

Sixth Judicial Circuit cultural exchange Aims to help Romanian children

CLEARWATER – Circuit Judge Irene Sullivan will lead a Sixth Judicial Circuit delegation on a cultural exchange undertaking in Tirgu Mures, Romania, where she and other local officials will discuss the effective aspects of Florida’s child welfare system.

Accompanying Judge Sullivan will be Courts Administrator Gay Inskeep, Dr. Cynthia Zarling, director of the Circuit’s Behavioral Evaluation program, and Jane Harper, president of Family Resources, a local non-profit organization that provides services to children, youth and families in Pinellas County.

No taxpayer funds are being used for the trip, which was arranged by Livada Orphan Care, the operator of three orphanages in Romania. Judge Sullivan said the Romanian officials are anxious to learn about the Sixth Judicial Circuit’s Unified Family Court (UFC), a prototype program being adopted throughout the state.

Under the UFC program, all court cases involving members of one family are assigned to a single judge, whose familiarity with the family prepares the judge to more efficiently deal with the family’s legal problems, which might include dependency, delinquency, drugs, divorce, etc. The Sixth Judicial Circuit pioneered the UFC concept in Florida in 2002.

“While it is good to know that the work of our Unified Family Court judges is drawing national recognition,” Judge Sullivan said, “it will be even more rewarding to offer help in a country that shares many of our same problems in caring for children in foster care.”

Ms. Inskeep said the group hopes to gain knowledge from the way the Romanians deal with two foster care areas that are a growing concern for officials in Florida courts. She said Livada has had success in preparing and transitioning children who “age out” of the foster care system, rather than turning them out into a society in which they are ill-equipped to function.

The second area of mutual concern is the number of children with mental health issues who are taken out of the foster care system and placed in mental health treatment facilities and institutions. Ms. Inskeep said she, Judge Sullivan and Dr. Zarling will look at Romania’s program that “steps down” these children into smaller group homes.

The group will depart the U.S. on Nov. 5 and return on Nov. 12.