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LOCAL

New child care center to open in southwest Gainesville in 2018

Samantha Brown, Alligator Contributing Writer 14 hrs ago

City officials and community members celebrated the groundbreaking of southwest Gainesville's first affordable early childhood education center last week.

The CHILD Center, which stands for Children's Health, Imagination, Learning and Discovery, is expected to open in spring 2018. The Southwest Advocacy Group (SWAG), an organization founded in 2010 to improve access to necessary and sustainable services for families in southwest Gainesville, played a large role in securing and fundraising for the new center, located at 820 SW 62nd Terrace.

Dorothy Thomas, a SWAG co-chair, said the concept for the CHILD Center was developed from the need to comprehensively provide for children in southwest Gainesville.

The new center's construction will be supported by O2B Kids, a child care provider serving as the facility's operations team, as well as UF's Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies.

"By starting with children and getting them on track from the time they are little, you are helping their parents become their best teachers," Thomas said.

Herman Knopf, a scientist at UF's Anita Zucker Center, said his research in high-quality education services shows the need for services that maximize the children's potential while supporting working parents.

"By partnering with a lot of other local organizations, we are able to layer together programs and leverage funding so that we can offer truly high-quality services," he said.

At little to no cost, the center will offer enrollment to about 50 children whose parents want to find a job or go back to school and need a safe and reliable place for their children to learn, Knopf said.

In order to enroll in the new center, families must meet the guidelines set by programs such as Head Start, a federally funded program, and the Florida School Readiness program, which will provide funding for the center.

Families unable to enroll their children in the center can take classes at the SWAG Family Resource center, located at 807 SW 64th Terrace, to learn about the components of high-quality education, Knopf said. These components include a reasonable student-teacher ratio, engaged children and one-on-one interactions between students and teachers.

"What we're trying to do is create a 'hub' of services so that it is a more streamlined process," Knopf said.

Gainesville Mayor Lauren Poe was one of many to express excitement regarding the center at a groundbreaking ceremony May 25.

"This center is just the next evolution in creating a full set of wrap-around services for the residents of SWAG," Poe said.