

EDITORIAL OPINION

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NCEF helping close learning, service gaps



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As a community with no system of independent, tax-based, public financial support for children's social services,

Collier County is uniquely in need of the benefits that charities provide.

The dearth of public assistance weighs especially heavily on the youngest Collier County residents. According to a 2016 report from the Florida Department of Health, the number of children living in poverty in Collier County increased by 27.3 percent over the past decade. While we have made tremendous progress in serving children in need, we as a community must double down on our commitment to charity to ensure our children have real opportunities to succeed.

Charitable organizations with a proven track record of success offer an opportunity to make a positive difference in the community and bolster some of the services that would otherwise be unavailable to children and families in need.

The Naples Children & Education Foundation, the charitable arm of the Naples Winter Wine Festival, is an excellent example of this. As the largest funder of children's social services in Collier County, we facilitate many local charitable efforts that provide immediate help to underprivileged kids. Our work is also built to be beneficial over the long term. By focusing our efforts on children, we aim to foster the vitality of the whole Collier County community through investing in those who will shape its future.

The foundation's influence is best evidenced through our recently released "Social Impact Report." It details the positive outcomes of our efforts to improve service delivery for children and facilitate their healthy development. It shows that, from 2001 to 2015, NCEF improved the lives of nearly 68,000 children with access to enriching after-school and summer programs; advocated for more than 47,000 children with crisis counseling, mentorship, shelter and other basic essentials; educated nearly 36,800 children through high-quality early childhood programs, and promoted healthy living by providing critical medical services

to 37,000 children countywide.

The report also details how NCEF made a dramatic difference in closing service gaps and improving outcomes for children of all ages. For example, in the last five years the number of children entering kindergarten "on grade level" increased by 42 percent, math proficiency by eighth grade improved 17 percent and the graduation rate for at-risk youth improved by 20 percent. It also shows NCEF's remarkable influence on educational and social trends that transcend grade levels: school suspension rates have decreased by 65 percent, and juvenile arrests have been reduced by 62 percent.

At the same time, while the "Social Impact Report" proves that important strides have been made, the need in Collier County is still very real — in fact, it's growing. Income inequality in Collier County is expanding as the population of underprivileged individuals increases.

This means that the services available to help those in need are stretched thinner, so children are facing even more daunting obstacles to a healthy, well-rounded future.

Targeted and strategic charitable

activity can combat many of these difficulties, but there is more work to be done to fill crucial service gaps for Collier County's children. We have seen firsthand the fundamental role that charitable funds can play to improve education, health care and other vital sectors that are critical for children to thrive. Faced with this growing need, we must likewise grow our commitment to charity, especially the organizations and initiatives that are consistently successful. For our part, the Naples Winter Wine Festival remains dedicated to raising as much money as possible each year to benefit Collier County children. That dedication only grows more fervent as local need escalates.

The demographics of Collier County will continue to change over time, making it even more important that charities expand and adapt to best serve those who need it most. While the lack of public funding for social services leaves a considerable void, the influence of charity can go a long way toward closing it. As we look to the future, we can close this gap once and for all if we ensure that our services are efficient enough to consistently meet the magnitude of need in this county.