



# Expanding Florida's Early Childhood Court ("Baby Court") Initiative

*A Report Snapshot*

*September 30, 2020*

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# Introduction

- Ensuring the safety of Florida's abused, abandoned, or neglected children is a responsibility all Floridians ultimately share.
- A legacy of unattended childhood trauma can have a detrimental effect on a person's life and create unintended social costs in the future.
- Due to the interconnected nature between individual and societal costs, child welfare solutions should minimize social costs and maximize child health outcomes.
- Once such solution comes in the form of the Early Childhood Court (ECC) initiative — a transformational approach to ending multigenerational child abuse through evidence-based measures.

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# Childhood Development and Abuse

- Neuroscience shows that the first 1,000 days are the most crucial in a baby's development. By age three, 80 percent of the adult human brain is developed. By age five, this increases to 90 percent.
- The relative importance of this developmental period also makes abuse and maltreatment so much more detrimental.
- Early abuse can cause children to experience developmental problems, school failure, mental health problems, and suffer re-traumatization later in life. These challenges progress well into adulthood.

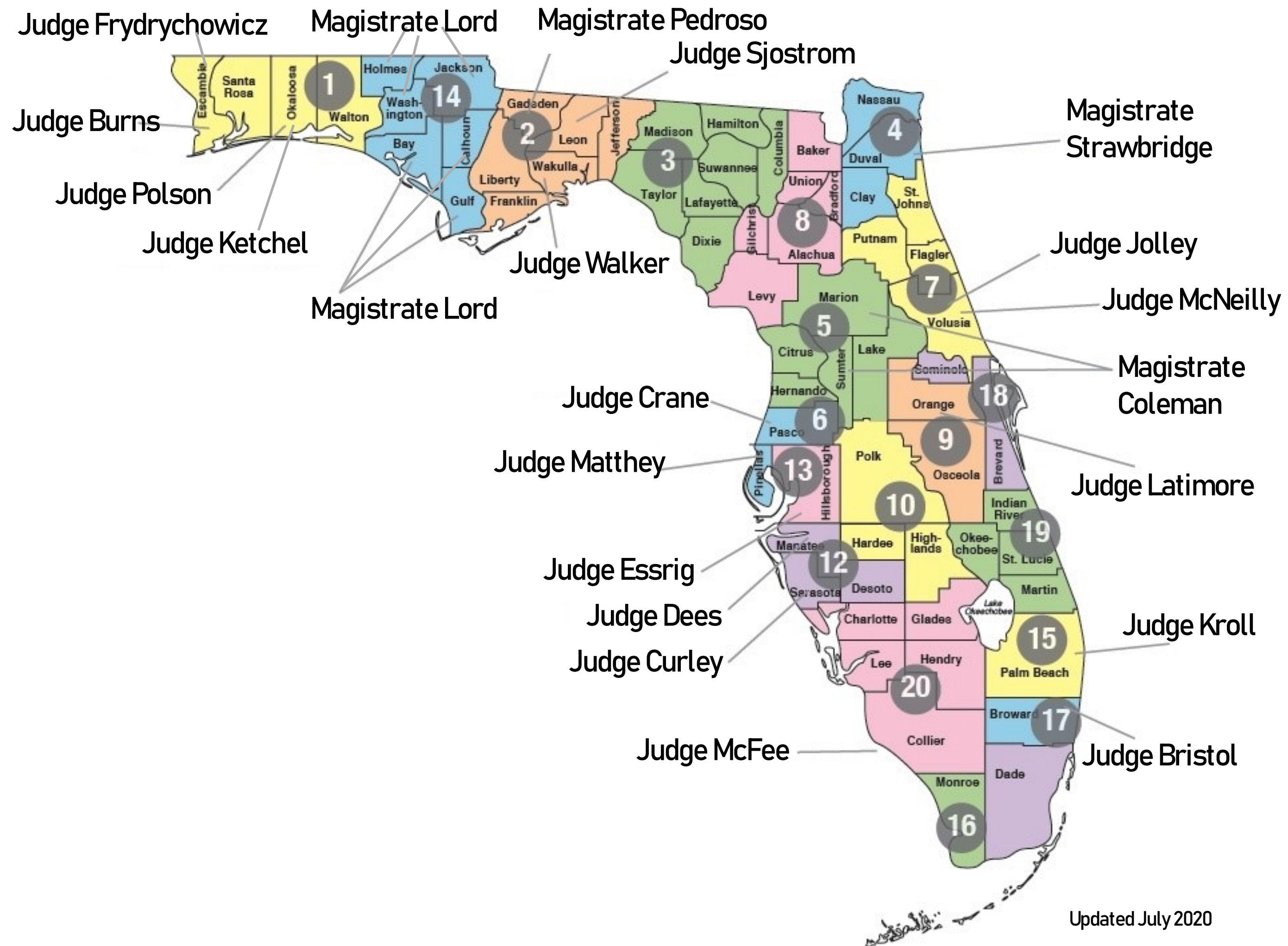
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# What are Early Childhood Courts?

- Early Childhood Courts (ECCs) are specialized problem-solving courts that approach early childhood abuse cases for children under age three.
- These courts bring together trauma-informed judges, multidisciplinary teams, and clinical professionals to provide family-specific therapies and support.
- Monthly judicial meetings identify underlying issues and assess progress, while community support teams provide monthly parent meetings and offer evidence-based clinical services.
- ECC teams ensure adequate support services while ensuring a safe and expedited exit from the system for abused children.

# Map of Florida's Early Childhood Courts



# Benefit to Children and Families

Early Childhood Court Success			
	ECC	Non-ECC	Difference
Reunification (average days from removal to closure)	477	736	259
Adoption (average days from closure to adoption)	697	699	1.7
Permanent Guardianship (average days from removal to closure)	453	683	230
Overall Permanency (average days from removal to closure)	552	695	143
Number of Children Removed After Case Closure (re-removals)	22	36	14
Total Number of ECC Youth Served: 799			

Source: Office of Court Improvement analysis.

Based on analysis by the Office of Court Improvement, children who go through ECC attain permanency in a stable home on average 143 days (4.75 months) sooner than children outside the ECC system.

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# Benefit to Children and Families

- In addition to reducing time to permanency, ECCs also reduce the chance of re-abuse for children.
- Based on prior analysis, only 22 out of 356 ECC children (6 percent) re-entered the court system due to re-abuse, compared to 46 out of 366 non-ECC children (10 percent) who re-entered.
- ECC involvement also provided families many non-quantifiable benefits. Many parents reported increased relationship building, greater trust, and more teamwork skills through the program.

# Benefits to Taxpayers and Society

	Total Labor Costs	Total Out-of-Home Costs	Total Recidivism Costs	Total Cost & Savings
Traditional Courts	\$297.2 million	\$140.1 million	\$55.9 million	\$493.4 million
Early Childhood Courts (ECC)	\$242.7 million	\$111.9 million	\$25.1 million	\$379.8 million
<b>Total Savings</b>	\$54.5 million	\$28.3 million	\$30.8 million	<b>\$113.6 million savings</b>

Source: FSU Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy

Florida currently pays nearly \$500 million for the 13,175 children who go through traditional dependency court.

When factoring in personnel costs, out-of-home care costs, and potential recidivism costs, Florida can save over \$113.6 million per year if it transitioned to an ECC delivery method.

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# Benefits to Taxpayers and Society

- Adverse childhood experiences, when left untreated, can also lead to substantial societal costs further downstream.
- Prior economic research finds that the cost of child abuse is around \$1.8 million per victim over their lifetime.
- This amount factors in the cumulative effects of health care, mental health issues, potential crime involvement, and missed earnings. Therefore, there are even more societal costs not initially captured.

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# Challenges to ECC Expansion

- Florida's ECCs have grown from two sites in 2013 to 27 fully operational sites by 2020.
- Time-intensive judicial involvement and consistent child-parent therapy require sufficient financial resources to handle judicial caseload and clinical capacity.
- In 2020, the Florida Legislature allocated \$11.3 million among the state's problem-solving courts, making ECCs compete with other courts for funding.
- Another issue deals with the localized nature of expansion. Treatments are Medicaid billable and some Community-Based Care (CBC) agencies bear the costs; however, most costs and savings should accrue to the courts who lead the ECC efforts in each circuit.
- There is no dedicated source of revenue from the state government. This creates inconsistency and uncertainty from year to year.

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# Past Policy Efforts

- To address some of these challenges, policymakers passed HB 1105 last legislative session, which among other things:
  - Developed a key set of components for a court to establish an Early Childhood Court (ECC).
  - Allocated \$1.86 million for 20 community coordinator positions across the state.
  - Coordinated with each participating circuit court to fill community coordinator positions.
- Despite these changes, the state legislature did not create a dedicated revenue stream to fund ECCs apart from other problem-solving courts.

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# Conclusions

- Florida's Early Childhood Courts both ensure positive health outcomes for the state's most vulnerable and create long-term cost savings for taxpayers.
- The ECC approach transforms child welfare into a practice that heals the underlying roots of intergenerational abuse.
- Children who go through ECCs are likely to attain permanency 143 days (4.75 months) sooner than non-ECC participants.
- Taxpayers can save at least \$113.6 million in direct savings by transitioning to a full ECC delivery method. These cost savings grow even more the potential long-term cost savings from treating a victim's abuse early on are included.

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# Florida TaxWatch Recommendations

- Identify potential new revenue sources, earmarked specifically for the implementation, maintenance, and expansion of ECCs across the state, such as court filing fees, opioid funding, medical marijuana revenue, or the Victims Compensation Fund.
- Assign funding separate from other problem-solving courts to prevent unneeded competition and uncertain annual funding amounts from year to year.