



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **MEETING MINUTES**

#### **Attendance:**

In-person: 28

Online: 66

Total: 94

#### **Full Attendee List is Provided in Appendix A**

#### **Hosts/Facilitators**

Department of Children and Families (DCF) Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health (SAMH)

Zoha Khan, Regional Collaboration Coordinator (RCC), SunCoast Region (SCR)

Melissa Leslie, SCR Regional SAMH Director, DCF

#### **Presenters**

##### **Managing Entity: Central Florida Behavioral Health Network (CFBHN):**

- Erin Branchaw, Senior Program Manager
- Elyssa Pena, BHI Systems Manager

##### **BayCare Family Support Team (FST):**

- Jenine Martin-Literski, LMHC, Clinical Manager

##### **BayCare Family Intervention Team (FIT):**

- Rachel Brockhouse, LMHC, Behavioral Health Manager

##### **Sunshine Health:**

- Julie Smythe, LCSW, Vice President, Child Welfare Programs Children's Behavioral Health

##### **Peer Background Exemption Workgroup:**

- Nathan Scott, Child & Family Well-Being System Coordinator, Department of Health (DOH)
- Sonya Johnson, Adult Peer Programs Manager, NAMI

### **I. CALL TO ORDER**

Zoha Khan, RCC, SAMH Program Office, DCF called the SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration (RBHIC) meeting to order at **1:00 p.m. EST on July 22, 2026.**

### **II. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Zoha Khan RCC, SCR SAMH Program Office, DCF

- Welcomed participants
- Reviewed housekeeping items
- Introduced SAMH Director



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

Melissa Leslie, SCR Regional SAMH Director, DCF

- Welcomed participants
- Introduced the presenters

### **III. PRESENTATION**

#### **Central Florida Behavioral Health Network (CFBHN):**

Erin Branchaw, Senior Program Manager and Elyssa Pena, BHI Systems Manager

The presenters reviewed CFBHN's Behavioral Health Integration programs serving the SunCoast Region:

#### **Behavioral Health Consultants (BHC)**

- Master's level clinicians who assist Child Protective Investigators (CPIs) with behavioral health assessments.
- Support identification of substance use and mental health concerns impacting child safety.
- Assist CPIs with referrals and connections to behavioral health services.

#### **SunCoast Highlights**

- 955 CPI investigations supported.
- 1,599 behavioral health consultation activities completed.
- Average response time from referral to engagement: 21 days.

#### **Family Intervention Specialists (FIS)**

- FIS staff engage and retain child welfare involved families with substance use or behavioral health concerns in treatment.
- CPIs refer families to FIS, who then make contact, connect the family to an appropriate level of care, and support treatment engagement and retention.
- 267 families engaged in treatment within 30 days.

#### **Family Intervention Treatment (FIT)**

- FIT is a team-based service delivery model encompassing treatment, engagement, and connection for families with parental substance misuse involved in child welfare.
- Improved Daily Living Activities (DLA-20) scores.
- Increased caregiver protective capacities.



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **BayCare Behavioral Health:**

Jenine Martin-Literski, LMHC, Clinical Manager

Family Support Teams (FST) provide intensive home and community based services. FST was designed as an adaptation of the CAT model for families who are frequent utilizers of other systems (e.g., Baker Act holds, hospitalizations), aiming to help children and families stay together and promote stability.

Services include:

- Home, school, and community based therapy
- Case management
- Family engagement
- No service authorization limitations

### **Eligibility**

FST serves children who:

- Have behavioral health conditions
- Are not eligible for CAT services
- Require intensive family centered intervention
- Referrals accepted from the Managing Entity, Community Based Care Lead Agencies, CPIs or BHCs

### **Program Goals**

- Increase family stability
- Improve caregiver functioning
- Reduce psychiatric hospitalizations
- Decrease substance abuse
- Improve school attendance
- Increase natural community supports

Jenine presented a case study involving:

- A 13 year old youth with extensive childhood trauma, PTSD, ADHD, ASD, and multiple placement disruptions.
- FST provided intensive therapeutic support to both the youth and foster family.
- Services improved emotional regulation, trust, caregiver relationships, and family stability.
- The youth successfully transitioned into an adoptive placement with her biological sibling and continued to thrive.



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

Community Action Team (CAT)

Jenine also reviewed the Community Action Team (CAT), highlighting:

- Wraparound treatment model
- Home-based behavioral health services
- Multidisciplinary treatment team
- Trauma-informed care
- Intensive family engagement

CAT focuses on reducing:

- SIPP admissions
- DJJ involvement
- Child welfare placements

### **Question 1: Family Support Team (FST)**

*Can schools refer to FST?*

**Donna Sicilian, Executive Director Student Services with Pinellas County Schools**

- Jenine advised that any agency, community partner, or individual can make a referral to CAT or FST services. She also noted that she does not believe Pinellas County currently has an FST program. However, they do have a CAT (Children's Advocacy Team) program available.

### **BayCare Behavioral Health:**

Rachel Brockhouse, LMHC, Behavioral Health Manager

Family Intensive Treatment (FIT)

FIT began around 2013–2015 through statewide pilot programs, created to close a communication gap between child welfare and behavioral health providers. Rachel discussed FIT's role in integrating child welfare and behavioral health services. The presenter emphasized the importance of long-term engagement and collaboration with child welfare partners.

FIT Eligibility

- At least one parent with substance use disorder
- A child 0-17 of age (children 0-5 are prioritized as high risk)
- Have been assessed as unsafe
- Decrease substance abuse
- Improve school attendance
- Increase natural community supports



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **Program Outcomes**

- Average enrollment/engagement length: 6 months
- Improved caregiver protective capacities
- Stable housing
- Stable employment
- Improved overall well being
- Increased reunification rates

### **Sunshine Health:**

Julie Smythe, LCSW, Vice President, Child Welfare Programs Children's Behavioral Health Sunshine Health is a Medicaid managed care organization contracted by the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA), operating statewide as a Comprehensive plan alongside Long-Term Care. Julie explained that Sunshine Health's role extends beyond that of a managed care organization by highlighting its investments in care coordination, community partnerships, behavioral health integration, and addressing social determinants of health.

### **Child Welfare Specialty Plan**

Key features include:

- Specialized Medicaid plan for children in foster care, guardianship, and adoption
- Dedicated care coordinators
- Embedded staff within Community-Based Care organizations
- Individualized care planning

### **Expanded Benefits:**

- Transportation
- YMCA memberships
- Over the counter benefits
- Transition assistance
- Tutoring
- Housing support
- Community grants

### **Behavioral Health Initiatives**

- Early childhood behavioral health and Dyadic Care
- Mobile health clinics
- Foster Care Centers of Excellence
- Workforce development initiatives



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **IV. REGIONAL SUCCESS STORIES**

Zoha Khan, RCC, SCR SAMH Program Office, DCF

Dr. Courtney Alston, Regional Mental Health Consultant, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)

Dr. Alston shared a case involving a youth from the Brooksville area with an extensive history in foster care and multiple program placements. A strong, trusted relationship with his DCF caseworker built over time despite his history of high turnover with other providers carried through his transition into a DJJ program.

- The caseworker's consistency and honesty gave him a foundation of trust that extended to his trust in the DJJ program and treatment team.
- Discharge planning began on day one, with a continual focus on "what's next," which helped sustain motivation even when the youth's own motivation wavered.
- Balancing the youth's tendency to become dependent on the few relationships he trusted was an ongoing challenge.
- Despite turnover and differing expectations across agencies, keeping the youth's needs central made the collaboration more effective.

The youth was discharged from residential commitment, is now 18, remains in contact with his former DCF case worker, has begun reconnecting with family, and is considered a success story by the team.

### **V. SURVEY RESULTS**

Zoha Khan, RCC, SAMH Program Office, DCF

From the prior April collaborative meeting:

- 85% of participants reported familiarity with substance abuse and mental health services available in the region.
- Top identified barriers to accessing behavioral health services: transportation, cost, limited provider availability, and insurance limitations.
- Top identified capacity needs: services for individuals experiencing homelessness, recovery housing, co-occurring disorder services, transportation to treatment, and peer recovery coaches.
- Strong participant interest in cross-agency collaboration on system challenges.
- 85% reported improved understanding of the CORE Network role in the behavioral health system after the April meeting.
- The panel discussion was cited by most participants as the highlight of the meeting.
- 81% expressed interest in participating in workgroups, which led directly to the formation of the Peer Background Exemption Workgroup.



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **VI. PEER BACKGROUND EXEMPTION WORKGROUP**

Toni Fixico, Recovery Oriented Quality Improvement Specialist, SAMH Program Office, DCF  
Nathan Scott, Child & Family Well-Being System Coordinator, Department of Health (DOH)  
Sonya Johnson, Director of Community-Based Peer Programs, NAMI

The workgroup focused on identifying practical recommendations to strengthen Florida's peer workforce while maintaining public safety. Organized along a socioecological model, from immediate/individual-level fixes up to policy and legislative change.

#### **1. Navigating the Current System Better (individual level)**

- Develop an applicant toolkit: plain language guidance on the exemption process, sample questions/answers, and a decision making tree, so applicants understand what to expect.
- Promote correct use of the peer applicant pathway/checkbox, so applicants are routed through the appropriate screening pathway.
- Create an appeals checklist to clarify the appeal process for applicants who are initially denied.
- Provide employer guidance on realistic timelines for the exemption and certification process.

#### **2. Improving Employer and Organizational Practice**

- A fair chance hiring template to help employers evaluate applicants individually (e.g., how long ago an offense occurred, evidence of growth) rather than applying blanket exclusions.
- Guidance on peer-informed, trauma-informed supervision for organizations building peer capacity.
- Strategies to maintain engagement with applicants while their screening is pending, so candidates aren't left without communication for extended periods.
- Encouraging employers to hire peers who have already navigated the exemption process to help mentor new applicants.
- A finalized peer support toolkit for employers covering the full process from initial peer engagement through supervision and organizational readiness.

#### **3. Building Peer Networks and Local Support Systems**

- A peer ambassador program: peers who've completed the exemption process mentoring others going through it.
- A funded legal advocate position for certified recovery peer specialists (CRPS) navigating denials or administrative hearings.
- Flexible assistance funds to help applicants pay outstanding fines/fees (often the actual barrier to eligibility).



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

- Regional expungement/records clinics to help applicants understand and navigate their legal history and rights.
- Peer support groups specifically for people going through the exemption process.
- Partnerships with legal aid and recovery organizations for applicants needing legal guidance.

### **4. Administrative Improvements (DCF/AHCA level)**

Organized into process, data/transparency, accountability, and cross-agency alignment:

#### *Process:*

- Criteria for expedited review for applicants with demonstrated rehabilitation or prior exemptions.
- More trauma-informed communication during the review process.
- Standardized denial letters that clearly explain the denial category, appeal rights, next steps, and available supports.
- Updating the governing guidance document (last revised in 2016).

#### *Data & transparency:*

- A public aggregate dashboard showing exemption application, approval, denial, and certification numbers, potentially compiled into an annual report.
- Publishing decision criteria for exemption determinations.
- A standing screening advisory group (peers, employers, DCF, the certification board, legal experts, recovery advocates, AHCA, etc.) to review data and recommend improvements.

#### *Accountability:*

- Status tracking and timeline reporting.
- A designated, trauma-informed point of contact for applicants.

#### *Alignment:*

- Consistent contract language across managing entities to prevent additional contractual screening barriers beyond state requirements.
- Reciprocity of exemptions across AHCA and DCF, which currently have differing requirements.

### **5. Modernizing Law and Policy (longer-term/statutory)**

- Reform the disqualifying events list (e.g., reconsidering simple possession charges).
- A tiered offense framework: automatically disqualifying, temporarily/conditionally acceptable, and non-disqualifying categories.
- Reciprocity between AHCA and DCF exemption processes, so applicants aren't required to apply twice.
- Fair-chance protections, including presumed eligibility and appeal rights standards.
- Shortening look-back periods (currently up to 10 years, even for non-disqualifying offenses, and applicable regardless of conviction).



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

- A provisional peer designation, allowing applicants to begin working and pursuing certification while their exemption is pending.
- Alignment with SAMHSA and national models: many other states tie the background exemption to employment rather than to certification itself, leaving screening decisions to individual employers.

The presenters' noted Florida is one of only six states that conducts criminal background screening as part of the certification process rather than at the point of employment. They also noted New York does not tie certification to a background check at all screening decisions are left entirely to individual employers.

### **VII. NEXT STEPS**

Zoha Khan, RCC, SAMH Program Office, DCF

- Next statewide Lunch and Learn: will be on Substance Use and Older Adults, virtual, September 3.
- The state behavioral health commission's final report is due to the Florida Legislature on September 1, 2026, reflecting roughly five years of work by commissioners, subject matter experts, and agency leaders.
- The next workgroup will focus on Youth and Family Access to Services, chaired by Charlene Gersek with SEDNET, focused on supporting children and youth with severe emotional disturbance and their families.
- A post-event survey will follow. In-person attendees can access it via QR code, and a link will be shared in chat for virtual attendees.
- Next collaborative meeting: October 29, 2026, 1:00 p.m., in collaboration with AHCA.

### **VIII. PUBLIC COMMENT**

- No public comment
- Participant question:

1. **Phil Agnes, Retired Attorney:** Asked what percentage of youth aging out of foster care enroll in Extended Foster Care (EFC) versus the Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) program, statewide and in Circuit 12.

➤ **Amanda VanLaningham, Assistant Secretary of SAMH Program Office, DCF:**

Explained eligible youth are automatically enrolled in Extended Foster Care unless they opt out. PESS has separate eligibility requirements. Specific participation percentages will be obtained through the Department of Children and Families Office of Child and Family Well-Being and shared following the meeting.



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### **IX. CLOSING REMARKS**

Zoha Khan, RCC, SCR SAMH Program Office, DCF

Melissa Lesile, SCR Regional SAMH Director, DCF

Melissa thanked all presenters, participants, and agency partners for their continued collaboration and emphasized that survey feedback continues to shape future collaborative topics and workgroups.

Zoha Khan reminded participants to complete the post-event survey and submit any remaining questions.

### **X. ADJOURNMENT**

Meeting adjourned at **3:00 pm EST on July 22, 2026**, by Zoha Khan.



## SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

### APPENDIX A

|             |                    |                                                                        |
|-------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Abigail     | Reckard            | Community Care Plan                                                    |
| Alan        | Davidson*          | CFBHN                                                                  |
| Alicia      | Hyatte             | Bay Pines VA                                                           |
| Alyssa      | Deines             | DCF                                                                    |
| Amanda      | Romeo              | Eleos Wellness                                                         |
| Amanda      | Sanchez            | DCF                                                                    |
| Amanda      | VanLaningham*      | DCF                                                                    |
| Amanda      | Sciarrotta-Farell* | Pinellas County Sheriff Office                                         |
| Amy         | Hood*              | CFBHN                                                                  |
| Angela      | Gambino            | Aetna Better Health of Florida                                         |
| Ashley      | Paquin             | Live Tampa Bay                                                         |
| Asta        | Trinh*             | DCF                                                                    |
| Beth        | Hatch              | NAMI                                                                   |
| Beth        | Piecora*           | CFBHN                                                                  |
| Brianna     | Dumas              | DOH                                                                    |
| Bryan       | Clark              | Agency for Persons with Disabilities                                   |
| Carla       | Johanns            | Forty Carrots Family Center                                            |
| Charlene    | Grecsek            | SEDNET                                                                 |
| Chauneva    | Garlington         | DCF                                                                    |
| Christie    | Sparks             | Division of Children's Medical Services-Bureau of Child Health Quality |
| Christina   | Gillis             | DCF                                                                    |
| Christina   | King               | BayCare                                                                |
| Christine   | Didion             | Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas                                 |
| Christopher | Austin             | DCF                                                                    |



## SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

|             |                  |                                    |
|-------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| Christopher | White            | DCF                                |
| Claudio     | Dimundo*         | Pinellas County Sheriff Office     |
| Courtney    | Alston           | DJJ                                |
| Cris        | Riviere          | ACTS                               |
| Daisy       | Corea            | Sarasota County                    |
| Darrick     | Paul*            | One Check Away                     |
| Deanna      | Obregon          | Ibis Healthcare                    |
| Deborah     | Comella          | Thrive Lee                         |
| Diane       | Harris           | DCF                                |
| Donna       | Sicilian         | Pinellas County Schools            |
| Douglas     | Griffin          | Community Member                   |
| Elizabeth   | Tanner           | Hillsborough County Public Schools |
| Elyssa      | Pena             | CFBHN                              |
| Eric        | Munroe           | Pasco County Fire Rescue           |
| Eric        | Young*           | DCF                                |
| Erin        | Branchaw*        | CFBHN                              |
| Giselle     | Stolper          | Centerstone                        |
| Idris       | Gaines           | DCF                                |
| Jarrett     | Ballo            | DJJ                                |
| Jenine      | Martin-Literski* | BayCare                            |
| Jesse       | Kemper           | DCF                                |
| Jessica     | Kneger*          | Centerstone                        |
| John        | Cornett          | DCF                                |
| Jomayra     | Cestero-Colon*   | Mantee Public Schools              |
| Joy         | Jewet*           | Manatee County Sheriff Office      |



## SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

|           |               |                                       |
|-----------|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| Julie     | Smythe*       | Sunshine Health                       |
| Kamayah   | Frazier       | Hicoria Pines                         |
| Kathryn   | Thorsen       | DOH                                   |
| Kelly     | Shanklin      | North Port Behavioral Health          |
| Kevin     | Curry*        | One Check Away                        |
| Kirk      | Hall          | Agency of Health Care Administration  |
| Kris      | Dalebout*     | DOH                                   |
| Kristin   | Gallagher*    | DCF                                   |
| Kristine  | Garrison      | Pasco Sheriff Office                  |
| Kylie     | McKeever      | SEDNET                                |
| Laura     | Carson*       | DOH                                   |
| Lisa      | Moisan        | Lee County Human and Veteran Services |
| Luis      | Rivas*        | CFBHN                                 |
| Mark      | Sherrod       | DCF                                   |
| Megan     | Rhoades       | Sunshine Health                       |
| Melissa   | Leslie*       | DCF                                   |
| Michael   | Licciardiello | AHCA                                  |
| Monica    | Gonzalez      | Hillsborough Recovery Coalition       |
| Nathan    | Scott*        | DOH                                   |
| Olga      | Reyes         | Centerstone                           |
| Patrick   | Heidemann     | Disability Rights Florida             |
| Phil      | Agnes         | Community Member                      |
| Priscilla | Smith         | Health Quality Innovators             |
| Rachel    | Brockhouse*   | BayCare                               |
| Raven     | Reid          | DCF                                   |
| Ryan      | Warner        | New Port Richey Police Department     |
| Samone    | Franklin      | DCF                                   |
| Sonya     | Johnson*      | NAMI                                  |
| Tara      | Bryant        | Optum                                 |



## **SunCoast Regional Behavioral Health Interagency Collaboration**

July 22, 2026, | 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Goodwill Manasota Job Center-2705 51ST Ave E, Bradenton, FL 34203 - Hybrid

|          |                    |                                       |
|----------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Tara     | Martinson          | Lee County Human and Veteran Services |
| Timothy  | Macsuga            | UHS Inc                               |
| Tina     | Neff-Legg          | DCF                                   |
| Tingting | Zhang*             | University of South Florida           |
| Toni     | Fixico*            | DCF                                   |
| Tracy    | Grey               | Sunshine Health                       |
| Trina    | Kucera             | Sunshine Health                       |
| Tyla     | Graham<br>Mortimer | Gulf Coast JFCS                       |
| Victoria | Bartow             | UF Health St. Johns Care Connect      |
| Willam   | Hardin*            | DCF                                   |

\* *Attended the meeting in person*