

A CENTRAL FLORIDA FOUNDATION REPORT

2025-2026

# Community Landscape



**CENTRAL FLORIDA**  
**FOUNDATION**



**THRIVE CENTRAL FLORIDA**





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# About Central Florida Foundation

## Building Community by Building Philanthropy

WE ARE YOUR  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION.

### CENTRAL FLORIDA FOUNDATION

As our region's community foundation, Central Florida Foundation serves as a launchpad for high-impact philanthropy. Championing the collective power of head, heart and dollar, we coordinate the commitment and investment of philanthropists, nonprofits, and community partners to target today's most critical challenges and those on the horizon to truly transform our community. The Foundation also offers expert giving advice, a personalized approach to managing charitable funds, and the capacity to convene collaboration across sectors. Learn more at [cffound.org](http://cffound.org).

## WE BELIEVE IN



### COLLABORATION

We bring all the essential cross-sector partners to the table.



### IDEAS

We generate ideas to address the root-cause of the challenge rather than simply treating the symptoms.



### COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

We connect strategy to philanthropy, coordinating community-wide investment into sustainable solutions.



### INNOVATION

We pilot big-picture, systemic solutions with the potential to change things for good.



### LEGACY

We help community-minded individuals establish a meaningful legacy with lasting impact.

## Connect with us.

@cffound     





# Community Landscape

Powered by Thrive Central Florida, creating a healthy and thriving community.

Central Florida has become one of the most attractive places to call home—and for good reason. Known globally as a top vacation spot thanks to renowned attractions like Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando, and SeaWorld, the Orlando area is rapidly transforming into a premier relocation destination. According to the [Orlando Economic Partnership](#), Central Florida sees about 1,000 new residents weekly, second only to Austin, Texas. Between July 1, 2022, and July 1, 2023, the Orlando metropolitan area alone welcomed over 55,000 new residents.

Within the broader Central Florida footprint, countless advantages appeal to residents. One of the most celebrated benefits is the inviting climate, with abundant sunshine nearly year-round and mild winters. This weather encourages an active outdoor lifestyle, including activities such as biking along lush trails, boating on numerous lakes, or simply relaxing on nearby beaches.

Affordability is another significant advantage for people moving in from out of state. Florida's lack of state income tax allows residents to keep more of their earnings compared to those in other states. While housing prices have increased recently, the region remains more affordable than many metropolitan areas newcomers often leave behind. Additionally, lower utility costs—due to minimal heating needs during the mild winters—further enhance affordability.

Central Florida's global reputation as a tourist destination drives the local economy, thanks largely to its world-famous attractions. However, the economic footprint of the region is expanding beyond tourism and hospitality. Growth sectors include technology, aerospace, healthcare, and education, bolstered by institutions like the University of Central Florida, one of America's largest universities, and Rollins College, ranked the number one private university in the South in 2024. These educational hubs fuel opportunities for innovation, research, and professional advancement.

The appeal of Central Florida also lies in its diverse community footprint, blending vibrant urban experiences with the charm of

smaller, rural towns. Cities such as Mt. Dora and Sanford offer residents quaint downtown districts rich with arts, culture, and community events. Meanwhile, Orlando has established itself as a thriving culinary destination, attracting top chefs, influencers, and Michelin-starred restaurants.

Despite these strengths, the Central Florida footprint does face challenges. Lower wages can make financial stability difficult, leading many families to rely increasingly on community resources like food pantries. Homelessness is on the rise, and affordable housing remains elusive for many residents. Transportation barriers also exist, limiting employment opportunities for individuals without reliable access to vehicles.

Fortunately, Central Florida's dedicated community leaders and robust independent sector are proactively addressing these challenges, committed to creating an inclusive and sustainable environment that enhances the quality of life for all residents.



### Thrive: A Framework for Sustainable Development

Central Florida Foundation's Thrive framework aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of global goals agreed upon by 193 countries. Thrive localizes this effort and focuses on five key areas: Education, Health and Well-Being, Livability, Economic Stability, and Community and Social Connection. These areas are closely linked to the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) and align with the Orange County Pillars.

Through the Thrive framework, data is gathered on community well-being and engages residents and leaders in setting shared goals. At its core, Thrive is about discovery, collaboration, practical solutions, and accountability.

The horizon goal for Thrive is to create a healthy and thriving community. A healthy and thriving community is one with:




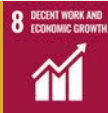


















- ✓ Income for basic needs, at a minimum
- ✓ Stable housing
- ✓ Nutritious food
- ✓ Transportation access
- ✓ Good educational opportunities
- ✓ Social networks
- ✓ Healthcare homes or primary care
- ✓ Fresh air, recreation, and arts & culture
- ✓ A properly working system of justice
- ✓ A feeling of safety
- ✓ Cultural competence and language accessibility in services
- ✓ Access to digital connectivity and technology



The Thrive framework and initiative by the Foundation catalogs data addressing key metrics for community well-being and convenes local residents and leaders for their input in developing shared goals.

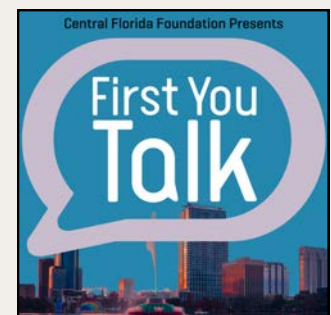
Below is a chart that shares the Thrive focus areas and the aligning SDG[s].

## Thrive Focus Areas and Aligned SDGs

<b>Economic Stability</b> 	   
<b>Healthcare</b> 	
<b>Livability</b> 	       
<b>Education</b> 	
<b>Community and Social Connection</b> 	  

Each Thrive Focus Area has an associated Impact Fund held at CFF, with the goal of strategic grantmaking that pilots, scales, accelerates or fills gaps [PSAFg] within that space.

**Check out our podcast episode on PSAFg strategy!**



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## About this Community Landscape

This Community Landscape report provides a high-level overview of the Central Florida community through the lens of the Thrive Framework, highlighting critical challenges we face when addressing complex social issues. It also identifies opportunities to engage with or support ongoing community efforts. While not exhaustive, think of this as a springboard—an invitation to collaborate, innovate, and make a real impact in solving some of our region’s toughest challenges.

Following each focus area’s overview, challenges and opportunities are outlined, with many sources linked for easy access for further research.

For questions on this report, please reach out to Sandi Vidal at [svidal@cffound.org](mailto:svidal@cffound.org).



**Thank you to the organizations who answered our pre-Community Landscape survey to help us build this report.**

West Leesburg Community Development Corporation  
Florida Immigration Law and Justice Center  
The Indian River Institute for the Creative Arts  
Fix It Forward, Inc.  
Pathlight HOME  
Timucua Arts Foundation  
Peace and Justice Institute  
TeamUP FSL  
Conductive Education Center of Orlando [CECO]  
Southeastern Food Bank  
Little Ray Children’s Books, Inc.  
Southeastern Food Bank  
HomeAid Orlando  
Cornerstone Connections  
Entryway CFL  
Catholic Charities of Central Florida  
Hands On Orlando, Inc.  
Hispanic Federation

Black Homeschoolers of Central Florida, Inc.  
Covenant House Florida  
Open Scene  
IMPOWER  
Trinity Fitness  
Population Relief International Corp.  
The Story Mission / Istoria Ministry Group  
Neighbors Network  
Our Sanctuary Corp.  
Brevard County Foster and Adoptive Parent Association  
First Nature Foundation  
Per Scholas, Inc. – Orlando  
New Hope for Kids  
CORE Foundation, Inc.  
The New Heartgiver, Inc.  
Foundation for a Healthier West Orange  
Magnify of Central Florida  
Yoga 4 Change







## Economic Stability



Economic stability is foundational to thriving communities, yet achieving and maintaining it poses significant challenges across the housing, workforce, and transportation sectors. In our region, increasing housing costs coupled with limited availability in the lower to moderate price ranges have escalated homelessness and created barriers for many seeking stable living conditions. Furthermore, workforce shortages and wage stagnation continue to limit economic opportunities, making it challenging for individuals and families to build financial resilience.

Transportation is a critical factor impacting economic stability. With limited and often costly public transit options, car ownership becomes essential, adding financial pressure to already strained budgets. Seniors and lower-income workers are often disproportionately affected by these transportation barriers, highlighting the urgent need for improved infrastructure and more accessible transit solutions.

Despite these challenges, our community is actively pursuing positive and promising solutions. Initiatives such as the Low Barrier Shelter Group, which focuses on solutions for

the unsheltered, have embraced innovative programs like the "Dignity Bus," which provides immediate relief and connections to long-term housing solutions. With many neighborhoods saying "not in my backyard" [NIMBY] to homeless shelters, the group will have to continue to seek innovative solutions such as programs like Housing Connectors with Zillow and leverage technology and community collaboration to effectively address homelessness.

Workforce-focused programs, including CareerSource training and Per Scholas tech training, offer vital opportunities for skill-building and upward mobility, enhancing employment prospects across multiple sectors.

Further opportunities such as zoning reforms to encourage more attainable housing, employer-sponsored transportation programs, and childcare subsidies can further support financial resilience. By embracing these proactive initiatives and strengthening community collaboration, we can significantly mitigate economic pressures and create a robust foundation for sustained economic stability and growth.



## Challenges and Opportunities

The following list shares challenges ⚠️ and opportunities 💡 within this focus area. Challenges are obstacles while opportunities hold potential for solutions.

### Housing



#### Rising Homelessness

The increased price of housing and the low supply numbers for attainable price point housing have led to an increase in homelessness. New legislation [HB 1365] and anti-camping ordinances have contributed to the rise in arrests for the unsheltered and general worry about this issue.



**Listen to Episode 7 of the First You Talk Podcast: Why is solving homelessness so hard? Part 2**



#### Housing Affordability & Availability

The housing market can be a bit complex with a combination of higher prices, higher insurance premiums, and higher mortgage interest rates it can be difficult for the average consumer to purchase a home. While prices show signs of stabilization, home listings average 4.67 months on the market [as of Dec 2024], and rental rates are projected to rise between 2.4%–5% depending on location. Housing and shelter inquiries are the top requests to Heart of Florida United Way's line 2-1-1.



#### Insurance Cost

Insurance costs are high due to a number of factors including hurricanes, lawsuits, and the large number of Florida homeowners. In 2023, a law was passed to reform tort laws and prevent the abuse of benefits. Several insurers have left the state making it more difficult to obtain insurance. This trend seems to be shifting with some new companies entering the market.



#### The Low Barrier Shelter Group

This partnership between Homeless Services Network and local governments is exploring low-barrier shelters to give people experiencing homelessness a place to stay off the streets while being connected with housing options. The City of Orlando will be purchasing two custom buses



## Economic Stability Subgoals

1

**Increasing Income**

2

**Attainable Housing**

3

**Transportation Solutions**



“  
**Homelessness is inextricably linked to the shortage of attainable housing. It’s crucial that we come together as a community and act with urgency to address this challenge.**

**-Mark Brewer,  
President/CEO,  
Central Florida  
Foundation**

inspired by the “Dignity Bus” in Vero Beach. This will provide a safe sleeping place for 40 individuals. The City has also focused their ARPA fund dollars on expanding housing and investing in the infrastructure of the current homeless facilities.



### **Housing Connectors with Zillow**

This is a pilot program funded through the Orange County government to leverage the power of Zillow with housing connectors in the local community who will help to identify housing units for people experiencing homelessness.



### **Zoning Reforms**

Zoning reforms might allow for more multi-family housing, accessory dwelling units, and mixed-use developments. While the Live Local legislation seemed promising, several communities have rejected it because it limits local control and doesn’t always address local needs.

## **Workforce**



### **Workforce Shortages**

Labor shortages continue in healthcare, construction, education, and hospitality.



### **Wage Stagnation**

Many wages have not kept pace with inflation, limiting economic mobility for low- and middle-income workers.



### **Upskilling**

Upskilling is the process of learning new skills in order to remain competitive in a career field. In addition to degree programs, there are several avenues to obtaining new skills. CareerSource offers training programs and apprenticeships in high-growth industries like information technology, transportation, healthcare, advanced manufacturing, hospitality management, and construction. There are also certificate programs at technical schools and state colleges.



## Specialty Programs

Per Scholas is a nonprofit that offers no-cost top-tier tech training to individuals earning less than 80% of Area Median Income (AMI). Home Builders Institute's Build Strong Academy offers tuition-free construction career education.



## Childcare Programs

Support childcare subsidies and workplace flexibility to reduce household financial burdens.



## Nurturing Entrepreneurs

Expand entrepreneurship support programs, including small business grants and micro-loans.

## Transportation



### Transportation Barriers

Limited and costly public transit options make car ownership essential for most workers, adding financial strain due to insurance, fuel, and maintenance costs. Seniors who have lost their ability to drive have difficulty in getting to appointments, shopping, and other resources. Lynx and SunRail provide limited coverage areas and are not reliable as mass transit. Currently, the rail only runs Monday-Friday and has limited evening hours.



### Rising Cost of Living

Inflation continues to impact essentials like groceries, utilities, and childcare, straining household budgets.



### Fragmented Social Services

Nonprofit and local government service delivery remains disjointed, reducing efficiency in meeting community needs.



### Employer-Sponsored Programs

Employer-sponsored transportation programs, such as shuttle services or subsidized transit passes, can be developed to offset costs and barriers.



### Biking and Walking Accessibility

Increase biking and walking accessibility by investing in infrastructure improvements.



### Expand Current Transit Systems

Increase evening hours and expand to weekend hours for SunRail.





## **Threats to Federal Funding**

Many programs face potential grant and contract funding cuts, making it difficult for many nonprofit organizations to predict their ongoing budget needs and future sustainability.



## **Increase Wages and Benefits**

Increase wages and benefits in key industries to attract and retain workers.



## **Increase Partnership**

Strengthen collaboration among nonprofits to reduce duplication of services and improve access to assistance.



## **Expand Assistance Programs**

Expand access to food assistance programs and cost-saving initiatives like utility assistance programs.



## **Financial Literacy**

Increase financial literacy programs such as the Financial Empowerment Center with Orange County and Habitat for Humanity to help individuals build savings, access credit, and improve long-term financial stability, and Prosperity Planners with Goodwill Central Florida.

# Stay Connected!

## Newsletters

Sign up for the CFF newsletters that fit your unique interests.



### CFF News

General Foundation news, including blog posts, philanthropic articles, and upcoming events



### 100 Women Strong

Keep in touch with our strategic giving circle, including grant news, events, and ways to engage.



### Professional Advisors

Gain a competitive edge with clients through expert tools and actionable insights on charitable giving—designed to seamlessly integrate into your practice.



### Nonprofit News (for nonprofits)

Get grant and educational opportunities right to your inbox, plus tips and tricks on keeping a current Nonprofit Search profile.

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## Health and Well-Being



Health and well-being in Central Florida faces complex challenges, ranging from provider shortages and rising costs to systemic barriers and disparities in access. Many residents encounter prolonged wait times, brief interactions with physicians, and hurdles like limited transportation or inadequate insurance coverage. Particularly troubling are the significant gaps in maternal and prenatal care, as evidenced by higher-than-average maternal mortality rates and insufficient prenatal visits, disproportionately affecting Black women. Mental health services are similarly stretched thin, further compounded by high treatment costs and a shrinking provider base.

Financial barriers continue to exacerbate healthcare inequalities. With nearly 14% of Floridians under 65 lacking insurance—partially due to the state's decision not to expand Medicaid—many individuals find themselves unable to afford essential medical and dental services. Hourly workers often have to weigh the loss of income against healthcare needs, leading to increased reliance on emergency room visits instead of regular

preventative care. Compounding these economic concerns are provider burnout, a disconnected healthcare system, cultural competency gaps, and legislative barriers, including recent laws impacting undocumented immigrants' access to emergency care.

Despite these obstacles, Central Florida holds promising opportunities to improve healthcare delivery and outcomes. Initiatives like the PCAN network, which establishes comprehensive primary care centers for uninsured populations, alongside expanded telehealth services, offer tangible solutions to accessibility challenges. Efforts to integrate mental health care through peer support and programs addressing the Social Drivers of Health represent proactive steps toward reducing disparities. Additionally, partnerships among hospitals, educational institutions, community organizations, and local businesses continue to foster innovation, coordination, and ultimately, healthier communities across the region.





## Challenges and Opportunities

The following list shares challenges ⚠️ and opportunities 💡 within this focus area. Challenges are obstacles while opportunities hold potential for solutions.

### Access to Care



#### Shortage of Healthcare Professionals

Central Florida is one of many areas experiencing a shortage of primary care physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. Access to mental health services remains limited, with a decrease in the number of mental health providers available to serve the community.



#### Long Wait Times and Decreased Face-to-Face Time with Doctors

For some, it may take weeks to get an appointment with a primary care physician or specialist. The in-office wait may be long and the visit with the doctor short. This is due mostly to insurance and administrative demands.



#### Availability and/or Access to Prenatal Care

In 2023, approximately 10.7% of infants in Florida were born to mothers who received late or no prenatal care. Additionally, 23.2% of live births were to women who received inadequate prenatal care, which is defined as care beginning in the fifth month of pregnancy or later, or fewer than 50% of the recommended visits for an infant's gestational age.



#### Maternal Mortality

Florida's maternal mortality rate stands at 24.1 deaths per 100,000 births, higher than the national average. Notably, Black women face a maternal mortality rate three times higher than that of white women, highlighting significant racial disparities in maternal health outcomes.



#### Barriers to Care

Environmental factors such as lack of transportation, poor housing conditions, and residence in rural healthcare deserts create barriers to care.



#### Primary Care Access Network (PCAN)

PCAN has been developing an integrated, comprehensive system of primary care centers. These centers provide medical homes for uninsured and underinsured residents of Orange County.



## Health and Well-Being Subgoals

1

### Physical Health

2

### Mental Health

3

### Food Security and Nutrition





## **Reimbursement for Community Health Workers (CHWs)**

State, federal, and local governments are starting to recognize the value of CHWs to address health and health-related inequities. Some states are building sustainable financing approaches to increase access to CHWs.



## **Telehealth Expansion**

Telehealth gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued to be a method to increase access to healthcare providers for non-emergency care. Doctors can assess patients and prescribe medication. This method saves time and transportation costs.



## **Peer Support Model in Mental Health**

Peer support is a proven best practice model for mental health support and should be considered for increased investment.



## **Employee In-House Training Programs**

Programs such as AdventHealth University's Master of Science in Nursing and separate Midwifery Nursing Program address the provider gap. With the shortage of healthcare professionals, more hospitals are investing internally in programs to train professional staff.



## **Fourth Trimester Program at AdventHealth**

This program was created in response to data showing Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to die during pregnancy or in the year after than other demographic groups. It follows women for an additional 12-week post-partum period.



## **Winnie Palmer Maternal Telehealth Program**

Patient-guided program support, telehealth, and in-the-moment health education. This program is primarily led by nurse navigators in multiple languages.

## **Expense of Care**



## **Mental Health Treatment Expenses**

The cost of mental health care is a significant barrier, with therapy sessions for conditions like anxiety or depression costing up to \$200+ per session, often requiring multiple sessions.



## **Uninsured Populations**

Many Floridians remain uninsured, limiting their access to necessary healthcare services. As of 2023, Florida's uninsured rate for individuals under 65 was 13.9%, higher than the national average of 8.9%. Florida has not expanded Medicaid, leaving nearly one million residents in a coverage gap, earning too much to qualify for Medicaid but too little for marketplace subsidies.



## **Dental Care**

Dental care is expensive and insurance is limited, often with low caps on the maximum payment annually.



## **Loss of Work/Pay for Hourly Employees**

For hourly employees, the loss of work time or pay sometimes outweighs the need to see a doctor. This can lead to increased emergency room visits.

## **Other Health and Well-Being Challenges and Opportunities**



## **Provider and Caregiver Burnout**

In Medscape's most recent report on Physician Burnout & Depression, 49% of U.S. Physicians across 29 specialties said they felt burned out.



## **Food Insecurity**

With threats to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] and USDA's Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program [TEFAP] benefits at the state and federal levels, there is a potential for decreased availability of food supplies for food pantries.



## **Threats to Federal Funding**

Many programs face potential grant and contract funding cuts.



## **Disconnected System of Care**

Not all healthcare providers are on the same medical record programs. It is incumbent on the patient to make sure records are shared. In Florida, healthcare records are owned by the healthcare provider, complicating the patient's ability to easily access records.



## **Senate Bill 1718**

In 2023, Florida enacted Senate Bill 1718 [SB 1718], an immigration law affecting healthcare access for undocumented immigrants. The law requires hospitals accepting Medicaid to inquire about a patient's immigration status when they visit the emergency department.



## **A Lack of Cultural Competency in Healthcare**

Many patients are more comfortable getting health instruction in their native language and/or being treated by health professionals who understand their culture.



## **A Gap in Health Literacy**

To prevent return emergency visits and control chronic conditions, an increase in education around health literacy is needed for patients to understand their diagnosis and treatment.



## **Universal Screening for Social Drivers of Health with a Clear Referral Path**

The Social Drivers of Health (SDoH) include economic status, food security, access to green spaces and fresh air, belonging and social connectivity, and education levels. Many hospitals and doctors are screening for SDoHs and are connected to closed loop referral systems.

## **Coordination of Referral Services**

There is a dedicated effort with partners including the Florida Department of Health Orange County, Second Harvest Food Bank, and Nemours to improve the connectivity between referrals and resources, such as Findhelp.org, Unite Us, and 2-1-1.

## **Healthcare Clearing House**

A healthcare clearing house for medical information can increase coordinated care.

## **Healthcare Innovation Through Hospitals and Medical Schools**

Central Florida is home to Medical City in Lake Nona and has many innovative hospitals and businesses working on solutions to improve health outcomes.

## **Increase of Community Partnerships**

There has been an increase of partnerships working on the Community Health Improvement Plan, and, adding businesses to the mix, the Central Florida Collaborative is working to continue to improve the community health assessment process. AdventHealth and Orlando Health partner with the local health departments and nonprofit health providers on this tri-annual assessment.

## **The Food as Medicine Movement**

Second Harvest hosts a task force focused on health and nutrition. 4Roots Farm hired a cardiologist to help with increasing the focus on food and health. Hebni Nutrition has offered cooking classes and recipes for many years as a response to diabetes.

## **The Intersection of Medicine and Art**

There is also an increased awareness of the healing value of art, with a study scheduled to come out soon from the University of Florida.

## **Increase in Caregiver Support and Awareness**

Share the Care and Orlando Health have a focus on supporting caregivers as more people find themselves in the “sandwich generation” caring for children and parents.



**CENTRAL FLORIDA  
FOUNDATION**

**NONPROFIT  
SEARCH**

## Central Florida's Giving Tool

Nonprofit Search [NPS] is our region's database of verified organizations serving our community. Easy to navigate and packed with data, this platform helps you to learn more about our region's nonprofits, with information on management, programs, financials, impact, and more.



### **Research local nonprofits with peace of mind.**

Each organization's profile is verified by the Foundation team.



### **Search by interest or name.**

Easily find nonprofits working within your passion area or search for a specific organization to learn more.

## **Are you a nonprofit?**

### **Get started on your profile today.**

Send us an email at [NPS@cffound.org](mailto:NPS@cffound.org) with the following information: organization name, your name and role, organization's EIN#, website or social media handle, and your preferred login email address. Our team will get back to you within two [2] business days.

**VISIT NONPROFIT SEARCH**





## Education



Despite being ranked in the top 10 states, education in Florida faces significant challenges spanning from early childhood learning to higher education. Workforce shortages have become critical, with childcare providers across the state struggling to maintain staffing levels. The ripple effects are clear: infant and toddler programs are closing, parents face barriers to employment, and nearly half of Florida's children enter kindergarten unprepared, placing additional stress on educators tasked with teaching fundamental skills and managing classroom behaviors.

At the K-12 level, the state faces severe shortages of qualified teachers and support staff, driven by Florida's ranking as 50th in the nation for average teacher pay. Coupled with funding dilemmas exacerbated by voucher programs diverting essential resources from public schools to private education, these challenges disproportionately affect economically disadvantaged students. Compounding these issues, recent policy changes have ignited debates regarding curriculum content, classroom discussions, and overall educational inclusivity.

Higher education in Florida is also navigating turbulent waters, as discussions around altering in-state tuition policies could make college less accessible. Further complicating the landscape are national political proposals threatening to dismantle the Department of Education and reduce support for diversity initiatives, potentially reshaping institutional policies, curricula, and campus environments significantly.

On the flip side, numerous opportunities offer pathways for progress. Initiatives like the TEACH Scholarship promoted by the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County promise improved retention and quality within early learning education. Additionally, innovative models such as Central Florida's Community Partnership Schools and Junior Achievement's 3DE Schools demonstrate the potential to transform K-12 education through community involvement, experiential learning, and enhanced teacher training programs. Moreover, higher education institutions across Central Florida continue expanding their certification and credentialing offerings, aligning student training closely with workforce demands to foster academic success and career readiness.



## Challenges and Opportunities

The following list shares challenges ⚠️ and opportunities 💡 within this focus area. Challenges are obstacles while opportunities hold potential for solutions.

### Early Learning



#### Workforce Shortages

Childcare providers across Florida are grappling with significant workforce challenges. A shortage of educators has led to classroom closures, particularly affecting infant and toddler programs. This shortage not only hampers early childhood education but also impacts families' ability to participate fully in the workforce.



#### Gaps in Kindergarten Readiness

Nearly 50% of children are not ready for kindergarten. This places an additional burden on teachers who have to teach children basic skills like identification of letters and colors, as well as handle issues due to lack of self-regulation.



#### Teacher Pipeline and Education Development

The Early Learning Coalition of Orange County is actively promoting the TEACH Scholarship program offered by the Florida Division of Early Learning to encourage early childhood teachers to pursue higher credentials, degrees, and certifications to increase workforce quality and retention.

### K-12 Education



#### Teacher and Staff Shortages

Florida's public schools are experiencing severe shortages of teachers and support staff. Thousands of students start each year without access to fully certified educators, with districts increasingly relying on long-term substitutes and out-of-field teachers. Florida is ranked 50<sup>th</sup> in average teacher pay, causing teachers to struggle to meet basic needs.



#### Changes for Special Needs Students

In an effort to be more "inclusive," schools will be integrating some special needs students into regular classroom environments and adding hubs for the students who will still need more intensive learning instruction. Parents are concerned student learning will be disrupted and mainstream teachers are not specially trained for the additional needs of these students.

## Education



### Focus Area Subgoals

1

Increase Kindergarten Readiness

2

Increase Literacy

3

Connect Graduates to a Career Path



## **Funding**

Despite constitutional mandates to provide quality education, Florida's K-12 public schools face underinvestment. The voucher programs currently have no income limitations and are being used to subsidize pricey private school educations and are drawing money away from the public school system.



## **Educational Equity**

A significant portion of Florida's K-12 students are classified as economically disadvantaged, with some schools reporting rates between 78% and 100%. These disparities contribute to educational imbalances, affecting graduation rates and overall student well-being.



## **Policy Changes**

Legislative measures have introduced new guidelines affecting curriculum content and classroom discussions. These policies have sparked debates about their implications for inclusivity and the scope of topics addressed in schools.



## **Decreased Math and Reading Scores**

Fourth and eighth-grade math and reading scores have dropped significantly.



## **Improved Communications About Pathways to Teacher Certification**

Each of the district websites has information about how to obtain a temporary certificate and the steps needed to obtain a teaching certificate. All of the counties require a minimum of a bachelor's degree.



## **Community Partnership School Model**

This model started in 2010 as a collaboration between Children's Home Society, Orange Blossom Family Health, Orange County Public Schools, and the University of Central Florida. This model has been replicated around the state.



## **Junior Achievement 3DE Schools**

The 3DE model is a customized instructional model that uses a multifaceted approach to learning. Using a combination of case methodology, project-based learning, and real-world experiences, this model is currently in 3 schools in Osceola and Orange Counties.



## **Reed Charitable Foundation**

Reed Charitable Foundation had an efficacy study done on their K-2 work, bringing the science based Orton Gillingham reading training to teachers. The results are very promising, exceeding expected growth by 78% for kindergarteners, 198% growth in reading for first graders, and 214% in second graders.



## **Orlando Kidz Zones [Formerly Parramore Kidz Zones]**

The Orlando Kidz Zones cover the neighborhoods of Parramore, Mercy Drive, Holden Heights, and Englewood, offering cradle-to-career programs to engage children and their parents with the goal of reducing criminal activity and increasing educational attainment.

## **Higher Education**



### **Access and Affordability**

Proposals to alter in-state tuition policies for undocumented students have raised concerns about access to higher education. Such changes could significantly increase educational costs for many students, potentially hindering their college aspirations.



### **Policy Reforms**

National political shifts, including proposals to dismantle the Department of Education and reduce funding for diversity programs, could have profound effects on higher education institutions in Florida. These reforms may influence curriculum design, campus policies, and the overall educational environment.



## **upliftED**

Heart of Florida United Way houses the upliftED program which aims to have 60% of our workforce holding a high-value credential or post-secondary degree. The program is also focused on ensuring students understand the different types of aid available to them.



## **Certification Programs**

Central Florida has a variety of certification programs to help students get training for careers and meet industry needs.

- University of Central Florida provides a range of online graduate certificate programs tailored to professionals seeking to enhance their expertise. These programs cover industries such as hospitality, healthcare, cybersecurity, and more.
- Valencia College offers over 80 certificate programs that prepare students for immediate entry into the workforce.
- Orange Technical College prepares students for various careers through programs ranging from a few months to over a year.
- Seminole State's certificate programs blend classroom instruction with practical, real-world training, often conducted in actual work environments.





Central Florida is at a pivotal moment; pressures such as increased frequency of extreme weather events and climbing energy costs are testing the region's resilience. Rapid urban development further exacerbates these challenges, contributing to habitat loss, human-wildlife conflicts, and mounting waste management issues driven by population growth and tourism.

Public safety also remains a pressing concern. Cities like Orlando have experienced fluctuations in crime rates, yet issues surrounding gun violence and community safety persist. Additionally, formerly incarcerated individuals continue to face barriers to reintegration, potentially fueling cycles of recidivism. Traffic safety presents another ongoing challenge, as Florida consistently ranks among the most dangerous states for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists, due in part to high-speed roads, distracted driving, and tourism-related congestion.

Arts and cultural institutions face distinct obstacles, particularly regarding consistent funding and support. The recent reduction in state arts funding in 2024 has strained many local organizations, limiting their ability to sustain programs or engage effectively with the community. The region's emphasis on

major tourist attractions often overshadows smaller, community-focused arts initiatives, making it difficult for local artists and organizations to gain visibility.

Despite these difficulties, Central Florida is presented with numerous opportunities to build a more resilient, vibrant future. Environmentally, initiatives promoting energy efficiency through home upgrades, solar power expansion, and innovative insurance approaches like parametric windstorm insurance can significantly mitigate risks and costs. The City of Orlando's ambitious goal to become a "zero waste" community by 2040 demonstrates proactive leadership in managing environmental impacts, from food waste composting to advanced recycling technologies.

In public safety, community-driven programs like Credible Messengers and Advancing Peace are proving to be effective at reducing violence. Expanding neighborhood revitalization initiatives could further enhance community safety and well-being.

By strategically addressing these challenges and capitalizing on available opportunities, Central Florida can enhance its quality of life, sustainability, and cultural vibrancy for years to come.



## Challenges and Opportunities

The following list shares challenges ⚠️ and opportunities 💡 within this focus area. Challenges are obstacles while opportunities hold potential for solutions.

### Environmental



#### Increase in Harsh Weather

Rising temperatures and weather conditions, increasing heat waves, and extreme weather events, including stronger hurricanes, impact both infrastructure and public health.



#### Increasing energy costs

Florida Power and Light recently announced large increases in energy costs. Some of the contributing factors to the energy burden are weather, increasing population, and supply chain issues.



#### Urban Sprawl & Habitat Loss

Rapid development is encroaching on natural areas, threatening wildlife habitats and increasing human-wildlife conflicts (e.g., with alligators and bears).



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#### Waste Management

With a growing population and tourism industry, managing waste, particularly plastics and hazardous materials, is an ongoing challenge.



#### Increased Energy Efficiency

Home upgrades, smart thermostats, energy-efficient appliances, and insulation improvements can and have helped to reduce energy use.



#### Energy-Saving Kits with Solar Power Batteries

In the City of Orlando, these kits have been distributed to low-income residents. The City is looking to scale the program.



#### Expansion of solar energy

This is a lower cost and cleaner way to address energy issues, but it has faced some political and regulatory challenges.



## Livability Subgoals

1

**Address  
Environmental  
Preservation**

2

**Ensure safe  
neighborhoods**

3

**Invest in arts  
and culture**



## **Parametric Insurance for Windstorm Damage**

Parametric insurance is focused on the event rather than the actual property damage and can be a way to mitigate the high costs of repairs due to weather-related events. The Miami Foundation is currently piloting a program with parametric insurance.



## **Zero Waste Communities**

The City of Orlando is striving to be a “zero waste” community by 2040. They are looking at innovative ways to find solutions to how we handle waste, including food waste and composting programs, and employing next-generation recycling technologies.

## **Public Safety**



### **Crime & Gun Violence**

While Orlando and other cities have seen fluctuations in crime rates, concerns about gun violence and public safety remain high, especially in certain neighborhoods.



### **Barriers for the Formerly Incarcerated**

Formerly incarcerated individuals face barriers to employment and housing which potentially contribute to recidivism.



### **Traffic Accidents & Road Safety**

Florida ranks among the most dangerous states for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists due to high-speed roads, distracted driving, and tourism-related traffic.



### **Hurricane Preparedness & Disaster Response**

With frequent hurricanes and storms, ensuring proper evacuation plans and emergency response is crucial for public safety.



### **Safety in High-Tourism Areas**

With millions of visitors coming to theme parks and attractions, there are unique challenges in preventing scams, ensuring transportation safety, and maintaining emergency preparedness in high-density areas.



## **Increase in Neighborhood Revitalization Projects**

More efforts around neighborhood revitalization, programs like Habitat for Humanity's Neighborhood Revitalization program work to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods through painting and repairs. The program, focused on Malibu Groves, is currently not accepting applications. Expanding these types of programs could enhance safety and increase property values.



## **Credible Messengers and Advancing Peace Programs**

Credible Messengers are "streetwise" individuals who serve as mentors for youth within underserved and disenfranchised communities. Orange County is the first in Florida to implement the Credible Messenger Program. It has proven effective at lowering youth violence and recidivism rates in several major U.S. cities. Advancing Peace is a community violence intervention initiative in the City of Orlando. After the first year, it showed a reduction in firearm homicides and shootings.



## **Metrowest Public Safety Program**

The Metrowest Public Safety Program is a good example of collaboration between law enforcement, local security, property managers, businesses, and residents to enhance safety and foster a sense of community.

## **Arts and Culture**



### **Funding & Support**

Many local arts organizations struggle with consistent funding, particularly as public and private investments in the arts fluctuate. The state cut funding in 2024 which put many organizations at a deficit.



### **Balancing Tourism & Local Culture**

While major attractions like Disney and Universal draw international attention, smaller local arts scenes can struggle to get exposure and support.



### **Affordability for Artists**

Rising housing costs make it difficult for local artists to live and work in Central Florida, pushing them to relocate.



## **CANVAS Cultural Plan**

Orange County and the City of Orlando are collaborating on a cultural plan to elevate arts and culture in the community.





## Community & Social Connection



Civic engagement, belongingness, and social justice are critical pillars that shape the quality of community life, yet Florida currently faces significant hurdles across these areas. Civic participation, particularly voter turnout, demonstrates troubling trends, with only slightly more than 70% participating during Presidential elections—a number that plummets in non-presidential and primary elections. Concurrently, volunteerism, though rebounding slightly since the COVID-19 pandemic, still faces numerous barriers including federal funding cuts to crucial programs like AmeriCorps, potentially leaving many nonprofits struggling to fulfill their missions.

Adding to these civic challenges are significant legislative restrictions and language barriers. New laws imposing fines on nonpartisan civic engagement groups have generated anxiety, deterring organizations from facilitating voter registration drives and civic participation. Moreover, language barriers severely hamper community members' ability to access critical information and engage fully in civic activities—a reality underscored by Hurricane Milton, where non-English speakers struggled significantly to obtain timely and essential services.

Florida communities also grapple with social

isolation and declining social acceptance, affecting individual and collective well-being. Seniors, individuals with health challenges, those constrained by finances, and residents impacted by remote working conditions are particularly vulnerable to isolation, underscoring a profound need for programs that foster a sense of belonging. On a broader level, there's an inherent human desire not merely to fit in but to feel genuinely valued and connected through shared interests and communal activities.

Lastly, social justice initiatives in Florida face severe threats, including diminished immigration support, the dismantling of diversity and equity programs, and weakened protections for workers—exemplified by state-level restrictions on heat safety regulations. These developments exacerbate existing inequalities, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations such as immigrants, minorities, and laborers exposed to harsh working conditions.

Yet, despite these stark challenges, opportunities exist to build stronger, more inclusive communities. By investing in these opportunities, Florida can confront challenges head-on and foster an empowered, cohesive, and just society.



## Challenges and Opportunities

The following list shares challenges ⚠️ and opportunities 💡 within this focus area. Challenges are obstacles while opportunities hold potential for solutions.

### Civic Engagement



#### Lagging Voter Participation in Non-Presidential Elections

Just over 70% of registered voters vote in a Presidential election, which drops to 47-53% for a non-presidential election, and between 17 and 25% in primary elections.



#### Volunteering Barriers

While volunteering has begun to recover since COVID caused a steep decline in volunteerism, there are still some barriers to volunteering, and nonprofits are having to adjust. The federal funding cuts put some programs like AmeriCorps at risk.



#### Language Barriers

Accessing information and participating in civic activities can be challenging if communications are not in a person's native language. This issue becomes especially critical during emergencies, as highlighted during Hurricane Milton, where language barriers impeded access to vital information and services.



#### Legislative Restrictions

Recent laws imposing fines on nonpartisan civic engagement groups for certain activities have created apprehension among organizations, potentially limiting voter registration efforts and other forms of civic participation.



#### Increase in Voter Education Programs

Programs, such as Central Florida Foundation's Let's Talk Voting Initiative, and other community organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Mi Familia Vota, and Equal Ground lean into civic education as a way to increase civic engagement.



#### ESOL Class Availability

Programs such as Orange County and UCF's ESOL classes can help with English learning and break down some of the barriers.



## Community & Social Connection Subgoals

1

Increase Civic Engagement

2

Support Diverse Communities

3

Encourage Belonging and Connection



“  
**Communities  
begin to  
thrive when  
people  
engage, listen  
to each other,  
and care  
enough to  
show up.**

**-Sandi Vidal  
VP of  
Community  
Strategies and  
Initiatives,  
Central Florida  
Foundation**



## **Improvement of Volunteer Communications**

The creation of awareness platforms, such as [United Way's volunteer portal](#), [Orlando Cares](#), [VolunteerMatch](#) and [Volunteer Florida](#), help to coordinate and increase volunteer efforts.

## **Belongingness**



### **Social Isolation & Exclusion**

Social isolation can stem from a variety of factors, including seniors who are less mobile and feel more isolated, digital connectivity replacing face-to-face interactions, remote work, financial constraints limiting participation in activities, and health challenges. Additionally, people want and need to feel valued. They need to find common ground and shared interests and values. It is more than fitting in; it is a desire to be part of something bigger than yourself - and many people lack this component in their lives right now.



### **Vibrant Program**

An innovative program based on the national Village to Village Network model, Vibrant is launching in the Fall 2025 with Healthy West Orange to help enable independent and enriched living for maturing adults in West Orange County. Neighbor to Neighbor is a grassroots version of this program and is fully volunteer. Other programs focus on the medical needs of seniors, but also look in on their social needs as well.



### **Common Read and Book Clubs**

The Peace and Justice Institute does an annual common read; bookstores and libraries have book clubs and other programs to get people together in community settings.

## **Social Justice**



### **Immigration Assistance Gaps**

Funding has been cut back. The demand for services is higher than the agencies can handle, and current funding streams do not align with the services needed.



## **A Shift in Community Programs**

Community programs that once were focused on inclusivity, breaking generational inequality, and embracing diverse perspectives and voices are losing popularity. These programs often served underrepresented and under-resourced communities, now creating a gap in services.



## **Loss of Protections for Workers**

As an example, Florida enacted a law banning cities and counties from enacting heat protections for workers.



## **Social Justice Promotion**

Promote organizations and programs that call for understanding, such as the Peace and Justice Institute, the Interfaith Council of Central Florida, and the Central Florida Pledge.



## **Successful Embrace of Central Florida's Diverse Communities**

There are a variety of organizations from legal clinics and community legal services to faith-based services like Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family services providing immigration and resettlement assistance.



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## CENTRAL FLORIDA FOUNDATION

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*Building Community  
By Building Philanthropy*