



## Empowerment Zone designed to help low-performing schools

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When presented with a list of daily challenges in her neighborhood, Sharon Lately was quick to respond: “All of the above.”

Veita Jackson-Carter asked Lately about the challenges Saturday as part of a survey conducted by the Gainesville For All initiative, which is seeking feedback from a neighborhood in northeast Gainesville about the establishment of the Gainesville Empowerment Zone.

The idea behind the zone, which was born out of GNV4ALL recommendations for systemic change, will mainly focus on helping students at Metcalf and Rawlings elementary schools — two of the lowest-performing elementary schools in Alachua County and the state. According to the Florida Department of Education, Metcalf and Rawlings, along with five other Alachua County public elementary schools — Alachua, Idylwild, Lake Forest, Shell and Terwilliger — were among the 300 lowest-performing elementary schools in the state last school year.

Jackson-Carter joined other GNV4ALL officials and more than 50 student volunteers from the University of Florida in canvassing the neighborhood bounded by Northeast 16th Avenue to the south, 39th Avenue to the north, Ninth Street to the west and Waldo Road to the east. One of the main purposes of their canvassing was to get residents to answer a short survey.

“In the last year, what have been your two biggest daily challenges?” The choices included food, affordable utilities, transportation, housing, employment, childcare, access to a doctor or dentist, personal safety or mental health/depression issues.

After Jackson-Carter asked the question, Lately, who was sitting on a bench watching her 5-year-old grandson, Deondre Bonner, play with a flat basketball at Eden Park apartments on Northeast 39th Avenue, immediately answered that she and many people she knows are in need of all of the services noted in the survey.

“We definitely need more affordable housing in Gainesville because even if you have Section 8 (a federal housing payment voucher program for those who meet certain income and other requirements) you still might not be able to find somewhere to stay that you can afford, especially if you are disabled,” Lately said. “Around here, you have to have multiple family members living together just to pay the rent.”

That is backed up by statistics Pamela Davis, executive director of the Gainesville Housing Authority, recently gave at a Gainesville City Commission meeting and at a forum on affordable housing.

The last time the housing authority allowed people to register for its programs, more than 4,100 applied to fill fewer than 100 vacancies that are awarded using a lottery system, Davis said at a forum in early October that was sponsored by Gainesville City Commissioner Gigi Simmons, whose District 1 seat includes northeast Gainesville.

Started by The Gainesville Sun and Community Foundation of North Central Florida two years ago, GNV4ALL seeks solutions to racial and socioeconomic disparities plaguing Gainesville and Alachua County. Those involved with the group have developed more than 50 proposals in the areas of criminal justice, education, health, housing and transportation, and jobs and families.

As a result of their research and outreach efforts, GNV4ALL officials have concluded that improved delivery of family support services can help narrow the achievement gap between black and white students in Alachua County public schools.

Since June, a group of volunteers headed by Partnership for Strong Families President and CEO Stephen Pennypacker and community activist Pastor Gerard Duncan, have been meeting regularly to map out plans for action. Teams have

been set up to give special attention to family support, education, health and transportation, and criminal justice.

On Saturday, Pennypacker, Duncan and Jackson-Carter, along with Cherie Kelly, supervisor of the Library Partnership Resource Center in northeast Gainesville, Nathan Crabbe, editorial editor of The Sun, and Will Halvosa, a retired captain from the Gainesville Police Department, led the canvassing teams.

The greatest success in building the GEZ, which is modeled after the more than 20-year-old Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, has been a commitment by the United Way of North Central Florida to fund family-support services. With that commitment in tow, the difference going forward in 2019 will be that the United Way will require agencies to partner with at least one other provider to qualify for funding in the GEZ. This new process will go far toward another GEZ goal: reducing duplication of support services and improving their effectiveness.

"I am very excited to be partnering with the GEZ to create more partnerships in our community that will ensure that all children and families in our community succeed," said Mona Gil de Gibaja, president and CEO of United Way of North Central Florida. "We hope to spread the lessons we learn to other parts of the community."

With partners such as the United Way, Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, Faith Mission (an arm of Trinity United Methodist Church that operates the KidsZone after-school program for elementary students in northeast Gainesville), Partnership for Strong Families, Alachua County Public Schools, UF, Santa Fe College and other organizations, the success of the GEZ will be determined by the support it gets from those willing to help it meet its goal.

"Obviously, to be successful we will need dozens more volunteers," said James Lawrence, director of GNV4ALL. "We're also looking for mentors to help build impactful relationships with students."

As Lawrence finished a pep talk to the volunteers Saturday before the canvassing, he said, "This is just the start of what we are doing in this community."

To join the efforts of the GEZ initiative, email [gnv4all@gmail.com](mailto:gnv4all@gmail.com).