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Hillsborough County Launches Community-Based Initiative to Support Unaccompanied Immigrant Children and their Caregivers as a Child Welfare Prevention Strategy.

Tampa, Fla. (October 8, 2014) -- The Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Committee of the 13th Judicial Circuit Community Alliance is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation. "The Community Alliance is charged by statute with involving community partners in coordination and collaboration in support of children and families," explains **Judge Emily Peacock** who chairs the Alliance. "When we got word of the increasing tide of unaccompanied immigrant children entering the U.S., our Alliance agreed that we could make the greatest impact by getting the community together before we experienced problems."

Kelly Parris, CEO of the Children's Board elaborates, "I see this planning process as the development of a primary prevention strategy to keep these children from unnecessarily entering the child welfare system. Federal dollars have been appropriated to provide services, keep them safe, and move them on to relative placement. Hillsborough County has numerous organizations that provide a variety of services to immigrant populations across a rich and diverse community."

Kathleen Cowan, Executive Director of Eckerd Community Alternatives for Hillsborough County added, "We are working hard to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care in Hillsborough. We think this effort can help keep kids from unnecessarily coming into care. We already have great prevention and intervention services so it makes sense on every level for our community to help caregivers before a crisis arises and children wind up in foster care."

Committee participants agree that incoming immigrant children can be served without displacing children who are already in our community. Moreover, additional federal funds will come to our community to cover the cost of services.

The Committee uses the 13th Judicial Circuit webpage on the U.S.F. Florida Center for Child Welfare website to post information for people who want up-to-date information on this important issue. The site includes information on the Mission and Goals of the Committee, as well key contacts in the Hillsborough County School District, how to obtain health care, mental health services, support for relative caregivers, answers to frequently asked questions and more. It can be viewed at: <http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/Circuit/Circuit13UICC.shtml>

In addition to marshaling existing resources, the Committee identified the need to develop additional pro bono legal resources. **Adriana Dinis**, of Gulfcoast Legal Services GLS CHILD project along with the Hillsborough County Bar Association's

Immigration and Nationality Section are recruiting lawyers to lend a hand. "We need both immigration lawyers and lawyers who can help caregivers obtain legal custody in family, probate and dependency courts. We have always had many immigrant children in the Tampa Bay Area, the GLS CHILD project has been serving their immigration needs for 10 years. This spotlight on the new influx of children provides an opportunity for lawyers to step up and help these children," said Ms. Dinis. Attorneys can volunteer and get support online at FLORIDA for Children and Families, www.F4CF.org.

Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn applauded this endeavor, stating, "Our heritage, cultural diversity, and economy - all qualities that make Tampa the unique and authentic city we love - are built on our history as a community that welcomed immigrants. 'Unaccompanied minors' doesn't adequately describe the young and vulnerable boys and girls, and I'm proud that we as a collective community are doing our part to plan for and accommodate their needs."

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Facts:

161 Children were placed with sponsors (primarily relatives) in Hillsborough County between January 1, 2014 and August 31, 2014. These children attend public schools and receive health care in the community.

The Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Committee's Mission and Goals

Mission: To ensure that all unaccompanied immigrant children in Hillsborough County have access to the services and supports needed to ensure they remain safe and well.

Goals:

1. Encourage discussion among stakeholders about the availability of existing services.
2. Identify barriers to accessing services and supports and work on solutions to overcome those barriers.
3. Identify service gaps and develop resources to address them.
4. Educate and engage the public to support children and their families.