

FOSTER CARE IN PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA

COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND INSIGHT REPORT

30+ STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIVE DATA ANALYSIS
CROSS-SYSTEM RESEARCH

Research conducted by One Degree
Sponsored by the LaFrance Project

February 2026

EXECUTIVE SNAPSHOT

This report examines how the foster care system functions in practice in Palm Beach County using public administrative data, policy review, and more than 30 stakeholder interviews.

Research Scope

- Public administrative data review
 - Policy and statutory analysis
 - 30+ stakeholder interviews
-

Core System Patterns

- Placement stability influences nearly every downstream outcome
- Workforce continuity shapes day-to-day system functioning
- Behavioral health access and placement stability are closely linked
- Transition-age youth face structural housing barriers
- Cross-system coordination remains essential and evolving

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This report is designed to support shared understanding across a broad ecosystem of stakeholders, including public agencies, nonprofit providers, caregivers, courts, funders, and community leaders. It is written to be accessible to readers who are not subject matter experts while still offering sufficient depth for those working directly in the system.

Suggested Ways to Engage with This Report

- **If you are new to the issue**, begin with the Executive Overview and Key Takeaways to understand the structural dynamics shaping the foster care system in Palm Beach County.
- **If you work within the system**, you may find it most efficient to navigate directly to the sections most relevant to your role, such as Placement Stability, Workforce Capacity, Behavioral Health, Transition-Age Youth, or Equity.
- **If you are a funder or community leader**, don't miss the Resource Structure and Emerging Alignment sections to understand how system pressures connect to investment decisions and coordination opportunities.
- **If you are referencing this report publicly**, use the appendices for definitions, data caveats, and source transparency.

Throughout the report, distinctions are made between:

- Measured public administrative data
- Stakeholder-reported experience and qualitative insight
- Areas where local data is limited or not publicly available

These distinctions are intentional as they preserve neutrality, clarify where interpretation is required, and prevent overstatement.

What this report is: a neutral synthesis of public evidence and stakeholder perspectives intended to support shared understanding.

What this report is not: a ranking of agencies, an evaluation of specific programs, or a set of policy prescriptions.

However you use this report, we hope you find it useful and look forward to hearing from you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

This research set out to understand how the foster care system in Palm Beach County functions in practice, where the system appears most strained, and what is measurable versus assumed.

Across public data, policy review, and more than 30 stakeholder interviews, several patterns consistently emerged as outlined below.

Core System Patterns

1. Placement stability shapes nearly every downstream outcome.

When placements are stable, other outcomes tend to move in the right direction.

When placements change frequently:

- School continuity is disrupted
- Behavioral health needs can escalate
- Youth disengagement increases
- Permanency timelines are often disrupted

Stability is influenced by caregiver capacity, youth needs, workforce continuity, and match quality.

2. The system runs on people, and continuity of people matters.

Case managers, supervisors, foster parents, kin caregivers, and service providers carry the day-to-day work. Turnover and high caseloads create:

- Repeated handoffs for youth and their families
- Delays in documentation and court preparation
- Reduced time for proactive case planning

Workforce capacity is not a background issue. It directly shapes stability, permanency, and youth experience.

3. Transition-age youth face a structural housing challenge.

Extended foster care and aftercare supports exist, but young adults leaving care enter

one of the most expensive rental markets in the state. Stakeholders consistently described barriers including:

- security deposits and application fees,
- limited credit history,
- income-to-rent requirements, and
- transportation instability.

Housing stability directly impacts long-term outcomes, often determining whether employment and education plans can hold.

4. Behavioral health capacity and placement stability are tightly linked.

Screening processes are in place, and many providers are deeply committed to trauma-informed care. However, stakeholders described gaps in access to higher-acuity services and variability in quality. When placement does not align with behavioral health needs:

- disruptions become more likely,
- youth disengagement increases, and
- caregiver strain intensifies.

Behavioral health is not a separate issue. It intersects directly with placement capacity and stability.

5. Cross-system coordination is essential and still evolving.

Child welfare, courts, schools, behavioral health providers, housing agencies, and nonprofits all interact with the same young people. In practice:

- Coordination often depends on individual relationships
- Data systems are not fully integrated
- Funding streams operate under different rules

Improvement efforts are underway, but structural fragmentation remains.

Interpretive Guardrails

6. Data visibility does not equal full understanding.

Public federal datasets capture many structural indicators. They do not capture episode-level runaway patterns, lived experience quality, or the reasons behind placement moves. Throughout this report, findings are labeled as:

- Measured in public administrative data
- Reported by stakeholders
- Inferred hypotheses requiring local validation

Where data is not publicly available at the county level, that limitation is stated clearly.

7. Equity analysis requires precision.

Race and ethnicity patterns can be measured with proper extraction and suppression rules. Other subgroup dimensions, including LGBTQ+ status, disability, and crossover involvement, are not consistently available in public county-level data.

Differences in outcomes must be described carefully and without causal overreach.

Resource Structure Matters

8. Economic and resource conditions shape system capacity.

Board rates, Medicaid reimbursement structures, and contracted service models determine what placement types and services are financially viable.

- Housing market conditions affect transition-age outcomes.
- Workforce labor markets affect recruitment and retention.
- Public cost figures provide partial visibility. Full per-child cost accounting is not publicly available.

Understanding the resource structure of the system helps explain why certain pressures recur.

Research Approach and Methodology

Research Design

One Degree conducted this research between mid-2025 and early-2026. The work was sponsored by the LaFrance Project.

The research was structured as a neutral issue study focused on the foster care system in Palm Beach County. The scope included the past ten years, with closer attention to the most recent five years. The focus remained on system functioning, outcomes, and cross-system interfaces affecting foster-care-involved youth.

The approach included:

- Review of federal administrative datasets including AFCARS, NCANDS, and NYTD
- Review of Florida statutes, operating procedures, and policy guidance
- Review of Florida Department of Children and Families public dashboards
- Review of ChildNet public reporting and oversight materials
- Review of dependency court workflow materials
- Review of local ecosystem materials, including Children’s Services Council publications
- Structured interviews with more than 30 stakeholders across child welfare, courts, behavioral health, education, housing, nonprofit providers, philanthropy, and caregiver networks.

Administrative data and stakeholder insights were analyzed together rather than in isolation.

Use of AI in the Research Process

One Degree used its structured research protocol, supported by their AI-enabled system, the Issues Intelligence Agent, which was used to:

- Systematically synthesize fourteen structured research domains across the foster care continuum
- Cross-reference statutory definitions with dashboard metadata to identify definitional drift
- Flag comparability risks in ten-year trend windows
- Map what is publicly measurable versus what requires internal system access
- Identify data gaps explicitly rather than smoothing them over
- Code and synthesize stakeholder interview data across recurring themes
- Layer interview insights over administrative data patterns to test alignment and tension

This layered synthesis approach differs from many publicly available reports that rely primarily on interviews or primarily on administrative data.

The process ensured:

- Full domain coverage across entry, placement, stability, permanency, transition-age supports, caregiver pipeline, workforce metrics, runaway definitions, equity framing, cost structure, and data limitations
- Explicit documentation of uncertainty
- Clear labeling of measured versus inferred findings

All outputs were reviewed and validated by One Degree researchers. The Issues Intelligence Agent supported synthesis and coverage integrity. It did not generate unsupported claims or replace human judgment.

Executive Overview

Palm Beach County's foster care system operates within Florida's community-based care model. The Florida Department of Children and Families oversees investigations and statewide policy. ChildNet serves as the lead community-based care agency. The 15th Judicial Circuit Dependency Court retains jurisdiction over removal decisions, case plans, and permanency timelines. Schools, behavioral health providers, housing agencies, and nonprofit organizations intersect with this system daily.

On paper, the system is structured and rule-bound. In practice, it is relational and capacity-dependent. Across public data and more than 30 stakeholder interviews, a consistent picture emerged.

Placement stability influences nearly every other outcome. When children experience multiple moves, service continuity becomes harder, school changes increase, permanency timelines can stretch, and behavioral health needs can escalate. Stability depends on caregiver availability, match quality, workforce continuity, and the complexity of youth needs.

Workforce strain shows up repeatedly. Publicly posted caseload and turnover data from prior years illustrate how staffing levels fluctuate. Stakeholders described the human impact of turnover, including repeated handoffs for families and delays in court preparation. Case management is both administrative and relational. When continuity breaks, youth and their families feel it.

Transition-age youth face a different challenge. Extended foster care and aftercare programs create a bridge beyond age eighteen. Yet housing costs in Palm Beach County remain high relative to entry-level wages. Stakeholders described young adults navigating lease requirements, deposits, credit checks, and transportation without family safety nets. Housing stability often determines whether employment and education plans can hold.

Behavioral health is another recurring theme. Screening processes are established, and there are strong local providers. At the same time, higher-acuity services are limited. Placement stability and behavioral health capacity are closely linked. A youth placed in a setting that does not match their needs is more likely to experience disruption.

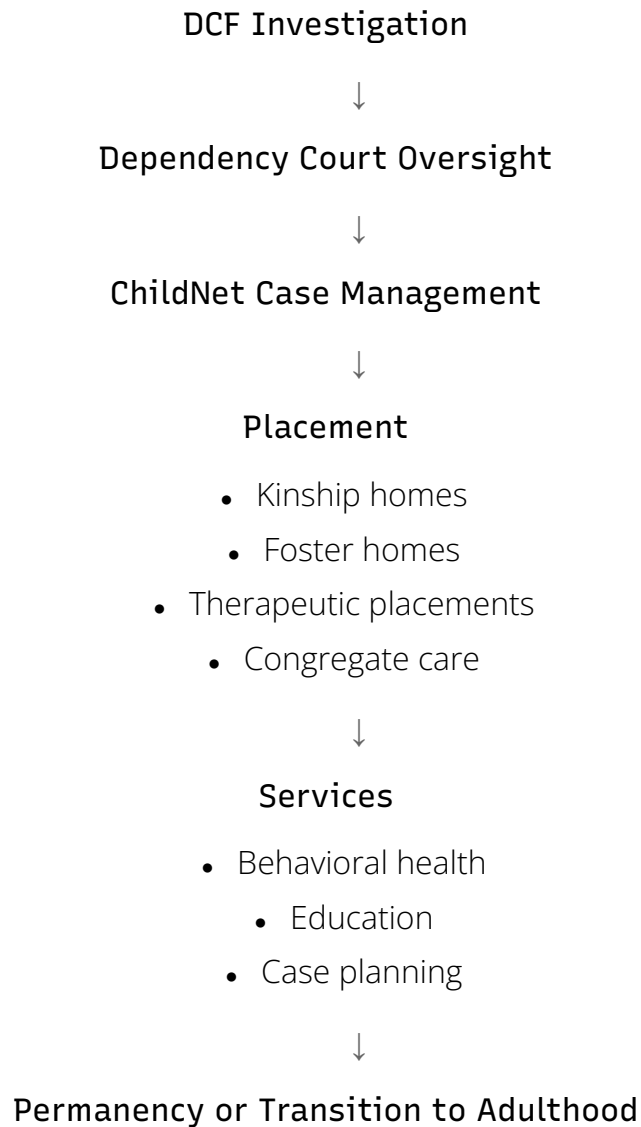
Cross-system coordination is improving but still uneven. Schools, courts, child welfare, and providers often collaborate effectively at the individual level. Data systems, however, are not fully integrated. Funding streams operate under different rules. Coordination often depends on relationships rather than shared infrastructure.

This report examines how those elements interact. It distinguishes between what is measurable in public administrative data, what is reported by stakeholders, and what remains uncertain without deeper local extraction.

The goal is not ranking, prescription, or advocacy but rather shared understanding.

System Overview

How Foster Care Functions in Palm Beach County



Palm Beach County's foster care system operates within Florida's community-based care model.

The Florida Department of Children and Families oversees investigations and statewide policy. ChildNet serves as the lead community-based care agency responsible for case

management, placement coordination, and contracting with providers. The 15th Judicial Circuit Dependency Court retains jurisdiction over removal decisions, case plans, and permanency timelines.

Around this core structure are schools, behavioral health providers, housing agencies, nonprofit organizations, and caregiver networks. Most children and families move through multiple parts of this system at once.

At a high level, the foster care continuum follows a predictable structure:

- Allegation and investigation
- Removal and court oversight
- Placement in a family-based or congregate setting
- Case planning and service coordination
- Permanency through reunification, guardianship, or adoption
- Or transition into adulthood with continuing care supports

On paper, this sequence appears linear. In practice, it is shaped by capacity and timing. Several pressure points surfaced consistently across data and interviews:

- Placement matching when youth have complex behavioral health needs
- Workforce continuity when case managers turn over
- Service access delays that extend case timelines
- Housing availability for older youth
- Coordination during placement changes

These pressure points do not reflect a single agency's performance. They reflect how interconnected systems behave when capacity is uneven.

Understanding this structure helps explain why certain themes, such as stability and workforce continuity, recur throughout this report.

Placement Capacity and Stability

Placement stability is both an outcome and a driver of other outcomes. Administrative data can measure placement type and number of moves over time. It does not capture match quality, caregiver stress, or youth perception of safety. Those dimensions emerged primarily through interviews.

Placement Types

Children in Palm Beach County may be placed in:

- Relative or kinship homes
- Licensed foster homes
- Therapeutic or medical foster homes
- Congregate or residential treatment settings

State and federal policy encourage family-based placements whenever possible. Kinship care has expanded in Florida over time, though support levels for kin caregivers can vary.

A foster parent and nonprofit board leader described the caregiver pipeline this way:

“We need really well-qualified foster parents who are willing to stick around.”

Congregate care remains part of the placement mix, particularly for youth with higher-acuity needs when family-based options are limited.

Stability Patterns

Placement moves occur for many reasons, including:

- Caregiver request
- Safety concerns
- Behavioral health needs

- Sibling placement changes
- Step-up or step-down transitions

Stakeholders consistently described the difficulty of finding stable placements for:

- Older adolescents
- Youth with complex behavioral health needs
- Sibling groups
- LGBTQ+ youth in some contexts

When placements change repeatedly, secondary disruptions often follow:

- School transitions
- Service interruptions
- Loss of trusted adult relationships

A case manager reflected on the impact of repeated moves:

“Every time there’s a placement change, you’re rebuilding trust from scratch.”

Stability, therefore, is not only a housing issue. It is a continuity issue.

Capacity and Match

Stability depends on:

- The number of available foster and kin homes
- Specialized placement capacity
- Workforce ability to support caregivers
- Access to behavioral health services

When match quality is strong and supports are available, placements are more likely to hold. When either is constrained, movement increases.

Economic conditions shape this landscape indirectly. Housing costs affect caregiver recruitment, workforce labor markets affect staffing levels, and placement reimbursement structures influence provider capacity.

These factors operate in the background but have visible effects.

Permanency Pathways

Permanency refers to a legally secure, long-term living arrangement. This may occur through:

- Reunification with parents
- Guardianship
- Adoption

Each pathway follows statutory timelines and court oversight requirements.

Administrative data can measure exits by type and time in care. It cannot measure the quality of family relationships, readiness for reunification, or the lived experience of court processes.

A dependency court professional described the tension between timelines and lived reality:

“The statute gives us a clock. Families don’t always move on that clock.”

Timeline Dynamics

Several factors influence permanency timelines:

- Availability and completion of required services
- Parental engagement and housing stability
- Court scheduling and continuances
- Case manager turnover

- Placement changes

Stakeholders described a tension between statutory timelines and the complexity of family circumstances. Delays are not always procedural. They are often tied to service access, behavioral health needs, or housing instability.

Reunification

Reunification remains the primary permanency goal when safety can be achieved. Its success often depends on:

- Service access
- Stable housing
- Consistent visitation
- Clear communication across systems

Housing affordability again appears as a structural backdrop. When families struggle to secure stable housing, reunification timelines can stretch.

Guardianship and Adoption

Guardianship and adoption require additional legal processes and, at times, identification of willing caregivers. Sibling groups and older youth may face more complex permanency pathways.

As with placement stability, workforce continuity influences permanency progression. Case transitions can delay documentation and court readiness.

Well-Being: Health, Behavioral Health, and Education

While safety is the legal threshold for removal, well-being is the longer-term objective.

A behavioral health provider explained the placement connection clearly:

"If the placement can't meet the clinical need, it won't hold."

Public systems are structured to ensure that children in care receive medical screenings, behavioral health assessments, and educational continuity. Administrative data can confirm that screenings occur. It does not fully capture whether services are timely, culturally responsive, or sustained across placement changes.

Across interviews, behavioral health surfaced as one of the most consistent themes.

Behavioral Health Capacity

Stakeholders described a system with committed providers and established referral pathways. At the same time, they noted uneven access to higher-acuity services.

Common patterns included:

- Delays in accessing specialized behavioral health care
- Limited placement options for youth with complex needs
- Caregiver strain when behavioral health supports are insufficient

When placement and behavioral health supports are aligned, stability improves. When they are not, the likelihood of disruption increases.

This creates a feedback loop:

- Behavioral health needs affect placement stability
- Placement instability disrupts therapeutic relationships
- Disrupted relationships can intensify behavioral health challenges

The system attempts to manage this loop, but capacity constraints make it difficult to eliminate.

Early Childhood

Young children in foster care require early developmental screenings and stable attachment environments. Research consistently shows that early instability can have long-term effects.

Administrative data can track age at entry and time in care. It cannot measure attachment disruption or caregiver-child relationship quality.

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of:

- Stable early placements
- Access to early intervention services
- Support for kin caregivers caring for very young children

Education Continuity

Children in foster care are entitled to school stability protections. In practice, school continuity is influenced by:

- Placement location
- Transportation availability
- Timing of moves during the academic year

Placement changes often result in school transitions. Even when enrollment occurs quickly, academic and social adjustment can take time.

Education stability is therefore closely tied to placement stability and housing geography.

Transition-Age Youth: Continuing Care and the Housing Interface

The foster care system does not end at age eighteen. Florida law provides for continuing care for young adults who choose to remain in extended foster care. Aftercare and postsecondary education support services are also available for eligible youth.

These supports create an important bridge. They do not eliminate structural economic pressures.

A transition-age housing provider described the moment of exit:

“At eighteen, we’re asking them to compete in the same rental market as everyone else, without the same safety net.”

Continuing Care and Aftercare

Extended foster care in Florida is voluntary and includes supervised living arrangements and case management oversight.

Aftercare services are intended to support young adults who exit care, helping bridge gaps in housing, employment, and education.

Nationally, the National Youth in Transition Database tracks outcomes in areas such as:

- Education and employment
- Housing stability
- Adult connections
- Access to health insurance

County-level breakouts are not consistently available in public form, which limits direct Palm Beach measurement without specific extraction.

The Housing Interface

Palm Beach County operates within a high-cost rental market. Young adults leaving foster care often enter the rental market with:

- Limited savings
- Limited credit history
- Time-limited subsidies
- Part-time or entry-level wages

Housing instability can emerge even when youth are engaged in school or employment. Stakeholders described common barriers such as:

- Security deposits and application fees
- Income requirements that exceed early-career wages
- Lack of co-signers
- Transportation constraints tied to housing location

Housing functions as a hinge point. When stable, other plans can move forward. When unstable, education and employment pathways are harder to sustain.

Economic conditions are not separate from foster care outcomes. They shape the environment into which youth transition.

Caregivers and Workforce Capacity

The foster care system depends on two interconnected pipelines:

- Caregiver capacity
- Professional workforce capacity

Both influence placement stability and permanency timelines.

A youth-serving nonprofit leader noted:

“That first night sets the tone. If a child shows up with nothing, that’s not neutral.”

Caregiver Pipeline

Florida’s licensing framework defines multiple levels of foster home licensure, including relative and non-relative homes and specialized therapeutic or medical foster homes.

The caregiver pipeline includes:

- Inquiry
- Application
- Training
- Licensing
- Ongoing support and retention

Some elements of this pipeline are measurable in state systems but not consistently published at the county level.

Stakeholders described ongoing efforts to recruit and retain foster and kin caregivers. They also noted that caregiver stress increases when youth needs exceed available support.

Housing costs, employment patterns, and reimbursement structures indirectly affect caregiver recruitment and retention.

Workforce Continuity

Publicly posted data from prior years shows fluctuations in caseload levels and turnover rates. While definitions can shift over time, these figures provide context for workforce continuity.

Turnover affects:

- Relationship continuity for families
- Court documentation timelines
- Institutional knowledge within teams

Stakeholders described morale and workload pressures as recurring concerns.

Workforce capacity does not operate independently from placement stability. When staff have manageable caseloads and consistent supervision, they are better positioned to support caregivers and youth proactively.

Safety Interface: Runaway and Missing Episodes

Runaway and missing episodes represent a safety interface within the foster care system. Clear definitions are important as they do not represent exits from foster care.

Federal administrative data captures whether a child is in runaway status at a reporting point. It does not count total episodes over a year, episode duration, or provide stable county-level public breakouts in most cases.

Operationally, when a child in out-of-home care is missing:

- The caregiver notifies the case manager
- Law enforcement is typically notified
- The episode is documented in the child welfare information system
- Court oversight continues

Upon return, safety and service reassessment occurs.

Research literature identifies correlational patterns associated with higher likelihood of runaway episodes, including:

- Older age
- Placement instability
- Histories involving congregate care

These associations describe mechanisms. They do not quantify local prevalence without county-level episode data.

A provider working with adolescents summarized it simply:

“When kids feel unheard or unstable, they vote with their feet.”

Publicly available Palm Beach-specific episode counts are limited. Operational data likely exists but is not consistently published in a decision-grade format.

Runaway status should not be equated with foster care exit and proxy indicators should not be treated as direct measures of exploitation prevalence.

In the context of this report, runaway and missing episodes are treated as:

- A defined safety interface
- A measurable but limited administrative category
- A point where placement stability, behavioral health, and youth engagement intersect

They are important but are not the defining feature of the system.

Equity and Disproportionality

Equity questions arise at multiple points in the foster care pathway.

Public datasets allow measurement of entries and exits by race and ethnicity at the state level and, with extraction, at the county level.

Other subgroup dimensions are less visible in public county-level data:

- LGBTQ+ status
- Disability status
- Crossover youth involvement

Equity analysis requires:

- Clear identification of the decision point
- Consistent definitions across years
- Attention to small-cell suppression
- Avoidance of causal claims without appropriate design

Where local subgroup data is not publicly available, that limitation is stated explicitly.

Resource Structure and Economic Context

Publicly observable cost elements include:

- Foster care board rates
- Supplemental payments for older youth
- Medicaid reimbursement levels for specialized care
- Contracted budgets for community-based care
- Adjacent local public funding streams

These figures describe categories of spending. They do not provide complete per-child cost accounting.

Florida's monthly foster care board rates vary by age band and serve as the base reimbursement structure for licensed foster homes. Recent public postings indicate base rates in the low \$400 range for younger children and the low \$500 range for adolescents, with higher reimbursement levels for therapeutic or medical placements. These payments offset caregiving expenses but do not capture the full cost of care, particularly for youth with complex behavioral health needs.

At the federal level, Title IV-E funding reimburses a portion of eligible foster care maintenance and administrative costs. The federal share varies based on formula and eligibility criteria, interacting with state appropriations and local contracting structures. This layered funding environment influences how resources are distributed across placement types, case management functions, and support services.

Placement mix directly affects fiscal pressure. Higher-acuity settings require higher reimbursement levels due to staffing ratios and service intensity. When the system relies more heavily on specialized or congregate placements, overall cost exposure increases.

Housing affordability represents a structural constraint for both reunification and transition-age youth. Recent U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Fair Market Rent benchmarks place monthly rents in Palm Beach County at roughly:

- More than \$1,800 for a one-bedroom unit
- More than \$2,100 for a two-bedroom unit

In practice, market rents often exceed these benchmarks. For young adults leaving foster care with entry-level wages, limited credit history, and no co-signer, these thresholds create significant barriers even when aftercare support is available. Housing instability can interrupt otherwise viable employment and education plans.

Housing costs also affect permanency timelines. When families struggle to secure stable housing, reunification may be delayed despite progress in other service areas.

Workforce capacity operates within the same broader labor market. Recruitment and retention of case managers, supervisors, and caregivers are shaped by competing employment opportunities and wage conditions. When staffing tightens, caseloads rise. When caseloads rise, proactive case planning becomes more difficult.

As one nonprofit executive observed:

"You can't separate outcomes from the resources behind them."

Public cost figures illuminate reimbursement structures and funding categories but do not capture the full economic footprint of foster care at the individual level. National estimates of the long-term economic burden of child maltreatment provide societal context but would require separate modeling to apply locally.

Economic conditions shape capacity. Capacity shapes stability. Stability shapes outcomes.

Funding Ecosystem and Governance Architecture

The foster care system in Palm Beach County operates within a layered funding and governance structure. While service delivery occurs locally, financing is shaped by federal statute, state appropriations, contractual design, and complementary local investment. Understanding how these layers interact helps clarify why certain pressures recur and where flexibility exists.

Core Public Funding Streams

Foster care services are financed through a combination of federal, state, and local funding sources, each governed by distinct rules.

At the federal level, Title IV-E of the Social Security Act reimburses a portion of eligible foster care maintenance payments and administrative costs. Federal participation depends on eligibility criteria tied to income standards, placement type, and documentation requirements. The federal share interacts with state general revenue appropriations and is subject to federal reporting and audit requirements.

The State of Florida allocates general revenue and federal pass-through funding to Community-Based Care (CBC) lead agencies, including ChildNet. Under Florida's CBC model, lead agencies hold primary contractual responsibility for case management, placement coordination, and provider contracting within defined appropriations and performance frameworks. Funding levels are tied to statutory obligations and negotiated contracts, and are structured around defined appropriation cycles and contractual parameters.

Medicaid finances many behavioral health and medical services for eligible children in foster care. Reimbursement rates, provider participation, managed care arrangements,

and workforce supply influence service availability. Higher-acuity behavioral health services often depend on specialized provider capacity that operates within statewide reimbursement parameters.

At the local level, additional public investments, such as those administered by the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSC), support prevention, early childhood development, behavioral health, and youth development services. These investments often intersect with families involved in child welfare but are not exclusively dedicated to foster care. Local public funding streams may provide upstream supports that influence entry, stability, and permanency outcomes without being categorized strictly as child welfare spending.

These funding streams operate under different eligibility rules, performance metrics, and reporting timelines. Their boundaries do not always align with how families experience services.

Structural Design Features

Several structural characteristics influence how funding architecture shapes system behavior:

- **Categorical Design:** Many funding streams are restricted to defined service categories. Dollars designated for foster care maintenance, prevention programming, housing assistance, or behavioral health cannot always be easily reallocated across domains, even when system pressures shift.
- **Reimbursement Orientation:** Significant portions of public funding reimburse eligible services after delivery. This structure can limit flexibility for proactive or upstream investment beyond defined eligibility parameters.
- **Eligibility Boundaries:** Federal reimbursement eligibility criteria shape how total system needs align with reimbursable cost categories. Children who do not meet federal eligibility thresholds may still require equivalent services funded through state or local dollars.

- Contracted Delivery Model: Under Florida’s CBC framework, lead agencies manage subcontracted service delivery within defined appropriations and performance measures. Contract cycles, procurement processes, and reporting structures influence how quickly service models can evolve.
- Multi-System Governance: Child welfare, behavioral health, education, housing, and juvenile justice systems are financed through separate administrative and legislative channels. Cross-system coordination often depends on negotiated collaboration rather than unified budget authority.

These features reflect statutory and administrative architecture rather than local preference alone.

Flexible and Complementary Funding

Philanthropic and discretionary local investments operate under different constraints than entitlement funding. In Palm Beach County, philanthropic organizations and community foundations have historically supported initiatives related to caregiver recruitment, prevention services, housing stability, youth development, and cross-system coordination.

Flexible funding may:

- Pilot emerging service models
- Bridge short-term resource gaps
- Support infrastructure such as data integration or convening
- Fund services not covered by categorical reimbursement
- Enable targeted innovation without statutory change

Because philanthropic dollars are typically more flexible, they often function as complements to public funding rather than replacements. They may accelerate coordination or experimentation, but they are generally smaller in scale than federal and state entitlement programs and are not designed to supplant core statutory obligations.

Local discretionary investments, including those administered through CSC, can also serve as stabilizing complements to state and federal streams. However, these investments operate within voter-approved mandates and defined strategic frameworks.

Funding Architecture and System Pressures

Funding design interacts directly with the system dynamics described throughout this report.

For example:

- Behavioral health capacity is influenced by Medicaid reimbursement structures, provider licensure pipelines, and workforce supply in addition to clinical demand.
- Placement mix is shaped in part by reimbursement levels for family-based placements compared to higher-acuity settings that require increased staffing ratios.
- Workforce continuity is affected by compensation levels relative to broader labor market conditions and by contract funding stability.
- Transition-age housing stability is influenced by rental market conditions that fall largely outside child welfare funding authority, requiring cross-sector coordination with housing systems.
- Prevention and early intervention investments may draw from funding streams distinct from foster care maintenance, affecting how upstream supports are structured.

Funding structure does not determine outcomes on its own. It does, however, influence what is scalable, sustainable, and operationally feasible within existing statutory frameworks.

Understanding the funding ecosystem clarifies why certain system pressures, such as placement stability, workforce strain, behavioral health access, and transition-age housing, persist across jurisdictions operating under similar governance models.

It also clarifies that many system dynamics reflect layered public policy design rather than isolated local performance decisions.

Areas of Emerging Alignment and Open Questions

Across interviews and data review, several areas of convergence emerged.

Stakeholders broadly agreed that:

- Placement stability should remain central
- Workforce continuity influences nearly every function
- Behavioral health access is tightly linked to placement success
- Transition-age housing requires sustained attention
- Cross-system coordination improves outcomes

Recurring tensions included:

- Balancing statutory timelines with complex family realities
- Expanding family-based placements while managing high-acuity needs
- Supporting kin caregivers without overburdening them
- Improving data visibility without oversimplifying sensitive issues

Open questions include:

- What additional local data would most improve clarity around placement stability drivers?
- How can workforce continuity be strengthened within existing funding structures?
- What housing partnerships would most effectively support transition-age youth?
- Where are measurable equity differences along the pathway that warrant deeper analysis?

- What data integration would reduce reliance on informal coordination?

These questions are presented to support shared learning and alignment.

Appendix A

Data Coverage and Limits

This report relies on public administrative data, publicly available dashboards, statutes, policy documentation, peer-reviewed research, and structured stakeholder interviews.

While these sources provide important visibility into system structure and trends, they do not capture the full lived experience of children, youth, caregivers, and families.

Where local data is not publicly available in a consistent format, that limitation is stated clearly in the relevant sections of the report.

What Is Commonly Measurable in Public Sources

The following elements are typically measurable through federal or state public reporting, although often at the state level rather than the county level:

- Foster care entries and exits
- Placement type distributions
- Time in care
- Permanency exit types (reunification, guardianship, adoption)
- Selected race and ethnicity breakdowns
- State-level transition-age youth outcomes through NYTD

Florida's public dashboards allow some county or circuit drill-downs, but availability and historical depth vary by metric.

What Is Measurable Operationally but Not Consistently Published Locally

Some data elements are likely tracked internally but are not consistently available in stable public, county-ready form:

- Episode-level runaway and missing patterns, including repeat episodes and duration
- Reasons for placement changes
- Placement match quality indicators
- County-level NYTD outcome breakouts
- Linked education and child welfare outcomes
- Linked behavioral health and placement stability measures
- Workforce vacancy and time-to-fill metrics
- Per-child or per-episode cost accounting

Absence of publicly visible data does not imply absence of measurement. It reflects reporting boundaries and publication practices.

Definition and Comparability Risks

When interpreting foster care data, several definitional and methodological cautions apply:

- Entry, removal, and shelter concepts are not interchangeable across systems.
- Placement categories can shift over time due to policy or reporting changes.
- Federal runaway status reflects a point-in-time designation, not episode frequency.
- Small-cell suppression may hide subgroup data to protect confidentiality.
- Reporting boundaries (county, judicial circuit, CBC region) may not perfectly align across products.

These risks are noted throughout the report to prevent over-interpretation or false precision.

Appendix B

Runaway and Missing Definitions Summary

This appendix clarifies terminology to prevent common misinterpretations.

Runaway Status vs. Foster Care Exit

A runaway episode does not represent a foster care exit. Youth remain under court jurisdiction while missing from placement.

Federal Reporting

In federal reporting (AFCARS), runaway is typically captured as a status on a reporting date. It does not count:

- Total number of episodes
- Duration of episodes
- Frequency across a year

This distinction materially affects interpretation.

Florida Practice

In Florida practice:

- Caregivers notify the case manager when a youth is missing.
- Law enforcement is typically notified when whereabouts are unknown.
- The episode is documented in the child welfare information system.
- Court jurisdiction continues.
- Upon return, safety and service reassessment occurs.

Proxy Indicators and Limits

Runaway and missing episodes are sometimes used as proxy indicators for instability or vulnerability. However:

- They are not prevalence measures of exploitation.
- They do not, by themselves, indicate trafficking.
- They should be interpreted within a broader placement and behavioral health context.

Clear source labeling is essential whenever referencing runaway-related data.

Appendix C

Comparator Context (Florida Peers)

Comparators are included for contextual learning and evidence-quality reference only. This report does not rank jurisdictions or evaluate performance.

All listed peers operate within Florida's Community-Based Care (CBC) model.

Core Florida Peers

- Broward County (Circuit 17) — same lead agency structure as Palm Beach
- Miami-Dade and Monroe (Circuits 11 and 16)
- Hillsborough (Circuit 13)
- Orange, Osceola, Seminole, and Brevard (Circuits 9 and 18)
- Pasco and Pinellas (Circuit 6)

Adjacent Regional Peer

- Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie (Circuit 19)

Purpose of Including Comparators

Comparators are referenced to:

- Understand how certain mechanisms operate in similar governance structures
- Identify evidence-backed practices implemented elsewhere
- Surface definitional or measurement differences

They are not used to imply better or worse performance.

Appendix D

Interview Representation

One Degree conducted more than 30 structured stakeholder interviews between mid-2025 and early-2026.

Participants represented a cross-section of the Palm Beach County foster care ecosystem and adjacent systems.

Stakeholder Categories Represented

- Community-Based Care leadership
- Dependency court professionals
- Case management providers
- Behavioral health leaders
- Housing and transition-age service providers
- Foster parent and caregiver representatives

- Youth-serving nonprofit leaders
- Local philanthropic leaders
- Public funders
- Community-based service organizations

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to surface:

- System strengths
- Pressure points
- Cross-system coordination dynamics
- Lived experience insights
- Perceived data gaps

Interview insights were synthesized and layered onto deep research findings to identify alignment, divergence, and structural themes.

Appendix E

Sources and Evidence Base

This report draws from federal, state, and local public sources, as well as stakeholder interviews conducted by One Degree.

Federal Administrative Data

- Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)
- National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS)
- National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)

Florida Statutes and Policy

- Florida Statutes, Chapter 39
- Florida Statute 39.6251 (Continuing Care / Extended Foster Care)
- Florida Department of Children and Families operating procedures
- Florida Safe Families Network public documentation

State and Local Reporting

- Florida Department of Children and Families Office of Child and Family Well-Being dashboards
- ChildNet public reporting and transparency postings
- Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County public reports
- Florida Medicaid fee schedules

Research and Literature

- Peer-reviewed studies related to placement stability
- Federally sponsored research on runaway and missing episodes
- Research on transition-age youth outcomes and housing instability
- Evidence syntheses addressing foster care system dynamics

Stakeholder Interviews

- More than 30 structured interviews across public, nonprofit, philanthropic, and community stakeholders
- Interviews conducted between mid-2025 and early-2026
- Synthesized using One Degree's structured research protocol using their AI-enabled Issues Intelligence Agent

Where local, county-level data was not consistently available in public form, that limitation is stated within the report.

Appendix F

Glossary of Industry-Specific Language

Community-Based Care (CBC): Florida’s contracted child welfare service delivery model in which nonprofit lead agencies administer foster care and related services under oversight from the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Dependency Court: The division of the state court system that has jurisdiction over child welfare cases, including child removal decisions, case plan approval, judicial oversight, and permanency determinations.

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS): The federal data collection system administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that tracks foster care entries, exits, placement settings, and selected child and case characteristics.

National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS): The federal data collection system that compiles information on reports and investigations of child abuse and neglect from states.

National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD): The federal data system that collects information on services provided to youth in foster care and selected outcomes for youth transitioning out of care.

Florida Safe Families Network (FSFN): Florida’s statewide child welfare information system used to document investigations, case management activities, placements, and service coordination.

Kinship Care: Placement of a child with relatives or individuals who have a close family-like relationship with the child rather than with a non-relative licensed foster parent.

Congregate Care: Group-based foster care placements such as group homes, residential treatment centers, or other facility-based settings.

Placement Stability: The continuity of a child's living arrangement while in foster care, often measured by the number and frequency of placement moves.

Permanency: A legally secure, long-term living arrangement for a child, including reunification with parents, guardianship, or adoption.

Extended Foster Care (Continuing Care): Florida's voluntary program that allows eligible young adults to remain in foster care beyond age 18 under defined participation and supervision requirements.

Aftercare Services: Support services available to eligible young adults after exiting foster care, intended to promote housing stability, education completion, employment, and self-sufficiency.

Transition-Age Youth: Adolescents and young adults who are approaching adulthood or who have exited foster care and are navigating early independence.

Runaway Episode: An incident in which a child or youth leaves a foster care placement without permission while remaining under court jurisdiction.

Small-Cell Suppression: A data reporting practice in which small subgroup counts are withheld in public datasets to protect confidentiality and prevent identification of individuals.

Placement Mix: The distribution of children across different types of placements within the foster care system, such as kinship homes, licensed foster homes, therapeutic foster homes, or congregate care settings.