

MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT



Office of Public Information

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2011 CHILD WELFARE AWARD WINNERS ANNOUNCED TODAY

Foster Care Review Board recognizes honorees for work helping children in foster care

DETROIT, MI, November 10, 2011 – The [Foster Care Review Board](#) today announced the recipients of its 2011 Child Welfare Awards, which recognize exceptional services to children and families in the state’s child welfare system.

Department of Human Services Director [Maura D. Corrigan](#) presented the awards today at the FCRB’s annual conference in Southfield.

FCRB Program Manager Jim Novell explained that the awards “are presented annually to recognize exceptional work on behalf of abused and neglected children and their families.”

Karen Bontrager of the Michigan Department of Human Services, Chippewa/Luce/Mackinac Counties, was named **Foster Care Worker of the Year**. Nominated by her supervisor, Lori Tomkinson, Bontrager was commended as “an exceptional caseworker who works diligently to reunite children with their parents [and] a strong advocate for our foster families, as well.” Tomkinson cited Bontrager’s support of a foster family when the foster mother died unexpectedly, in addition to her work in engaging community resources on behalf of families in crisis.

The **Lawyer-Guardian Ad Litem of the Year Award** was presented to Cheboygan attorney **Donna Hansel**, nominated by Judge Robert John Butts of the Cheboygan County Probate Court. Hansel, who has represented children in foster care for eight years, is also a licensed foster parent, having fostered more than 50 children; she is also the adoptive mother of five siblings, three biological children, and three stepchildren. Butts praised Hansel for her “exceptional representation” of children, noting the efforts she made to find a permanent home for three young children whose parents died in a boating accident.

Don and Cindy Prince of Suttons Bay received the **Foster Parents of the Year Award**. In nominating the Princes, FCRB board member Diana Zapalski noted that “[t]hey have fostered numerous special needs children ... [r]egardless of any disability, children in the Prince home swim, ski, go to the school prom, are active members in the church community, and enjoy all that life has to offer.” Zapalski praised the couple, who are directors for the Grand Traverse Chapter of Joni and Friends International Disability Center, for their “remarkable insight and compassion.”

The **Parent Attorney of the Year Award** was presented to University of Michigan Law School **Professor Vivek Sankaran**, nominated by Jackson attorney Elizabeth Warner and Jodi Latuszek, a management analyst with the State Court Administrative Office. Praised as “a primary leader in improving the child welfare system in Michigan,” Sankaran directs the Child Advocacy Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School and also founded the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy. An expert on parents’ rights, Sankaran was commended for working to preserve families by solving legal problems that cause children to enter the foster care system.

Judge Leslie Kim Smith received the **Jurist of the Year Award** for her work as a family court judge. Smith, who has been a judge for 24 years, was nominated by System of Care Director Kathryne O’Grady of the Wayne County Circuit Court, and by members of the FCRB Wayne County boards. Smith was commended as “a fair and impartial jurist, a true leader, and a tireless advocate for children and families in the child welfare system.” Among her achievements, the FCRB cited the judge’s creation of an expedited reunification docket and parent orientation project to help increase the number of children reunified with their parents and reduce the time children spend in foster care.

The FCRB, which was created by the Michigan legislature in 1981, serves as a statewide system of third-party review of the foster care system. The program is administered by the [State Court Administrative Office](#), the administrative agency of the [Michigan Supreme Court](#), and is comprised of citizen volunteers who serve on one of 30 local review boards throughout the state. Local boards review randomly chosen child abuse and neglect cases to assess the performance of courts, DHS, and private child welfare agencies.

For more information about the FCRB, and for information about volunteering, visit <http://www.courts.michigan.gov/SCAO/services/fcrb/fcrb.htm>.

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