

WellFlorida: Working together for healthy communities, working together for a healthy Hamilton County

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United Way of Suwannee Valley is a volunteer-driven community impact organization that strives to address health and human service needs in three focus areas: ensuring our children's future; furnishing food, shelter and safety; and promoting independence and wellness. Our local United Way addresses these focus areas through 2 affiliated health and human service agencies, of which 17 provide services to Hamilton County.

Local community impact initiatives include the Homeless Services Network of Suwannee Valley, the 2-1-1 program for information and referral services, the Success by 6 early childhood development initiative and the Community Organizations Active in Disasters (COAD). The Long Term Recovery Committee is now working toward long-term sustainability by transitioning to a long-term recovery organization.

This is the first installment in a series of articles about agencies that provide services in Hamilton County. WellFlorida, an affiliated but non-funded United Way agency, is celebrating its thirty-seventh year of service to more than 1.6 million residents across 11,000 square miles of 16 north central Florida counties. Hamilton County is the northernmost county in the region served by WellFlorida.

The goal of WellFlorida is to foster greater community health by providing communities the insights, tools, programs, and services necessary to meet their healthcare needs and to improve health outcomes. Through partnerships with individuals, community-based and non-profit organizations, local governments, healthcare providers and businesses, WellFlorida strives to create healthier communities for all residents.

WellFlorida is an umbrella organization that covers a variety of in-house community partners, some of which provide direct services in Hamilton County, and coordinates regional networks for prenatal and infant and HIV/AIDS care. As the lead agency for the Healthy Start of North Central Florida coalition and the North Central Florida Ryan White CARE Program, over the last five years WellFlorida has assured that more than 750 at-risk Hamilton County residents received nearly \$450,000 of needed prenatal and infant and HIV/AIDS care.

The organization also develops and implements critically needed programs. An example is the Self Managing Rural Awareness Team (SMART), a diabetes and hypertension education outreach program. SMART provides disease self-management skills to lower income residents in or most rural counties. Diabetes-related hospitalizations for clients in this program have decreased by more than 90% since joining the program.

Other programs that provide services in Hamilton County are Central Healthy Start, Rural Health Partnership of North Central Florida, and Community Initiatives.

In Hamilton County, WellFlorida was instrumental in obtaining the Blue Foundation for a

Healthy Florida grant which brought a volunteer pharmaceutical assistance program coordinator to the community. This program has brought hundreds of thousands of free and reduced price medications to low-income county residents.

WellFlorida provides insights and education on healthcare issues, health plans and community health profiles that help inform local and state health policy decision makers. In 2005, WellFlorida conducted a pro-bono comprehensive health needs assessment for the Hamilton County Strategic Health Care Working Group. This needs assessment has been the core of an evolving discussion on the future of Hamilton County's healthcare system and health outcomes.

To learn more about WellFlorida, visit www.wellflorida.org.