

## **Eighth Judicial Circuit Family Law Advisory Group (FLAG) Minutes of May 14, 2007**

The FLAG met on Monday, May 14, 2007 at the Alachua County Family and Civil Justice Center. Ruth Angaran substituted for Myrna Neims as Chairperson. Also in attendance were: Harvey Baxter, Mary-Ellen Cross, Robin Davis, Kathleen Fox, Arlene Huszar, Judge Ysleta McDonald, Judge James P. Nilon, Leon Plympton, Marcia Rapczak, Evelyn Sapp and Cheryl Smith. Our guest speakers were Bev White from Substance Abuse and Mental Health at DCF, Ruth Trimmer and Betty Strayer from Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, and Dr. Linda Abeles, clinical psychologist.

Judge Nilon reported for the Information Sharing Committee which has been meeting monthly. The group had met with Ester Tibbs and Steven Murphy regarding payments for DNA testing in non-IV-D paternity cases. Judge Nilon reported that not having someone to cover the costs has been delaying proceedings. The Partnership for Strong Families has agreed to pay for paternity tests not covered by DOR in our DCF district. Judge Nilon also noted that the failure to have birth certificates filed when TPR petitions are filed is also slowing down proceedings.

Ruth Angaran brought up the issue of standardized parenting plans. She noted that other circuits have them but we do not. Arlene Huszar offered to work on developing such a plan with Ruth and anyone else who is interested.

Ruth also asked about forming a website taskforce. Items such as the parenting plan could be posted to the site. Arlene stated that the FLAG now has a place on the Family Division webpage at [www.circuit8.org/family/](http://www.circuit8.org/family/). Currently, minutes of meetings and notices of future meetings are being posted there. Arlene and Ruth will work on more content.

Bev White from the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Ruth Trimmer from Meridian, Betty Strayer from the CSU, and Dr. Linda Abeles, a clinical psychologist, gave a presentation about mental health issues. The handout they provided is included with these minutes. They noted that the Partnership for Strong Families manages the therapeutic foster homes and therapeutic group homes. Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, which serves ten counties, accepts mental health referrals from DCF, the Partnership, schools, and self referrals. They will not do an assessment until they get the case plan. Mental health and substance abuse assessments are done at the same time. A treatment plan is then done if Meridian is going to provide services. They may suggest a psychological evaluation.

In discussing Baker Acts, we learned that the Crisis Stabilization Unit (CSU) does not get a copy of the Baker Act petitions. Sometimes they only get the court order. Many Baker Acts come from emergency rooms and some come from law enforcement. Through the discussion, it was clear that packets of information regarding the assessments are not getting to the service providers, i.e., the people doing the psychological evaluations.

Evelyn Sapp brought up the need for cross-training. She felt it is important that people who work in dependency court get mental health training especially on issues such as the side effects of the medications that are currently being prescribed for children. She also suggested training regarding mental health care for adults. Everyone agreed that this would be beneficial.

The question was posed as to whether or not a psychological evaluation can be requested before a mental health assessment is done. The answer is yes, but it is preferred that a professional make the assessment of the need for the evaluation.

There was a discussion of comprehensive assessments. These are usually provided to children in foster care and should be filed early in the case. It can take up to 20 hours to complete a comprehensive assessment. From the time of the referral, that takes about 35 days. It is rare to have the assessment at the time the case plan is developed. Meridian is a provider for comprehensive assessments along with 15 others. There is currently no waiting list to have an assessment done because there are so many assessors.

Judge Nilon noted that there is a huge gap between what is supposed to happen and what is happening. It was decided that a process management group is needed and Bev White will participate on that.

It was noted that when an evaluator gets a referral for a psychological evaluation, they generally do not get any information such as if the evaluation needs to be expedited for an expedited termination of parental rights. The evaluator need to know the purpose of the referral because their focus will be different if the issue is placement than if it is for treatment recommendations.

Meridian noted that their CSU records become incorporated into outpatient records.

We discussed the idea of having a training about what services are available and how to make referrals to those services.

Dr. Linda Abeles talked about adults' ability to parent. There may be intellectual concerns and there may be the issue of a personality disorder. The goal of an assessment would be to decide if the person can ever parent. Evaluations of children involve intellectual issues for educational and treatment planning, as well as personality tests. A qualified examiner is paid for by First Health Services. Dr. Abeles is the only one in our district.

With regard to personality disorders, the evaluators state their opinion but they are not the decision maker. Personality disorders cannot be treated with medication. There is a hierarchy of personality disorders, some of which are more damaging to children than others.

**The next meeting will be held on June 18, 2007 at 4:00 PM in the Chief Judge's Conference Room.**



**State of Florida  
Department of Children and Families**

**Charlie Crist**  
Governor

**Robert A. Butterworth**  
Secretary

**Presentation on Children's Mental Health Services in Circuit 8  
FLAG Committee - May 14, 2007**

**Presenters:**

Ruth Trimmer- Director of Outpatient Services in the Northern Counties, Meridian Behavioral Healthcare

Betty Strayer - Director of Crisis Stabilization Services(CSU) at Meridian Behavioral Healthcare

Linda Abeles - Psychologist who provides psychological evaluations for children and adults -  
Qualified Evaluator for District 3

Bev White - Program Administrator, District 3 Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH)  
Program, Office, Department of Children and Families

**Role of SAMH Program Office – Bev White**

1. Allocate Circuits 3 & 8's share of state funding to agencies who provide substance abuse and mental health surveys
2. Responsible for assuring that these agencies meet the state performance goals which measure the success of substance abuse and mental health services.
  - Days in the community – Children and adults
  - Improvement in functioning (CFARS) - Children
  - School Days - Children
  - Work at Discharge – Adults involved with Substances
  - Days Worked – Adults – Seriously and Persistently Mentally Ill.
3. Provide oversight to agencies to assure appropriate service provision and conduct monitoring
4. Work closely with other stakeholders in the community (such as the Courts) to assist in coordinating services and assuring services are being provided.
5. Provide funding for additional alternative services as needed that are not currently being provided by contract providers.
6. Managing placement of Children into Statewide Inpatient Psychiatric Programs (SIPP)

Gateway to Services – Intake and Assessments – Ruth Trimmer, LMHC

CSU Services and the Use of Psychotropic Medications – Betty Strayer, LCSW

Psychological Evaluations – Dr. Linda Abeles

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