

VIDEO/PHOTOS Study: Collier population of kids booming, their lives improving

By LIZ FREEMAN

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NAPLES — Nobody would have dreamed a population explosion of children in Collier County during the past five years.

The recession did not mean families packed up after the jobs dried up.

The number of children living in Collier increased from nearly 55,000 in 2005 to more than 80,000 last year, according to a study commissioned by the Naples Children and Education Foundation (NCEF), sponsors of the annual Naples Winter Wine Festival.

“The absolute number of children shows the need for our services is more than ever,” said Anne Welsh McNulty, foundation trustee and this year’s grant chairwoman.

Researchers at the University of Florida were retained by NCEF to update a child well-being study done in 2005 to see where the nonprofit organization has made inroads to improve the health and quality of children’s lives.

During the past decade, wine festival proceeds enabled the foundation to invest \$82.5 million in grants to child-focused charities and to long-term strategic initiatives that have focused primarily on early childhood education, after-school programs, medical and dental care, and mental health services more recently. The foundation has touched the lives of 125,000 at-risk and underprivileged children during the past 10 years.

The 53-page status report on child well-being was completed this past week, just as this year’s wine festival is set for Jan. 28-30. The report provides findings but doesn’t offer detailed recommendations.

The report highlights successes with improved health and oral health of children as a result of the foundation’s considerable investment in medical and dental services, McNulty said.

In turn, the findings will help guide NCEF for moving forward.

“The failing economy that started in 2007 has changed the needs structure,” said John Scot Mueller, a trustee and vice chairman of the grant committee. “Hunger and homelessness suddenly became a huge issue.”

The report's findings will be studied in detail over the next few months to decide what makes the most sense for future endeavors, especially with multi-year strategic initiatives. For certain, a hunger initiative is on the horizon, he said.

The foundation also is continuing its focus on addressing mental health needs of children.

"Mental health has already been started and clearly is a significant long-term initiative," McNulty said.

With respect to the current population of 80,447 children, from birth to 18, the children represent 147 countries (there are about 195 countries in the world). Sixty percent of the children come from non-white ethnic groups.

The number of children living in poverty has held relatively stable in the past five years but 6,000 more children are living in low-income households, the study found. That has led to a 10 percent increase in the number of children eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches at school. Today, 58 percent of school-age children are eligible compared to 48 percent five years ago.

When it comes to access to medical and dental care, and the quality of the care, NCEF has had considerable impact as a result of multi-year strategic initiatives and partnerships with Collier Health Services (CHS), Florida State University's College of Medicine and the University of Florida's College of Dentistry.

Now, more than half of the community's children are served. With foundation funding, CHS renovated the Isabel Collier Read Medical Center in Immokalee into a pediatric and maternal health center, and CHS has doubled its dental capacity as a result of combined expansions in Immokalee, East Naples and Golden Gate, according to the study.

In addition, the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center on the Edison State College campus in East Naples treated 9,000 children in 2009.

Thirty-one percent of children lacked adequate dental care in 2005 and that was down to 12.4 percent in 2010.

"We were very encouraged to see measurable improvements in medical and dental services to children, which of course is one of the things we have concentrated on in the last five years," McNulty said.

Access to early learning programs and improved quality of those programs has been another major focus of NCEF in the past five years. Fifty-one percent of children who needed subsidized early learning placement didn't receive it in 2005 and that went down to 40 percent in 2010.

Statistics for kindergarten readiness show 44 percent of children weren't ready in 2005 and today 29 percent aren't ready, according to the study.

Likewise, access to after-school programs has been enhanced. Five years ago, 50 percent of kids from kindergarten to eighth grade didn't receive assistance for enrollment and that decreased to 33 percent in 2010.

Addressing the substantial gaps that exist in mental health services has been a more recent focus, but how that moves forward hasn't been decided, McNulty said.

"Mental health has already been started and clearly is a long-term initiative," she said, adding that it hasn't been determined if it will move toward a consolidation of services. "Whether we have a physical center is kind of further down the planning process."

Although NCEF hasn't addressed the obesity problem in children, the report raises the issue and points out that low-income families eat large amounts of processed food.

"I think we see it tied in somewhat to the hunger initiative we are about to launch," she said.

In addition to children not getting enough to eat, they are not eating the right food, she said.

Mueller said the hunger initiative will have three elements — increasing the availability of food, improving access through mobile food trucks and improving on existing distribution programs.

"This is something that has a huge impact," he said.

The UF researchers also addressed shortcomings with how the present system of delivering services to Collier children is failing to meet basic needs. The researchers offered suggestions, which include locating activity centers that are easy to reach by public transportation, maximizing "multi-use facilities," and using private investment to leverage public dollars.

In addition, an effective use of information technology to track children and how services are delivered needs to be addressed and is a difficult challenge, the report said.

The 2005 well-being report also raised the topic of establishing a children's trust, similar to what has been done in Miami-Dade County. The 2010 report again talks about how such a tax-supported children's trust to address the needs of kids can address future challenges.

"As Collier's child population continues to increase, the demand for children's services will increase exponentially," the report said. "It is likely that, without the targeted, leveraged investment of human and financial resources made possible through a Children's Trust, the gaps in essential services in Collier will grow."

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