







# SOUTHWEST ADVOCACY GROUP: MAKING STRIDES IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The children in southwest Gainesville didn't always have a playground. But, at the SWAG Family Resource Center, a state-of-the-art park is just one of many improvements being made in the community. Through a local grassroots program, people all over town have worked to bring previously unavailable services to the area's low-income families.

BY KRISTINA RAMER

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## THE BEGINNING

Within one square mile of 32607, where 20th Avenue bridges the interstate, is one of the most underserved areas in Gainesville.

At first, demographic surveys failed to identify southwest Gainesville as an area in need; more prosperous neighborhoods nearby contributed to higher average statistics for the entire zip code, showing normal crime rates, poverty levels and infant mortality rates. So, low-cost and free-resource centers were only funded across town where the numbers were more consistent. When residents of the area needed these services, they had to make the journey or do without.

But, that was before SWAG.

The Southwest Advocacy Group, or SWAG, began with just a few volunteers. In 2010, they conducted a neighborhood survey to ask residents about the programs they needed most. Overwhelmingly, the responses asked for activities and enrichment programs for their children, as well as a community center and a health clinic.

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"They came to us and said, 'If the county will make the investment, we will operate it,'" said county commissioner Lee Pinkoson. "They looked for help, not a handout."

The county purchased a small duplex in the back of the Linton Oaks neighborhood, and SWAG raised money to renovate it. Community businesses volunteered services and donated supplies and money to complete construction.

From the beginning, SWAG assumed the responsibility for directing the project and acting as the voice of the neighborhood to help direct the center and raise funds. The organization itself has only a few members, but it coordinates with 30 to 40 different partners to provide services ranging from free meals to financial planning.



So far, Pinkoson said, he believes it's been a success.

"This will be one of the things I look back on and say, 'We did something right with this one,'" he said.

The SWAG Family Resource Center

At any time of day, especially in the summer, the center is full of children. The school bus pulls up in front of the neighborhood, and children file into the center.

"Good afternoon," they say politely, and volunteers acknowledge each child by name.

The resource center is a cheery, yellow ranch-style building bordered with well-tended flowerbeds. Inside, two large bulletin boards advertise available job postings. Staff and volunteers assist patrons in applying for food stamps, Medicaid and other community supports.

PSF manages day-to-day activities. Two full-time employees oversee most operations, along with the help of several volunteers.

Previously, neighborhood children didn't have many resources for education outside of the classroom, said Jenn Petion, director of community and government relations for PSF. Because transportation is scarce in the area, children had to use the school bus that left when classes ended, and they couldn't take advantage of after-school programs or tutoring.

"When the bus stops, we have kids running to the center," Petion said. "They're excited to be here."

Parents often stop by to share success stories: a child who aced a spelling test for the first time or brought up scores by two letter grades. Teachers use the center to request specific tutoring programs for children and schedule parent-teacher conferences. When parents realize what the center can offer, they begin visiting as well.

"From the beginning, that center has received the highest traffic of any of our resource centers," Petion said.

On average, the center receives over 1,100 visits each month. Around Thanksgiving and Christmas, as families struggle to make ends meet, the count is much higher.

While a family may come in to visit the food pantry or pick up donated winter coats, Petion said, the organization's success lies in connecting people with deeper solutions such as financial literacy classes and help finding employment. These long-term investments are an effective tool to strengthen families.

"We want to help people improve themselves," Petion said. "You do that starting with individuals and families."

### THE PROGRAMS

Joan Canton, SWAG vice-chair and volunteer, said all of SWAG's programs are designed to meet short- and long-term needs. Families can receive basic services such as food and clothing, but SWAG also helps families to continue meeting those needs themselves over time through

programs for budgeting and meal planning. People who visit the center are encouraged to give feedback about other resources they'd like to see offered.

Most people want to be self-sufficient, and they want to be able to take advantage of programs that respect that, Canton said. But, poverty can be isolating without access to the right resources.

For example, the nearest grocery store is in Haile Plantation, and residents without cars can't get there easily, let alone transport groceries home. For families with young children, the trip is almost impossible. There is a convenience store within walking distance, but it usually offers inferior products at higher prices.

"It's very expensive being poor," Canton said.

Through Bread of the Mighty and SWAG's Oasis program, the center offers after-school snacks for children who use the tutoring program, and it also supplies breakfast, lunch and afternoon snacks during the summer months when school is out of session. Families also visit the food pantry throughout the year — during Thanksgiving in 2014, the SWAG Family Resource Center, along with the Preservation and Enhancement District and many other partners, gave out 220 complete meals, including turkeys.

A free clothing closet gives residents everything from winter coats to interview outfits to newborn clothing. CareerSource comes in twice each month to give advice on finding employment.

Low-income families have different problems, Canton said, but like all families, they want to build better futures and teach their children to do the same. They just need the means to do it, and SWAG and the SWAG Family Resource Center hope to continue providing that.

Miriam Gonzalez, SWAG board member, said the good schools in the Gainesville area attract some families. In the past, some parents just wanted to figure out how to claim an address in the right district without living in the neighborhood. Now, they actually want to be in the area.

"That's a big change," she said. "A very, very nice change."

### THE SOUTHWEST HEALTH CLINIC

Soon after the resource center opened, SWAG began working on the second part of its vision: a health clinic right in the SWAG neighborhoods. The group again approached the county commission with a plan: SWAG would work with the county, the Alachua County Health





Department and the private sector to create a health clinic right across the street from the resource center. The county signed on, providing the initial funding to purchase another small apartment building in the neighborhood.

To determine the project's viability, the health department ran computer models on the neighborhood to measure treatments that could have been avoided with consistent, regular care. The findings concluded that in 2013, there would have been 3,276 avoidable ER visits and 267 avoidable in-patient stays. SWAG conducted surveys of over 200 residents in the neighborhoods and found that for over 50 percent of residents, transportation was an obstacle to receiving health care.

SWAG hopes the clinic can reduce those numbers. Until the building opens in early 2015, a temporary clinic will continue to come on Tuesdays and Thursdays to provide many of the same services. Since many residents don't have cars, making the trip across town to receive services from the health department can take 90 minutes and three buses. It's a grueling trip for the elderly, the mobility-impaired and those with sick children. But with the new clinic, health care will be available to most residents within walking distance or one short bus ride. The project really began to come together when the Alachua County Health Department secured a \$300,000 grant from the Florida Blue Cross/Blue Shield foundation for the operation of the clinic. This momentum allowed SWAG to raise the additional funds necessary to renovate an apartment building into a proper health clinic.

"This collaboration and partnership is consistent with the Florida Department of Health's mission to promote, protect and improve the life of all people in Florida," said Paul Myers, administrator of the Alachua County Health Department.

The clinic will contain five medical exam rooms as well as four dental exam rooms. It will provide an assortment of public health services, including programs focused on disease control, women and children's health, and increasing dental services capacity. The clinic promises to be well used — the temporary clinic averages over 100 visits per month, even though it is only open 12 hours a week.


"This project was something that people wanted to support from the beginning," said Dorothy Thomas, SWAG special projects and fundraising chair. "People like Dr. Bill Martin stepped up in ways that I would have never imagined possible — he gave us four dental chairs and an x-ray machine that made the dental arm of the clinic a near-term possibility."

The construction manager for the project, CPPI Inc., estimates that the bricks-and-mortar clinic will be completed by spring 2014.

#### SWAG'S FUTURE

SWAG has had many successes so far, but there are many more things it hopes to accomplish in the near future. In 2014, it began work with several partners, including the University of Florida, on an early learning center to serve the youngest members of the community and their parents.

"We feel like this is a pivotal time in the life of our organization," said Dr. Tony Delisle, SWAG board chair. "The synergist impact of these projects and the people and organizations that have come together to make them happen is allowing us to positively impact the trajectory of our community and its people."

To learn more about SWAG or to make a donation, please visit [www.swadvocacygroup.org](http://www.swadvocacygroup.org). 

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