



thrive by five

ensuring hope, health & happiness in early childhood

Executive Summary and Recommendations

February 4, 2009

A Community Agenda publication

www.agendayf.org

Flagler and Volusia Counties, Florida

Executive Summary

The purpose of this study – *thrive by five: ensuring hope, health and happiness in early childhood* – is to provide a review of literature and summary of data on the issues affecting the prenatal through age five population and the families and community who support them. A summary of the research illustrating the value of early intervention to ensure the best possible child outcomes is presented here. The conclusions and recommendations on the final pages are designed to serve as a starting point for advocacy for improved conditions and support for pregnant women, infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

As a supplement to the **Community Agenda Snapshot**, “thrive by five” serves to expand on Focus Area A, Creating a Brighter Future for Our Children and Youth. Early childhood represents approximately 27% in Volusia and 35% in Flagler of the child population under age 18. Overall, children in early childhood are 5% (Volusia) and 7% (Flagler) of the total population. It is, however, a unique opportunity for exponential returns on investments in the future of our community.

Child development is outlined chronologically by prenatal, infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Each age is described within the multiple categories of development. Included are the brain and central nervous system, health and physical development, emotional development, executive functions, language development, and cognitive development. Additionally, peer relationships and disabilities are examined.

The significance of the family and community are assessed with attention to cultural factors, socioeconomic status, employment, educational attainment and other family features. There is also a brief look into child abuse and neglect with its potential for difficulties in childhood and beyond. Community factors include race, ethnicity and culture. The contributions of a healthy physical environment are also acknowledged.

The increasing number of children in outside-of-home child care is the basis for a discussion on the types of child care available. Concurrently, the quality of care and the amount of time spent (quantity) in care are components worthy of discussion.

A brief overview of early childhood programs in other states is offered as is a quick take on local prenatal and early childhood programs. These community assets are valuable partners for strong birth and child outcomes.

There are multiple pages of data tables giving a detailed view of the community by the numbers. Population, economic and other demographic data are offered for review.

Finally, highlights from 14 interviews with community leaders are contained in the closing pages. Each page outlines current and future activities with a section devoted to the barriers to reaching an optimal state for each organization or interviewee.

In conjunction with the **Snapshot** report, it is hoped that *thrive by five* will be a catalyst for renewed and vigorous action toward optimal early child outcomes.



Recommendations for a Brighter Future for Children and Youth

In the interest of young children in the Volusia and Flagler community and based on the data and literature review, below are recommendations for our community to consider. Experts in early child development and education working with individuals who each have the interests of our youngest residents at heart can build a community of support together.

- The community efforts on behalf of our youngest residents should be coalesced to better provide efficient and effective services and generally enhance early childhood systems. A review of existing services to identify opportunities for integrated service delivery would be beneficial for children and their families as well as child-serving organizations. Funding proves to be a barrier identified by many sectors and/or organizations. To start the dialogue, convene a work group dedicated to coordinate activities, integrate services and maximize current resources among the existing providers. This work group would seek ways to maximize revenues and “connect the dots” among services to improve service delivery. To achieve the best outcomes, interventions should occur as early as possible. It is particularly important to identify and serve children with disabilities at the earliest point possible.
- Early intervention services are available to families of all socioeconomic levels. Efforts should be enhanced to increase awareness of Healthy Start services, parenting education resources, and other family support services available to all families. Healthy Start and other family support providers will need community reinforcement to build their capacity to serve more families. Additionally, extolling the values of health maintenance through healthy lifestyle choices – especially during preconception and interconception (between births) – would be beneficial for all children and their families.
- Approximately 50% of babies born in Volusia and Flagler Counties will have deliveries paid by Medicaid. Every effort should be made to encourage early entry into prenatal care and “seamless” enrollment in programs such as WIC, Food Stamps and Healthy Start. Significant work is underway in our community to remove the barriers for pregnant women with Medicaid to enter prenatal care as early as possible. Strong community support should be built for these efforts, currently led by Healthy Start, to better ensure that babies born in Volusia and Flagler Counties will receive early health care needed for successful birth outcomes. Families should also be encouraged to follow the schedule for childhood immunizations. Efforts to get all women into early prenatal care should be enhanced including a strengthened referral process for women to be enrolled in WIC.

- Due to the large number of single parents with children under age six, it is vital to build a system of support for these families. Single parents expend less for their children on housing, child care, food, transportation, clothing and health care than married couples. Children in single-parent families often have less time available to them with their parent which can lead to less emotional support and a less stimulating environment. Because most single parents are women, children have fewer relationships with adult male role models. Most of the births to unmarried women in our community are to women younger than age 25. For these reasons and others, increased education and awareness for adolescent youth and young adults on the challenges children face in a single-parent family could have a major impact. Boosting efforts to link single parents to the myriad of programs and services available to them and their children could provide the additional support to better ensure a more successful transition from early childhood into the school years. Engaging pediatricians, sports organizations and other youth-serving groups to deliver the message could be a key component.
- Research shows that early childhood interventions can be successful, especially for children with economic disadvantages. The return on investment can be considerable in addition to being the “right thing to do”. The median household income in our community is only slightly above the income criteria for many social services. Evidence-based social service programs for families with young children should be funded to the fullest extent with the expectation that, in the long term, social service costs would be reduced. Businesses in the community should develop and/or continue to implement family-friendly working conditions including child care employee benefits when possible. From a broader perspective, the Volusia/Flagler community is in critical need of economic development that can raise wages for the workforce. As the current economy rebuilds, new and innovative businesses must be attracted to the area in order to revitalize local employment opportunities.
- The prenatal months and early childhood years are critical for successful outcomes throughout life. The importance of this developmental period is not recognized by many. Develop and implement a plan to educate community members (parents, businesspersons, etc.) on the importance of prenatal and early childhood development and education. This message must be widespread in multiple languages at multiple levels of understanding in an array of media and technology formats in order to reach preteens through nonagenarians.
- Child abuse and neglect has a lasting effect on children. Inappropriate expectations are one factor that can lead to abuse. Parental and child stress can be reduced when actions meet expectations. A cohesive, singular message



about expectations at the various stages of early childhood development should be widely distributed. Include resource information for interested persons to further research specific topics.

- The current capacity for affordable quality child care does not meet the community need, especially for infants and young children with special needs. Due to the high volume of working parents and low median household income, there are many families who meet the eligibility criteria for subsidized child care. However, the waiting list in 2008 is 1,500 children. Advocacy for restoring funds that have been cut as well as developing a plan to ensure full local match to leverage the maximum amount of federal and state funds that can be allocated to Volusia and Flagler Counties is of paramount importance.
- Low socioeconomic status alone does not lead to poor outcomes. Stress, less time spent with children, low amount of talking with children, and inattentiveness to children's needs leads to poor outcomes. Another contributing factor is a family history of toxic stress and/or parental mental health issues. There should be a pervasive community effort to create and promote a community norm that supports families with pregnant women and/or infants, toddlers and preschoolers to better ensure hope, health and happiness in early childhood and a brighter future for our children and youth.