



2022-2023

ANNUAL REPORT



Making a Difference for Children

VFC Annual Report

Table of contents

About Us

New Milestone Reached	3
A New Mission and Vision	3
Pioneering Child Welfare System Improvements	4
Enhancements for Dependent Children and Youth	4

Overview of Miami-Dade County’s Dependent Children and Youth

2022-2023 Representation by Child Advocates	5
2022-2023 Demographic Details	6

2022-2023 Miami GAL Office Accomplishments

Child Advocacy	7
Child Permanency	7
Independent Living Project	9
GAL Volunteer Recruitment	12

2022-2023 Voices For Children Foundation Children’s Needs Program Accomplishments

Direct Financial Assistance and More	13
Experiential Learning	14

2022-2023 Voices For Children Foundation Organizational and Financial Achievements





About Us

New Milestone Reached

Voices For Children Foundation (Voices) is grateful to many foundations, individuals and corporations for general operating support that benefited those served by the renamed Statewide Judicial Guardian ad Litem Office/Eleventh Circuit (GAL Office) in 2022-2023. With increased public support, too, Voices and the GAL Office achieved a milestone fourth year (since April 2019) of providing 100% of Miami-Dade County's vulnerable dependent children and youth with continuous advocacy and legal representation. More effective access to health and human services, entitlements, needed and wanted items and new opportunities also benefited children and youth in 2022-2023.

A New Mission and Vision

2022-2023 began with strategic planning through 2027, as initiated by Voices new President and CEO Kadie Black with support from Kira Grossman, Voices new Board Chair beginning July 2022. Engaging Voices' board and staff members and GAL Office leadership, we expanded Voices mission: *"Voices For Children is a beacon of hope for abused, abandoned and neglected children/youth in the Miami-Dade County foster care system. We do this by providing critical support for advocacy, essential needs and positive experiences."* Voices also developed a vision: *"Voices For Children believes that support should not be a privilege. Voices' vision is that every child in the foster care system has quality Guardian ad Litem representation and fully centralized access to services and resources to meet their physical, social and emotional needs."*

Pioneering Child Welfare System Improvements

As leaders within Miami-Dade’s child welfare system, Voices continued its quest to increase capacity towards addressing the need for systemic change. This goal was advanced by securing sufficient unrestricted funding to cover all general operating expenses for FY 2022–2023. This enabled continued funding for the innovative permanency specialist and independent living specialist positions. These new positions brought forth daily changes expected to positively impact children’s and youth’s long-term success. Not only are children and youth and their advocates better informed about available community resources, but these specialists also provide information to ease access. Both positions are expected to significantly impact future systemic change as more dependent children begin to achieve expedited permanency in safe, stable homes and more dependent youth and young adults move towards more successful transitions to adulthood.

In Spring 2023, Voices also added a family intake coordinator to provide dependent children and their kinship caregivers with whom they have been placed, with immediate financial and other assistance plus help in understanding the complex dependency system and the role of GAL advocates. This initiative both stabilizes families most likely to contribute to children’s positive development – extended family members that children already know and who know and care about their child relatives – and helps mitigate children’s and their kinship caregivers’ fear of the unknown child welfare system.



Enhancements for Dependent Children and Youth

With a one-time allocation from the Miami-Dade Mayor and Board of County Commissioners received in January 2023, Voices provided many more essential and fun items for children and youth through its new Comfort Closet, which allowed access to whatever they needed at no cost to them or their caregivers. With this funding, Voices also provided potentially life-changing experiential learning opportunities never provided for Miami-Dade County dependent children and youth served by the GAL Office.

Overview of Miami-Dade County's Dependent Children and Youth

2022-2023 Representation by Child Advocates

From July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023, Voices For Children Foundation and the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office/Circuit Eleven (formerly known as the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Guardian ad Litem Program) provided child advocacy, legal representation, and more to 2,140 or 100% of children, youth and young adults placed under the supervision of the Florida Department of Children & Families and Citrus Family Care Network due to abuse or neglect. All were provided with diligent representation by well-trained, FDLE background-checked, caring, committed and tenacious Statewide Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Office/Circuit Eleven adult advocates that worked in tandem with GAL attorneys. Voices For Children Foundation (Voices) funded 58 of 107 or 54% of GAL Office full-time and one of five or 20% of part-time staff members.

The GAL Office recruited, trained and supervised 596 child advocates that represented all 2,140 dependent children from throughout Miami-Dade County in 2022-2023. This included 552 GAL volunteers plus 44 staff advocates, all who directly represented children, including 16 that also supervised volunteer advocates. All GAL advocates worked closely with 21 GAL Office attorneys, including 19 full-time and two part-time attorneys. Together, GAL advocates and GAL attorneys provided the best, most comprehensive advocacy, legal representation and other support for Miami-Dade's most vulnerable newborn babies to young adults up to 22 years of age. Representation included:

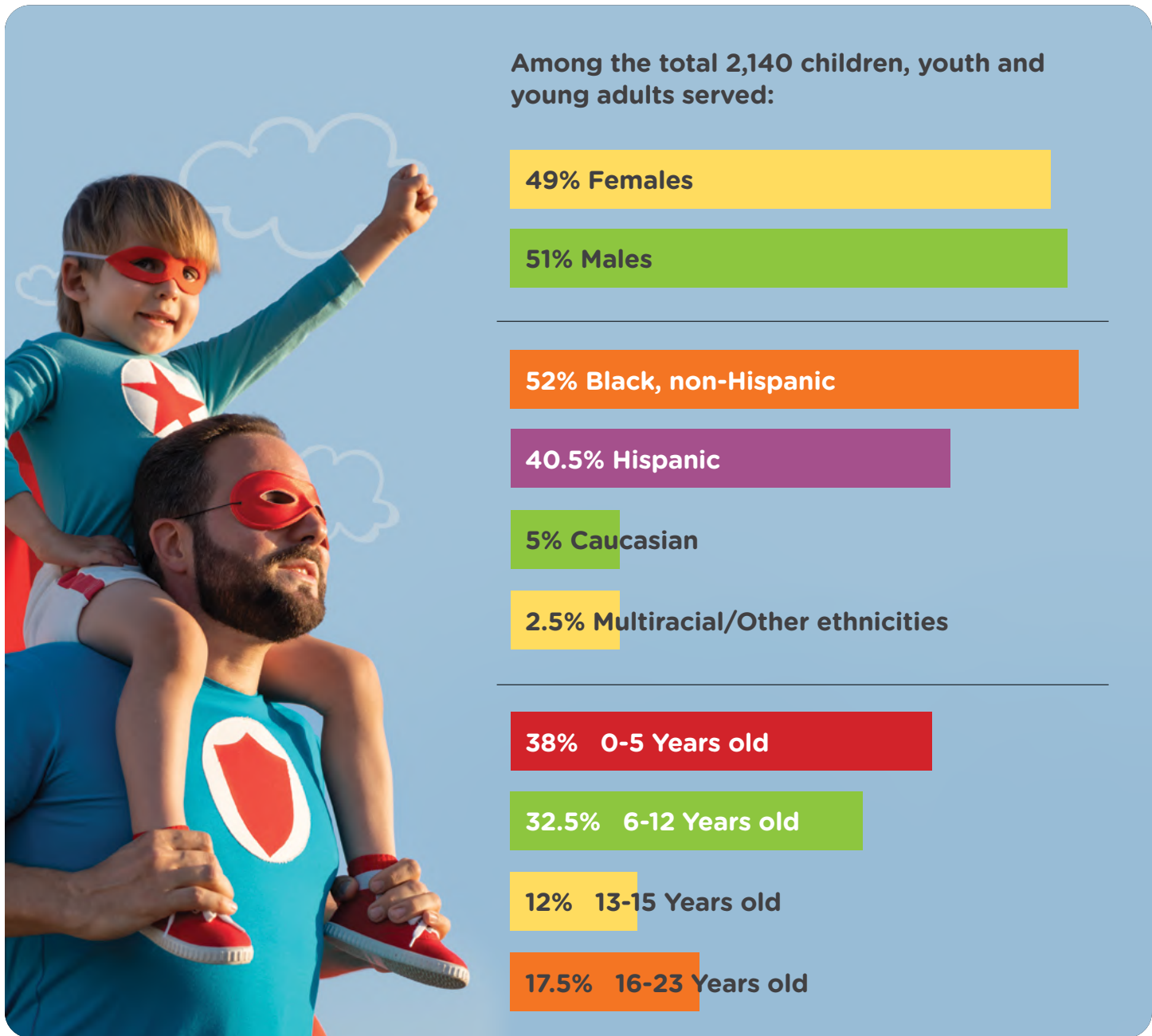
1,237 or 58% of children were represented by GAL staff advocates

903 or 42% of children were represented by GAL volunteer advocates

Voices is pleased to report that 2022-2023 was the fourth consecutive year in which 100% of all children under Miami-Dade Dependency Court supervision received the GAL Office's unique advocacy and representation. This is a historic milestone for Voices and the GAL Office. 100% representation was maintained in 2022-2023 for all 2,140 dependent children, youth and young adults despite an increase of 209 or 11% more than the 1,931 dependent children, youth and young adults served in 2021-2022. These formerly abused and neglected children, youth and young adults benefited from the GAL Office's caring advocacy and legal representation, ensuring that each one's best interests were identified and voiced in Dependency Court. Many also received access to Voices' financial support and much more.

2022-2023 Demographic Details

As always, children were placed in the dependency system due to physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse or neglect; surviving human sex trafficking; and/or having parents that had untreated or unresolved substance abuse problems and/or serious mental health issues and/or were incarcerated. Among the total 2,140 children, youth and young adults served, 51% were males and 49% females; 52% were Black, non-Hispanic; 40.5% were Hispanic; 5% were Caucasian; and 2.5% were multi-racial/other ethnicities. 38% of children represented by GAL advocates were 0-5 years old; 32.5% were 6-12 years; 12% were 13-15 years old; and 17.5% were 16-23 years of age. Children and youth represented by the GAL Office came from throughout Miami-Dade County. Most dependent children, youth and especially young adults experienced rising inflation in predominantly low-income underserved communities. These included Overtown, Allapattah, Edgewater, Liberty City, Little Haiti, Brownsville, North Miami, Opa Locka, Hialeah, East Little Havana, West Coconut Grove, Princeton, Perrine, Florida City and Homestead.



Miami GAL Office Accomplishments

Child Advocacy

Representing each of 2,140 children, youth and young adults (to be further referred to only as children) in tandem with GAL Office attorneys, and with ongoing GAL Office child advocacy managers' supervision and guidance, GAL volunteers and staff advocates ensured that each child had a voice in court that represented and advocated for his or her best interests. 2022-2023 outcomes exceeded all projections and include the following:

1. 99% of all dependent children represented by GAL Office staff and volunteer advocates vs 95% proposed whose cases closed (572 of 576) achieved permanency through reunification with biological parent(s) who have completed treatment/services, adoption, legal permanent guardianship or independent living status in a safe and stable environment as documented by official Motions to Discharge filed in Dependency Court.
1. 92% of all dependent children in Kindergarten to 12th grade represented by GAL Office staff and volunteer advocates vs 85% proposed continued their education as documented by GAL Monthly Reports or official school transcripts.
2. An average 1,284 children under Dependency Court jurisdiction vs 1,200 proposed were represented by GAL Office staff and volunteer advocates at any given time for a total of 2,140 children and youth represented throughout 2022-2023 vs 2,000 proposed as documented by official Dependency Court Hearing Reports.



Child Permanency

The GAL Office has consistently increased the number of dependent children that achieve permanency. With an impressive 99% or 576 children whose cases closed achieving permanency in 2022-2023 vs 98% or 529 in 2021-2022, Voices and the GAL Office again had a positive impact on the required coordination of public systems that historically though unintentionally impeded children's expeditious achievement of permanency despite statutory mandates. In 2022-2023, targeting the youngest children languishing in the dependency system to reduce their trauma and increase their chances for positive child development remained a priority.

Aware that by five years of age, 90% of all human brain development occurs, children develop their initial and essential sense of trust that enables them to form attachments with others and because the largest group of children entering dependency and subsequently represented by GAL advocates has always been 0-5 year-olds, a permanency specialist position was developed and successfully piloted in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. The permanency specialist position was specifically designed to expedite permanent placements to provide stability and increase sibling attachments for these youngest children. Exclusively focused on eliminating barriers so permanency could be achieved as quickly as possible, the permanency specialist identified children who were languishing and helped eliminate the obstacles that thwarted the progress of GAL advocates, case managers/social workers and GAL attorneys. In 2022-2023, Voices and the GAL Office secured continued funding for this now essential position as the goal was and remains to reduce the number of 0-5 year-olds of all ethnicities and their siblings that languish in the child welfare system and to minimize sibling separation.

In 2022-2023, the permanency specialist (PS) achieved the following outcomes:

1. 370 children ages 0-5 years of all ethnicities and their siblings vs 350 proposed had a total of 1,296 GAL Team and intensive staffings convened plus follow-up, as needed, was conducted to identify and eliminate all obstacles to permanency as documented by GAL Office Case Reports, Hearing Reports and Dependency Court Motions.

370 Children (ages 0-5 years) had a total of 1,296 staffings

VS

350 Children (ages 0-5 years) were proposed to have 1,000 staffings

2. 161 dependent children ages 0-5 years of all ethnicities plus 57 of their siblings for a total of 218 dependent children (vs 150 proposed and a total of 205 served in 2021-2022) received enhanced legal advocacy with requests for status hearings and filing motions/orders for cross-agency staffings to eliminate barriers and achieve permanency as documented by GAL Case Reports and Dependency Court Motions to Dismiss.

218 Dependent children (161 ages 0-5 years and 57 siblings) achieved expedited permanency

VS

150 Dependent children were proposed to achieve expedited permanency

3. 85% of siblings not placed together were provided with 60-day staffing reviews to identify/eliminate barriers as proposed so that siblings were placed in the same home and, when impossible, were provided with court-ordered regular visitations as documented by GAL 60-day staffing review reports.

85% of siblings were provided with 60-day staffing reviews as proposed

The above results provided the immediate benefits of increased stability and sustained sibling ties. Long-term positive impacts on children’s social and emotional development are also expected. This is because expedited permanency prevents further trauma and instability caused by placement and other changes, including sibling separation or decreased contacts, which are more likely to occur when children languish in the child welfare system.

With the achievement of GAL representation for 100% of all Miami-Dade dependent children, Voices has continued to prioritize more expeditious permanency for children so their chances for success would be improved and there would be an end to the intergenerational cycle of abuse. In 2022-2023, Voices secured funding for the GAL permanency specialist through October 31, 2024 and expects to continue to fund this vitally important position indefinitely. This full-time professional with extensive experience as a child advocate and considerable knowledge about all facets of the child welfare system has effectively identified and helped mitigate all barriers to permanency for dependent children ages 0-5 years of all ethnicities and their siblings. Voices is hopeful that other Circuits of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office will choose to replicate this position within their child advocacy operations.

Independent Living Project

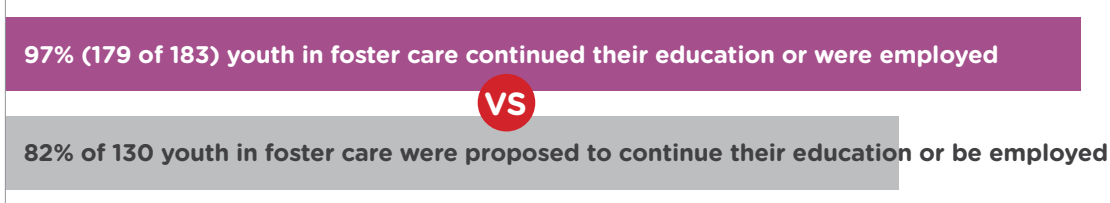
Despite research on best practices demonstrating that for many reasons, youth benefit from extended foster care and that this increases their chances for effectively transitioning from dependency to independent adulthood (also preventing the negative outcomes that many former foster youth experience), the judicial system has historically only started this transitioning process at 17.3 years of age. Also proven is that waiting until dependent youth are age 17.3 years to begin focusing on what they will need to have in place by age 18 almost guarantees that they will be unable to provide for themselves once on their own. This remains due to insufficient time for overburdened child welfare system (CWS) employees to effectively engage youth in creating and implementing realistic transition plans as the myriad services they need remain inaccessible from overburdened government agencies. This nine-month race to achieve what most non-dependent youth in stable homes begin years before and continue for years after their 18th birthday sets dependent youth up for frustration and disappointment. This usually results in their desire to leave foster care as soon as they turn 18 despite lacking the resources needed to support themselves instead of consenting to extended foster care, which provides youth with numerous benefits.



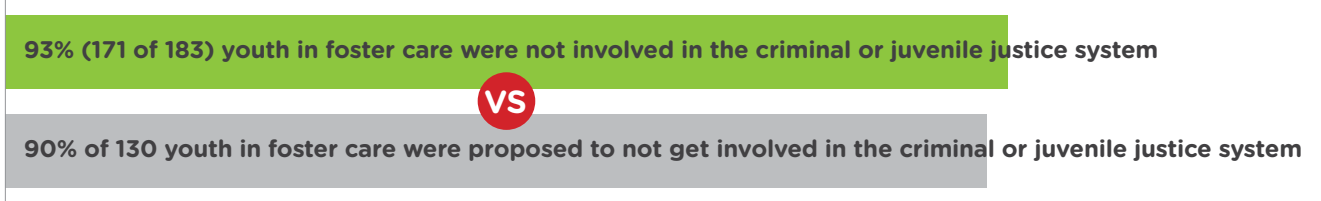
As reported in Voices 2021–2022 Final Report, Voices and the GAL Office built on the success of the permanency specialist (PS) and secured funding to implement a similar approach to assisting youth “aging out” of the child welfare system. In 2022–2023, the laser focus of an independent living specialist continued to significantly enhance the committed efforts of GAL advocates by identifying the barriers to dependent youth ages 16 years and up so they could begin to successfully transition to adulthood by having barriers removed or mitigated. This full-time independent living specialist, also with extensive CWS experience and knowledge, exclusively focused on identifying and eliminating barriers so that 130 dependent youth ages 16 years and older could successfully create and implement their own individualized transition plans to adulthood. Collaborating with GAL advocates and GAL attorneys, other CWS staff and those from various youth services organizations, the independent living specialist also ensured youth were informed about the benefits of extended foster care and were able to access all appropriate State entitlements.

In 2022–2023, the independent living specialist (ILS) exceeded all proposed objectives and achieved the following on behalf of youth ages 16–23 years with a case plan goal of APPLA:

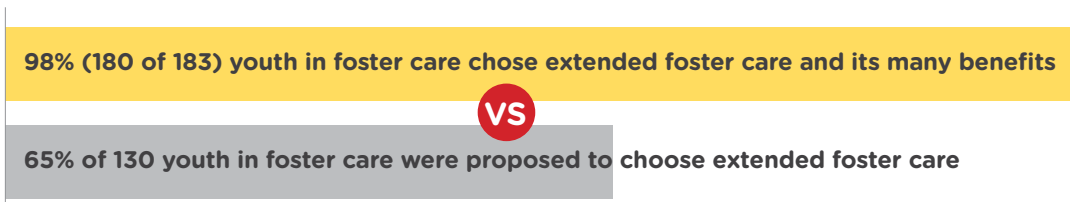
1. 97% or 179 of the actual 183 youth in foster care vs the proposed 82% of 130 youth were enrolled in a high school or GED program, vocational program or college or were employed full-time as measured by GAL Program Office Files.



2. 93% or 171 of the 183 youth in foster care vs the proposed 90% of 130 youth did not have open involvement with the Juvenile or Criminal Justice System as measured by dependency and juvenile court files.



3. 98% or 180 of the 183 youth in foster care vs the proposed 65% of 130 youth elected to extend foster care jurisdiction as measured by GAL court files.



Working with any teen population is challenging but working with dependent teens is significantly more difficult because these youth experienced trauma with their biological parents and have learned to distrust adults. Recognizing that developing a trusting relationship with every youth must come first, the ILS demonstrated her genuine concern for each one's welfare by helping each one address his/her individual needs and interests.

The ILS coordinated with the GAL Office and case management agencies year-round to ensure that every youth's Social Security application was submitted six months before their 18th birthday so there was no lapse in their receipt of this essential monthly income. She worked diligently to get to know each youth, helping them develop realistic Transition to Adulthood Plans tailored to each youth's strengths, interests, talents and motivation to work hard. The ILS collaborated with Educate Tomorrow and helped chaperone 40 dependent youth on a week-long King's College Tour of Florida colleges and universities during Spring Break 2023.

The ILS' patience, respect and cultural humility have enabled her to effectively connect with each youth, so they are receptive to her assistance. Her good sense of humor and use of interactive texts and emails to communicate with youth have also facilitated increased engagement in the positive steps needed for them to succeed. The addition of the ILS to the GAL Office is expected to prevent negative outcomes associated with being in foster care, benefiting the individual youth and the community at large, as these young adults are more likely to become productive, healthy members.

In 2022-2023, Voices also secured funding for the GAL ILS through October 31, 2024 and expects to continue to fund this essential position indefinitely. Voices is hopeful that other Circuits of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office will also choose to replicate the ILS position within their child advocacy operations.



GAL Volunteer Recruitment

To provide community-wide recruitment, training and screening of volunteer child advocates, the GAL Office achieved the following in 2022–2023 with Voices’ support:

1. A total of 107 newly certified GAL volunteers were recruited, screened, completed the required 30-Hour Initial GAL Training, and were assigned to represent dependent children in Miami-Dade County. All received educational advocacy training as part of their initial training to enable them to assist children to meet age-appropriate educational objectives.
2. A total of 552 GAL volunteers represented dependent children in 2022–2023, including 62% primarily ethnic minorities with 36% Hispanic; 14% Black, non-Hispanic; and 12% other/multi-ethnic. The remaining 38% were White, non-Hispanic. A total of 97 or 18% of all GAL volunteers were men and 455 or 82% were women. As always, Voices and the GAL Office aimed to increase the diversity of volunteer advocates and the number of male advocates to best reflect the demographics of and relate to Miami-Dade County’s dependent children.
3. In addition to the required 30-Hour Initial GAL Training, 51 volunteers were trained and given information and materials to serve as Certified Educational Surrogates for Miami-Dade Public School children. These volunteers advocated for children represented to ensure each child received the appropriate grade- and achievement-level placements and that the educational needs of children and youth they represented were met with tutoring, mentoring and/or via MDCPS’ Exceptional Student Services programs, as appropriate for each child.
4. A total of 14 GAL volunteers received training in the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children to enable them to effectively advocate for human trafficking victims.



The impact of GAL advocates on the lives of the children served is captured in this quote from a foster parent:

“The GAL advocacy program is a building bridge of compassion and trust that pieces together a safe environment in which the child can thrive and succeed in. The program adds meaning to “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Voices For Children Foundation Children's Needs Program Accomplishments

Direct Financial Assistance and More

In 2022-2023, a total of 1,151 unduplicated children received direct financial support for basic needs and dignity items including toiletries, toys, school supplies and bicycles from Voices' new Comfort Closet plus a variety of learning opportunities, all provided through the Children's Needs Program. These were provided to ensure the children's essential and other needs were met, including the need to feel like a "normal" kid and have fun, and to experience exciting activities that give them hope for a better future as documented by Voices Children's Needs (CN) Program Request & Disbursement Forms.

In 2022-2023, Voices was able to build upon the direct financial assistance provided through its Children's Need Program with a special allocation from the Miami-Dade County Mayor's Office, as approved by the Board of County Commissioners in Fall 2022. Received by Voices in January 2023, in the six months through June 30, 2023, this funding enabled Voices to provide many more essential and fun items for children and youth through Voices new *Comfort Closet* to provide children and youth with access to whatever they need at no cost to them or their caregivers.

This includes pillows; clothing; toiletries; baby needs including diapers, formula, wipes, clothing and more; school supplies; various other items; and a myriad of toys, including children's books, playthings and bicycles. As of September 2023, more than 500 unduplicated children and youth received more than 2,000 items from Voices Comfort Closet.

The Comfort Closet is housed within Voices' centrally located offices, where all items are carefully inventoried, stored and given out. Voices CN Program staff safely manage the Comfort Closet so that all GAL staff advocates can "shop" there before making home visits so they can bring the children, youth and their caregivers served needed items or "care Packages." GAL advocates make an appointment to visit the Comfort Closet during regular business hours.



Experiential Learning

Voices also provided potentially life-changing experiential learning opportunities never provided for Miami-Dade County dependent children and youth served by the GAL Office. These impactful experiences included:

1. In collaboration with Educate Tomorrow and with the GAL independent living specialist among the adult chaperones, 40 dependent youth participated in a week-long King's College Tour during Spring Break Week in March. Visiting the University of Florida, University of Central Florida, Florida A&M University, Florida State University and several other Florida colleges, this tour provided students with opportunities to discover college life and learn what it takes to succeed in college, culminating in a fun day at Universal Studios.
2. The Buffalo Cove Outdoor Education Center: This was created as an opportunity for inner-city foster children to travel to the mountains of North Carolina and experience the power of being immersed in the natural world. The mission is to create a physically and emotionally safe learning environment where individuals can find harmony and empowerment through self-understanding, self-confidence, simple living, friendships and fun. One week of camping in North Carolina in June introduced 10 dependent children and youth served by the GAL Office with opportunities to explore the Southern Appalachian mountains, learn earth and nature skills, and develop a greater sense of self-confidence and community awareness.
3. Building Love and Uniting Everyone (BLUE) Missions Group: This provided 20 youth with the most potentially life-changing experience: traveling to the Dominican Republic in July 2023 to help bring clean water to rural communities. This nonprofit organization provides youth ages 15+ years with an 8-day experience (worth 120 community service hours) in the Dominican Republic (DR). Youth live with and help local people construct water and sanitation systems for impoverished families as they learn about global citizenship and sustainable development. This experience benefited the health and overall quality of life of the families served in DR as it impacted Voices' youth by helping them discover their power to affect positive change. This was a life-changing experience for many of Voices' 20 youth participants, as expressed by Voices' Intern Gabriela Sepulveda that participated in the BLUE Missions trip:

"For me, it was a life-changing experience to witness all 19 of our children rising to the challenge of living in "el campo" (the field) and opening their hearts to help others... Throughout this trip, our group got to learn what it means to serve others. For eight days, we braved the elements while helping to provide comfort and sanitation to members of the community."



Voices For Children Foundation Organizational and Financial Achievements

As leaders within Miami-Dade’s child welfare system, Voices and the GAL Office continued to increase their capacity towards addressing the need for systemic change. This was achieved by securing sufficient unrestricted funding to cover all general operating expenses for FY 2022-2023 and by securing funding for the permanency specialist and independent living specialist positions that were recently pioneered and are expected to significantly impact the eventual systemic change needed in Miami-Dade County’s CWS. Dependent children are beginning to achieve expedited permanency in safe, stable homes and dependent youth are moving towards more successful transitions to adulthood.

Voices and the GAL Office are excited that these new positions bring forth daily changes that will impact youth’s long-term success, often by informing them and their advocates about the many community resources that are available and how to access them. For example, the independent living specialist is informing dependent youth who have Medicaid that within the Medicaid system they are entitled to a \$25 monthly allowance at CVS stores for over-the-counter medications, health and hygiene items and other necessities. Ordered online with free delivery, this important benefit is especially valuable as youth can obtain these essentials despite not having their own transportation to get them. Finding such resources and empowering youth to access them on their own will continue to make the daily differences that minimize barriers to self-sufficiency and maximize youth’s successful outcomes.

As stated at the beginning of this report, in 2022-2023, Voices new president and CEO and board chair engaged Voices and the GAL Offices’ leadership teams in Strategic Planning to guide their ongoing success through 2026-2027.

In 2022-2023, a total of \$5,922,608 was raised, including \$1,996,696 from individuals and corporations; \$599,150 from foundations; \$3,326,762 from local, state and federal government sources; and \$119,103 in in-kind contributions.



According to Charity Navigator, the nation’s premier independent evaluator of nonprofit organizations, Voices continued to earn a 4-star rating. This highest possible rating indicates that the organization adheres to nonprofit sector best practices and executes its mission in a financially efficient way. Attaining a 4-star rating verifies that Voices exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in its area of work.

Voices and the GAL Office are grateful to the foundations and other private funding sources that made 2022-2023 an enormous success, especially for Miami-Dade County’s dependent children, youth and young adults.



beavoice.org

**601 NW 1st Court, 10th Floor
Miami, FL 33136
Phone: (305) 324-5678**

Voices For Children Foundation. All rights reserved.

Voices For Children Foundation, Inc. raises funds to ensure that every abused, abandoned, and neglected child in Miami-Dade County has a court-appointed Guardian ad Litem (GAL) as well as financial assistance and other resources available for their health, educational, and social needs.

Tax ID 59-2746076