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EDUCATION

Children's Trust of Alachua County provides funding after slow start

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Published 10:09 p.m. ET Jul. 12, 2021

After getting off to a slower-than-expected start, Children's Trust of Alachua County — an organization created by voters to pay for programs to help children — has begun some of that work.

The group this year invested \$1.1 million into 23 summer programs and provided funding to three early learning centers focused on children from birth to age 5.

The Children's Trust of Alachua County was approved by voters in 2018. Voters agreed to tax themselves an extra half-mill on property taxes to generate roughly \$7 million a year to support children's programs.

Currently, The Children's Trust has a budget of \$8.1 million for the fiscal year of 2021, which ends Sept. 30.

Opinion: Children's Trust starting to ramp up efforts

After the entity's inception, Gov. Ron DeSantis was slow to appoint five of the board's 10 members, letting more than a year go by before the board could get a quorum. COVID-19 also delayed the board's operations.

Under Florida law, the 10-member board must include the superintendent of schools, a school board member, a juvenile justice judge, an administrator from the Department of Children and Family Services and a Gainesville city commissioner. The other five can be community members who must be approved by the governor.

"The first year, all of 2019, was really a lot of preliminary stuff, we had no money, so we had to put together a budget ... it was just a lot of foundational things," said School Board member Tina Certain, the Children's Trust's treasurer.

Among the programs that have received funding from the group are Aces in Motion, the Boys and Girls Club of Northeast Florida, Girls Place, the Cultural Arts Coalition and I Am Stem.

Providers of summer programs that received funding had to fill out a Request for Proposal (RFP) that addresses the issues the trust is working toward such as ensuring children are born healthy, that they have nurturing environments and supportive caregivers.

Children's Trust Chair Lee Pinkoson said the panel funded a significant amount of summer programs so that there wasn't a loss in what children learned at the end of the school as they moved to the start of the new one.

"And from the next couple years, what we're trying to do is make improvements from the time the child is conceived until they're 18 years old," Pinkoson said.

Also among the groups initially funded by the Children's Trust is the NewborRN program — which sends a nurse to visit the home of a new mom to make sure the parent is off to a good start — and an emotional development and early education center for young children.

The current RFP application cycle for funding closes Aug. 31.

Certain said during the group's first funding cycle they bought vans for numerous organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club.

"It was like a gazillion organizations that said they needed to buy a van to provide transportation because that was a hindrance to children getting to the program," Certain said.

Several organizations also asked for funding to install fire safety systems.

Since then, she said, the RFP application has narrowed the allowable expenses organizations can apply for.

Critic faults Children's Trust setup

Chanae Jackson, an activist in Alachua County, said she believes there are problems in the way the board was set up.

"It was very problematic in the beginning for me, also the way that the board is structured, to me it's all of the same people at the table," Jackson said.

The people who are the most impacted should be sitting on the board, she said.

"But the way the board is structured it's going to be the people with the best resumes, and those are who the governor turns around and picks, and so those are things that are problematic," Jackson said.

Jackson was a part of the Youth Development Research Practice Partnership (YDRPP) that was developed by Diedre Houchen, Alachua County's manager of equity and community relations.

The YDRPP conducted a study for the Children's Trust which included a needs assessment for summer programs.

From the assessment researchers had four recommendations for Children's Trust that could strengthen summer youth and children programming.

The recommendations were to build an equitable system, make sure programming is accessible to families and to collect more data on programs across the county.

"They followed one out of the [four] so far, which was to subsidize a number of programs this summer, and make them free and reduced," Houchen said.

Where does money go?

Jackson said most of the trust's early funding has gone into early learning programs for children ages 0-5, however there needs to be more programming for children ages 6 to 18.

Certain agrees with Jackson on that issue. She said it seems like early learning advocates want to keep the money for children 0-5, however when voters cast their ballots, Children's Trust was created to serve all children of all ages.

Certain said the trust members have found that they have funding available to give for programming, but in many cases, there aren't enough nonprofits providing youth programs.

Certain said she's also not pleased with how the funding cycles are being announced to the community.

"I think that right now for fall after-school programming we should have had an RFP out on the streets so that providers can be trying to apply and planning for what they're going to do in August," Certain said.

The next Children's Trust Board meeting will be held Aug. 9 at the Cade Museum.