

**December
2025**



Children's Services Annual Report



WWW.MYMANATEE.ORG



**For additional information on Children's
Services in Manatee County, please visit
mymanatee.org**



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Member Message

Carolann Garafola, Child Advocate

"I joined the Children's Services Advisory Board four years ago, inspired by a lifelong commitment to supporting families of children and adults with special needs. With more than 50 years of experience in this field, I value the opportunity to work alongside a dedicated group of community members who share a common purpose—ensuring that Manatee County's children have access to programs that help them grow, learn, and succeed."

Our work is guided by thoughtful discussion, collaboration, and a shared responsibility to invest public funds wisely. Each decision reflects our commitment to strengthening local services and building a community where every child has the chance to thrive."



The Children's Services Advisory Board (CSAB) holds a day-long annual retreat dedicated to identifying and discussing issues affecting children and families in Manatee County. Although no formal actions or votes take place during the retreat, the meeting is conducted "in the sunshine," ensuring transparency and public accessibility. This annual session gives CSAB members the focused time they need to:

- Review current issues and emerging concerns impacting children and families
- Examine community data, trends, and outcomes related to children's services
- Assess successes, gaps, and areas needing improvement across local programs
- Collaboratively refine Board priorities, targets, and strategic direction
- Strengthen their shared understanding of community needs to guide future funding recommendations

The retreat helps the Board maintain a clear and collaborative approach to supporting Manatee County's children—ensuring that the community's investments reflect real needs and promote positive outcomes.

Children's Services Advisory Board



Xtavia Bailey
Chair
Child Advocate

Jannon Pierce
Vice Chair
Child Advocate



Connie Shingledecker
Criminal Justice Representative

Hon. Scott Brownell
Judge (Ret.)



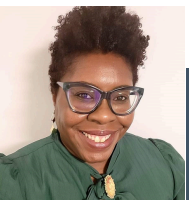
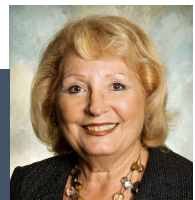
Rita Smith
NCAAP Representative

Heather Felton
School District Representative



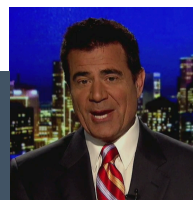
Debbie Tapp
United Way Representative

Carolanne Garafola
Child Advocate



Cassandra Mitchell
Mental Health Provider

Graham Ledger
Child Advocate



Kristin Gallagher
*Department of Children
and Families*

Laurie McCracken
Child Advocate



The Children's Services Advisory Board currently has one open seat for a physician. Applications are open for interested and qualified individuals living in Manatee County who would like to serve on behalf of Manatee County children. www.mymanatee.org - search "Children's Services Advisory Board"

State of the Community

Children and families in Manatee County continue to make progress in education, health, and early development. Yet, many still face persistent challenges in accessing affordable childcare, behavioral health care, food, housing, and other essential supports. A coordinated, prevention-focused approach remains critical to ensuring every child can thrive.

Child & Family Well-Being

County partners are aligning priorities around prevention, literacy, health, and stability. Developing a cross-sector child well-being dashboard would enable data-driven coordination and equitable resource distribution across neighborhoods. Manatee County partners with Unite Us and will move not-for-profits that receive investment through the millage to that dashboard.

Child Removal Rates & Foster Care

According to the Florida Department of Children and Families, Manatee County continues to experience child removal rates above the state average. Between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2025, the county recorded 635 removals to out of home care, including foster care, relative placements, and non-relative placements—a rate of 5.3 per 100 children compared to the statewide rate of 3.7. The leading causes of removal were caregiver drug or alcohol misuse and inadequate supervision. Despite elevated removal rates, Manatee County's timeliness to permanency consistently exceeds state performance. During the same period, 36.84% of children achieved permanency within 12 months, surpassing the statewide rate of 30.20%. While this reflects meaningful progress, the data underscores a continued and urgent need for upstream prevention efforts and family-stabilization services to reduce removals and strengthen long-term child and family well-being.

Children with Special Needs

While early intervention services do exist, many families experience delays due to limited staffing, long waitlists, and slow referral processes. Strengthening the system through timely developmental screening, coordinated family navigation, expanded therapy opportunities, and smooth transitions into school services would greatly enhance developmental outcomes for children with special needs.

Early Care & Kindergarten Readiness

In Fall 2024, 1,454 of 3,591 (40%) Manatee County FAST (Florida Assessment of Student Thinking) takers achieved "Kindergarten Readiness" (FLDOE). Limited infant/toddler care, staff shortages, and affordability barriers persist. Expanding high-quality early learning and family engagement programs is essential to improve readiness and long-term achievement.



Food & Shelter

According to Feeding Tampa Bay, child food insecurity affects roughly 1 in 4 children in Manatee County, and many families face rising rent burdens. Food and housing instability undermine children's health and school performance. Strengthening meal programs, mobile food access, and housing supports is key to family stability.

Physical & Mental Health

Based on the result of the Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS), a substantial proportion of youth report symptoms of depression (feelings of worthlessness, failure and sadness). Behavioral health needs among children and youth are increasing. With provider shortages and long wait times, expanding services to include in-school and in-home mental health programs, enhance mental health screening, and access to telehealth will help close this critical gap.

Safety: Preventable Child Deaths Due to Drowning & Unsafe Sleep

The Manatee County Child Death Review Team recognizes drowning and unsafe sleep practices as leading causes of preventable causes of death among Florida children under five. Manatee County averages 3 child drownings per year, now ranking 16th among Florida counties. Manatee County averages 5 infant deaths annually (2020-2024) that are linked to unsafe sleep environments. In both situations, sustained education for the community and service providers, along with essential equipment-distribution programs, are vital to prevention.

Stabilizing Families & Parent Education

Rising living costs, food insecurity, and transportation barriers strain families. Evidence-based home visiting, coordinated economic supports, parenting education, and access to community resources help prevent child maltreatment and strengthen family resilience.

Youth Development & Literacy

Access to quality after-school and enrichment programs varies by neighborhood. Roughly half of third graders read on grade level, underscoring the need for early literacy interventions, mentoring, and career-readiness programs to promote lifelong success. Based on data from the 2024-25 school year, 35% of 3rd graders who attended VPK somewhere in the state, were 60% more likely to be on grade level for 3rd grade reading. Showing the demonstrating the connection of quality early education and youth literacy.

Children's Services Advisory Board

Priorities and Targets

A.

Children are safe in their homes, free from abuse or neglect.

A1. Children remain in their homes free from abuse and neglect, avoiding the need to re-enter foster care

A2. Children who enter foster care gain a permanent, stable, and nurturing home within 12 months and remain there.

B.

Children develop literacy skills necessary to be successful in school.

B1. Children who demonstrate below developmentally appropriate or grade level literacy skills, reduce their existing gap towards developmentally appropriate or age-appropriate literacy skills.

B2. Children who attain grade level or developmentally appropriate literacy skills will maintain grade level or developmentally appropriate literacy skills.



C.

Children have the skills necessary to function appropriately in all environments.

C1. Children with symptoms of adverse indicators of behavioral health as identified objectively by a measure of level of functioning determined by the program will build protective factors.

C2. Children who use drugs, alcohol, or other substances, or are at risk of use, will stop or resist use, and establish a plan to manage triggers.

C3. Children with one or more incidents of referral or suspension for aggression, bullying, harassment, or other negative action aimed towards another group or individual, will reduce those incidents.

C4. Children will learn and demonstrate appropriate social, emotional, and impulse control and regulation skills in relevant environments as identified objectively by a measure of level of functioning as determined by the program.



D.

Parents and caregivers have the skills and resources needed to stop preventable child death.

D1. Children will be safely placed to sleep in accordance with the Sleep Baby Safely initiative of Manatee County.

D2. Children and families will implement water safety practices at home and in all environments where water safety is a concern.

Financial Data FY23-FY25

Program Investments by Service Category

Early Care and Education

- FY2024-25: \$4,978,953
- FY2023-24: \$1,130,504
- FY2022-23: \$3,512,736

Food & Shelter

- FY2024-25: \$738,802
- FY2023-24: \$933,558
- FY2022-23: \$956,554

Physical & Mental Health and Safety

- FY2024-25: \$1,728,547
- FY2023-24: \$1,538,166
- FY2022-23: \$2,189,648

Special Needs

- FY2024-25: \$468,480
- FY2023-24: \$691,701
- FY2022-23: \$862,407

Youth Development & Success

- FY2024-25: \$7,889,750
- FY2023-24: \$4,420,012
- FY2022-23: \$4,853,477

Stabilizing Families & Parent Education

- FY2024-25: \$4,251,131
- FY2023-24: \$5,020,606
- FY2022-23: \$5,310,070

Demographic Data FY23-FY25

**FY
2
0
2
3**

51 programs served

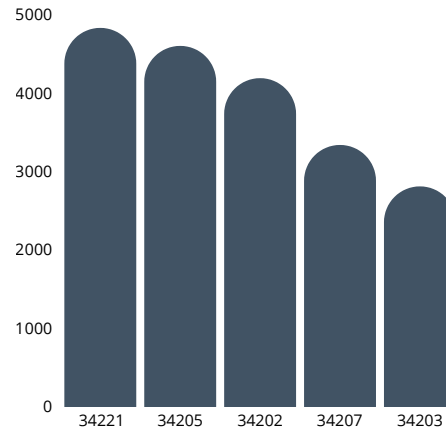
\$15,078,577 total
investment

30,963 clients served

46% Male

54% Female

Highest Zip Codes Served



**FY
2
0
2
4**

51 programs served

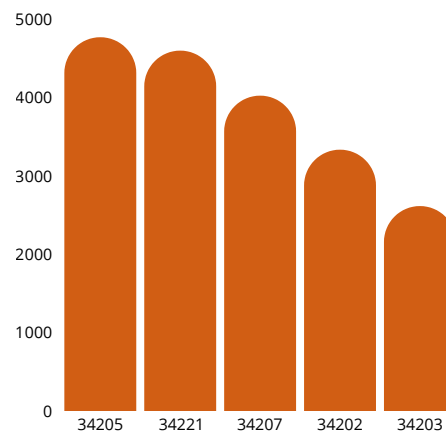
\$14,630,761 total
investment

29,137 clients served

47% Male

53% Female

Highest Zip Codes Served



**FY
2
0
2
5**

55 programs served

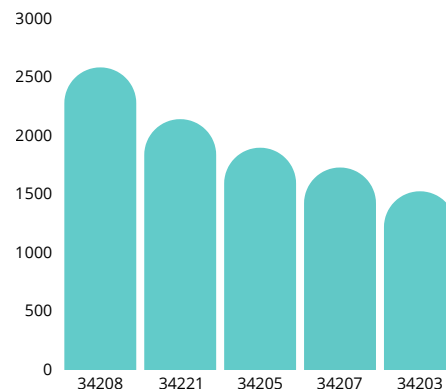
\$16,789,583 total
investment

35,292 clients served

46% Male

54% Female

Highest Zip Codes Served



Manatee County's Drowning Prevention Initiative



The Manatee County Drowning Prevention Initiative represents a collaborative, community-driven effort focused on decreasing preventable drowning incidents through comprehensive education, public awareness, and increased accessibility to water safety resources. The initiative underscores the critical role of attentive supervision, swimming competency, the use of appropriate safety equipment near water, and preparedness for emergency response. Its primary objective is to foster a strong culture of water safety that safeguards lives and enhances the overall well-being of individuals and families throughout Manatee County.

POOL SAFETY

NEVER LET YOUR CHILD HAVE ACCESS TO A POOL ALONE

Constant Supervision

Nothing is better than watching your child. If child is missing, check pool first.

Water Watcher

Designate someone as a "Water Watcher" when swimming. Take 15 minute shifts.

Fences

Enclose the pool with fence at least 4 feet in height with self latching and self closing gates.



Remove Temptation

Remove all pool toys when not in use.

Alarms & Locks

Install high locks and alarms on ALL door and windows leading to the pool. Remove all pet doors. Add pool surface alarms to pool or personal immersion alarm for child.



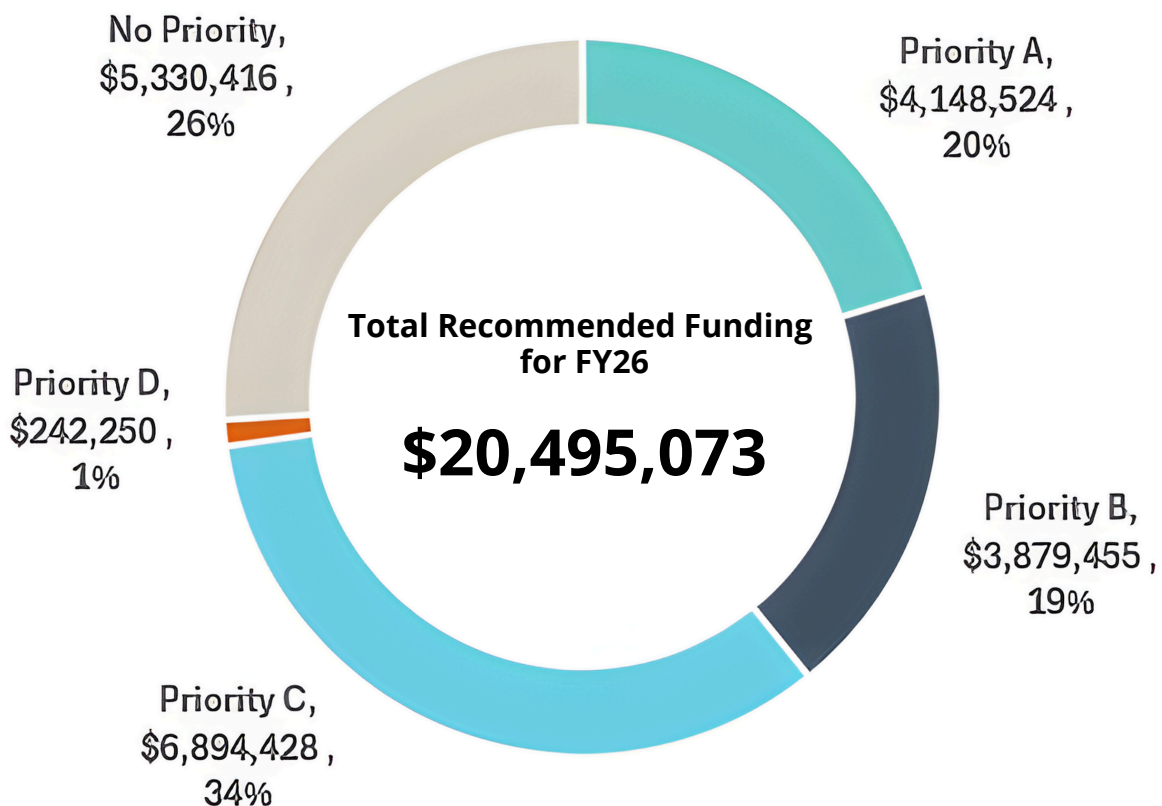
For additional resources on water safety:

- <https://www.poolsafely.gov/>
- <https://ndpa.org/>
- <https://www.watersmartfl.com/>

Fiscal Year 2026

Program Investments by Priority

Manatee County Government utilizes available funds from the Children's Services Dedicated Millage to ensure a lasting positive impact on the lives of Manatee County's youth. These youth have experienced abuse or neglect, have adverse childhood experiences or risk factors, or come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These funds provide financial assistance, through investment, to local non-profit organizations dedicated to helping children and their families achieve necessary improvements and mitigate risk factors.



\$20,495,073 was approved with a total of 63 programs receiving investment through the Children's Services Millage.

Fiscal Year 2026

Program Investments by Service Category



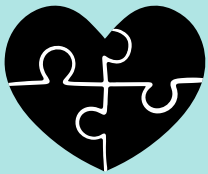
Early Care and Education- \$4,810,340

- Early Care and Education Subsidy and Match Program, Early Learning Coalition
- Head Start & Early Head Start, Step Up Suncoast*
- Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, Step Up Suncoast*
- Nemours Reading BrightStart!, Early Learning Coalition*
- Parents as Teachers, Step Up Suncoast*



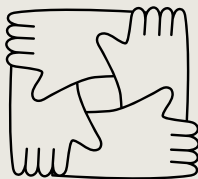
Food and Shelter- \$738,802

- Emergency Family Food & Baby Baskets, Meals on Wheels
- Housing-Focused Family Shelter, The Salvation Army
- Residential Program, Manatee Children's Services
- SafePlace2B, Family Resources*
- Weekend Meals, Feeding Empty Little Tummies



Physical and Mental Health and Safety- \$1,896,710

- Baker Act Youth, Centerstone of Florida*
- Blue Butterfly Family Grief Center, Tidewell Foundation*
- Children's Community Action Team, Centerstone of Florida*
- Children's Counseling (Domestic Violence), Hope Family Services
- Collaborative Action Therapy for Children's Health, Step Up Suncoast
- Coordinated Approach to Child Health, Early Learning Coalition
- Sexual Assault Child Advocacy and Therapy for Children, Centerstone of Florida
- Sexual Offense Abuse Reactive, Insight Counseling*
- Trauma Informed Services, All Star Children's Foundation*
- Community Youth Response Service, Jewish Family and Children*
- Adolescent Diversion and Assistance Program, Jewish Family and Children*
- Kids Personal Safety, Manatee Children's Services



Special Needs- \$468,480

- Adaptive Riding and Equine Assisted Services, Sarasota Manatee Association for Riding Therapy*
- Children's Therapy, Easter Seals*
- Dream Oaks Camp, Foundation for Dreams*
- Family Support Services, Easter Seals

**Claimed a priority*

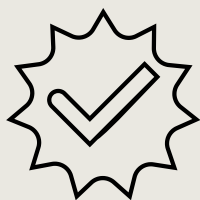
Fiscal Year 2026

Program Investments by Service Category (continued)



Stabilizing Families and Parent Education- \$4,251,131

- Child Advocacy Center, Manatee Children's Services*
- Child Welfare Prevention, Safe Children's Coalition*
- Chosen Families, Parenting Matters*
- Early Childhood Court, The Florida Center for Early Childhood*
- Family Preservation and Reunification, Safe Children's Coalition*
- Healthy Families Manatee, Step Up Suncoast*
- Parent Partner Program, Parenting Matters*
- Systems Advocate Program, Sarasota County Health Department
- Whole Child, Step Up Suncoast
- NAMI Parents for Parents, NAMI Sarasota and Manatee Counties*
- Sleep Baby Safely, Early Learning Coalition*



Youth Development and Success- \$7,889,750

- Alternative Path to Success, Next Generation Academics*
- AMIKids Manatee Prevention, AMIKids Manatee*
- Before and After School, Summer Enrichment Plus, United Community Center*
- Before School, After School, & Camp Myakka, Myakka City Community Center
- Community Effort to Reduce Truancy by Assessing Individualized Needs, Family Resources
- Foundation for Excellence, Palmetto Youth Center*
- Future Leaders Academy, UnidosNow
- Girls Alternative Program for Success, Just for Girls*
- Great Futures Start Here, Boys & Girls Club of Manatee County*
- Teen Health Educator, Healthy Teens Coalition*
- Helping Young People Excel, Palmetto Youth Center*
- Iron Sharpening Iron, Educational Consultants Consortium*
- One to One Mentoring, Big Brothers Big Sisters*
- Stepping Up to Success, Just for Girls*
- Success4Life Training, Replay Outreach*
- Summer Blast Camp, Manatee County Government*
- Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Program, Pace Center for Girls*
- Teen Program, Boys & Girls Club of Manatee County*
- Youth Intervention Program, Safe Children's Coalition*
- After School Program, Creative Arts Academy*
- Level Up 360 Youth, Genesis*
- Juvenile Justice Ministry, Suncoast Youth for Christ*
- Mentoring Matters, Take Stock in Children of Manatee County
- Musical Motion, Parenting Matters*
- Summer Youth Employment Program, Suncoast Workforce Board
- School-Year Program, Avenue941*

**Claimed a priority*

To our valued community partners and organizations,

The Children's Services Team extends its sincere appreciation to each of your organizations for the essential services you provide to the youth and families of Manatee County. Your dedication strengthens protective factors, opens pathways for success, and supports children who are most at risk.

The continued investment of millage funding plays a critical role in sustaining and expanding these vital programs. This dedicated support ensures children receive timely interventions, access to safe and enriching environments, opportunities to build essential skills, and the guidance needed to develop strong, resilient futures. The positive outcomes made possible through millage-funded services reflect our community's shared commitment to safeguard and uplift its youngest residents.

Thank you for your steadfast partnership, your compassion, and your unwavering advocacy. Together, we are improving lives today and creating lasting impact for generations to come.

With gratitude,

Your Manatee County Children's Services Team



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MORE INFORMATION

There are several reliable websites available on the state of children and families in Manatee County covering a myriad of topics. These links are accessible on the Children's Services pages of the Manatee County Government website.

Please see these websites for more information on data related to Manatee County children and families:

Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

- www.gradelevelreading.net/

Community Indicators Dashboard

- www.cfsarasota.org

Florida Department of Children and Families

- www.myflfamilies.com/

Florida Health Charts

- www.flhealthcharts.gov

Florida Policy Institute

- www.floridapolicy.org/roadmap

Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey

- www.myflfamilies.com/services/samh/florida-youth-substance-abuse-survey

Sleep Safely Baby Initiative of Manatee County (ELC)

- www.elc-manatee.org/Sleep-Baby-Safely

United for ALICE

- www.unitedforalice.org/

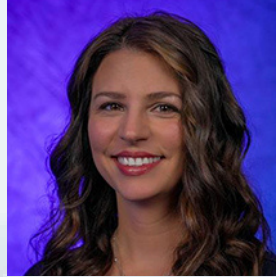
United Way Suncoast

- www.unitedwaysuncoast.org/what-we-do/

Manatee County Board of County Commissioners



Carol Ann Felts
District 1



Amanda Ballard
District 2
CSAB Liason



Tal Siddique
District 3



Mike Rahn
District 4



Dr. Bob McCann
District 5



Jason Bearden
District 6 At Large



George Kruse
District 7 At Large
Chairman

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