During the month of November, many foster children found their forever homes during Mass Adoption Ceremonies within the 20th Judicial Circuit. Last year, Southwest Florida had 38 children adoption during the hearings. But this year that number rose above 50.

National Adoption Day is a collective national effort to raise awareness of the more than 110,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families. Since its inception, this annual, one-day event has made the dreams of nearly 65,000 children come true. Hearings were conducted in Hendry, Charlotte, Collier and Lee counties during November to give 52 children a forever home as their adoptions are finalized during National Adoption Awareness Month. That is a record for our area.

The hearings started on Thursday, November 9th in Charlotte County where 8 adoptions were finalized. On Monday, November 13th, 8 more children had their adoptions finalized in Hendry County. On Friday November 17th 10 children were adopted in Collier County. The final hearing was held on Saturday, November 18th in Lee County where 26 adoptions were finalized. Between the four hearings, 11 sets of siblings were adopted.

The Children’s Network is the lead agency for child welfare in Southwest Florida. They are responsible for recruiting and supporting prospective adoptive parents. Currently there are 199 children waiting for adoption; 46 of these children have no identified homes. Interested families can contact the agency at 1-855-933-KIDS to learn what is needed to get involved.
**New Deputy Court Administrator welcomed**

Criminal Division Director Liza Flecha has been selected to fill the Chief Deputy Court Administrator position vacated by Jim Sullivan last year. Ms. Flecha has been working for the Administrative Office of the Courts for over eighteen years, including thirteen years within various supervisory and management roles such as Court Investigator, Pretrial Services Manager, Deputy Criminal Justice Director and then Division Director.

Fresh out of school, her career began with the Lee County Clerk of Court’s office, Criminal Division. Liza graduated from Edison Community College with an Associate of Arts, with a major in Criminal Justice and from Florida Gulf Coast University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice and an emphasis in Forensic Psychology.

The Criminal Division thanked her for her service to the division during their holiday luncheon and presented her with a plaque.

**20th Circuit Judges honored in local community**

Three Judges have been recognized for their work in our community. In November, Circuit Judge Margaret Steinbeck was named 2017 Southwest Florida American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA) Jurist of the Year. At the annual dinner, a Jurist of the Year and an Attorney of the Year, both which are voted on by their membership, are recognized. During her introduction, Attorney Ed Cheffy said, “One of the many things I enjoyed working with Meg was hearing her favorite sayings, one of which was “bloom where you’re planted,’ and I think that saying fits her well. Wherever she has planted, she has bloomed.” She was chosen because of her years of public service, her work to improve our court system and her unwavering commitment to justice. The American Board of Trial Advocates is a national association of experienced trial lawyers and judges dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the civil jury trial right provided by the Seventh Amendment to the United States Constitution.

In December, Collier County Judge Janeice Martin was recognized by NAMI of Collier County as 2017 Mental Health Advocate of the Year during its annual luncheon. She was chosen because of her tenure presiding over the mental health and substance abuse dockets, her support in gaining funding for comprehensive mental health treatment in the community, and her steadfast commitment to improving the lives of those living with mental illness. Judge Martin serves as the presiding judge for all three Collier County treatment courts: Mental Health Court, Drug Court and Veterans Treatment Court. Proceeds from the Annual Hope Shines Luncheon help NAMI of Collier County provide a lifeline – free of charge – to over 16,000 people per year that are struggling with mental health challenges, helping them shine the light on their own road to recovery.

Circuit Judge Robert Branning is a finalist for the News Press’s Trailblazer of the Year, which is a part of the paper’s People of the Year awards. The winners will be announced in February.

Judge Branning was nominated because of his work in dependency court with the therapy dog program. About a year and a half ago, Branning proposed piloting the program along with the Children’s Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida. Therapy dog providers bring the dogs to meet with the children in waiting rooms adjacent to the courtroom prior to their hearing. Right now, the program is offered in dependency and Termination of Parental Right proceedings.
Lee County Court Security Officer (CSO) Michael Vazquez is the 2017 recipient of the Lee County Court Security Departments’ Hubert “Eddie” Swords Commitment for Excellence Award. The award is given annually to an employee in the Court Security Department, who best exemplifies its tenets. A total of twelve nominations were made. CSO Vazquez received eight nominations.

Michael was born and raised in Spanish Harlem in New York City. He attended Chelsea Vocational High School where he excelled in basketball and cross country. Upon graduating in 1981, he was awarded best athlete and declined a scholarship to play basketball in Ohio State University.

CSO Vazquez attended John Jay College of Criminal Justice, but then joined the NYPD in July 1983. After attending the Police Academy, he was assigned to the 030 Precincts’ regular uniform patrol duties. A few years later he was reassigned to the Organized Crime Control Bureau where he worked narcotics investigations. In April 1990, he was promoted to rank of detective and assigned to the Detective Bureau. Six years later, Michael was requested to work in an NYPD/FBI Task Force and obtained Deputy Marshall Status with National Security clearance. Michael was a first responder during 9/11 and survived the collapse of the South Tower. He is the recipient of 3- Meritorious Medals, 4 Excellent Police Medals and 1- Best Police Command. CSO Vazquez retired after 20 years of service with the NYPD and then went on to work for an international private security company. Michael has been married to his wife, Noemi, for 23 years and has three children.

“I want you to know that I am honored and very humbled that my coworkers chose me,” said Michael Vazquez. “I’m proud to be a part of this unit and I am proud to continue in my efforts to keep things safe.”

To celebrate Veterans Day, on November 9, 2017 sixteen Lee County Court Security Officers (CSO) were presented with the “Governor’s Veterans Service Award.” Chief Judge Michael McHugh and Circuit Judge Margaret Steinbeck presided over the ceremony. Judge Steinbeck served on active duty as an Army JAG officer from 1984 through 1990, and continued her military service as a member of the Army Reserve, achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel before her military retirement in 2008.

“We are in a justice center, where we would not be in a position to provide justice to our citizens if we didn’t have men and women in the armed forces protecting those values,” said Judge Steinbeck.

Any Florida resident who is either serving honorable as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, the U.S. Coast Guard, or the U.S. Reserve Forces or any Florida resident who has been honorably discharged or retired from active duty as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Florida National Guard, the U.S. Reserve Forces, or Merchant Mariners with veteran status is eligible for the award.

The Florida Department of Veterans Affairs (FDVA) manages this program.

During the ceremony, the CSO’s received an award medal, a certificate, and a service bar to wear on their uniforms in recognition of their military service.
Governor Service Award recipients

CSO Shannon Dunn, United States Army (Korea)
SPEC4 Electronic Technician

CSO William Hall, United States Marine Corps/Army National Guard (Enduring Freedom)
SSGT

Sgt. Samuel Matos, United States Army
SGT

CSO Peter Matticola, United States Navy/Air National Guard
Command Master Sergeant

Sgt. James Hill, United States Marine Corps
CPL Military Police

CSO Nicholas Iammatto, United States Army Reserve (Korea)
CAPT. Artillery

CSO Luis Skolnick, United States Marine Corps (Afghanistan)
CPL Military Police

CSO Dennis Reed, United States Marine Corps (Desert Storm/Desert Shield)
CPL Arline Refueler deployed

CSO Carlos O. Rivera, Army National Guard (Activated for NYC 9-11)
SGT

CSO Ronald Schilke, United States Air Force (England)
SSGT

CSO James Skinner, United States Navy (Desert Storm)
BM2 Boatswains Mate 2nd Class

Sgt. Kevin Snyder, United States Air Force (Germany and Kosovo)
TSGT Security Forces

CSO Michael Surette, United States Army (Germany and Korea)
SP4 Military Police

CSO Tony Taylor, United States Army
SP4

Lt. David Toumey, United States Navy Reserve (Guantanamo Bay, Cuba Detachment)
BU2 Builder 2nd Class

CSO Trevis Wheatley, United States Army (Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom)
PVT Military Police
Circuit begins using emergency notification system

Emergency situations can happen at any time. Safety is a priority and we want everyone to be prepared, safe, and well-informed.

The Administrative Office of the Courts has decided to deploy a service throughout the circuit that will notify all Judges, Judicial Assistants, and employees in the event of an emergency, whether it be a natural disaster or a man-made event.

This application is called Send Word Now and allows management to send notifications through texts, phone calls, or emails. Not only does Send Word Now send alerts, but it also allows two-way communications between management and teams further ensuring your safety.

This urgent messaging is effective only if critical messages reach you quickly. To make sure you receive all critical messages, please make sure your home and/or cell phones and/or contact information in Court Connect remain up-to-date. This information will only be used for emergency notifications.

A notice directly from Send Word Now will be sent out early in 2018 wherein you can choose specific preferences for receiving emergency information.

Don’t forget to connect with Court Connect

Missed a benefits representative visit or open enrollment period? Need to update your contact information? Employees may be surprised to find just how much information is available to them by simply exploring the AOC intranet site; Court Connect.

The Human Resources Team regularly posts information on the HR, Training, and Benefits/Wellness pages, so you are encouraged to utilize this great resource and ensure you are aware of the beneficial opportunities for you and/or your family!

All AOC employees have a shortcut on their desk top for CourtConnect, the latest news headlines, birthdays, events, links of interest, and documents are available to choose from.

On the HR page there are many useful links as well as County and State tabs which contain specific information for both County or State funded employees respectfully. Next time you log on to Court Connect, be sure to visit the HR main page and not just the County or State drop downs; it is on this main HR page that you will find important announcements posted often by the HR Team. In addition to benefit representative visits, you will find there are benefit update information, Payroll updated, discount websites, an AOC Employee Discounts list, and all AOC Personnel Regulations, and links to other related resources, just to name a few.

The Benefits/Wellness page is also updated by the HR team with those announcements that are specifically benefit related, so if you prefer not to scroll through all the discounts and it is benefits on your mind, simply visit that page instead.

The Training page lists any scheduled training as well as the ability to sign up for scheduled training right from Court Connect. In addition to any scheduled training, the HR Lending Library link is located on this page, so if you are interested in expanding your knowledge, visit the lending library where you will find in addition to books, there are DVD's, Audio CD's, and Manuals.
Hendry and Glades Probation website updated

Hendry and Glades counties are joining the Technology Age!

Over the last couple of months court administration has worked with court technology to create functional websites for both Hendry and Glades County Probation Departments.

The new websites include forms and program details. This is especially helpful for our Glades County Probation Department since a significant portion of our probationers are from out of the area and often report by mailing their forms to the department. Staff will be able to refer such probationers to the department’s website to print the forms saving on printing costs and postage. The website will also be utilized to broadcast needed information as we didn’t have a means to announce office closures during Hurricane Irma. The departments have begun educating probationers on utilizing this tool for information purposes, which has cut down on certain phone calls to the office.

Technology saves money and environment by recycling

Collier County’s Technology department diverted 2,482 pounds of recyclable materials out of the landfill in October. A1 Assets picked up a pallet with 40 Central Processing Units (CPUs), a bulk sized box (known as a Gaylord box) with batteries, wires & phone equipment, and another box with 15 LCD monitors, one CRT TV, and six printers.

Collier County began using the company in 2013. Before using their services, Court Administration would call Facilities to come pick up the junk and haul it off to the county’s electronic recycling drop-off location, but that came with a fee. Other times, staff would haul the junk to recycling, but that would require multiple trips or multiple vehicles because we didn’t have a large truck.

A1 Assets comes to the courthouse to collect the outdated electronics for free. This saves time, money, and the environment. Also, whatever proceeds the company receives from refurbishing & reselling or from precious metal extraction they then share with Collier County.

In Lee County, Court Technology has received over $7,000 by recycling old equipment. Networking, Servers, and Desktop setups are taken off the floor and sent to storage for Disaster Recovery. That equipment can then be used to outfit 100 users in a remote location. This inventory is available to any county, or circuit in the state if necessary. After it stays in Disaster Recovery for a few years, its then recycled and newer equipment is brought in. Lee County was also able to save the rent from a storage unit in Lee, thus saving approximately $2,500 per year in storage.
Celebrating the Holidays

Lee County’s Criminal Division got in the holiday spirit with a few contests!

Pretrial Officer Maureen Ganim (far left) facilitated a “decorate your door” contest with prizes to get everyone in the spirit. The first place winner was B side Intake, with Kassee Buonano accepting the 1st place basket.

Some staff members also had fun dressing up in their ugliest sweaters!

Phones donated to help soldiers

Thanks to an idea from Court Security officer Nick Iammatteo and the generosity of Lee County Justice Center employees, some soldiers overseas will get to call home. After serving overseas in the Army himself, Iammatteo decided it would be a great idea to partner with Cell Phone for Soldiers. The organization takes donated phones, recycles the materials and then purchases prepaid phone cards for soldiers. Each phone can provide up to two hours of free talk time.

This year, Lee County Court Security donated 32 phones. Some of the phones were no longer in use, abandoned or turned into lost and found and never claimed.

Cell Phones for Soldiers began in 2004 as the idea of two patriotic kids who wanted to give back to the men and women who dedicate their lives to protecting us each and every day. To date the charity has provided more than 300 million Minutes That Matter to our troops serving around the world, and it continues Helping Heroes Home via emergency funds that so far has assisted more than 3,100 veterans and their families.

CSO Neftali Gomez sorts the donated phones.