



## New CHILD Center to provide care, education

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Posted Jun 5, 2018 at 5:31 PM

Updated Jun 5, 2018 at 6:25 PM

Joan Canton for years has advocated for better resources to serve children in her neighborhood.

Her efforts and those of others who are part of the Southwest Advocacy Group, or SWAG, will again pay dividends with the opening of a new child-care center with an 8:30 a.m. ribbon-cutting ceremony Thursday morning at 820 SW 62<sup>nd</sup> Terrace in the Linton Oaks neighborhood.

“The vision has always been to meet the needs of the children and families who live in our area,” said Canton, who lived in Brooklyn, New York, for almost 40 years before moving to Linton Oaks off Southwest 20<sup>th</sup> Avenue about 14 years ago. “When our kids start school, they are not on the same reading level as kids who come from upper-income neighborhoods, and they need to be in order to have success early and later on in school.”

The new CHILD (Children’s Health Imagination Learning Development) Center joins the SWAG Family Resource Center and a health department-run neighborhood dental and health clinic as resources for the mostly low-income families who live in and around Linton Oaks.

The CHILD Center will focus on providing affordable and quality early childhood care and education, serve as a place where early childhood education experts, policymakers and researchers can study and learn best practices for working with preschool-aged children, said Dorothy Thomas, chairwoman of the center.

The center aims to equip parents with the skills needed to be the best advocates possible for their children, said Dorothy Benson, one of SWAG’s co-founders.

“Family and community engagement will be a major component of the center,” Benson said.

Parents have become increasingly more involved with their children as they take advantage of the resources offered by SWAG and its partners at the facilities that are open now, and SWAG officials expect that will continue at the CHILd Center, Thomas said.

Private donations, which came from one extremely generous anonymous donor and about 275 others, were instrumental in building the \$1 million center. The center also received a \$50,000 grant from the Women’s Giving Circle, an arm of the Community Foundation of North Central Florida, Benson said.

The center’s services will target kids ages 0 to 5, and will be provided by a host of partners, including the Alachua County Commission, Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida, Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County, O2BKids, School Board of Alachua County and others.

The center will offer 57 slots for students, and 37 of them will be for Head Start programming during part of the day, thanks to the School Board, Benson and Thomas said.

The center will be open from 6:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays, and will be a great resource for parents who have transportation issues, Benson said.

“We’ve heard a lot of stories about how difficult it is for parents in that area who rely on RTS (Regional Transit System) to get their children to Head Start,” Benson said.

The services and research at the center will greatly benefit the children, families and those who work in the field of early childhood care and education, said Patricia Snyder, director of the Zucker Center and the David Lawrence Jr. Chair in Early Childhood Studies in UF’s College of Education.

The center’s comprehensive curriculum will work to develop the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, literacy, social and performing and visual arts of the children who attend the center, Snyder said.

Lessons learned from research at the school will be passed on to help those in the early childhood care and education fields, Snyder said.

Canton, the mother of five daughters, a dozen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, said the CHILD Center will be another resource to help children and families living in the SWAG area.

“I’m very pleased that we are providing a continuum of care for people from all segments of the community to come and get services in a first-class environment,” Canton said.