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# Better Families and Better Jobs: Why Florida Lawmakers Should Increase the Strong Families Tax Credit

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## KEY FINDINGS

1

FLORIDA HAS **ONE OF THE LARGEST FOSTER CARE SYSTEMS IN THE COUNTRY**, AND THERE ARE MORE THAN 22,500 CHILDREN IN THE SYSTEM.

2

MOST CHILDREN END UP IN FOSTER CARE BECAUSE OF **FACTORS RELATED TO POVERTY**.

3

BETTER FAMILIES AIMS TO **PREVENT THE NEED FOR FOSTER CARE**, AND BETTER JOBS EMPOWERS PARENTS BY **HELPING THEM GET JOBS**.

4

THE STRONG FAMILIES TAX CREDIT PROVIDES A **TAX CREDIT TO BUSINESSES THAT DONATE TO CHARITIES** THAT PROMOTE THE WELFARE AND WELL-BEING OF FLORIDA CHILDREN.

5

BETTER TOGETHER **IMPROVES OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES** AND **SAVES FLORIDA TAXPAYERS THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS** EVERY YEAR.

### THE BOTTOM LINE:

FLORIDA LAWMAKERS SHOULD INCREASE THE STRONG FAMILIES TAX CREDIT TO HELP MORE FLORIDA CHILDREN.

## Background

Florida has one of the largest foster care systems in the country, and there are currently more than 22,500 children in the system.<sup>1-2</sup> The unfortunate reality is that most children are placed in foster care because of factors related to poverty.<sup>3</sup> Many parents are struggling to make ends meet, and too often children suffer as a result. These children end up in foster care, even though foster care may not be necessary.

Removing children from their parents and placing them in foster care can have lifelong, devastating mental and physical effects.<sup>4</sup> Children in foster care are more likely to have mental health issues, experience difficulties in school, struggle to get jobs, and deal with substance abuse issues.<sup>5</sup> The longer a child is in foster care, the more likely the child will be placed in more than one foster home.<sup>6</sup> In Florida, most children are in foster care for more than a year, compounding the potentially negative effects.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately, there is another alternative to foster care. Founded in 2015, Better Together is a non-profit based in Southwest Florida that operates Better Families, which seeks to prevent neglect before foster care becomes necessary, and Better Jobs, which helps parents get jobs and provide a supportive foundation for their children.<sup>8</sup> Nearly all of these families are trapped in the welfare cycle of dependency and four out of five families lack full-time employment, underscoring the benefit of having these programs work in tandem to keep families united and to break the cycle of government dependency.<sup>9</sup> The program works in cooperation with government entities and receives 62 percent of its referrals from the Sheriff's Department and the Department of Children and Families.<sup>10</sup>



## Better Together is keeping Florida families intact

Better Families seeks to prevent the need for foster care by allowing parents who are experiencing tough times to voluntarily place their children with a loving family for up to a year. This lets parents focus on solutions for their family while keeping children out of the state system. Thanks to Better Families, 96 percent of families served find full-time employment within 60 days.<sup>11</sup>

Better Families puts decision-making power back with parents. Unlike foster care, which gives the power to the courts, parents decide when to reunite with their children in the Better Families program. Often, parents need less time than they think, with the average stay in Better Families being only 41 days.<sup>12</sup> And 90 percent of families are reunited within 90 days.<sup>13</sup> But 100 percent of families are reunited.<sup>14</sup>



**100 PERCENT OF FAMILIES ARE REUNITED—  
90 PERCENT ARE REUNITED WITHIN 90 DAYS.**

# Better Together is proving there is a better way than foster care

Better Families began and currently operates in Circuit 20 in Southwest Florida, among other regions of the state. Circuit 20 includes Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry, and Lee counties.<sup>15</sup> Since its founding, the program has grown substantially, from serving 105 children in 2015 to serving 828 children in 2020.<sup>16</sup> In total, the Better Families program has served more than 3,000 Florida children since 2015.<sup>17</sup> **After Better Families got up and running, Circuit 20 saw a decline in the number of children and young adults in out-of-home care.**<sup>18</sup>

## FOSTER CARE DEPENDENCY HAS DECLINED IN COUNTIES WITH FAMILY-FOCUSED PHILANTHROPY

*Children and Young Adults in Out-of-Home Care in Circuit 20*



*Source: Florida Department of Children and Families*

But other areas of the state were not so fortunate. Indeed, neighboring Circuit 10, where Better Families does not yet operate, saw an overall increase in the number of children and young adults in out-of-home care from 2016 to 2021.<sup>19-20</sup>

## FOSTER CARE DEPENDENCY HAS INCREASED IN COUNTIES WITHOUT FAMILY-FOCUSED PHILANTHROPY

*Children and Young Adults in Out-of-Home Care in Circuit 10*



*Source: Florida Department of Children and Families*

Because many children enter foster care due to poverty-related issues, Better Together works with families to prevent parental neglect.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, circumstances like inadequate housing and inadequate supervision continue to be some of the main reasons why children enter foster care in Florida.<sup>22</sup> After Better Together had been operating for two years in Southwest Florida, Circuit 20 saw an overall decline in the number of children entering out-of-home care due to inadequate supervision.<sup>23</sup>

## FAMILY-FOCUSED PHILANTHROPY IS KEEPING FAMILIES INTACT

Average Number of Children and Young Adults Entering Out-of-Home Care on a Monthly Basis Due to Inadequate Supervision in Circuit 20



Source: Florida Department of Children and Families

## Better Together is saving taxpayers money

Not only does foster care often result in worse outcomes for children, but it also comes at a significant cost to taxpayers. Millions of taxpayer dollars are spent on foster care each year.<sup>24</sup> In Florida, foster care costs taxpayers approximately \$30,000 per child, each year.<sup>25</sup> But children in the Better Families program only cost \$1,200 per year in private donations.<sup>26</sup> This means significant savings for Florida taxpayers, with the potential of saving millions of dollars as the program continues to grow.

	BETTER FAMILIES	FLORIDA FOSTER CARE
Average Cost	<b>\$1,200</b> private dollars per child, per year	<b>\$30,000</b> taxpayer dollars per child, per year

Source: Better Together

## **Better Together is empowering parents**

With more than seven million people unemployed across the United States, many Americans are struggling with the financial hardships associated with not having a job.<sup>27</sup> To help solve this problem, Better Together operates Better Jobs to help struggling people get back on their feet.

The Better Jobs model works by partnering with local churches and providing them with the tools and support to execute a jobs ministry. This means that the church partners hold job fairs, and equip parents with life skills, including helping with resumes, providing interview tips, and coaching on the hiring process.

Better Jobs has grown tremendously, serving 34,000 job seekers in 24 different states.<sup>28</sup>

## **Florida's innovative Strong Families Tax Credit is helping families**

Florida lawmakers passed the Strong Families Tax Credit in 2021.<sup>29</sup> This provides a tax credit to Florida businesses that donate to Florida charities that promote the welfare and well-being of children.<sup>30</sup> To be eligible, a charity must provide services to prevent child abuse, neglect, or abandonment; assist parents in learning or improving skills; assist families with children who have a chronic illness or disability; provide books to eligible children; or provide workforce development services to eligible families.<sup>31</sup>

Increasing the amount of the Strong Families Tax Credit will allow organizations like Better Together to grow and serve more Florida children and families. Better Together currently works in 10 counties in three Florida regions.<sup>32</sup> With greater resources from an enhanced Strong Families Tax Credit, Better Together could more easily attain their goal of establishing a Better Jobs program in every Florida county.

Additionally, the expansion of this credit could encourage even more family-focused philanthropies to make Florida their home.

**But ultimately—and most importantly—the expansion of this tax credit would mean even more Florida children receiving the help they desperately need and being spared from the broken foster care system.**

## **BOTTOM LINE: Florida lawmakers should expand the Strong Families Tax Credit to help more children and families.**

Better Together is helping change the lives of Florida families and saving taxpayers money along the way. Because of their work, families are preserved. By increasing the Strong Families Tax Credit, Florida lawmakers can fuel even more success, help even more children, and perhaps encourage even more philanthropy in the Sunshine State.

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