

FLORIDA IS A NATIONAL LEADER IN CHILD WELFARE DUE TO ITS SUBSTANTIAL PROGRESS IN PRESERVING FAMILIES AND PROVIDING SAFE AND PERMANENT HOMES FOR CHILDREN AFFECTED BY ABUSE OR NEGLECT

Orlando, FL - Florida is a national leader in child welfare due to its substantial progress in preserving families and providing safe and permanent homes for children affected by abuse or neglect, Secretary George H. Sheldon of the Florida Department of Children and Families said in his "State of the Child 2010" speech on Tuesday.

"Now, I am not yet ready to declare that Florida has the best child-welfare system in the nation. But we are leading the nation in some very important ways. We are setting an example for America in the preservation of families and protecting children," Sheldon said at the 2010 Dependency Summit. "Together we have re-imagined and remade Florida's child welfare system into a national model for reform."

Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty joined Secretary Sheldon on the opening day of the Dependency Summit. The audience of about 2,000 included many of DCF's local partners in the courts, law enforcement and community-based care agencies, substance abuse and mental health providers, child advocates, youth in foster care and biological, foster and adoptive families.

"Since the beginning of Governor Crist's administration nearly four years ago, you have achieved what the New York Times called a 'radical transformation' in child welfare," said Sheldon, appointed DCF secretary in September 2008 after serving as the agency's deputy secretary under his predecessor, former Attorney General Bob Butterworth. "You have reduced children in out-of-home care, accomplished record adoptions and guardianship, and reunified families with reduced rates of re-abuse."

"Governor Crist never wavered in his support for our work. So many times he told me, 'Just do the right thing.' He meant it, and he has stood by us and stood by the children who come into our care," Sheldon said. "The Casey Family Programs, the Eckerd Foundation, the Youth Law Center and others have made major investments of their time, money and expertise in Florida. We could not have done what we have done without them. We could not have done it without partnerships at every level, all over this state."

Florida undertook several transformative initiatives, becoming the first state allowed to use federal dollars based on the needs of children and not solely on children in foster care and setting the goal of safely reducing the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by 2012.

Since the beginning of Governor Crist's administration, Florida has:

- Safely reduced the number of children in foster care by nearly 11,000 - a 36 percent reduction.
- Set adoption records with nearly 12,000 children adopted from foster care, and received a nearly \$10 million federal bonus in September 2009 that recognized Florida as best in the nation in increasing adoptions.
- Reunified more than 30,000 children with their parents.
- Placed nearly 16,000 children into permanent guardianships, most often with relatives.
- Was ranked number one among the states in 2010 by the federal government for achieving timeliness of adoptions.

The August 24-26 Summit brings together a wide range of individuals who work with Florida's vulnerable children and families so they can collaborate on innovations and best practices to find effective solutions.