

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES COUNCIL OF LEON COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"A child who can't read by the end of grade 3 is usually "lost to the system," while failure to master early math concepts also has vast, long-lasting consequences. Today, only about half of Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program students test ready for kindergarten. If Florida's workforce is to reach its full productive potential, all students must arrive ready to excel in fourth grade."

- Florida Council of 100, *The Horizons 2040 Project Grades PreK-12, August 2019*

Section 125.901, Florida Statutes, gives counties the authority to create an independent special district with taxing authority for the purpose of providing funding for children's services – if the local electorate approves. Children's Services Councils (CSC) do not deliver services; instead they fund community providers that can demonstrate desired outcomes through a competitive review process. Their sole purpose is to invest in the wellbeing of children by maximizing resources and ensuring accountability, making them an umbrella community organization like no other.¹ A proposal to create the Children's Services Council (CSC) of Leon County will appear before voters in November 2020. If approved, the CSC of Leon County will begin receiving funding in November or December of 2021. The CSC will be responsible for computing a proposed millage rate (the maximum millage rate allowed by law of 0.5 mils would result in approximately \$8 million in Leon County). Reauthorization must be considered every 12 years by the voters.

The history of CSCs in Florida shows that citizens will commit and recommit tax dollars to their local CSCs when they trust the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the process and outcomes at issue (no CSC has failed to be reauthorized by the voters). CSCs in Florida have achieved a variety of positive outcomes, including:

- Reduced juvenile crime and violence through youth support, mentorship, and employment services;
- Increased school readiness and reading proficiency by 3rd grade through access to quality child care and home visiting;
- Reduced child abuse and neglect through family strengthening programs;
- Increased health and mental health through access to mental health, substance abuse prevention, oral health, vision, breast-feeding, and nutrition services; and
- Reduced rates of teen pregnancy through family strengthening programs.²

¹ Florida Children's Council (2018). Independent children's services councils highlighted outcomes. [Available at www.flchildrenscouncil.org].

² Ibid.

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In July 2018, the Leon County Board of County Commissioners voted to support the proposal of Our Kids First to establish an independent Children's Services Council Planning Committee. This Planning Committee sought to establish a roadmap for ethical governance, quality controls, absolute transparency, no duplication of services, and measurable, results-oriented outcomes for a CSC of Leon County. This report details how the Planning Committee gathered information, sought expert advice, developed accountability measures, kept the public informed and engaged, and laid the groundwork for future collaboration.

Members of the Planning Committee were selected to represent a true cross-section of Leon County. They included elected officials and private citizens, business people with concerns about accountability for taxpayer funds and providers of services to children who believe quality programs can lift the entire community. To a great extent, these goals are parallel – and the committee sought to make them more so whenever possible.

To ensure transparency, the Planning Committee adopted guiding operating principles and a purpose statement; developed and launched a website at <https://LeonCSC.bookmark.com>, including a listserv with sign-up opportunity; distributed meeting notices to media and stakeholders; created and posted a plan of work, progress reports and detailed minutes; and dedicated time for public comment and encouraged public participation in identifying priorities, vision and mission.

The Planning Committee reviewed existing assessments of unmet community needs, collected input on unmet needs, invited public testimony, and synthesized findings. Members reviewed data in four key areas: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. They reviewed data from community organizations about unmet needs and service gaps as well as data collected by community coordinating partners such as United Partners for Human Services, United Way of the Big Bend and Whole Child Leon. The data review focused on outcome areas in which Leon County ranks relatively low on a state or national basis. The data and extensive public comments highlighted unmet needs.

Of specific concern is that Leon County, compared to the state, has a:

- Higher total arrests rate of citizens under age 18 (2017): 10.8 % to 7.9%;
- Lower rate of Gold Seal (accredited) childcare programs than the state (2017): 12 % to 28%;
- Higher rate of citizens experiencing food insecurity (2016): 21.1 % to 13.9%;
- Higher rate of deaths ages 5-9 per 100 (2016): 17.8% to 13.2%;
- Higher percentage of low-birth-weight babies than the state (2016): 9.2 % to 8.7 %; and
- Higher infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births (2016): 6.6. deaths to 6.1.³

³ See Appendix E in the Full Report for data and references.

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Three general priority areas were identified based on needs in Leon County:

- **Success in school and life (i.e., investing in programs that increase school performance and reduce juvenile crime);**
- **Healthy children and families (i.e., promoting physical, mental and oral health education and programs to optimize individual and community health and resiliency); and**
- **Stable and nurturing families and communities (i.e., promoting stable families including food stability, youth development and economic opportunities).**

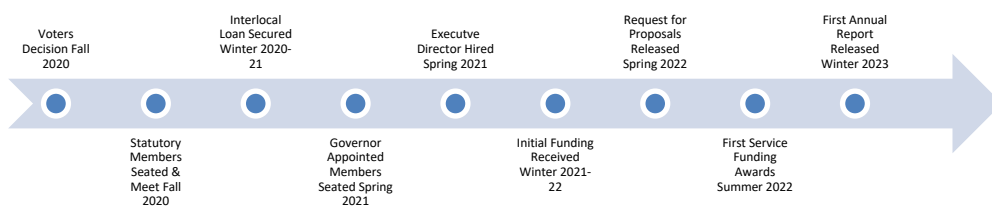
Broad priorities determined by the committee encourage funding a range of potential programs reflecting the critical needs identified in the planning process. Narrowly defined priorities and specific measures would exceed the role of the Planning Committee and infringe upon the role of the CSC of Leon County's board and executive director.

Utilizing the guidance of long-standing, successful CSCs across the state, recommendations were developed to guide the launch and implementation of the CSC of Leon County. The report provides guidance for development of:

- Evidence-based practices to ensure return on investment;
- Accountability and reporting structures;
- Policies and procedures, including policies on nepotism, procurement, public comment, financial/audit, racial and ethnic equity);
- Community engagement and communication strategies; and
- Coordination and collaboration mechanisms.⁴

The report incorporates numerous resources to support the CSC of Leon County during years one and two of operation if approved by Leon County voters, and Figure 1 provides an overview of a timeline of major milestones in the launch of the CSC recommended by the Planning Committee to serve as guidance for the CSC.

Figure 1. Recommended Timeline for Major Milestones in Launching the CSC of Leon County.



The Planning Committee is pleased to present this report to the Leon County Board of County Commissioners and the citizens of Leon County for consideration.

⁴ All recommendations can be found in Appendix J in the Full Report.