



Initiatives with the Lee County School District

United Way Programs/Direct Services:

Community Partnership School - In January 2020, the United Way of Lee, Hendry, and Glades received a Community Partnership School (CPS) grant from the University of Central Florida. This initiative was made possible through collaboration with core partners, including the School District of Lee County, Gulf Coast University, and Lee Health. This grant allowed United Way and core partners to establish Franklin Park Elementary as the first Community Partnership School in Lee County. This five-year grant provides funding and development support throughout the process of becoming a University of Central Florida Certified Community Partnership School. Franklin Park Elementary, A Community Partnership School, is in year five of the UCF grant, focusing on implementing programs and services. To date, matched contributions totaled over \$4 million of in-kind and financial donations utilized to serve United Way Community Partnership Schools. Due to the success of the implementation at Franklin Park Elementary, United Way was thrilled to expand Community Partnership School efforts to Fort Myers Middle School in 2021, creating a pathway of success via continuity of services as students move from elementary to middle school. The Community Partnership Schools program has grown to include services at Colonial Elementary School in January 2023, now in its second year of implementing programs and services.

The partnership embeds United Way staff at Franklin Park Elementary School, Fort Myers Middle School, and Colonial Elementary School, to provide boots-on-ground support to children and families both at the schools and in the surrounding community through social services and collaboration.

Services, partnerships, and programs through the Community Partnership Schools have included:

- Grace Community Church - Teacher Appreciation Breakfast
- Fowler Street Grill - Staff Appreciation Breakfast
- Midwest Food Bank - Weekly Hope Pack weekend food distribution and school food pantry
- Hoops on Mission - Food donations and mentoring
- Goodwill Industries - Employment assistance, parent, community engagement, and student career-readiness opportunities
- FGCU - tutoring, student volunteers, work-study placement, student internships
- Lee Health - Wellness services and the first school-based clinic in SWFL.
 - Golisano Pediatric Clinic at Franklin Park Elementary, A Community Partnership School
- University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences - Food and nutrition programming
- Affordable Care Act Navigator - Health Insurance Marketplace and Medicaid enrollment
- Holiday Assistance - Thanksgiving and Christmas support to families throughout the community
- Children's Network - Teen Outreach Program mentorship
- I Will Mentorship Foundation - STEM Club
- YMCA - before and after-school programming
- Beesley's Paw Prints - reading and social-emotional enrichment
- CRAM tutors - after-school tutoring support and mentorship
- And many others!



United Way School Resource Center - This initiative began in September 2020 as the brainchild of United Way's COO Hannah Pelle and former interim Superintendent Dr. Ken Savage. Lee County District school social workers and school counselors assess students in need and request essential items such as clothing, school uniforms, hygiene products, shoes, and school supplies from the School Resource Center, which is located at the School District's administrative offices on Colonial Blvd. All items donated are brand new and high quality. United Way staff manage the inventory and use the District's Pony System to provide students with these items as quickly as possible – often within 24 hours of the request. *As of January 2025, the value of the goods distributed is \$6,163,059, and 259,925 items have been delivered to our Lee County students.* This program is supported in part by the Price Foundation. The School Resource Center has also partnered with the School District to provide specific uniform items to needy children through a \$4,500 grant.

United Way Gifts in Kind - The Gifts in Kind program takes items donated by the community or sourced by United Way and distributes them to United Way's network of partner agencies and community organizations. Some of the specific programs within the School District that received items and support through the Gifts in Kind program include the Migrant program, School Resource Center, the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, and a special Christmas in July Event.

School-Based Blood Drives - *12 High School-based blood drives were held in the 2023-2024 school year in partnership with Lee Health and United Way donor initiatives.* These events encourage student community engagement and provide a lifesaving blood supply to our local health system. The United Way Volunteer Center also provides information for students at these events for volunteer opportunities, FAFSA assistance and 211 resources.

School District of Lee County Migrant Program - United Way has worked closely with the School District of Lee County to provide support for the migrant program's children and families. *Through United Way's Gifts in Kind program, \$71,410.61 in donated goods have been provided to the program including furniture, clothing, medical supplies, and home goods. Within this partnership, a vehicle donated to United Way was given to an identified family in need.*

College & Career Access Team in partnership with Future Makers - In partnership with The Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, United Way Volunteer Center staff and volunteers assist with FAFSA and financial aid sessions to help students and their families complete the FAFSA, understand financial aid award letters, and complete the Florida Financial Aid application each year. In addition, they assist career and guidance counselors with in-person and virtual FAFSA and Financial aid completion sessions.

Pet Therapy – The teams from United Way Beesley's Paw Prints specializing in pet therapy make regular visits to numerous schools across the district. These special visits serve multiple purposes, including participation in reading programs, providing emotional support for students and staff in times of tragedy, and contributing to reward programs for students.

United Way Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) – Our United Way Volunteer team, and IRS-certified volunteers, offers free tax return preparation, financial education, and e-filing services to residents with a household income of \$66,000 or lower. We specialize in aiding families eligible for earned income, education, and child tax credits. *Annually, we process more than 8,700 tax returns and extend our support to faculty, staff, and families to the entire school district as well as on site at our Community Partnership Schools.*

Summer Break Spot - A United Way 211 contract with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services link children 18 and younger to summer food service programs, sponsors, and sites throughout Lee County. *Every year, the United Way 211 information and referral hotline connects hundreds of children in need to these locations.*



Civil Citation Program, Lee County Sheriff's Office - Students who have committed a minor offense will be able to serve volunteer time working on special community projects with the United Way. *United Way has hosted several groups and connected them to meaningful opportunities.*

United Way Volunteer Center - Every year, the United Way Volunteer Center hosts presentations for Middle School and High School counselors, social workers, and Career Specialists, as well as various schools. These presentations focus on showcasing a wide array of volunteer opportunities within the community. Moreover, the Volunteer Center consistently serves as a vital link, connecting students seeking opportunities with the extensive network of agencies and partner organizations.

United Way 211 - United Way 211 is an information and referral hotline that connects callers with the social services needed such as utility assistance, and food insecurity assistance. Each year, United Way 211 assists thousands of callers, many of whom are families that reside within the district.

United Way Funded Programs:

United Way funds over 260 community programs, most of them touching the families of the Lee County School District. Below is a sampling of direct services to students of the district.

Social Norming/The Norm Project - The Norm Project is a School District of Lee County prevention initiative, funded by a grant from United Way that seeks to correct misconceptions about teen alcohol and drug use. Lee County students create posters and PSAs that send the message that most of their peers choose not to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Sun Coast – United Way partners with Big Brothers Big Sisters to fund programs that create and support one-to-one mentoring relationships that ignite the power and promise of youth. Community Based matches meet in the community for mentoring, and Site Based matches meet at specified locations for specific mentoring. For example, Reading Bigs matches meet at schools to read with children.

Testimonial

JD is growing up in a loving single-parent household, but his Mom felt strongly something was missing - a strong male role model. She knew Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Sun Coast could help. She was right! Our mentor managers matched JD with Jason - who according to JD's Mom, has "filled a gap I was not able to fill...he is truly a genuine and caring person." Jason has introduced JD to a new world of activities that ignites his curiosity and fuels his desire to learn! From golf camp to working on cars and playing basketball to doing Science projects, Jason has become a consistent positive role model to JD.

Blessings in a Backpack - Blessings in a Backpack, in partnership with the Lee County School District and United Way, mobilizes communities, individuals, and resources to provide food on the weekends for elementary school children who might otherwise go hungry. The weekend backpack program includes four meals and snacks every weekend for 38 weeks (about 8 and a half months).

Blessings in a Backpack envisions a world where every school aged child in America has adequate nourishment to learn and grow. As a leader in the movement to end childhood hunger, Blessings in a Backpack feed close to 8,500 children in Lee County schools alone, and United Way funds 338 of those children.



Testimonial

Our school is very grateful that Blessings in a Backpack assures our children will have something to eat over the weekends, which helps them focus on their schoolwork and improves attendance. We are blessed to have this program in our school for so many years. This great partnership has made a difference in our students' lives. Those who have moved on to middle school and return to visit often tell us how much they miss it. On behalf of our students and staff thank you for your generosity.

Boys and Girls Club - Boys and Girls Club provides at-risk youth with after-school and summer programming that includes character development, wellness, and academic support. United Way partners with the Boys and Girls Club to support several Club locations throughout the County.

The Boys and Girls Club's mission is to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens. The agency's five key focus areas are Education & Career, Sports & Recreation, The Arts, Health & Wellness and Service & Leadership.

Testimonial

Shervias, a single father of 7-year-old Isabella: "Isabella has Down Syndrome, and she amazes me daily. She had heart surgery when she was only 5 months old and was in the NICU for her first 3 months. She had to be fed through a tube in her stomach until she was almost 2 years old. Having Isabella participate in the Boys & Girls Club Program has been a true blessing and an everyday adventure that I wouldn't trade for anything in this world. This summer, I witnessed Isabella doing things I would not have thought possible, I saw my daughter living a normal life and accomplishing anything and everything the doctors said she wasn't going to be able to do. It has brought me such joy to see her running, swimming, exercising, making friends, and most importantly enjoying herself without me by her side... I am so thankful for the experience this summer...it was truly a blessing."

Boy Scouts of America - The mission of the Boy Scouts of America is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Law. United Way partners with Boy Scouts of America to fund the Scout Reach and Learning for Life programs, both offered across the School District of Lee County. The Scout Reach program ensures that every child can be a Scout, regardless of ability to pay.

Learning for Life is part of the SWFL Council's in-school-based community outreach programs. The Character Education/Social/Life Skills-based program is designed for students in elementary, middle, and high schools. The SWFL Council's primary focus is on elementary and middle schools, and at-risk school communities. The program is certified to help meet state-mandated "Character Education" requirements and delivers engaging, research-based academic, character, leadership, and career-focused lessons that guide and enable all students to achieve their full potential. The program positively impacts academic performance, social and emotional maturity, character development, and career education for students.

Testimonial

Amari, 3rd grader: "I have an eye disease, but it doesn't control me. I can do anything I put my mind to. I choose to persevere and have courage now. With our dance for Learning for Life, having courage and showing my intelligence has really helped me."



Our Scout Reach "Community Outreach" program is focused on providing opportunities for under-served/at-risk youth to participate in Scouting programs. Scouting units meet before school, in-school or after school, depending on the needs of the youth and school. The majority of Scout Units are run by the parents, but when traditional leadership is unavailable, we partner with a local organization or school to provide them the manpower, or in some cases we employ a program aide who acts as the unit leader.

Testimonial

Another girl makes Eagle Scout Rank! Scout Troop 2018 of Lehigh Acres celebrated with delicious food and fanfare for their newest Eagle Scout, Ms. Kory. This was a fantastic feat for Ms. Kory, who is just 15 years old. For her Eagle Project, she built bus stop safety benches for the students of Lehigh Acres. In addition, she completed the required 21 badges and worked in several leadership positions along her way to Eagle. Most extraordinary, to add to this, she is a Cuban immigrant who only attained her U. S. Citizenship in March of this year. Her dedication to Scouting can be seen from her project and her achievements and the fact that she was chosen and participated in a National Youth Leadership training program for Scouts. Ms. Kory is a true overachiever and is so worthy of our praise and recognition. Upon completion of high school, she plans to go into a career in law enforcement.

Catholic Charities Diocese of Venice - In devotion and adherence to the teachings of Jesus and the Catholic Church, we seek to serve and empower ALL in need regardless of race, nationality, or religion. Programs include Bonita Springs Positive Youth Development.

Testimonial

When David joined The Positive Youth Development Afterschool Program in Bonita Springs, he was entering fourth grade. His parents were worried as his grades were at an all-time low. He was failing in the language arts, math and science. The school had told his parents that he would fail fourth grade if he did not get help. He is the middle child of a large family; he needed confidence, focus, and structure. His family was new to Lee County. His new school referred him to our program as they knew we could help him and his family. PYD staff and volunteers worked hard with David to help him understand and improve his grades so he could be at grade level. As the weeks went by, we could see his progress. He could better focus, complete his homework, and understand the subjects better. This improvement was noticed in school as well. He was actively participating in class and completing his classwork. David's parents decided to enroll him in our Summer Enrichment Camp, which added to helping him improve his confidence and social development. His parents were so impressed by his new passion for learning and newly developed enthusiasm. Over the years, David has improved and become a great role model for the younger students. He graduated from our program and returned as a school volunteer. He will be graduating soon with Honors and hopes to become a Cardiologist.

"I give thanks and pray for all the amazing people who are willing to help children like my daughter it is wonderful to see and experience such blessings." - Yasmine

"The after-school program has helped my children with everything that I cannot help them with, and it has changed our lives. I am thankful for the amazing staff and volunteers." - Carlos

Children's Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida - United Way partners with the Children's Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida to provide a coordinated response to child victims of abuse and neglect; and improve the lives of at-risk children and their families through prevention services. The East United Way Resiliency Hub aids those residents of East Fort Myers, specifically along the Palm Beach Boulevard corridor. Many children who reside in this area and their parents utilize the services of the East United Way Resiliency Hub for programs such as



ACCESS Registration assistance and a large-scale choice food pantry. Most of these children are Lee County Schools students, with the majority attending Tice and Orange River Elementary. One event that we take great pride in at the East United Way House is our yearly back-to-school backpack and supply drive. This is our second highest attended event each year, and this year was no different. Aside from providing backpacks and school supplies to over 175 children, we were also able to expand the event to include face painting, community outreach, and even provided lunch for children and their families. Taking the burden of purchasing backpacks and school supplies off the shoulders of our clients with children hopefully reduces stress and financial strain for our clients.

Child Care of SW Florida - United Way partners with Child Care of SW Florida which offers before and after-school programs at their centers. This has been a major part of their care for entire families, especially those with siblings in their PreK programming. Their programs allowed parents to drop off all their children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Their after-school programs focused on improved nutrition (USDA-approved afternoon snacks) and help with homework, allowing parents more quality time with children after work.

Children's Home Society of Florida – United Way partners with Children's Home Society to provide the Healthy Families Program, through which parents receive encouragement, practical guidance, tools and resources in the comfort of their own homes as they partner with CHS to help their children realize their full potential. During voluntary weekly sessions, parents learn how to help their children reach key developmental milestones – and how to know if their child may be experiencing delays. Healthy Families also coaches overwhelmed parents on how to handle everyday stress, how to make their homes safe for infants and small children, and how to positively engage with their children, including the teaching of age-appropriate discipline. Among families that complete the program, nearly 100% remain free from abuse or neglect, and they also continue to pursue personal and family goals. The program helps children prepare for learning and adapt to a structured school environment. If there are older siblings, we help the parents understand the forms (especially for our families who are not English speaking) to enroll the new students and if there are any concerns that arise with their child/student.

Testimonial

Bianca was a participant in Healthy Families Lee who recently completed the program after receiving home visiting services for four years. Bianca was not able to read or write and when her Family Support Engagement Specialist (FSES), Tatiana discussed our Family Goal Plan with her, Bianca understood the opportunity to change her situation. Bianca chose a goal of learning how to write and recognize her name as well as her children's names. This one goal motivated Bianca to become proactive with her children's education and she passionately spoke with them about the importance of education. Her desire for them was to succeed in school which she knew would build a bridge to bright futures for each of them.

This became a theme in their home and came to fruition when her twelve-year-old daughter received an award from Lee County School District celebrating her excellent grades. The following year, her second daughter also received an award for school participation and excellent grades.

Bianca said the teachers are wonderful and she is so proud she was able to overcome her educational barriers for her children. She said she thanks CHS, the teachers and School District for supporting their bright futures.

Children's Network of Southwest Florida - The Children's Network of Southwest Florida is committed to working with the community to protect children and preserve families. The funding we receive from the United Way enables us to support relative caregivers when parents are unable to care for their children. These dollars support the initial placement when caregivers require emergency supplies for the children they take care of. Allowing a child to be placed with a relative or family friend when they cannot be home decreases the



amount of trauma the child(ren) experiences. Trauma in a child's life can affect their ability to perform well at school and can have lasting effects into adulthood. Without this support, the caregiver may not be able to financially care for the children. They may need beds, diapers, clothing, or other up-front expenses.

Testimonial

This funding was utilized for a family friend who took custody of three children while the parents worked on their case plan. Bunk beds, cribs, and bedding were purchased to help the family give the children a comfortable place to sleep. Food and clothing were also purchased to help them care for the children while waiting for non-relative funding.

Dr. Piper Center for Social Services - United Way partners with the Dr. Piper Center to enhance the social and economic well-being of those 55 and older individuals who reside in Southwest Florida and make a positive impact on the lives of frail elderly, at-risk youth, special needs children, and our communities. The Foster Grandparent Program provides meaningful and challenging volunteer opportunities to seniors 55+ to serve children with special needs by providing one-on-one attention in the classroom setting or an afterschool program.

Testimonial

We received a letter from Foster Grandparent Peggy's 2nd grade teacher at James Stephens Elementary. She shared that Grandma Peggy had been her foster grandparent for 6 years, though she had been at the school for 8 years. She stated, "She is not just my volunteer (and an amazing one at that), she has become part of my family. A true grandmother to me. She should be the poster grandparent for your [Dr. Piper Center] program!" She noted that her classroom could not function properly without Peggy, who comes in every day with a smile on her face ready to face the day. She greets every single student as they walk through the doors with a "Good Morning" and a hug. She stated she never hesitates to help a student in need. On one occasion, a student was celebrating a birthday. This student was sad because the parents could not bring in cupcakes because they didn't have the money. Without hesitation, Grandma Peggy said, "Ms. Taylor, I will be right back sweetheart." Grandma came back with cupcakes and balloons for the students and class. The student was beaming with joy and excitement. It truly made a difference. She has taken students' clothes home to wash, she has bought uniforms for students whose parents could not afford them, and she has even gone out and bought them "everyday clothes" for home. She brings snacks for the students because she knows some of their meals only come from school. She concluded by stating that Grandma Peggy has made a tremendous impact on her students' lives and has been an even bigger impact on her (the teacher's) life.

Drug House Odyssey (Drug-Free Southwest Florida) - The Drug House Odyssey brings children from across the school district to experience a 40-minute walk-through dramatization of real-life issues and effects of drug and alcohol abuse. Each year, the event serves thousands of children and their families.

Family Initiative, Inc. – Family Initiative is committed to engaging in community partnerships to empower families and ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Utilizing a family centered and holistic approach, our mission is to maintain transparency in collaborating with all we serve. United Way funds the agency's Autism Spectrum Social Skills Playgroup and Teen Hangout Group.

Autism Spectrum Social Skills Playgroup (ages 4 and up), the agency's hallmark program, provides a unique, safe, fun, and supportive environment for children to connect with their peers to develop socialization skills, friendships, and a social network through fun activities. Our team of experienced Applied Behavior Analysis and Occupational Therapy clinicians offer a high level of skill and can support each child's unique needs while promoting positive



social interaction in a fun, supportive, and safe environment. If you are looking for a place for your child to have fun, be accepted, and “live out loud,” this is the place for you!

Teen Hangout Group (ages 14-19) offers teenagers a place where everyone can be themselves, where they can talk and hangout with peers without worrying about knowing the “right way” to engage. These six-week cycles are focused on developing those social skills through a combination of clinical engagement and super fun activities for teens! For the last session of every cycle, they venture into the community for a fun outing.

Testimonial

One of the success stories for our Social Skills Playgroup involves a young man who goes by the nickname Kirby (from the Nintendo games). When we first met Kirby, he was living at home with his mother in his grandparents’ home. Kirby’s father had been incarcerated for most of Kirby’s life. Kirby’s mother brought him to our social skills playgroup when he was in first grade. She reported he was having a very hard time across the board; he was about to be kicked out of school, and she could not control him at home. Kirby was able to communicate in a limited manner, mostly scripting and repeating phrases he was familiar with. When Kirby first started attending the group, he had difficulty following any direction and would often engage in aggressive behavior, hitting, biting, and scratching other participants as well as engaging in high rates of aggression with the staff. Kirby did not know how to play with others, even though he wanted to. He did not understand turn taking or sharing and this would often trigger many behaviors.

Kirby’s mom continued to bring him almost every weekend. The transformation in him over the last five years has been life changing. He is currently one of the happiest and friendliest participants. He rarely engages in any aggressive behavior, has friends at school, at our group, and in his neighborhood, and recently asked a girl to be his girlfriend! His mother and grandparents have found a support family, making friends of their own and finding connections with other families and parents. Kirby’s mom has been able to sustain a relationship with someone who has children of his own, and Kirby has adapted to having “siblings”. Kirby’s family credits a vast majority of his success to his attendance at our group, where we stuck by him and helped provide him with the tools to be successful across these environments and in his life!

FGCU Scholars Club - The FGCU Outreach Programs (to include the Public-School Enrichment Partnership (PSEP)/Scholars Program) seek to inspire academically talented children and youth from disadvantaged environments to discover, believe in, and fulfill their dreams of graduating high school and pursuing post-secondary education. The FGCU Outreach Programs provide enrichment opportunities for elementary through secondary (4th -12th grade) students who aspire to excel academically, develop leadership skills, exhibit citizenship, and serve their community and school. Outreach Programs has three pre-college programs that benefit Lee County students in grades 6-12. United Way funding assists students who are in the Public Schools Enrichment Partnership (PSEP)/ FGCU Scholars Program. Currently, there are eight high schools and two middle schools in Lee County that participate in the program. The programs provide services and resources to students such as ACT/SAT Boot Camps; academic enrichment and supplemental instruction, academic counseling, tutoring resources, college tours, "College for a Day" workshops, financial aid workshops, and career development workshops.

Testimonial

Hello... I'm a seventh grader at Harns Marsh Middle. I went to your summer camp last year and the camp improved my knowledge of collegiate studies. My goal is to be an engineer and to be the



best in my field of work. Last year there was a project to build a model rocket and fly it with hydraulic pressure. That improved my knowledge of engineering because I know what I did right and what I need to fix. I think FGCU is the best place for me to continue my education after high school.

Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida - United Way partners with the Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida to build girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place while preparing for the careers or life journeys they choose in the future. Our Girl Scout Leadership Experience offers a variety of age-appropriate, girl-led activities that are cooperative and hands-on, preparing girls to take on challenges big and small in their lives. Girls practice everyday leadership as they earn badges, go on exciting trips, explore the outdoors, participate in STEM activities, develop valuable life skills and entrepreneurship, and more. Girls learn and grow in a safe environment where they can discover themselves and their values, try new things, take healthy risks, connect with others to create positive relationships, and act in their communities on issues they care about. The curriculum is correlated to national and state learning standards to reinforce what girls are learning during the school day.

Harry Chapin Food Bank – One-in-five children experiences hunger in Southwest Florida. About two-thirds of schoolchildren are either eligible for or receive free or reduced meals at school. United Way partners with Harry Chapin Food Bank to provide supplemental food to help keep children and their families fed. The In-School Pantry Program addresses child hunger by providing nutritious food to children and their families when they need it most, in convenient, familiar, and safe locations. In-school pantries operate within the school, and enlist the school staff, students, and others to distribute food to hungry families. Harry's Helpings is a program to help food-insecure families at sites where neither in-school pantries nor mobile pantries are available or feasible.

Lighthouse of Southwest Florida – Lighthouse of Southwest Florida's mission is to enable people of all ages living with a visual impairment or blindness to remain independent, active, and productive in our society. United Way funds the Blind Babies and Children program, which provides early intervention vision rehabilitation and related instruction to children, with visual impairments, as well as their families. The purpose of the program is to help families minimize the impact that vision loss may have on their child's independence, education, and quality of life.

Testimonial

When he was in elementary school, Randal started participating in our Children's Program. Then, he was an eight-year-old boy who was very much aware of the limitations that Nystagmus (a vision condition in which the eyes make repetitive, uncontrolled movements often resulting in reduced vision and depth perception that can affect balance and coordination) and being very nearsighted had on his ability to read, play sports, and in many other areas.

The constant uncontrollable movement of his eyes made it difficult to focus on details, and a sentence in small print was just a confusing string of letters. Randal would often be hesitant to try new activities if it was with a group of peers with better sight than his. He knew how much longer it took him to do certain activities, and he did not like being the one who was slowing down the group.

Despite his challenges, Randal always brought positivity to the group instruction and activities in which he participated. Being around other kids with similar struggles made him more comfortable with his own visual impairment. Randal takes to heart all the instruction, advice and tips given to him by his Lighthouse of SWFL instructors and puts them into practice immediately.



Randal has learned not to get frustrated with taking longer to complete tasks. He's also a leader in boosting the group's courage to try new things. Over the past few years, Randal has succeeded in raising his reading level by utilizing assistive technology for magnification. He has even taken his newfound confidence into the kitchen to bake brownies, practically all on his own. During the summer of 2022, Randal participated in Lighthouse of SWFL's Summer Camp and was a leader, always with a word of encouragement and a helping hand for his peers.

Recently, he was selected to join his middle school's National Junior Honor Society, which promotes the values of scholarship, service, leadership, character and citizenship within the school. Randal also confidently presented his story and his Lighthouse of SWFL experiences to the United Way Fund Distribution Team that visited us in 2023!

Thanks to the vision rehabilitation services Randal receives at Lighthouse of SWFL, and the ongoing love and support from his family, he has made incredible progress that has flowed into his home life, school, and in the community. Randal epitomizes the goal of our Children's Program, which is to instill confidence and teach the skills needed to be as independent and active as other kids, regardless of their vision impairment.

Meals of Hope - Meals of Hope is an Agency devoted to ending hunger. The agency provides easy-to-make, pre-packaged meals to food pantries across Lee County and through their own direct distribution. United Way partners with Meals of Hope to support its meal-packing events. Through these events, meals have been provided to children identified by the School District of Lee County through backpack meal distribution.

NAMI Lee, Charlotte, and Hendry Counties - United Way partners with NAMI to provide advocacy, education, support, and public awareness so that all individuals and families affected by mental illness can build better lives.

Youth Mental Health First Aid teaches adults how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use disorders in youth. This 6-hour training gives adults who work with youth the skills they need to reach out and provide initial support to children and adolescents (ages 6-18) who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem and help connect them to the appropriate care.

Teen Mental Health First Aid teaches young people in grades 10-12 how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders among their friends and peers. The training gives teens the skills to have supportive conversations with their friends and get a responsible and trusted adult to take over as necessary. It is designed to be delivered to schools or community sites in three interactive classroom sessions of 90 minutes each or six sessions of 45 minutes each.

Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Training for School Resource Officers (SROs) offers nationally recognized curriculum courses designed to train law enforcement and school resource officers in how to identify the signs and symptoms of mental illnesses/substance abuse and tools that can be used to de-escalate situations when they encounter someone experiencing a crisis. The course also covers the signs and symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorders, trauma, and substance use. It also provides information about our local mental health system/resources and the Baker/Marchman Acts. Participants will learn first-hand from family members about their experiences; and verbal de-escalation techniques that are practiced hands-on through role-play scenario training. The goal of CIT is to make encounters safer for the kids and the officer, lower the number of children put into the juvenile justice system, and instead help get kids into the treatment they need and deserve.

Testimonial



Comments from officers who completed recent SRO CIT Training:

"I really appreciated the families that discussed the struggles they faced and how they overcame them with their children. It is something I didn't always consider when responding to those calls for service."

"I learned more about depression and how it's not a mood or a feeling, but an illness."

"This SRO training was the best I've received as an officer. The training helped me look at myself and how the culture I grew up in framed my perception of discipline."

New Horizons of SWFL - United Way partners with New Horizons of SWFL which provides after-school tutoring, mentoring, and character-building support to under-resourced students at trusted neighborhood clubs. With the goal of seeing all students grow into successful members of the community and graduate from high school with a plan, New Horizons of SWFL currently serves 600 K-12 students alongside dedicated volunteers at 11 locations across Bonita Springs, Estero, Fort Myers, and Naples. Students are served through the Super Kids Club, Super Teens Club (Middle School), Super Teens Club (High School), Super Girls Club, Super Boys Club, College-Career Bound Program, Super Kids Reading Camp (summer program), and Super Teens Leadership Camp (summer program).

Testimonial

MARIA'S STORY: I have attended New Horizons since the fourth grade and have received an abundance of help and support throughout my time here. As I grew, New Horizons pushed me to try my best academically and motivated me to not settle for the bare minimum. A prime example of this would be when the New Horizons staff helped me apply for the Take Stock in Children scholarship ... Thanks to their guidance, I was able to move on to the next step: the interview. This was something that I was extremely nervous about. They helped me prepare by asking me questions and giving me great tips about confidence and calming my nerves. After the interview, I was announced as one of the winners. Besides helping me academically, they helped me strengthen the relationships around me. I met staff and volunteers who have become mentors whom I could turn to and look up to as role models. Because of the Super Girls Club, I met one of my best friends. I've also had the opportunity to experience things that I would've never been able to do without New Horizons, like cooking classes, fishing trips, leadership camps, and visiting different college campuses. Because of this help, pursuing higher education has become possible. I am currently in the medical program at school, and I plan on attending Florida Gulf Coast University and going into the medical field in the future so I can help others.

Our Mother's Home – The mission of Our Mother's Home of Southwest Florida, Inc. is to empower young mothers in the foster care and human trafficking systems to break the generational cycle for themselves and their children. United Way helps fund the Mentored Living Program, which provides teen moms with a supportive environment to stay with their children, learn life skills, and finish their education.

Testimonial

R.S. came to Our Mother's Home as a timid and shy 14-year-old, who had become pregnant due to sexual abuse within her own family. By age 15, she had given birth to a beautiful baby girl. Years of trauma had created many behaviors that were inappropriate for her age, including an unhealthy emotional connection with adult men.

Our Mother's Home provided psychological therapy, art therapy, pet therapy, and relationship and sex therapy. R.S. was also enrolled in school at the Lee Adolescents Mothers Program so that she could continue her education and bring her child to school with her.



Over the years, R.S. has accomplished many things, with the help of the OMH Case Manager and the organization itself. Not only has R.S. continued to be on the honor roll, but she's also active in the Student Government at her school. She attends weekly parenting classes and recently completed an additional class called The Parenting Toolbelt. She also loves to cook and takes monthly cooking classes at the home. R.S. enjoys art projects and dancing and loves to help the other teen moms with their babies.

Our Mother's Home has not only provided normalcy for R.S. over the last 3 years, but they have also helped her to gain her independence. R.S. completed a financial literacy course and was able to open her own bank account. The agency also partnered with Vocational Rehabilitation and was able to get R.S. a job, where she currently works as a hostess on the weekends for a local diner. On her 18th birthday, R.S. transitioned to the 18+ room at Our Mother's Home. She was given help in applying for food stamps, shown how to ride the city bus, and has now gained her independence.

PACE Center for Girls - Pace provides girls and young women an opportunity for a better future through education, counseling, training, and advocacy. United Way specifically funds PACE's transitional services which help young women who have attended PACE transition back into public school. The staff working in this program partner with individual school sites to ensure the PACE graduate has the emotional and academic support needed to be successful!

Testimonial

Katya is a shining example of the success of the transition program. Katya came to Pace with a history of family instability and academic underachievement. She excelled at Pace and graduated in 2018 and went on to pursue a career in cosmetology. Katya recently opened her own business and credits Pace and the transition program with always continuing to help her meet her goals and keep her on track for success.

Quality Life Center - United Way partners with Quality Life Center to strengthen and instill pride in family and community through the development of programs and services that cultivate self-development, teach self-discipline, build confidence, and promote cultural awareness, health, and one's highest human potential. Funds from United Way support QLC's Arts, Character, and Education (ACE) program, which helps at-risk youth become academically successful, confident, emotionally resilient, and equipped to lead a quality life. QLC serves children ages 5-18, the majority of whom reside in the African American area of Fort Myers known as Dunbar where 92% of school-age children are designated by the Florida Department of Education as "Economically Disadvantaged," and where nearly 70% of third-grade students could not read at grade level at the end of the 2021-22 school year. ACE has four primary focus areas: Academics, Enrichment, Leadership, and Mental Health & Emotional Wellness.

Testimonial

My name is Cathy and my daughter is Gennifer. Gennifer started at the Q at 5 years old and she is now 17. The Q has been more than an after-school program to me; it is my family. About 12 years ago my quiet and shy little girl walked in and out came a beautiful, smart, intelligent, and empowered young lady. The Q has shown me and my child that you can be more than your 33916-zip code. I will be forever grateful for all the kind words and love that the Q showed me when my mom passed and when my husband had open heart surgery. The one thing that I love about the Q is every time I walk through the door everyone knows your name and talking to the staff is like talking to a sister or brother at home. I would not trust my child with anyone else but family and to me that is the Q my family.



Sally J. Pimentel Deaf & Hard of Hearing Center - United Way partners with the Sally J. Pimentel Deaf & Hard of Hearing Center to empower Southwest Florida's deaf and hard of hearing citizens and their families through education, advocacy, and community involvement. The Deaf Mentor Program is dedicated to the well-being of deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Through tailored in-school support, our Deaf Mentor directly engages with deaf children in the Lee County School District (K-12) in their school environments, providing crucial academic and social skills. This personalized approach ensures a more inclusive educational experience and empowers these children to excel academically, build self-confidence, and thrive within their educational journey. Family classes and workshops for parents equip them with advocacy tools and life skills to better support their children's development, while the program's unique peer-led Deaf Support Group and newly formed Deaf Youth Program foster mental well-being, social connections, and a deep understanding of Deaf Culture among participants.

Testimonial

A high-school-aged deaf child had to complete a formal interview conducted by law enforcement. It was conducted at a nonprofit agency that specializes in these matters. A regular interpreter was used, but the child was unable to share their traumatic story, so our agency sent the Deaf Mentor, who is also a Deaf Interpreter, along with a regular interpreter so the child could feel comfortable and share the story successfully. Because of the Deaf Mentor Program, a child was able to share their story with a trusted deaf person and get the help they needed from the trauma they experienced.

Another school-aged child who is hard of hearing has begun working with the Deaf Mentor in the school and at our agency. The child is learning American Sign Language (ASL) and has immersed themselves in Deaf Culture, which has broadened their perspective to new horizons and possibilities for employment and has opened communication accessibility. With a new love of learning a language that is opening the doors of communication, the child feels empowered for success and a bright future filled with possibilities.

SalusCare – With a mission statement to provide exceptional and compassionate behavioral healthcare, SalusCare provides mental health and substance use services to children and adults in Lee County, FL. Services include Crisis Stabilization, Residential Care, Outpatient, and Community Services. Serving 12,000 patients annually, SalusCare provides services to citizens regardless of their ability to pay for services. United Way partners with SalusCare to fund Crisis Stabilization and Outpatient Therapy (individual and group therapy), which benefits children in the School District of Lee County.

Testimonial

Joe, who is 9 years old, was referred by Skyline Elementary school for significant behavioral concerns including "saying inappropriate things at school." He said he was going to bring a gun to school in the past and was suspended but then recanted and said that it was a nerf gun. He threatened others regularly. He would often say things to get a reaction from others. He was suspended from the school bus because he, "pulled his pants down." Joe came to SalusCare after his family had recently moved due to hurricane Ian incurred damage. He was a smart, loving boy, but had poor grades, was getting into physical altercations at school, was not listening to parents, and broke into a few homes. Joe was all too familiar with treatment, having sought treatment at several facilities. He had been previously diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder and received several visits to the family home from the Department of Children and Families. His father passed away in 2021 which only amplified his behavioral issues including threatening others and school suspensions. With weekly outpatient



therapy, including some family therapy, grief therapy, behavioral modification, anger management, impulse control techniques, and medication management, Joe was able to successfully graduate from counseling! He has consistently completed school assignments and, according to the teacher report, had significantly less arguments and authority issues, and there have been no incidents of aggression or school suspensions. Teacher reports earning rewards for good behavior and becoming a class helper. Since admission Joe has begun feeling happy again, experiencing greater self-esteem, and he has made more friends.

Valerie's House - The mission of Valerie's House is to help children and families work through the loss of a loved one together and go on to live fulfilling lives. Our vision is that No Child Will Grieve Alone. Valerie's House is a special place where children connect with one another and learn the tools to heal after they have experienced the death of a loved one. At Valerie's House, children know others their age, and they learn that loss doesn't have to limit their dreams. Valerie's House provides open-ended peer support groups and activities for children to heal after a significant loss in their lives. Valerie's House has partnered with the Lee County School District to provide school-based peer support groups for grieving children.

Testimonial

In 2016, a young high school girl found herself on the doorstep of Valerie's House after tragically losing her mother. As a participant in Valerie's House program, she was able to gain healthy coping skills to support her grief journey and not lose hope in pursuing her dreams. Following in the footsteps of her mother, this young woman went on to graduate high school and earn her nursing degree. Her experience as a Valerie's House child made such an impact on her that she is now a Valerie's House group night volunteer supporting other children in their grief journey.

YMCA of Southwest Florida - YMCA puts Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy mind, body, and spirit for all. United Way partners with YMCA in Lee County to provide scholarships and support for before and after-school enrichment and Summer Camp programs at multiple schools, Youth in Government, Youth Programs, Teen Programs, Aquatics Program, Education Enhancement Programs, and First Tee Youth Golf Programs.

Additional United Way partnerships and partner agencies with programs that benefit children in the School District of Lee County include:

- GiGi's Playhouse
- I WILL Mentorship Foundation
- Lutheran Services
- Midwest Food Bank
- Salvation Army
- Special Equestrians
- East Bonita Springs United Way Resiliency Hub– Gulf Coast Literacy Council
- Bonita Springs Assistance Office
- Fort Myers United Way Resiliency Hub– Children's Advocacy Center of SWFL
- Estero/San Carlos Park – Interfaith Charities of South Lee
- Harlem Heights United Way Resiliency Hub – The Heights Center
- Lehigh Acres United Way Resiliency Hub– Lehigh Community Services



- Dunbar/MLK United Way Resiliency Hub– Community Cooperative
- Pine Island United Way Resiliency Hub – Beacon of H.O.P.E.
- Pine Manor United Way Resiliency Hub
- Sanibel United Way Resiliency Hub – F.I.S.H. of Sanibel-Captiva
- South Fort Myers United Way Resiliency Hub – Jewish Family Services
- Tice United Way Resiliency Hub – Goodwill Industries of SWFL