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### **Governor Crist Visits Statewide Heart Gallery Exhibit as Part of "Explore Adoption" Campaign**

*~ Praises Heart Gallery and "Explore Adoption" for helping record number of Florida children find loving homes ~*

TALLAHASSEE □ Continuing his commitment to helping foster children find loving and permanent homes, Governor Charlie Crist today toured a first-of-its-kind Heart Gallery exhibit at the Mary Brogan Museum. The exhibit is a statewide showcase of pictures and biographies of children available for adoption, compiled from the 14 local Heart Galleries operating across Florida. The exhibit is part of the Governor's statewide adoption initiative, "Explore Adoption," and it comes as Heart Gallery organizers push for a Tallahassee Heart Gallery dedicated to local foster children.

"Every child featured in the Heart Gallery deserves a stable life with a loving family," said Governor Crist. "I am grateful to all of the Gallery organizers for their efforts, and for working to help make the Explore Adoption campaign a success. Initiatives like the Heart Gallery are making a difference for these children."

Governor Crist has made adoption a priority of his administration. He is dedicated to increasing the public's awareness of the adoption process, and about the number of children in need. In May he launched "Explore Adoption," a public awareness campaign that promotes the benefits of public adoption and urges families to consider creating or expanding their families by adopting a child who is older, disabled or part of a sibling group.

Joining Governor Crist today was Deborah Polston, wife of Judge Ricky Polston, the Governor's most recent appointment to the Florida Supreme Court. The Polstons adopted six brothers from foster care after seeing some of their pictures in a program similar to the Heart Galleries. Also joining the Governor were Department of Children and Families Secretary George Sheldon and Jim Kallinger, Florida's Chief Child Advocate.

State officials recently announced a record number of adoptions for the 2007-08 year □ 3,674 adoptions were finalized, up from 3,079 the previous year. Every year, about 3,000 Florida children

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become available for adoption when a court permanently severs ties to their birth parents due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. Of those, 40 percent are adopted by relatives, and another 40 percent are adopted by their foster parents. The remaining children must be matched to a family previously unknown to them, which is the goal of the **Explore Adoption** initiative. Most of the children who wait the longest are older than age eight, are African American, are part of a sibling group or have a physical or emotional disability.

Since the Governor launched **Explore Adoption**, the state's adoption hotline, 1-800-96-ADOPT, has received a record number of calls. The new website for **Explore Adoption**, [www.adoptflorida.org](http://www.adoptflorida.org), features real Florida family stories, the road map to the adoption process, a detailed listing of the benefits to adoption, all campaign materials and much more. The campaign also includes radio and television spots that are airing statewide in English and Spanish, as well as a 30-minute television special featuring the adoption stories of three Florida families.

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