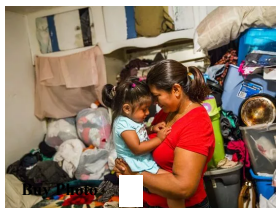


Federal grant awarded to Immokalee program

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(Photo: Dorothy Edwards/Naples Daily News)

The federal government has awarded \$3 million to Florida State University for mental health research and services to migrant children in Immokalee and for broader research purposes.

The five-year grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is to develop mental health services for children of migrant workers who face higher levels of toxic stress than most children due to their lifestyle and poverty, according to Dr. Elena Reyes, regional director of FSU's College of Medicine in Southwest Florida.

The decision to award the grant to the Immokalee program was made before Hurricane Irma, where Immokalee sustained widespread damage to mobile homes where many migrant children live.

Research shows children who experience adverse events without mental health treatment are at greater risk as adults to suffer depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and medical conditions such as obesity, diabetes, eating disorders and even cancer. More so, they are more likely to become substance abusers and attempt suicide.

"The parents are facing the same level of stress themselves, including depression, problems related to socioeconomic status, their own history of trauma and barriers to health care," Reyes said. "They're not able to provide the protective buffer needed by these young children."

The grant also recognizes FSU's Center for Child Stress and Health in Immokalee, which was established last summer and applied to become part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, she said. The national program was established by Congress in 2000 to improve access to care for children who have experienced trauma.

"We applied last year, and it became effective Oct. 2 this year," Reyes said.

The FSU medical school program has been offering screenings to children for exposure to trauma and stress during their annual wellness checks. The data gathered is the result of a clinical partnership with the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida. About 300 children every month, she said.

The objective with the new federal grant is to evaluate the effectiveness of the screening protocol used to identify trauma in children of migrant farmworkers and to develop prevention and treatment strategies. In addition, the college will develop instructional materials to train health care providers and early childhood educators throughout the country.

"There is little existing literature about universal mental health screenings in pediatric primary care," said Javier Rosado, clinical associate professor with FSU's medical school program in Immokalee. "Children in rural areas face a number of challenges in getting treatment for behavioral and emotional problems, including availability of such services, accessibility and acceptability."

The research project proposes to demonstrate how services can be provided to young children of migrant farmworking families, which are known to be medically underserved.

"They live in the shadows of the health care system, particularly the mental health system," Reyes said.

Instructional material will be made available to child care professionals and others who are part of the national child traumatic stress network. Each center that is part of the national network has a subject area that it specializes in, she said. The Immokalee's center area of specialty is young children in rural areas, she said.

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