

WellFlorida Council

CARING FOR PLENTY IN THE BACKGROUND

■ ■ By Kristen Stewart
■ ■ Photos by Megan DeGance

By serving 16 counties in North Central Florida, WellFlorida Council helps more than 1.6 million people across 11,000 square miles, with almost 248,000 of those being Alachua County residents, lead healthier lives. And you've probably never heard of them.

"People won't know who we are," said Steven Oliva, MHA, CEO of WellFlorida, "We rarely ask for donations or fundraise. Our goal is not to make \$1 million but to build healthier communities."

WellFlorida began in 1969 under its original name, North Central Florida Health Planning Council. Under federal law it was formed as a health systems agency, assessing local communities' needs for hospitals, medical facility capital expenditures, nursing homes and the like.

Then in 1982, though federal funding ended, Florida decided that health councils could be valuable tools for local health planning. Under state statute, WellFlorida became one of the state's 11 local health councils designated to operate the state's Certificate of Need program – a healthcare facility regulatory program known as a CON.

Over time, as Florida deregulated CON and decision-making authority became centralized in Tallahassee, WellFlorida evolved as a private, nonprofit organization and was able to focus on meeting the healthcare needs of the residents of North Central Florida.

"Our agency can mobilize on health issues. We get to choose how and when to attack issues. It's one of the most satisfying things of this work.

"It was an opportunity for me to develop my aspiration in public health without the red tape of government and to make a good, solid impact in the community," said Oliva. "WellFlorida continues to grow and diversify. We're here for the long haul."

"Our programs are all under the guidance of the CEO, who answers to the board of 24 from 16 different counties," said Oliva.

WellFlorida is an umbrella agency with multiple main functions of program administration and community initiatives or consultant work, including program development, community outreach, customized data collection and analysis, coalition building, grant writing and program evaluation. Without fundraising or advertising, program management and consultancy projects keep WellFlorida afloat. WellFlorida also appeals to the counties it serves by asking for voluntary contributions of \$0.07 per capita to support unfunded community health planning work.

"What we do in program management, data collection and analysis, evaluation, policy formulation and grant writing is not always a glamorous process, but it can be glamorous in the outcome," said Feller, a UF graduate of industrial engineering who came to work for WellFlorida in 1996 after working on Tomahawk missile building as part of his graduate studies during the Gulf War. "I decided that ultimately I wanted to build cities – construct, not destruct – and I was fascinated by health issues."

Approximately 15,000 residents receive care

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mental health counseling, all a woman has to do is agree to a simple risk screening by her doctor.

The 1,500 clients in the Ryan White CARE Program are HIV patients who can't afford care and have no other way to obtain life-sustaining care. Clinical, dental, mental health, pharmaceutical, comprehensive case management and medical transport services are covered for eligible individuals. Rental and utility assistance can also be secured.

"Folks don't know that their network of care and funds for their services come through WellFlorida, just that their doctor bills and rent get paid," said Oliva.

WellFlorida also still assesses health needs and regional and statewide resources as it did in its early days.

"We let the data, the facts, the community and its needs speak through the work we do," said Feller.

When Gainesville's first community hospital, Shands AGH, closed in 2009, WellFlorida was there to help the community

"We have the creativity and ability to move forward."

—Jeff Feller

take stock of its needs.

"Where do you focus scarce resources? We are uniquely positioned to help the community identify these areas. That's our value," said Oliva.

"WellFlorida is not taking temperatures or laying hands on folks, but we help the people who can help, help others," said Feller. "We build relationships. Provide our services. You get fulfilled."

"We're twice removed from the good we do – behind the scenes. But sometimes individuals come and thank us," said Oliva.

That is, the people who actually knew who helped them may come to thank the two dozen committed staff who work for WellFlorida. But most don't. Most don't even know about WellFlorida Council, the good it does, and the amount of lives they touch. ■ ■

For more information on WellFlorida Council, please visit www.wellflorida.org.

