



NEWS FROM: Office of the Public Defender Matt Shirk, Fourth Judicial Circuit www.MattShirkPublicDefender.com

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‘Team Juvenile’ Works All Hours to Ensure Detained Child Final Visit With Dying Mom

Jacksonville, FL (September 21, 2011): Public Defender Matt Shirk recognizes several members of ‘Team Juvenile,’ APD’s who handle the court-appointed defense of those under 18 facing criminal charges. Pictured below are (L-R): Legal Assistants Shawna Hodges and Precious Newton, Assistant Public Defenders (APD’s) Elizabeth Webb, Shannon Schott, Belkis Plata and Juvenile Director Rob Mason.



Thursday evening September 1, an Assistant State Attorney (ASA) informed Assistant Public Defender (APD) Belkis Plata that the mother of a detained girl was gravely ill from surgical complications and likely to pass at any time. The ASA hoped the PD Office could put forth legal efforts to allow the child one final visit with her mom. Though Ms. Plata was scheduled for vacation the next day, she called her colleague APD Shannon Schott and PD Juvenile Director Rob Mason to see if they

could fulfill this child’s wish. Ms. Plata also contacted the Duval Detention Center (DDC), and learned that the detainee could not be transported to the hospital until the next day (Friday) at earliest.

Shortly after 7:00 am on Friday, Mr. Mason directed APD Elizabeth Webb to check with the hospital on the mother’s condition. Ms. Schott contacted DDC to let them know that an Emergency Order for the child’s release was being prepared. Mr. Mason then learned that the detained child in fact was not a client of the PD Office, rather was represented by Regional Conflict Counsel. Director Mason knew the challenging process to gain the client a temporary release and had the necessary contacts within the DDC to strengthen the collective effort for a final reunion of daughter and dying mother. He also knew that if work ceased and was turned over to Regional Conflict Counsel (RCC) that there was a chance that the child would never see her mother alive again.

Team Juvenile moved forward, apprising RCC personnel of the situation. PD Office legal assistants Precious Newton and Shawna Hodges worked together and prepared an Emergency Order that Mr. Mason emailed to the Judge. With RCC approval, Ms. Schott personally went to DDC to break the news to the child. The signed Order was later faxed to the DDC and the Department of Juvenile Justice authorities took the girl for a visit to Shands Hospital where her mother lay on her deathbed. The two were given substantial time alone that day before the detainee was taken back to DDC. Tragically, her mother died the very next day.

Said Director Mason of the series of events, “There were a lot of people involved in this serious effort of allowing a child in detention a final visit with her mother and it was worth everyone’s effort. What’s notable is that no one who played a part in helping fulfill this young girl’s wish even had to. Our staff had no legal obligation but continued to assist to make the visit happen. It was truly a successful group effort that concluded with an important outcome. I commend all players in this bittersweet story and I believe we did the right thing.”
