

Sunday's Editorial: Jacksonville has an impressive number of programs for kids

By the Times-Union Editorial Board

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It's not official but Jacksonville already looks like a Child Friendly City.

A project to have Jacksonville identified as such by UNICEF has been underway for over a decade led by pediatrician Jeff Goldhagen.

At a recent three-day conference held in Jacksonville, interested parties from around the nation met to talk about the Child Friendly City program.

UNICEF in the United States is developing criteria for the Child Friendly City designation, while this program has been active worldwide since 1996. It's in more than 3,300 communities in over 40 countries.

Criteria include demonstrated results for children, child participation and demonstrated commitment to eliminating discrimination against children.

"We've done a tremendous amount as a community," Goldhagen told the conference. "Jacksonville can pat ourselves on the back."

What we lack is a blueprint and a framework, he said.

"The designation is important but more important is bringing us together under a common umbrella as a Child Friendly City. If not, we'll be here 10 years from now, wondering why all this passion, resources and money haven't produced more results."

Nevertheless, few people in Jacksonville are aware of all of the programs that have been developed here, some with statewide and national scope, to improve the lives of children.

What makes many of these programs special and rare nationally is the amount of collaboration that takes place in Jacksonville among City Hall, the school district, nonprofits, philanthropists, private industry and the health and medical community. Here is a partial list:

Nemours BrightStart!

Begun in 2005 in Jacksonville with funding from the Nemours Foundation, BrightStart! has proven to be effective in raising the reading level of children through a rigorous and age-appropriate approach. It is now being used in 20 states and in more than 1,000 classrooms nationwide. More than 70,000 children have been served. Since reading is the foundation of academic success, what is more important?

Pace Center for Girls

Pace began in Jacksonville in 1985. Today there are 21 Pace Centers in Florida. Pace provides alternatives for girls in the juvenile justice system. There were no effective alternatives for a system designed for boys. Pace is now recognized as a national model for improving school success, employment and self-sufficiency for girls. A total of 40,000 girls have been in the program.

Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center

An outgrowth of this focus on girls in the juvenile justice system, the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center was established in 2013. Led by CEO Lawanda Ravoira, the center uses rigorous research to advance the rights of girls in the juvenile justice system. Programs used in Duval's schools wind up helping boys as well.

Reforming foster care

In 2009, The New York Times wrote about the radically successful transformation of the child welfare system in the Jacksonville area. Focused on saving families, it resulted in fewer children being sent away to foster care. Money once spent on foster care was being spent on in-home counseling, therapy for children and even cash aid to help families stay intact. The new system saved money and families: a win-win for conservatives and liberals. Led by local leaders of the Florida Department of Children and Families, the dateline in the Times story said it all: Jacksonville.

Full Service Schools

With United Way and the school district, services have been provided to nearly 3,500 students and families including mental health, physical health and social services. The goal is to address non-academic barriers to success in school.

School-based health center

Wolfson Children's School-based Health Center serves Ribault Middle School and High School students and families. The goal is to provide primary and preventive health care that is often lacking in high-poverty neighborhoods. Besides Wolfson and the school district, this collaboration includes the Duval Health Department, Sulzbacher Center, Agape Community Health, Full Service Schools and UF Health Jacksonville.

Working with students

Communities in Schools in Jacksonville is one of the largest CIS affiliates in the nation with a documented record of success in improving graduation rates and student literacy. Case managers work directly with students, including home visits. A dropout prevention program is aimed at sixth graders.

Sulzbacher Village

This new apartment community was designed with children and families in mind. Women and children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population and represent more than two-thirds of the people served by Sulzbacher. Services are provide on-site.

Improving mental health

In 2010 the University of Florida College of Medicine in Jacksonville was awarded a federal grant to create a system of care for children with mental illness. The system has trained pediatricians to recognize mental illness and consult with child psychiatrists. Too few child psychiatrists was a barrier that could be crossed with collaboration.

Serving LGBT youth

Jacksonville Youth Equality provides a system of care for LGBT youth. The youth came up with the name. This community coalition provides medical and mental illness care, information and advocacy.

Baby friendly hospitals

Most hospitals in the Jacksonville area, whether officially certified or not, promote healthy infant feeding and mother-baby bonding through a framework provided by UNICEF and the World Health Organization. Mothers are assisted with breastfeeding and are given information on nutrition.

Children's ombudsperson

Garry Bevel, Jacksonville's first children's ombudsperson, advocates for the full and equal treatment and participation of children in decisions that affect them. He consults and works with schools, juvenile justice and foster care systems, nonprofits and other agencies.

Child friendly schools

Baldwin and Sandalwood are Jacksonville's first Child Friendly Schools in which children's rights are recognized, modeled and respected. The idea is to give children a voice in decisions that affect them.

Center for Children's Rights

The center is designed to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. The Hope Pipeline Project is designed to intervene in the lives of troubled children with support services. Keeping kids out of the juvenile justice system is about building relationships. Executive Director Betsy Dobbins, a former social worker and public defender, also addresses discrimination against children.

Partnership for Child Health

The logical home if Jacksonville is awarded the Child Friendly City designation, the partnership pursues funding, builds collaborations and leverages local resources. For instance, the partnership uses a public health framework to ensure access of services to children.

The Mayor's Office

The Kids Hope Alliance was designed with a children's rights framework, said Dawn Lockhart, director of strategic partnerships for the city. It has the direct involvement of Mayor Lenny Curry. The Mayor's Young Leaders Advisory Council is composed of 50 high school juniors and seniors. They share ideas with the mayor and other city leaders. The Mayor's Youth at Work Partnership connects young adults with jobs and educational opportunities.

Engaged pediatricians

A two-year fellowship in community and societal pediatrics prepares a new generation of physicians. Such factors as children's rights, health equity and child advocacy are taught. Goldhagen is the program director. Community and societal pediatrics provides care, for example, for children in foster care or homeless conditions. For years, these pediatricians have been writing letters to the Times-Union on important issues affecting children.

So while the needs continue to be great and funds are always limited, it is worthwhile to step back and celebrate all the activities taking place in Jacksonville surrounding the well-being of children.