

## SWAG CENTER CREATES COMMUNITY WHEN NOBODY ELSE WOULD

By Brittany Valencic

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This is a place where the prayers of parents are answered. This is a place where children climb up the metal rungs of the jungle gym and swing on shiny red monkey bars, where their laughter echoes through the neighborhood. This is a place where people can come to feel safe.

The SWAG Family Resource Center serves the adults and children in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods west of Interstate 75 — an area characterized by crime and where hardships are woven into the wire of chain link fences. The facility strives to connect its neighbors and patrons with community-based services and offers educational opportunities, employment assistance and child care programs, among other resources.

SWAG, which stands for the Southwest Advocacy Group, is the nonprofit organization that advocated for the founding of the resource center and now serves as a partner and in an advisory role for the center. The group also partnered with the Alachua County Health Department to create a health and dental clinic that opened right across the street from the resource center last year.

Their latest triumph — a partnership with the University of Florida to open an early childcare learning center down the road that will double as a model demonstration center for childcare providers in the county.

Dorothy Benson, the current co-chair of SWAG and one of the organization's founding members, said the SWAG members are hard workers and don't talk about what the problems are in the area, but rather, they focus on finding ways to fix them.

"There is no question we are action-based and solution-based," she said. "As a matter of fact, if it's all for show, you might as well leave us out."

Benson, who lives in Haile Plantation, one of the more affluent neighborhoods in Gainesville, said it didn't make sense that this low-income area of town existed amid upper-income neighborhoods. Her activism stemmed from wanting to make a difference in this community.

"To me, it didn't make sense," she said. "I didn't understand with such a huge population here, why there weren't services for families. I just wanted to help."

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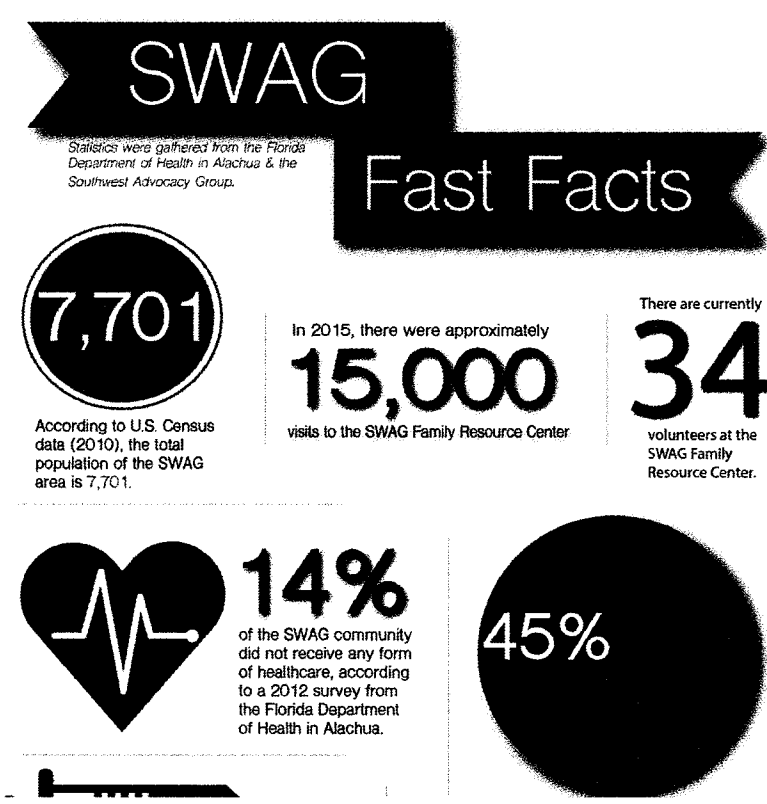
Joan Canton, the vice-chair of SWAG, lives in Linton Oaks, one of the neighborhoods SWAG serves. She watched as her neighborhoods began to deteriorate and saw the lack of resources in her own backyard. She wanted to give back to her community, she said.

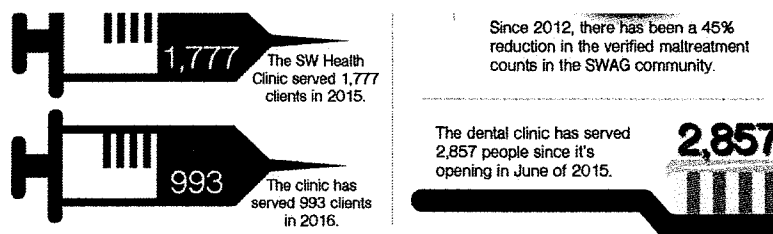
“I came here, I raised my kids and they are fine, so now it’s time for me to give back a little,” said Canton, who acts as a voice inside the community and volunteers full time at the resource center. But the center does not simply give handouts, she said. They give hand ups.

Although the resource center offers its services to people of all ages, the greatest need in the community was for services focused on children.

“You see children and you know that they have extra hurdles to overcome to succeed in life and so you want to help those children and those families break through those barriers and to do well for themselves,” said SWAG co-chair Dorothy Thomas, who has been volunteering at the resource center for about four years. “We are all so interconnected and we live so close together and this is our town, our collective community, and so if parts of our collective community are doing without, then our community as a whole will not be as good of a community. And if we can help the people that don’t have the resources they need to survive and succeed, then we as a whole become a better place to live.”

And SWAG is trying to do just that.





### The start of something new

Although a lot has been accomplished, the creation of the Southwest Advocacy Group didn't start till the late 2000s.

Dorothy Benson, along with her neighbor from Haile Plantation, Alison Law, started working together to see how they could help the low-income communities in the SWAG neighborhoods — an area that stretches between Interstate 75 and Tower Road.

As an abundance of affluent neighborhoods were built along Tower Road, the SWAG communities went unnoticed and failed to receive any attention. As a result, the two knew there were not only real health disparities in area, but a real lack of services as well, Benson said. By merging forces with leaders living in the SWAG community, like Joan Canton, the Southwest Advocacy Group was born in February of 2010.

"The day we met Joan was the day it all really came together for us because then it was community members who were already active inside this community, and then neighbors just down the road outside of the community," Benson said, who has played a pivotal role in SWAG's success. "We all started working together and that's when things really started to take off for SWAG."

The nonprofit organization also got a helping hand when they teamed up with Dr. Nancy Hardt and Alachua County Sheriff Sadie Darnell. Hardt, now a retired physician and professor at the University of Florida, generated maps in 2008 that showed the cluster of SWAG communities had the highest number of babies born to mothers who were eligible for Medicaid. Darnell had maps of her own, ones that overlapped with Hardt's, and showed extremely high crime rates in an area the Alachua County Sheriff's Office calls the "Mike Zone"— a square mile of community that had the highest number of crime reports year after year.

Now equipped with data that showed the disparity in the area, SWAG reached out to the Alachua County Commission to help. The county spent \$225,000 to buy and restore two buildings across the street from one another (one would become the SWAG Family Resource Center, and the other would eventually be converted into the Southwest Health Clinic). SWAG also partnered with a Partnership for Strong Families, an organization that provides child welfare services and operates several other resource centers in the Gainesville area.

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Partnership staffs the center with a manager and family support facilitator and pays the cost of the center's operation, in addition to bringing in a wide array of resources from partners.

"A huge part of what makes our resource centers strong and unique for the community is the number of partners we having going into those resource centers," said Patty Carroll, the senior community relations professional at Partnership for Strong Families. "At each resource center, we have between 30 to 40 partners that are working with us to provide services to the patrons of those centers."

The SWAG members also recognize the importance of partnerships.

"Rather than us trying to do everything ourselves, we form all these partnerships," Thomas said. "I think that has helped us cast a really wide net and draw a lot of people in to be a part of this collaborative vision."

The center offers day-to-day services like computer and internet use and after-school and tutoring programs for children. Concrete needs of patrons are met with an emergency food pantry and a clothing closet. The center also offers programs like financial literacy, job readiness, and stress management, as well as a ton of community events, according to Amanda Elliott, the SWAG Family Resource Center manager.

And just across the street, patients can receive a wide arrange of clinical care ranging from vaccinations and physicals to pediatric care and birth certificates. Patrons can also receive dental services.

But the quantity of services offered doesn't have an impact on the quality.

"One thing that SWAG really prides itself on it a reputation of doing things well and doing things with high standards," Thomas said. "We don't settle for mediocre."

Elliot said offering these place-based services in an area of high disparities reduces some of the barriers that patrons face.

"It makes some of life's challenges a little bit easier," she said.

### **A sense of community**

SWAG gave the community a voice when no one else would listen.



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Children learn about family crests and the symbolic meaning behind colors and mottos on coats of arms in the summer program at the SWAG Family Resource Center. Using crayons and markers, they create their own coat of arms. "I think the children's programming is what the community appreciates the most, simply because there is nothing else in the community for children," said Amanda Elliott, the manager of the SWAG Family Resource Center. "It's definitely highly utilized and highly received."

The organization's early efforts consisted of a door-to-door survey in the surrounding community that asked neighbors what they thought the greatest need was for them and their families, said Canton, who was one of the women who spent her Saturday surveying people in neighborhoods like Majestic Oaks and Linton Oaks years ago. And ever since, SWAG has been trying to meet the needs that the community identified.

"Everything we've done, we've asked if it's something they would want," she said.

It is this grassroots approach that many SWAG leaders attribute to some of their success.

"I don't think there is any question why that's exactly why we are so successful," Benson said. "You cannot just go into a community and say 'this is what we are going to give you.' If you want community support, you absolutely have to ask them what they need."

Reaching out to the community members directly is probably the best thing that they ever could have done for themselves and for the community, said Terrance Brown, who has lived in the SWAG community with his wife and daughter since 2008.

"It's really personally engaging ... and I think you get better results that way," he said.

And these results can be seen in the statistics. According to Stephen Pennypacker, president and CEO of Partnership for Strong Families, their data shows a 45 percent decrease in the verified child maltreatment counts in the communities served by the SWAG Family Resource Center.

"Ever since the SWAG Family Resource Center opened, we have definitely been making a visible impact on that community," he said.

Canton said she sees this visible difference in the character of the neighborhood too—it no longer looks like everything is falling apart. Buildings have been re-done and freshly painted and there are no longer vacant

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apartments. The doors of yellow school buses swing open and drop off more children than ever before, showing that there are more families in the area too, she said.

But most importantly, there is a sense of community here that wasn't before, Benson said.

"Neighbors are talking to each other and they are forming relationships," Brown said. "It's becoming more of like a village environment."

It is this sense of community that makes Brown want to give back to the neighborhood that has given so much to him and his family. Last year, he was asked to volunteer as the community Santa Claus at Christmas time, and he's ready to do it again this year, he said.

"It's the SWAG magnet, it draws people in and it just makes people want to help," Brown said. "These guys have helped us out so I just want to give back and I do that by putting on a crazy red suit for the kids."

Brown is especially thankful for the programs SWAG offers to children in the area. Not only does his 7-year-old daughter frequently use the center, but he said the SWAG center help keep kids out of trouble.

"There's an old saying that says kids are like arrows, you just have to aim them in the right direction," Brown said. "SWAG is that archer that's taking these kids in and aiming them in the right direction. I just appreciate everything that they are doing down there."

This appreciation is emphasized in how the patrons care for the center, Elliot said. Community members will rally the kids to clean up the playground if it gets dirty from use, or notify her if something is wrong, like when she got a call at 9 p.m. when the water was running outside the center.

"For the community members, this is their center," she said. "It's not ours, it's theirs. People take pride in this place."

This sense of pride carries to SWAG's volunteers as well.

"I think what we have done with SWAG is probably one of the greatest things I've ever done in my life," Benson said. "It's been pretty epic."

With the foundation of SWAG built on a sense of community, its future looks bright.

"If we can continue to all come together as a community, we can ensure that SWAG stays here throughout the years," Brown said. "I want people to be talking about SWAG 100 years from now."

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