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Florida needs to invest in mental health system

Maggie Labarta Guest columnist

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Nationally, May is Mental Health Month, but in Florida it is when the Legislature is in session deciding on policy and budget, largely determining the health and well-being of our mental health system. Right now that system is at risk.

While every news source reports a growing mental health crisis that exceeds what is available, the Florida Legislature continues to under-resource care and allow valuable resources to languish. Industry experts, providers and the media document the need repeatedly with little change.

Across the state, there are community behavioral health centers that daily provide crisis, counseling, psychiatric, residential and other supportive services to those with mental illnesses and substance use disorders. They are accredited health care organizations that meet state, federal and professional guidelines for quality. They often provide services for which neither insurers nor the state pay and struggle to cobble together local, state, federal and philanthropic funds to stabilize families and save lives.

The state Legislature for years has failed to recognize, maintain or upgrade these precious community assets. Most people do not even realize that these resources exist in their community, or the breadth of what is available through them.

Despite lofty language in statute, Florida's legislatures — past and present — have failed provide the funding needed to create and maintain a minimum continuum of care in every community and to ensure access for all who need care. Even core services —like crisis stabilization beds — are too often funded as “special projects,” using non-recurring state funds. Innovative or new practices are funded only occasionally and then only temporarily.

Initially, the state made a substantial investment in these centers (largely with federal funds), but like any asset, continued improvement and upkeep is required. The legislatures' approach to funding has provided neither.

Local communities must then decide what critical or innovative services to fund, which most small and/or fiscally constrained counties cannot afford. Some are fortunate to have elected officials whose leadership roles in the Legislature boost the odds that special projects for their area will be funded, for at least a year with no guarantee of future support, regardless of the project's merit or performance.

Legislators often recognize the need but not that existing community behavioral health centers, assets in which they already have a substantial investment, can be leveraged to address new and growing need if they are adequately supported.

While acknowledging the need Florida's leaders need to build upon and enhance the existing community behavioral health care infrastructure. Other states have done this successfully by moving their existing system to the evidence-based Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic, or CCBHC model.

The federal government created the model in 2017, in 10 demonstration states with 66 clinics, designing it to align funding with clinical outcomes and local community needs. The centers meet quality, access, scope of service and data collection standards but are paid an enhanced rate, like that received by the federal community health centers that exist across the country.

Since 2017, the CCBHC model has been expanded using grants to 340 clinics in 40 states, including 11 in Florida. The CCBHC model reinforces the value of existing community assets, and uses additional funding to enhance their scope, quality and sustainability.

CCBHCs emphasize greater outreach into the community, and speedier patient access. They increase the number of people seen and the range of services, based on unique community needs. Crisis response and diversion of people from the criminal justice system and homeless population improve. Intensive collaboration and communication with other community resources is required. These centers also have a more stable and enhanced workforce.

Although the CCBHC expansion grants are time limited, states can implement the program through Medicaid waivers or dedicated funding. Florida has not expanded Medicaid, which

elsewhere has been shown to improve outcomes and reduce unnecessary healthcare expenditures. Instead, Florida continues to pay 100% of the cost of many behavioral health services for those who are low income but ineligible for Medicaid, leaving many without care at all.

Expanding Medicaid would allow the state share for many of those costs to drop to 10%, freeing up current state funds to implement CCBHCs and also provide needed housing, social and vocational supports.

In the current health care crisis, at a time when need is growing, investing in the existing community behavioral health infrastructure is the wise and right thing to do. The Legislature should act now to expand Medicaid and require state agencies to develop a plan for reinvesting the savings to implement the CCBHC model statewide, leveraging its most valuable behavioral health care asset, its existing community behavioral health centers.

Maggie Labarta is a retired health care executive and founder of Impact Non-profit Consulting in Gainesville.

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Idylwild Elementary Redevelopment Project Kickoff

10 PHOTOS
5:18 p.m. EDT Apr. 16, 2021



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Evelyn Folsom, 7, a first grader at Idylwild Elementary writes her name in the wet concrete with her mom Kim Folsom, left, who is a teacher at Idylwild Elementary during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.
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Dr. Carlee Simon, the superintendent of Alachua County Public Schools, delivers comments during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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Lisa Peterson, the principal of Idylwild Elementary, delivers comments during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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George Wyatt Folsom, 12, a fifth grader at Idylwild Elementary signs his name in the wet concrete with with other during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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Markesia Akinbami, left, and Eric Drummond, with Charles Perry Partners, Inc., deliver comments about the construction team during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district. [Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun]

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Wendy Fletcher-Shannon, the Idylwild 2021 Teacher of the Year, delivers comments during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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Tina McClain, the Idylwild 2021 School Related Employee of the Year, delivers comments during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district. [Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun]

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People sign their names in the wet concrete with with other during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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A rendering of the new Idylwild Elementary during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district.

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A construction team from Charles Perry Partners, Inc. works on the new Idylwild Elementary during the Redevelopment Project Kickoff event held at the construction site of what will be the new Idylwild Elementary, in Gainesville Fla. April 16, 2021. The school system has used millions of tax dollars to reinvest in the infrastructure of four older schools. Idylwild will be one of the almost completely new schools in the district. [Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun]

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From left: Commissioner Ken Cornell, Commissioner Marihelen Wheeler and Commissioner Mary Alford meet on Wednesday with Gainesville city commissioners and Alachua County School Board members to discuss improving equity across the county. (Briana Farrell/WUFT News)



17 ELECTED LEADERS IN ALACHUA COUNTY AND GAINESVILLE MET THIS WEEK TO DISCUSS RACIAL EQUITY CONCERNS. HERE'S SOME OF WHAT THEY SAID

By Briana Farrell

🕒 April 15, 2021 📁 Education, Government and politics

The Alachua County Public Schools Board, Alachua County Commission and Gainesville City Commission held a joint meeting on Wednesday, tackling a wide-ranging agenda focusing on equity and matters such as youth literacy and programming, digital access, transportation and school rezoning.

“A little over three years ago was the last joint meeting,” County Commission Chair Ken Cornell said. “This is a meeting that should excite us all and make us come together.”

Seventeen elected officials participated, with the county commissions present in the County Administration Building, and the city commissioners and school board members taking part virtually because of ongoing social distancing requirements.

The first agenda item on the agenda: Ensuring that the county’s children can read at grade-level by the end of third grade. Nearly two-thirds of U.S. children cannot, according to the Lectio Institute, which is working

with school districts, states and philanthropists on the problem.

“We have children who have never even been to the ocean before, and yet they’re trying to read about things that would happen in the ocean,” County Commission Vice Chair Marihelen Wheeler said. “So, I’m just saying, if we could maybe include in those kinds of things some experiences, too. Not only for the children, but for their families, because not only have those children not been to the ocean, their parents haven’t either.”

Another literacy program discussed was the Summer Adventures in Literacy (SAIL) program, a four-week initiative offered by the University of Florida College of Education’s Literacy Institute. SAIL aims to help elementary school students make significant gains in reading achievement.

“It is a literacy program that is meant to teach literacy skills, but also to build background knowledge and life experiences in students,” said Tina Certain, vice chair of the school board. “So that when they read a passage and books, they can connect what they’re reading with their life experiences.”

Below: Hear reporter Briana Farrell explain what this story means for the future of racial equity in Alachua County. Subscribe to The Point podcast on iTunes or Spotify.



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Colin Murphy, executive director of the Children's Trust of Alachua County, offered a presentation on youth programming on and what it takes for children to thrive in their environment.

Murphy said they not only need their academic learning, but also more attention focused on the social and emotional pieces that help prepare them to interact with the world and their peers – and how to have the self-confidence and emotional skills needed for success in life.

"I am not a big believer that you're going to really improve reading scores in after school programs," Murphy said. "I think those are for the social, emotional skills and safety. The gap in opportunities in equity for children is in the summertime."

The elected officials and presenters also discussed how equity in digital access has become even more important when the world is dealing with a pandemic.





From top left: City of Gainesville Chambers, Commissioner Ken Cornell, Commissioner Anna Prizzia, Mayor Lauren Poe, Board Member McGraw, Commissioner Mary Alford, Board Member Certain, Commissioner Marihelen Wheeler, Board Chair McNealy, Colin Murphy, Superintendent Carlee Simon and Board Member Rob Hyatt on a zoom conference for the joint meeting discussing equity in youth programming. (Briana Farrell/WUFT News)

With schools everywhere having to teach students remotely, too many students were hurt by not having sufficient internet connectivity around the clock and especially during school hours.

School Board Member Gunnar Paulson proposed that the county and city commissions should work to provide greater e-learning access in after-school programs.

“Some of our parents not only don’t have access, but don’t know how to use it,” Paulson said.

That led to the discussion of providing greater broadband access for the public, which some city commissioners have wanted for some time.

“The direct broadband access to every home – where people live, work and study most of the time – is paramount,” Mayor Lauren Poe said.

A motion to have affordable broadband across the county passed unanimously.

Transportation was another issue. The elected officials discussed a new route that was costly.

Chris Dawson, the transportation planning manager at Alachua county, talked about developing the potential for an additional route that would serve Elementary School I. This new elementary school is expected to be completed in August of 2021.



“It’s a fairly long way from where we currently provided any service through existing agreements with RTS, and it’s in an area of relatively low-density residential use,” Dawson said. “It’s approximately four miles from the SWAG (The Southwest Advocacy Group) Area, which is a pretty long run and that’s why there’s some higher costs associated with the fixed routes to go there.”

Elementary School I and Meadowbrook Elementary School would benefit from the service. However, the bus route would be \$460,000, the elected officials debated between the expensive cost and the importance of families having transportation.

They have not yet come to an understanding, but are searching for better solutions.

Schools Superintendent Carlee Simon also discussed the rezoning of the county’s public schools.

The issue is unbalanced enrollment. Buchholz and Gainesville High Schools, both of which located near the city’s west side, are over capacity. So are nearby middle schools, Simon said.

“Our schools run efficiently when it’s at capacity,” the superintendent said.



There was also discussion of needing more diverse populations and the problem of racial inequity that needs to be solved.

The goal is to reprogram the schools and improve them.

At the end of the presentation, Simon proposed a community engagement campaign involving listening sessions and public surveys.

“We get more out of it when we work together,” she said.

