

# Leon County, FL's Children's Services Council

*A November 2020 Ballot Measure Case Study*



## Summary

In December 2019, a committee of Leon County, FL, leaders released a report detailing the unmet needs of children and youth in the county. Among other needs, the report revealed the county's high youth arrest rate (10.8%) and low rate of accredited child care programs (12%—less than half the state average).<sup>1</sup> To address these needs, a group of advocates pushed for the county commission to place a measure on the ballot to establish a Children's Services Council (CSC)—an independent governing body with the power to levy taxes and direct the revenue exclusively to services for children, youth, and families. In November 2020, their efforts succeeded and nearly two-thirds of voters chose to raise taxes to create a new CSC that is projected to raise approximately \$7 million annually.

## How Did Leon County Create a CSC?

Work to create the CSC officially began almost three years before the proposed referendum reached voters. A similar effort failed in a special election 30 years prior, the same year that Manatee County, FL, and St. Lucie County, FL, successfully established their CSC's.

In early 2018, a group of Leon County advocates for children and youth met and agreed to invest their time and small amounts of money into an effort to establish a CSC in the county. In May 2018, they met with county commissioners (including current Tallahassee Mayor and then-County Commissioner John Dailey) to request that the county commission place a measure on the August 2018 ballot to create a Leon County CSC. While some commissioners supported the effort, others pushed back against the short time frame remaining until the election arguing that a comprehensive needs assessment study was necessary first. Advocates continued to push for the measure in the community, and in June 2018 the commissioners agreed to place the

### Ballot Measure/ Tax Details

**Proposed Tax**  
0.5 mill property  
tax increase

**Annual Revenue**  
Original estimate:  
\$8 million - \$9 million  
Revised estimate:  
\$7 million

**Length of Tax**  
12 years

**Final Vote Results**  
65.8% approval

### Leon County Details

**Population**  
293,582

**Population Younger  
Than 18 Years**  
18.6% (U.S. average: 22%)

**Median Household  
Income**  
\$51,201  
(U.S. average: \$68,703)

measure on the November 2020 ballot rather than the 2018 ballot.

In mid-2018, the Leon County Commission created a planning committee of 23 community leaders including the Leon County sheriff, Leon County school superintendent, chief judge of the Florida Second Circuit Court, and representatives of the business and health care sectors to study the potential impact of a CSC. This committee met during the next 18 months, gathering information, soliciting and considering feedback from community members and service providers, and identifying local unmet needs and priorities. In December 2019, the committee released the report [\*Recommendations for the Establishment of the Children's Services Council of Leon County\*](#), which detailed the needs of Leon County's children and youth and provided guidance on creating a CSC.<sup>2</sup> The Our Kids First campaign led by Jon Moyle and Monesia Brown, both attorneys and lobbyists, kicked off shortly after the report's release in January 2020. The campaign included dozens of virtual meetings and information sessions to educate local leaders and organizations about the value of a CSC to prepare voters to support the referendum in the 2020 election.

## How Did the Campaign Overcome Opposition?

The Our Kids First campaign faced pushback to creating a CSC throughout the process. In 2018, the opposition consisted of an informal collection of people, plus the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, who opposed placing the measure on the 2018 ballot. By 2020, opposition began to coalesce into a more formal, bipartisan group helmed by a Tallahassee city commissioner and a Leon County commissioner. These two elected officials announced their objection to the measure with a press conference arguing that the county did not need a CSC and that higher taxes would be detrimental during the pandemic. Throughout the campaign, they opposed the Our Kids First campaign with op-eds in local newspapers and commercials that ran during televised Florida State University football games with high viewership in Tallahassee.

The Our Kids First campaign, in consultation with experienced political consultants, responded to the opposition by maintaining strict message discipline. They trained the coalition to redirect requests for comment to campaign champions and spokespeople and to reiterate positive messages about the need for and impact of the CSC. Rather than reacting to the opposition's every point, the campaign addressed the opposition by engaging with the community proactively and positively to educate voters about the benefits of a CSC. "We won on the persuasiveness of our argument, not by attacking anybody," said Moyle. The campaign's leadership appeared on radio, at clubs, in online and in-person forums, and other venues to promote the CSC to anyone who was interested. To avoid controversy, the campaign spokespeople did not attack their opponents. Instead, they sent targeted mailers to potentially sympathetic voters and ran TV commercials that described the potential benefits of a CSC, focusing on three key areas:

1. improving early childhood education,
2. expanding after-school activities, and
3. keeping kids off drugs.

This approach earned the attention of the editorial board of the county's largest newspaper, *The Tallahassee Democrat*, which commended the "civility" of the campaign in its editorial "[\*Debate over Children's Services Council showed political discourse at its finest.\*](#)"<sup>3</sup>

# How Did the Campaign Leverage Its Broad Coalition?

While formal, organized opposition has dissolved similar campaigns in other communities, the breadth and strength of the coalition built by the Our Kids First campaign withstood the difficult final months before the election. This coalition of supportive community members was organized into two separate groups: one that steered the campaign and the other that supported it.

The group that steered the campaign included the CSC planning committee, which authored the December 2019 report; a Leadership Council, which included civic leaders and several local elected officials; local business leaders; and local human services providers. The Leadership Council supervised the early stages of the campaign before it became public. Its members brought legitimacy and early donations to the effort, which encouraged other potential funders to donate to the campaign. As the campaign became more visible, the Leadership Council used its influence in the education, business, nonprofit, and neighborhood spheres to encourage others to support the campaign and to vote for the measure.

The wider group of general campaign supporters included prominent community leaders such as the Leon County sheriff, local state attorney, Tallahassee's mayor, CEO of Tallahassee Memorial Regional Medical Center (one of the city's largest employers), and the Tallahassee superintendent of schools. Many of these individuals, including the county sheriff and chairperson of the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, supported the CSC by writing one of the more than one dozen op-eds the local newspaper published in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Support from the chamber was particularly significant given that the organization originally opposed the 2018 ballot effort (though the Big Bend Minority and Capital City chambers of commerce supported the effort from the beginning). Each of these champions tailored their presentation of the campaign's talking points to different audiences to increase the coalition's reach. For example, Leon County Sherriff Walter McNeil focused on four communities with whom he already actively engaged: law enforcement, judges, Rotary clubs, and African American faith leaders. The supporters also participated in virtual debates and forums about the upcoming ballot measure, always staying on message when they discussed the benefits of a CSC and answered questions from Leon County citizens.

## How Will the CSC Help Leon County's Kids?

The new Leon County CSC has the potential (based on its full millage rate) to provide up to \$9 million annually to local children- and youth-serving nonprofits. The CSC intends to double this amount by leveraging state matching funds. The CSC will prioritize the following areas identified in the original December 2019 county needs report:

1. **Success in school and life:** investing in programs that improve school performance and reduce juvenile crime.
2. **Healthy children and families:** promoting physical, mental, and oral health education and programs to optimize individual and community health and resiliency.

- 3. Stable and nurturing families and communities:** promoting stable families, food stability, youth development, and economic opportunities for youth.<sup>7</sup>

According to early estimates, the new CSC likely will increase the percentage of Leon County child care programs that receive Gold Seal accreditation, impacting nearly 4,000 children per year. The CSC also aims to reduce the percentage of low birth-weight babies and infant deaths.

## What Happened During the CSC's First Year?

In January 2021, the Leon County Commission nominated members to the new CSC. After Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed the remaining members, the CSC officially began meeting in April 2021.<sup>5</sup> The following month, the council approved a 0.375 mill tax rate, down from the maximum allowed 0.5 mill tax rate approved by voters. The new tax rate will raise more than \$7 million per year. Council members plan to fund programs with the new revenue by December 2021.<sup>6</sup>



### CSCs Across Florida

Florida is one of the few states that allows its localities to create and operate CSCs. Florida Statute 125.901 governs their creation and contains guidance on how to administer them. These councils do not provide services directly; rather, they fund local community organizations that provide programs and services. Over time, a local CSC often becomes a hub for data collection, needs assessments, quality improvement, and other essential children's services operations.

With the passage of CSCs in Leon County and Escambia County in November 2020, Florida now has 12 CSCs statewide and more counties are considering similar ballot measures. Nationally, other communities may have similar success funding their child and youth services by following Florida's model:

- Advocate for and pass state legislation that allows local communities to create special taxing districts dedicated to funding children's services.
- Organize county-level ballot measure campaigns to gather voter support for a local CSC.

Admittedly, passing this type of state-level legislation requires statewide coordination; but these efforts can lead to widespread and long-lasting changes to local children's funding. Florida Statute 125.901 has led to billions of dollars of new revenue for children and youth since its passage in 1986, and to date no community has failed to reauthorize its CSC.



## Lessons Learned

### **Stay on Message**

The Our Kids First campaign followed a strategy of message discipline. This means that advocates stuck with approved campaign messaging even in the face of attacks by their opponents. The campaign focused on how kids will benefit from a CSC instead of fixating on the opposition's arguments. While message discipline is difficult to maintain with a large, diverse coalition, this approach allows a campaign to run on the actual issue and establishes proactive—not reactive—messaging.

### **Recruit Leaders in Your Community**

A diverse group of community leaders can play a wide range of roles throughout the campaign. One key role for them might be that of trusted public voices who write op-eds and use their credibility to back your campaign's message with different sectors of voters. Another role might be as a financial contributor. Whatever their role, it is important to recruit these leaders as early in the campaign as possible to leverage their influence during the entire campaign.

# Endnotes

- 1 Leon County Children’s Services Council Planning Committee, *Recommendations for the Establishment of the Children’s Services Council of Leon County* (Leon County, FL: Author 2019) <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ebdmy380o3kbj20/Leon%20CSC%20Planning%20Committee%20Full%20Report%20-%20DEC%2020%202019.pdf?dl=0>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Editorial Board, “Debate Over Children’s Services Council Showed Political Discourse at Its Finest,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2018/06/21/childrens-services-council-debate-showed-political-discourse-its-finest/721361002/>.
- 4 Walt McNeil, “Prevention Is the Key – and the CSC Is Key to Prevention | Opinion,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/2020/09/27/prevention-key-and-csc-key-prevention-opinion/5845389002/>; Beth Corum and Sue Dick, “The Tallahassee Chamber Supports a Children’s Services Council | Opinion,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/2020/07/12/tallahassee-chamber-supports-childrens-services-council-opinion/5414297002/>.
- 5 Kristian Thomas, “Leon County Holds First Children’s Services Council Meeting,” *WTXL Tallahassee*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.wtxl.com/news/local-news/leon-county-holds-first-childrens-services-council-meeting>.
- 6 Ana Goñi-Lessan, “Leon County Children’s Services Council OKs Tax Rate to Generate Over \$7M for Its Work,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/local/2021/06/22/leon-county-childrens-services-council-oks-new-tax-rate/5303438001/>.
- 7 Leon County Children’s Services Council, *Recommendations*.

## ABOUT CHILDREN’S FUNDING PROJECT

Children’s Funding Project is a nonprofit social impact organization that helps communities and states expand equitable opportunities for children and youth through strategic public financing.

[childrensfundingproject.org](https://childrensfundingproject.org)



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