisory Group (FLAG)
Minutes of December 3, 2007

The FLAG met on Monday, December 3, 2007 at the Alachua County Family and Civil Justice Center. Present were: Harvey Baxter, Randi Dincher, Bill Farley, Josh Fischer, Arlene Huszar, Myrna Neims, Judge Ysleta W. McDonald, Rebecca McHoltzick, Judge James P. Nilon, and Samuel P. Stafford. Our guest, Dr. Charles Hall, was also present.

Myrna Neims graciously agreed to be our chair for one more year and Randi Dincher has accepted the position of chair-elect.

Ideas for possible programs for the upcoming year were discussed including: a day-long domestic violence program such as the one put on by Judge Ray McNeal; a collaborative divorce training in Gainesville; and a discussion of brief, focused custody evaluations.

Dr. Charles Hall spoke about the issue of truancy in Alachua County. He noted that compulsory school attendance is defined by statute. The Alachua County School Board tries to resolve attendance problems before they meet the statutory definition. Notices go out to parents after five unexcused absences and after ten unexcused absences.

He noted the differences between the resources available in Alachua County and Marion County. The two counties have similar student populations and numbers of schools but Alachua County has two attendance officers while Marion County has 30 social workers who deal with attendance issues.

Dr. Hall described the School Attendance Review Board that was formed two years ago. It reviews the records of truant students and recommends specific action. There are two types of petitions that can be filed with the court. For elementary school students, the problem is often their parents and the State Attorney's Office can file charges against them. For middle and high school students, a truancy petition can be filed against the child. Services can be offered to a child such as counseling through Meridian or CDS. Almost every high school in the county has a vocational program and sometimes directing a student to an area of interest can help them stay in school. Examples of vocational magnet programs include culinary arts, health, and entrepreneurship.

Dr. Hall explained that the issues involved in truancy can be complex. There are often family issues involved and legal restrictions on what can be done. The School Board will continue to look for alternative services that can be provided. They will try to publicize the fact that attendance laws will be enforced by conducting truancy sweeps and seeking media attention for the problem.

He noted that the graduation rate dropped in Alachua County in 2007 and, correspondingly, the drop out rate went up. The graduation rate for African-American students is less than fifty percent. The School Board is making a concerted effort to work with parents on the east side of town to improve that number. Ninth grade seems

to be when the highest number of students have attendance problems. The School Board tries to identify potential drop outs and offer them options such as the GED exit option for students who have passed the FCAT and the credit retrieval program. He recommended checking the Department of Education website for more information.

We have a large migrant population here working primarily on the blueberry farms. The School Board is working with the University of Florida on ways to identify those families. The Anchor School, which previously served migrants and the homeless, has been shut down due to lack of resources.

There is an interagency agreement between the schools and law enforcement. When law enforcement picks up a truant child, they take the child to the Truancy Center located at Interface, which is also the local runaway shelter. At a parent's request, law enforcement can also pick up a child who refuses to go to school and take them to school. Parents can also call the school resource officer for assistance.

When asked if he would like to have more truancy officers for our county, Dr. Hall responded that he would rather have more services than more truancy officers.

The next meeting of the FLAG will be Monday, January 28, 2008.