

The Gainesville Sun | Gainesville.com

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Children's Trust starting to ramp up efforts

The Gainesville Sun Editorial Board

Published 12:02 a.m. ET Mar. 14, 2021

Quality summer programs are more important than ever for K-12 students and their families.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted children's schooling by closing classrooms last spring and keeping some students learning remotely even today. Students who are already struggling face the prospect of falling even further behind after classes end for the summer.

"Kids are not only suffering academically, but they're also suffering on the social and emotional level from being isolated," said Colin Murphy, executive director of the Children's Trust of Alachua County.

Camps and other summer programs provide the opportunity for students to learn, interact socially and participate in sports and other enrichment activities, but not all families can afford them. Fortunately, the Children's Trust provides a way to help.

Alachua County voters approved the Children's Trust in 2018, authorizing property taxes in the county to be increased up to a half mil annually over 12 years to fund programs benefiting local children. The Children's Trust is now starting to ramp up these efforts, beginning with programs offered this summer.

Last week, the Children's Trust board approved spending up to \$500,000 on expanding access to summer programs. Providers of these programs are being asked to submit proposals on how they would use funding to increase their enrollment, including through scholarships to lower-income families that cover some or all of their costs.

The funding is just the start of a greater focus on these programs. A University of Florida study of summer programs identified other problems for the Children's Trust to address moving forward, including a lack of information for families on summer options and a need for programs for children with disabilities and in rural areas.

Other Children's Trust efforts are aimed at helping kids in their earliest years. A three-year, \$250,000 grant from the Pritzker Children's Initiative was used to pay for a position with duties that include increasing the participation of local families in programs providing services for expectant mothers through the time their children turn 3.

Murphy said the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, also known as WIC, is an example of such a program that is underutilized. About 7,000 families locally qualify for WIC, he said, but only around 4,500 use the program.

"Even improving that by just a few hundred families would make a huge difference in our community," he said.

Murphy started as executive director in February 2020, right before the pandemic began. The pandemic has complicated Children's Trust programs such as home visits by nurses to mothers with newborns, which were halted due to restrictions on person-to-person contact.

But the period has allowed the Trust to start providing support for existing programs and lay the groundwork for future efforts. That includes making available \$300,000 in funds that area agencies can use to obtain grants for children's programs that require a local match.

All of these efforts fall under the Trust's goals of keeping local kids healthy, educated, supported and safe. Murphy noted that just 13 of Florida's 67 counties have authorized initiatives funding services for children, so he is appreciative of Alachua County voters for recognizing such a need here locally.

"It's really just a tremendous opportunity to make a big difference, so thank you to the community," he said.