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JEFFREY R. PICKERING

For the Future

INVESTING IN PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT
OUR COMMUNITY'S CHILDREN ENRICHES US ALL



Childcare Resources provides early education to more than 150 children each year.

One of the great things about living in this community is that there is no shortage of people willing to work to improve the lives of others. That's good news, because data available on Indian River Indicators, an online resource measuring community needs and progress, shows that 19% of Indian River County's 30,000 children under the age of 18 live in households with annual incomes below the federal poverty level. This means that today there are approximately 5,700 children whose parents or guardians earn less than \$17,420 for a family of two or \$26,500 for a family of four.

Those of us who are parents understand firsthand the desire to give our children the best chance possible to grow up to be healthy, productive, independent adults. We sign our children up for music lessons, enroll them in summer camps, feed them healthy food and do our best to keep them safe.

We know viscerally what studies show: that social determinants – the conditions in which people live, learn, work and play – have a significant impact on children's potential for health and prosperity as adults. In our county, where one out of five children live in poverty, unmet early childhood needs, along with additional challenges experienced during youth and adolescence, pose a threat to the long-term prosperity of those individuals as well as our community at large.

Fortunately, we know what makes children thrive. To minimize the negative effects of childhood poverty,



A team approach has made headway in school readiness among the youngsters of Indian River County.

we need to invest sufficient resources to ensure that every child, not just those born to parents with adequate means, gets a healthy start in life, a world-class education, access to quality, affordable health care and a safe home and neighborhood to live in.

Despite the high percentage of children living in poverty in Indian River County, in recent times we have made significant strides. Both infant mortality and childhood homelessness have decreased. At the same time, kindergarten readiness, the ability to read at grade level, and high school graduation rates have all increased. Access to medical, dental and behavioral health has improved as well.

How has our community been able to enhance the wellbeing of our children over time? The answer is simple and provides the road map for continued improvement. Data-driven information is allowing us to allocate resources to organizations that operate proven programs, develop promising practices, and collaborate with one another to allow the best ideas to become widespread.

REDUCING INFANT MORTALITY

Supporting programs that provide Indian River County mothers with a healthy pregnancy is one of the best ways to facilitate a healthy birth and a good start to life. Last year, of 1,260 live births in the county, three

Data-driven information is allowing us to allocate resources to organizations that operate proven programs.

out of four pregnant mothers received prenatal care beginning in the first trimester, significantly improving chances of a healthy pregnancy and delivery.

Compared to the rest of the state, fewer babies in our county had low birth weights, and fewer babies died prior to their first birthdays. Much of the credit for this progress can be attributed to the work of Indian River County Healthy Start Coalition and its affiliates. They have stepped in with three programs to help our children get off to a good start.

Healthy Start Coalition's "Babies and Beyond" provides childbirth education, lactation support, postpartum nurse visits, and peer play groups for all. "Healthy Families" is a home visitation program offered to pregnant women assessed as vulnerable or otherwise

high risk. And finally, the “Nurse Family Partnership” is a community health program that helps vulnerable mothers in targeted communities achieve a healthy pregnancy. Each program has contributed to reducing Indian River County’s infant mortality rate more than 50% since 2011. All are paid for with a combination of public and private funding that needs to be sustained if continued long-term results are to be achieved.

REDUCING CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS

Children in Indian River County, like children everywhere, need access to quality, safe, affordable housing to enable future prosperity and well-being. It’s difficult to get an accurate count of the number of homeless children, but the 2020 point-in-time survey of homelessness in Indian River County counted approximately 500 homeless people, 26% of whom were children. Statistics from the School District of Indian River County report more than twice this number of homeless children enrolled at some point during the last school year. For those of us who tuck our children into warm beds in well-appointed bedrooms each night, it can be hard to imagine these numbers.

Furthermore, housing instability combines with food insecurity to stand in the way of efforts to help children thrive. Again, local programs are already making a difference. The Hope for Families Center and Samaritan Center both provide transitional housing for homeless families. When those two sites reached capacity, an innovative collaboration called the Homeless Children’s Foundation emerged to fund programs and services to fill in the gaps and prevent further unnecessary suffering. With increased and sustained support, the Homeless Children’s Foundation represents one of Indian River County’s best opportunities for reducing the impact of homelessness on our community’s children over the next decade.

IMPROVING KINDERGARTEN READINESS AND GRADE-LEVEL READING

Programs that help Indian River County’s children to enroll in early childhood education, arrive in elementary school ready for kindergarten, and read by the end of third grade are some of the best ways to promote future prosperity and well-being. Research shows that most children who start kindergarten behind stay behind, and



Emily Wilcox and her daughter have both benefited from Winnie’s enrollment at Childcare Resources.

that most children who cannot read by third grade will never catch up.

In 2000, Indian River County’s statistics were some of the worst in Florida for these measures. Over the last decade, however, because of a powerful collaboration between the school district and more than 50 community-based organizations, called the Moonshot Moment, things are turning around. Preschool enrollment has increased by 13%, 58% of children now arrive ready for kindergarten, and 60% of students are proficient in English. While there is more progress to be made, together they are working to have 90% of students reading on grade level by third grade.

Emily Wilcox knows just how valuable these programs are. Her daughter Winnie has attended Childcare Resources for three years. “I wanted somewhere reliable and consistent that really advocated for my child’s educa-

tion and her health,” she notes. “The staff always checks in and makes sure I have all the tools and support that Winnie and I need.”

The support extends beyond the school day into the home. Wilcox explains, “Through the Parent Cafe program, I’ve been able to learn some of the tools that are in place in her classroom that I can bring home that benefit her growth and development. The program brings other school parents together and helps us learn different things about our child’s education, as well as budgeting and managing time. It has really been helpful to learn more and to feel connected to the school, the other parents, and the staff.”

It isn’t just the children who benefit from these programs. Knowing that their children’s needs are being met frees parents to invest in their own growth. Wilcox adds, “Since Winnie has been at Childcare Resources, I have grown professionally and received promotions. Knowing that she’s getting a great education gives me peace of mind and allows me to focus on my job. I feel really confident knowing that my daughter is in a place that is safe and really cares about her health and her education.”

The Learning Alliance serves as the backbone and convener of the Moonshot Moment. It hosts the Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative and operates its own proven programs that provide extended learning opportunities for students at risk of falling behind with their reading. Childcare Resources provides high-quality early childhood education to more than 150 children annually and provides free professional development opportunities to other organizations. Additionally, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Gifford Youth Achievement Center and several other groups provide mentoring and after-school enrichment opportunities to promote educational achievement. All depend on public dollars and private philanthropy to deliver these important services to our community’s children.

INCREASING ACCESS TO CHILDREN’S HEALTH SERVICES

Finally, ensuring all children in Indian River County have access to quality health services is another important way to bolster their future prosperity and well-being. Lack of insurance is one of the biggest barriers. While 89% of Indian River County’s total population has health insurance, approximately 1,600 of our children remain uninsured.

Fortunately, the news isn’t all bad. Over the last decade, even among uninsured children, health outcomes have improved for several reasons, including dedicated funding from the Indian River Hospital District and a high-level local continuum of care. Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital, Treasure Coast Community Health, and Whole Family Health Center collectively deliver excellent medical, dental and behavioral health care to insured and uninsured children in our community.

“I feel really confident knowing that my daughter is in a place that is safe and really cares about her health and her education.”

– EMILY WILCOX

The Mental Health Collaborative, the Mental Health Association, Tykes and Teens, and the Substance Awareness Center provide additional high-quality behavioral health services. All are funded by a combination of public resources and private philanthropy to deliver these important services to the children of our community.

RESOURCES TO HELP DONORS HELP CHILDREN IN NEED

As Emily Wilcox demonstrates, investing in programs that support our children enriches everyone. The Indian River Community Foundation (ircommunityfoundation.org) provides online resources to inform your decisions about how to help the children of our county.

As a parent and as CEO of the Community Foundation, I encourage you to continue to give generously. Together we can help today’s children grow up to become tomorrow’s healthy, productive and prosperous adults. ☀