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Browse the one-stop shop for online children legal resources

By Jan Pudlow

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“Go live and start communicating!”

That’s the enthusiastic invitation to those handling dependency and delinquency cases from Florida’s Children First, the nonprofit managing a new free online one-stop shop resource center aimed to help everyone do a better job for children and families.

It’s more than a website. It’s a “very robust online community available to lawyers and judges who must be registered users,” explains Robin Rosenberg, deputy director of FCF. Any Florida lawyer can volunteer their pro bono services for children and families by signing up on the site, without being a registered user.

F.L.O.R.I.D.A. (Florida’s Legal Online Resource, Information Driven Access) for Children and Families — [or its nickname F4CF](#) — is up and ready to go. Its value, promises Rosenberg, is a way to share expertise across Florida; provide instant access to information to handle cases; give immediate notice of critical updates in the law; supply answers to questions from peers and experts; and help find mentors and pro bono services.

Besides online legal resources organized by topic, there will be secure tools for communication, so judges and lawyers can connect with colleagues and search for pro bono lawyers, as well as case help for pro bono attorneys, who may want to volunteer for or seek help from a network of pro bono lawyers.

“The concept was started by an attorney practicing in a large law firm who had commercial clients, and took a pro bono case for a kid and there was nothing out there to help. So the lawyer decided to create online resources for all practitioners and judges,” Rosenberg said.

Used in Texas since 2004, Judge James Seals, a senior judge on the dependency bench in Ft. Myers, saw a presentation and said, “This needs to come to Florida,” Rosenberg explained.

Howard Davidson, director of the ABA Center on Children and the Law, said, “I think it will be a wonderful thing. Lawyers who do this work, and even judges who do this work, are too disconnected. They often have to look around a lot of different places to get relevant information. . . .That’s why I have been encouraging and supporting this kind of effort, having a statewide website for lawyers and judges who do child welfare kind of work. And it’s a nice adjunct to court improvement programs and bar associations that have committees on children’s issues.”

“There is a document vault, where attorneys can send us conclusions of law or trial memoranda,” Rosenberg said. “We will beat the bushes asking people to submit.”

The “resource center” part, organized by topic, is a child-welfare library of legal, medical, and psychological information.

"An issue may come up in court. Rather than send lawyers back to their offices to write a memo, the judge will be able to look at the issue of evidence or other matters and keep the proceeding moving forward," Rosenberg said.

They are still building Florida cases in the resources section, but it is already full of national resources.

The "secure tools for communication" will have a separate section for judges, so they can communicate with each other.

"What they learned in Texas is judges would find that an issue in their courtroom was also an issue of statewide concern," Rosenberg said. "In smaller places, they don't have another dependency judge to walk down the hall and talk, or dependency may be a little piece of what they do as a judge."

The "colleague connection" feature is password protected and allows lawyers and judges to send email messages. There are also discussion boards that offer a place to put out queries for help without revealing the confidential specifics of a case.

"Lawyers can ask: 'Has anyone come across this?' and they can find a colleague who can help," Rosenberg said.

The online forum is also a tool to get information to everyone immediately, such as a rule change or an important court decision.

The "pro bono" portion is a way to seek and offer expertise. Lawyers check off the areas of law they are willing to help with, as well as the level of involvement they are willing to provide. They can also designate their preferred method for initial contact.

"We know there are a lot of attorneys who are willing to help kids and families but haven't had a good mechanism for matching the lawyers with the need. This should greatly advance the matching process," she said.

For example, a lawyer may say, "Yes, I'm willing to take a case, but I need someone with Social Security disability experience."

While legal services lawyers, Department of Children and Families lawyers, and guardians ad litem email each other often, what's different about this, Rosenberg said, is "everybody is together in one place, and it is providing really rich research."

"Everybody," she said, are not only lawyers for children, but lawyers for parents, lawyers of any practice area who want to learn about child welfare issues or want to share special areas of expertise, lawyers for DCF, and GAL lawyers, as well as dependency and delinquency judges.

"It's a community. It's unity. As divisive as it can be in court, if we remember we are all trying to do what's best for children. That's why we are doing this."

Florida's Children First F4CF Q & A

Who can use it?

Lawyers and judges who register as users can use [F4CF](#). Lawyers who represent any party in dependency proceedings, or children in any forum, are invited to join. Lawyers who are willing to volunteer their time to represent children or assist other lawyers are also welcome. Active and retired judges with an interest in children's issues are also invited to participate.

What does it cost?

There is no charge to participate.

How do I sign up?

Email to obtain registration information.

How do I request that F4CF include materials that I need?

Send requests for items you would like to see to .

How do I submit materials for consideration?

Send documents, pleadings, motions, briefs, articles, research papers, or any other material you think your colleagues can benefit from to .

Doesn't Florida Center for Child Welfare already cover this?

While there may be a little overlap in written resources, the USF website and F4CF are significantly different. F4CF provides sources specifically geared to the research needs of lawyers and judges. It provides communication tools that create an online community. Where appropriate, F4CF will direct users to the excellent resources on the USF website.

Why does it include all lawyers?

Children get better outcomes when all the lawyers and judges involved in their cases have the best information and expertise available to them. Information is viewable by all members, so while it can help you find someone to strategize with, you must presume that posted information will be viewed by opposing counsel.

Is it public record?

F4CF does not create or hold public records. Government employees who participate remain subject to public record laws.

Source: Florida's Children First

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