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## Opinion

# **James F. Lawrence: Join the effort to empower east Gainesville neighborhoods**

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The Gainesville Empowerment Zone is no longer one of those concepts that looks and sounds good as a tool for social change. The GEZ is actually moving forward.

While we won't formally launch the GEZ until Oct. 20 with dozens of volunteers scouring the east Gainesville neighborhoods bounded by 39th Avenue, Ninth Street, 16th Avenue and Waldo Road to learn more about residents' needs and introduce ourselves, we've been busy in recent months making progress toward our goal.

Our goal? Over the next several years the GEZ, which is an outgrowth of Gainesville For All recommendations for systemic change, will mainly focus on helping students at Metcalfe and Rawlings elementary schools — two of the lowest-ranked schools in Alachua County.

Improved delivery of family support services, we believe, can help narrow the huge achievement gap between black and white students in the county as the school district gives greater attention to classroom underachievers. Call it a one-two punch that can knock out inequities and disparities that have persisted in the district for too long.

Since June, a group of volunteers headed by Partnership for Strong Families President and CEO Stephen Pennypacker and Pastor Gerard Duncan, a well-known community activist, have been meeting regularly to map out plans for action. Teams have been set up to give special attention to the areas of family support, education, health and transportation, and criminal justice. Reach out to us at [gnv4all@gmail.com](mailto:gnv4all@gmail.com) if you'd like to join a team.

So far our 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.

Granted, the United Way and other agencies are already providing services in the area we've carved out as the GEZ. 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: reduce duplication of support services and improve 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."

Indeed, the GEZ is a laboratory for ideas that can lead to systemic social change.

We're also working closely with the United Way to expand its ReadingPals program in the GEZ. With nearly one-third of Florida's third-graders reading below grade level, clearly this effort is needed. Experts predict these children, generally from low-income families, are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

ReadingPals involves volunteers spending one hour per week to help improve literacy of first-, second- and third-graders. The program is already active at Rawlings but needs more volunteers. We hope to introduce ReadingPals at Metcalfe in early 2019.

Obviously, to be successful we will need dozens more volunteers. We're also looking for mentors to help build impactful relationships with students. Again, to enlist, email us at [gnv4all@gmail.com](mailto:gnv4all@gmail.com).

It's encouraging too that Meridian Behavioral Healthcare plans to provide expanded services in the GEZ. Too many Rawlings and Metcalfe students regularly arrive at school with emotional problems linked to their families.

There is something everyone can do in the GEZ if this community is ever to truly become Gainesville for All. Please join us.

*James F. Lawrence is director of GNV4ALL.*