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Escambia Children's Trust Gets To Work

By [SANDRA AVERHART \(/PEOPLE/SANDRA-AVERHART\)](/PEOPLE/SANDRA-AVERHART) • 16 HOURS AGO

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CREDIT ESCAMBIA CHILDREN'S TRUST



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Sandra Averhart reports on the launch of the Children's Services Council of Escambia County, known as the Escambia Children's Trust.

About two-and-a-half months after winning approval with 61% of the vote, the Escambia Children's Trust (<https://www.escambiachildrenstrust.org/>) has begun its work.

Board members used their inaugural meeting on Jan. 21 to check a few items off their long "to-do" list, ahead of the dedicated property tax levy beginning in November.

Selecting its interim leadership was one of the first official actions by the new Escambia Children's Trust board, which was convened by its five mandated members.

Patty Hightower, selected as the interim chair, holds the seat reserved for a member of the Escambia County School Board. The interim vice-chair, District 3 Commissioner Lumon May, represents the Escambia Board of Commissioners.

"I'm Judge Frydrychowicz," said Circuit Judge Jennifer Frydrychowicz. "I'm also happy to be here. I am a juvenile judge here in Escambia County.

Tim Smith, Escambia School Superintendent, holds another seat on the board.

Representing the Florida Department of Children and Families is Northwest Region Director Walter Sachs.

However, Sachs's service on the Escambia Children's Trust board likely will be short term, as he already has been tapped to serve on the board of the new Children's Services Council in Leon County. He plans to select a replacement for the DCF-designated seat.

Using the Children's Trust of Alachua County (<https://www.childrenstrustofalachuacounty.us/>) as a model, members of the volunteer transition team got things started, meeting statutory deadlines by registering with the Escambia County Tax Collector and with the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. What the local board accomplishes in the next 6-9 months will be critical.

"During that time, a lot of tasks that need to be completed," proclaimed Michele Watson, CEO of the Florida Children's Council, which represents and supports all such organizations in the state.

She says early efforts will focus on getting the Escambia CSC ready to collect the property tax that will fund programs and services for children and families in the county.

"For example, you all go to trim hearings and work with the tax collector to set that levy against your millage rate beginning this April," Watson said. "So, you all need a designee to represent the Children's Trust of Escambia as part of those trim hearings."

After some discussion, the panel voted unanimously to support the recommended designation of community leader Buzz Ritchie as its registered agent, to handle the early business of the Children's Trust.

But, with so many other items on their checklist, Watson suggested the new CSC board establish a timeline of things to be done, working backward *from* the November collection of the tax *to* that first trim hearing.

“You probably want an executive director in place. You probably want a CFO in place to set up the accounting and the chart of accounts,” she explained of what needs to be done to be ready receive requests for proposals from providers and begin offering services as soon as possible. “And, you probably really want a program director in place, who’s really going to help think through what the funding process is going to look like.”

“This to-do list follows sort of an aggressive and ambitious timeline, but also meets the urgency of what we’re seeing in the community,” declared Kimberly Krupa, executive director of Achieve Escambia (<https://www.achieveescambia.org/>). She led the campaign for passage of the referendum to create the Escambia Children’s Trust and she headed the volunteer transition team that just handed off to the CSC board.

At this point, Krupa says one of the most important tasks to be completed is the appointment of individuals to fill the five remaining seats on the 10-member Children’s Trust board.

“We’re actively seeking citizen nominees, with a Jan. 30 deadline,” said Krupa. So, what we’ve just been doing is trying to get the word out to encourage as many citizens to apply for these positions as possible.”

Eligible applicants need to have been residents of Escambia County for the previous 24-month period and are willing to submit an annual Statement of Financial Interests Form. Florida Statutes also require that gubernatorial appointments represent the demographic diversity of the county’s population.

“This is the number one most important thing to making sure we are set up for success is having a robust, diverse applicant pool that represents our county, our issues,” she said.

Ensuring diversity throughout the process has been top of mind for Commissioner Lumon May, interim vice-chair of the new Children’s Trust Board.

“The collateral material, the advertisement was kind of targeted or particular to those children of color and those kids who are in failing environments,” May pointed out. “So, I think the board needs to be a representative board, a board that’s in touch with the constituency, those that are most adversely affected.”

At the inaugural meeting, only five completed applications had been submitted. As of mid-day Tuesday, nine completed applications had been received. However, May expects many more to come in by the Jan. 30 deadline on Saturday.

“Quite frankly, there were people who were waiting to submit. I think we’re going to have 40 or 50 people that will apply, would be my anticipation.”

Applications are available online at [myescambia.com](https://myescambia.com/childrens-services-council/application/) (https://myescambia.com/childrens-services-council/application/) or in-person at the Ernie Lee Magaha Government Building. They are due by 5 p.m. Saturday.

On Feb. 18, the Escambia County Commission will review and narrow the list to 15 nominations that will be sent to Gov. Ron DeSantis, who then has 45 days to select five for appointment to the board.

Commissioner May says he's ready for the work that lies ahead.

"We're excited about, hopefully, making a difference. And, I think that although we can take the model of other communities that we have to uniquely, architecturally design this for the specific needs that are in our community," he said.


To help get operations underway, May offered county staff and office support on a temporary basis. Looking to their next meeting on Feb. 22, Escambia Children's Trust board members agreed to discuss proposed by-laws and an official request for a \$250,000 line of credit – likely from the county commission – to provide funding until tax dollars start rolling in.

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