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Opelika selected as a 'Community of Hope' by Casey Family Programs

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The city of Opelika's efforts to improve quality of life for all its residents were recognized recently by the nation's largest foundation focused on reducing the need for foster care — Casey Family Programs, which named Opelika one of 12 "Communities of Hope" across the United States.

The Casey Family Programs' initiative, called "2020: Building Communities of Hope," sets "an agenda for change that draws on the strength of communities and the vision of local leaders to keep children safe and make families strong," according to its website. Communities of Hope work toward increasing communities' capacity to support children and families, investing public resources, leveraging philanthropic engagement and improving lives.

Opelika philanthropist, businessman and founder of the expansive Carver-Jeter Master Plan Jimmy Wright will co-chair Opelika's Community of Hope advisory board, along with local educator Novelette Seroyer. Wright said the program's steering committee will begin the planning process for Opelika's improvement initiatives in early February.

"February 8th, we begin a new process where Opelika will be called a Community of Hope. There are 12 Communities of Hope around the country: New York, Philadelphia, Tallahassee, Gainesville — all these metropolitan areas, and Opelika. We feel honored that the Casey folks would make that investment in Opelika to help us," he said.

"We've got to strengthen the family. If we don't work on those issues and we change the aesthetics, but by the same token if we work on the family issues, but the housing is not good and issues with that — these two things have got to go parallel. What we see with the Carver-Jeter Plan moving forward is developing our community through those aspects moving forward — through our work with the Casey Family Programs' Community of Hope. We've got to have good neighborhoods, opportunities for jobs, a good school system and programs to keep our families together and strong."

Wright said the city initiated the process of becoming a Community of Hope in the spring of 2014, when he and Mayor Gary Fuller met with Page Walley, managing director of the Casey Family Programs, and learned what the initiative was all about.

"Through a contact with the city of Opelika, we met Dr. Page Walley. Walley was in charge of the Annie Casey Foundation. Now Ms. Casey, if I understand correctly, her husband, I think, passed away. To make ends meet, she started a package delivery business so her kids could make money, which grew into UPS. So they are a huge foundation. Somewhere their focus really became on foster care. I think they began to realize that that strengthening the family was a really huge part and developed Casey Family Programs, and that's who Dr. Walley worked with. That's the whole mission: helping communities develop programs to strengthen families."

Wright and other interested community members had an opportunity in November of 2014 to visit with the Partnership for Strong Families group in Gainesville, Fla., which had worked with Casey Family Programs for years. He said they were impressed by what they experienced.

"They have been very successful in their work. We saw what programs they had put in place and how they worked with existing agencies to strengthen families in the greater Gainesville area," he said.

By 2015, Wright and city leaders had begun working with the Casey team to determine what issues needed to be addressed in Opelika.

"In November of 2015, lifelong Opelika resident and educator Novelette Seroyer and I attended the Community of Hope Learning Collaborative in Philadelphia with the other 11 cities in the U.S. that have been selected as a Community of Hope. In December of 2015, Mayor (Gary) Fuller selected an advisory board to work with Casey Family Programs on the Community of Hope initiative," said Wright.

The steering committee's first meeting is slated for Feb. 8, when board members will begin devising a plan to improve Opelika.

"I think what they look at is every aspect of a child's life and in the community. What do you do to create an environment for that child to be successful? The parents have got to have good jobs and have places to live, and



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things like that. We've seen a number of presentations from the other communities and the things that they've done, and there is some best practice sort of stuff out there," Wright said. "Opelika is a great city, but the way you stay great is by keeping working on things."

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