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Children's Home Society CEO's mission is to 'build a bridge to success' for Central Florida youth

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by Denise Hicks

The health and welfare of Central Florida's children is one of the most important issues our society today - and no more so than for Andry Sweet, president and CEO of Children's Home Society of Florida.

That's why her nonprofit works with local communities as some parents find themselves facing mounting financial challenges, in addition to poverty, hunger, abuse and homelessness. As the issues continue to grow, the need to find viable solutions becomes even greater, and Children's Home Society of Florida is one of the area's nonprofit agencies helping provide that solution, Sweet said.

"[Our] goal is to deliver the right solutions at the right time to keep more kids safe at home with their families, by partnering with parents to provide more services before crises happens."

To meet those needs, Children's Home Society of Florida has 16 locations statewide. Here's more about the work it does in local communities:

Why did you choose to work in the nonprofit sector? My entire career (30-plus years) has been in the field of nonprofit and public-sector work in child welfare and behavioral health services. I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. Growing up, I was blessed with a stable, loving family, with all the support and encouragement a child should have - a lot of opportunities and very few barriers. Early in my career, I witnessed, firsthand, the odds facing our children. Why is it that your ZIP code or the color of your skin can predict your success in life? This is what has driven me over the years: changing odds to opportunities, so every child can realize their full potential.

What are some of Children's Home Society's biggest accomplishments in the past year? So many families were affected by Covid-19 and the struggling economy, as well as the social unrest and inequities exposed this year. Family stress was escalated, as was the need for resources and support. At the same time, our ability to connect with families was compromised. Our traditional outreach and engagement strategies (in communities and in schools) were no longer possible. Even more alarming, calls to the child abuse hotline dropped more than 30%, and we were concerned that children were at greater risk of abuse or neglect if we waited for schools and the community to come back online. We had to think differently about outreach, and we had to make it comfortable for people to reach out for help before a crisis impacted a child. About a month into the pandemic, we launched the CHS Family Support Warm Line statewide. We created a digital marketing campaign to encourage families to reach out and get free supportive counseling. We repositioned our therapists, who could no longer see children in schools, to offer counseling through telehealth. We asked funders who typically sponsored our special events to give to help fill this need in our communities. To date, we have received more than 5,000 calls. Each call was an opportunity to build resiliency in families and prevent the need for more intensive and intrusive interventions down the road.

What's a little-known fact about your organization? We were involved in the creation of several laws affecting children, including child labor laws and compulsory education laws. Additionally, we were involved in creating what is now known as the Department of Children & Families and, more recently, we helped create several community-based care agencies when Florida was moving toward privatized child welfare.

Children's Home Society of Florida is also a founding partner of the Community Partnership Schools model, in partnership with the University of Central Florida and Orange County Public Schools, which first launched at Evans High School nearly a decade ago and since has been replicated 25 more times throughout Florida. Our statewide presence allows us to improve the lives of nearly 60,000 children and family members every year through a variety of programs in early childhood services; child welfare; counseling and other mental health services; community partnership schools; and mentoring, outreach and job training.

What was your agency's mission impact in the past year? Over the past year, we:

- Provided immediate counseling and support to more 5,000 youth and adults who called the Family Support Warm Line during their greatest time of need - and more than 13,000 children and family members found hope and healing through our counseling and mental health services
- Safely reunified 1,043 children in foster care with their families
- Created forever families for 769 children through adoption
- Helped more than 15,000 children and family members create safe, strong foundations through our early childhood services, and those services have a 98% success rate of keeping children safe at home with their families and out of foster care
- Served more than 19,000 students through our Community Partnership Schools, helping to remove barriers to learning by providing supportive connections to counseling, health and wellness services, expanded learning opportunities, and family and community engagement opportunities

What are your greatest areas of need? Based on the volume of calls and texts we receive to the Family Support Warm Line, it's clear that this is meeting a very real need in our communities. Because it is free to anyone in Florida, one of our greatest needs is funding to continue the Warm Line. It costs approximately \$100 to provide an hour of counseling to an individual in need, and we want to ensure that youth, parents and adults can continue to receive this support during their greatest time of need.

We are heavily focused on delivering programs and evidence-based initiatives that eliminate the root causes of child abuse and neglect, as those services have a life-long impact on children and families, and they impact families for generations - preventing more children from ever enduring the pain and trauma that leads to entry into the foster care system.

How can businesses and/or business leaders work with your agency? Support our mission locally. Volunteer. Serve on our local board. Join the cabinet in one of our community partnership schools. Spread the word about CHS and our mission. Invite us to come speak to your business or organization to learn how you can partner with us in creating brighter futures for our community's children. Partner with us on drives that provide much-needed items to support our programs, children and families. Offer internships, apprenticeships or mentoring to youth who are transitioning to adulthood. No matter what your passion is, there's an opportunity to join us in advancing our mission.

How do you measure success? So many ways. Every time a child experiences a healthy, safe childhood with their family; when a child enters school ready to learn with fewer odds and more opportunities; when a child graduates from high school, ready for college or a career; and when a child turns 18 with a solid support system and at least one positive adult role model in their life. And, as adults, when they have their own children, they have broken the cycle of poverty, abuse and neglect and are ready to parent.

Children's Home Society of Florida

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