

Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County - An Idea Whose Time Has Come

In 1986, a scrappy group of child advocates in Palm Beach County became weary of trudging to Tallahassee to ask the state legislature to give our county its due – enough money to provide needed services for our county's children. Frustrated, they began looking for a means to provide a comprehensive approach to helping Palm Beach County's children and families.

Members of the Child Advocacy Board of Palm Beach County, spurred by Appellate Judge Hugh Glickstein, ventured to Pinellas County to get a glimpse of one of Florida's best-kept secrets – the Juvenile Welfare Board. Created in 1946 in an effort to find a permanent, long-range solution to providing services for that county's children, the Juvenile Welfare Board was unique to Florida and to the nation. Through legislation, Pinellas County created an autonomous board of citizens, independent of existing governmental structures, to safeguard the rights and serve the needs of the county's children. Further, this board of citizens had the power to tax Pinellas County residents for its funds. And, until four decades later, Pinellas remained the only county in the state in which local dollars were designated for nothing else but to serve local children.

The Child Advocacy Board members returned to Palm Beach County with a singular goal – to assure that the children of Palm Beach County had the same benefits. With the aid of then state Senator Harry Johnston II, who was president of the Florida Senate, the group defied all odds and astonished even Johnston when the bill was passed with only one dissenting vote of the legislature.

With the enabling legislation tucked neatly under their belts, the advocates enlisted individuals, groups, businesses and organizations to mount a campaign to pass a referendum authorizing the creation of the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County. The focus was simple – Florida ranked 50th in its spending on services for children. Funds were needed to impact juvenile crime, child abuse, child care, education, etc.

The referendum was put on the ballot just months after the legislation passed. Again defying the odds and bucking political currents, the referendum gained approval in every precinct in the county, passing by a 70-30 margin in the general election. As set by state statute, it allowed the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County to tax its property owners up to one-half mill (50 cents per \$1,000 of taxable property value).

Businesses, media, social services and the public supported it. The Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches led the fund-raising effort. Less than \$30,000 was spent on the campaign, which was mainly a grassroots effort.

In the 2000 election, voters returned to the polls and approved by a similar margin increasing the millage rate to \$1 per \$1,000 of taxable property value.

So successful has this Florida phenomenon been that six other counties followed in Palm Beach County's footsteps – creating similar special taxing districts through local referenda.

The impact on the children and families of each such lucky county has been enormous. Because the legislation was specific in defining how the local tax funds could be used, each county can shape its mission, goals and objectives to fit the needs of the local children and families.

The results have meant millions of dollars to design unique systems of prevention in areas such as maternal and child health; early care and education; advocacy; youth development; and after-school care. Has it worked? Palm Beach County's infant mortality rate, teen pregnancy rate, and delinquency rates are below those of the state and nation; fewer babies are born of low birth weight, more children are entering school ready to learn, fewer are dropping out and, ultimately, more children are entering adulthood prepared to be productive members of society, thus assuring the future health of the entire county.