Children in behavioral crises are scared—frightened beyond being able to listen. If this is a repeat hospitalization, their parents are even more frazzled. Nearly 40 families in Hillsborough County made significant progress because of the CAT Team. Here are four of their stories.

**Beth and Christian**

“The CAT Team is the first behavioral health service that actually happened just like they said. Christian’s case manager was at our house the day he was released from a residential program,” recalled Beth. That alone was a relief.

Beth’s estranged 15-year-old lived with his dad in another state. He was traumatized and started self-medicating his mental illness with drugs and alcohol. When moved home, the substance abuse continued. “It took one year in and out of programs and being shuffled around before he got help,” she said.

That help came through Linda Siemer, advocate with Disability Rights Florida. She helped Beth and Christian navigate the system, qualify for the special residential placement.

“When I found out he was going to be released I was afraid he wouldn’t get follow up for three months.” That had happened before. Seimer helped qualify them for the CAT Team.

Christian likes the team and complies with therapy because he relates to therapist, Roberto Hernandez. Jose Sanabria is his mentor; and Gladys Rivera is the case manager.

At the beginning of the school year, the 15-year-old tested at seventh grade level. Rivera went with Beth when she enrolled Christian in a charter school that allows him to work online at the school and have teachers available. He is attending school and studying. The back talk and disrespect is getting under control, too. He retreats to
his room. He and Beth are working with Hernandez and Sanabria on ways they can get together during these times.

Roberto Hernandez is on a mission to help his fellow man. “I love what I do. I don’t carry cases. I carry families. Most of our CAT have had issues so they are judged too challenging for other centers. The entire family has conditions—usually they haven’t been diagnosed.”

His philosophy makes a difference for Beth and Christian.

“A typical morning now is I say something about his room being a mess,” Beth said. “The other day I started in again, and he just busted out laughing. He said, ‘Mom! Do you remember what we used to fight about?’ I busted out laughing, too! I totally get that these are our problems now. We’re closer to normal.”
Linda and Erica

Linda stood up and enthusiastically told it like it is to Florida House Representative Betty Reed and several legislative assistants representing Sen. Tom Lee, Sen. Jeff Brandes and Sen. Bill Galvano. She passionately believes in the results the CAT program is helping her family achieve.

Linda explained four years ago, Erica was a sweet, happy and laughing child who turned into something that she and her husband did not recognize nearly overnight. Now she is laughing again. Linda can and does call her therapist or any member of her CAT Team 24/7.

Since the Hillsborough CAT Team opened in August, 32 children have enrolled and five more are in process.

“Nearly one year after the Newtown shootings, we know one of the worst things you can hear when a child has issues is there is a two month wait. In CAT there’s no wait for services—a CAT family begins services within 48 hours. We can spend six to nine months making sure the changes and improvements are longer lasting,” said Bob Sleczkowski, Gracepoint-MHC chief operating officer. “We can accept youth who are 18-21—there’s not much out there for them right now. We work with foster care and adoptive home breakdown, mental health and co-occurring disorders.

“Our mentor bonded with my child. What a blessing that is to me. Regardless of whether my daughter wants to continue therapy and mentoring, the CAT Team will continue to support me.

“...
“I went to the doctor last week and my blood pressure was perfect! This program is worth every penny,” she said.

**Jim and Sophia**  
Donald and Jasmine

Men and women sometimes view the world differently. Imagine being a single father parenting a daughter with behavioral health or substance issues. Donald and Jim love their daughters. They thought they had run out of options.

Jim wants to get a copy of the “PBS Kids” lead in. Sophia is one of the little children playing patty-cake when the credits roll. He says it reminds her of better times. At 14, Sophia is brilliant. The straight A high school sophomore is on track to graduate early. She’s also been hospitalized several times for being a danger to herself or others. Derek McCarron, program manager of Gracepoint-MHC Children’s Crisis Stabilization Program, referred Jim and Sophia to the CAT Team.

“The ability to get in right away with everything in place really

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<th>Crisis Evaluations</th>
<th>6,600 per year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Crisis Admissions</td>
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It works. Her mentor takes her to the YMCA, to feed the ducks or helps her with homework. It gives us a break from each other. I wish the CAT Team was here when I was a kid,” Donald said.

Rep. Betty Reed (D, Tampa) agreed that the whole family is affected when one person is ill. “My grandson in Georgia is 20 and he’s had problems since he was 15,” she said. “Keep up the good work. Just know there are people in Tallahassee who are working to fund programs like this. If one family is helped, its better for the whole.”

“Ben (Sophia’s therapist) has bonded with her. Now we’re triaging issues between her and her brother who is 10.”

“I came from FamilyNet and Department of Juvenile Justice programs. There was not much we were sending our teens back to,” said Chris Thayer, CAT Team program manager. “There is no wait for services with CAT Teams. We serve children 11 to 21. We have a psychiatrist, nurse, therapists, case managers and mentors trained to help up to 40 families at a time.”

Continuing legislative funding for the CAT Teams offers a glimmer of hope, according to Joseph F. Rutherford, CEO of Gracepoint. “According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Florida is 49th in spending for behavioral health at $39 per resident. That is way behind the $129 per person average. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in Florida among 5 to 24-year-olds. There is a cause and effect.

“The CAT Teams allow us to demonstrate we can break unhealthy cycles for kids and their families,” he said.

Donald and Jasmine, 12, are learning to fight fair. Both now have therapists and action plans they are working on together.

Roberto Hernandez, CAT Team therapist, recently supported Donald at Jasmine’s school. “Jasmine was being bullied. I went three times before. When Roberto went with me it helped,” he said.

“He’s showing me a different way. I don’t scream anymore when I ask her to do chores or something. I lower my voice and let her scream.

It works. Her mentor takes her to the YMCA, to feed the ducks or helps her with homework. It gives us a break from each other. I wish the CAT Team was here when I was a kid,” Donald said.

Rep. Betty Reed (D, Tampa) agreed that the whole family is affected when one person is ill. “My grandson in Georgia is 20 and he’s had problems since he was 15,” she said. “Keep up the good work. Just know there are people in Tallahassee who are working to fund programs like this. If one family is helped, its better for the whole.”