Home — but not alone

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County is addressing complex women’s issues including isolation, loneliness, and depression through funding of socialization and support programs.

Naples is a paradise for everyone with the means to enjoy the area’s cultural and recreational amenities, but, increasingly, it’s not for those without the family, social network, or financial means to thrive in a town consistently rated as the top for well-being.

Last year—for the fourth consecutive year—the Naples-Immokalee-Marco Island area ranked No. 1 among 156 communities in the U.S. for well-being by the Gallup National Health Index. Indeed, that’s excellent news. But easily unnoticed by those swimming in the sunshine are some of Collier County’s most vulnerable residents — seniors, particularly women who are facing an uphill battle as the population ages, as dementia, Alzheimer’s and related diagnoses continue to increase, and as the cost of living continues to rise.

These factors, and others, combine to create a “perfect storm” for the graying population, which has been called a “silver tsunami.” Here is a snapshot of the evolving situation:

• A third (32.2 percent) of Collier’s residents are over 65, with the growth of the senior population outpacing Florida and the nation with an increase of 46 percent from 2010 to 2016.
• Women who provide care for an ill or disabled spouse were almost six times more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety than those with no caregiving responsibilities.
• More than 12,000 seniors 65 and older in Collier were diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in 2015, with annual diagnoses expected to rise to 16,096 by 2025.
• In Collier, there are twice as many women living alone than men.
• According to the Alzheimer’s Association, two out of three caregivers feel isolated and alone, and four out of five say they need additional support.
• On average, women typically live five years longer than men. However, they are often left alone with fewer resources. Nearly three in five older women (29 percent) have no sources of income other than Social Security. In Collier County, the average monthly benefit for female beneficiaries over the age of 65 is $1,235. For men, it’s $1,696.
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• One check,” said Eileen Connolly-Keesler, President/CEO of both CFCC and the Women’s Foundation of Collier County. “Those are the types of things we don’t intuitively think about in Collier County. We tend to think of the wealth we have here.”

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County has been taking strides to help women of all ages since its founding 24 years ago to fill in the gaps of unmet needs. The Women’s Foundation has been flexible in finding issues as they arise in Collier County, based on emerging trends. And it has funded causes ranging from addiction in expectant mothers, to extended breast cancer treatment for uninsured women, to hygiene products—relatively expensive items not covered through the federal food assistance program—for women reaching out for food pantry assistance.

This year, the Women’s Foundation made a single impact gift of $50,000 to counteract senior women’s isolation and loneliness through socialization and support programs at the Golden Gate Senior Center.

“I don’t think many people know that we’re dealing with 18,000 senior women in Collier County, and 10,000 senior women are living in severe poverty here,” said Connolly-Keesler. For these women—who have been the primary caregivers to their children, parents, and spouses—daily decisions can boil down to paying for food, medication, or even rent, with some ultimately resorting to living in their cars.

Poverty-level and homeless senior women, particularly those buckling under the pressures of caregiving for a terminally or chronically ill partner, are finding themselves in a place they never imagined. Many are turning to the county’s two senior centers for support. Naples Senior Center at JFCS and the Golden Gate Senior Center.

“Women can get isolated pretty easily. Thank goodness for both senior centers who help reduce that loneliness, depression, and isolation,” Connolly-Keesler said. “Both centers are also maxing out. How do they continue to expand services when the needs are so great?”

In addition to financially propelling programs for needy girls and women, Connolly-Keesler said that a major goal of the Women’s Foundation is to spread awareness of the issues and encourage and inspire women to get involved philanthropically. “Philanthropic giving specifically to women’s issues nationally was somewhere around 7 percent,” she said. “Why do we have a Women’s Foundation? When you present women’s issues to women, they want to participate in finding solutions. Women do want to take care of women. The job of the Women’s Foundation is really to raise awareness of these issues. If we don’t push the community on this, you just don’t think it’s a problem.”

Following a successful professional career, Women’s Foundation Board Chair Donna Messer felt empowered by her family and community to pursue her dreams, and she’s more than happy to parlay that to other local girls and women. Messer, who is involved in several community organizations, also serves as a mentor to adolescent, at-risk teen girls through the Junior Women of Initiative program at the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County.

“I felt very empowered to do what I needed to do, but I saw women around me that did not feel empowered in board rooms and management ranks, and women who were dealing with domestic violence,” she said. “In my family, I felt empowered to do anything that I wanted to do. I am very thankful for that.”

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County

POPULATION AND AGING

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"A lot of women came into Collier County with a spouse or partner. But then, maybe half of their income is gone. There used to be two Social Security checks, and now they’re down to one check,” said Eileen Connolly-Keesler, President/CEO of both CFCC and the Women’s Foundation of Collier County. "Those are the types of things we don’t intuitively think about in Collier County. We tend to think of the wealth we have here."

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Isolated seniors are at a higher risk of developing high blood pressure, depression, dementia, and other complications than their peers who are surrounded by a loving, caring network of family, neighbors, and friends, according to several studies. Collier Senior Resources is helping to resolve this problem at the Golden Gate Senior Center with funding from a $50,000 Women’s Foundation grant.

“This grant is going to make a significant difference,” said Messer. “In years past, we’ve given smaller amounts to different organizations. This year, we decided to give a larger grant to just one organization to be more impactful.”

The grant is called UPSLIDE, which stands for: Utilizing and Promoting Social engagement for Loneliness, Isolation, and Depression in the Elderly. Senior center director Tatiana Fortune fashioned it after a similar, successful program in Tallahassee, Florida. The Tallahassee senior center “has been in existence for decades, but they saw the need to engage even more with isolated seniors.” While that program includes men and women, “I targeted women because they are more likely to live longer than men, and report more depression,” she said. In fact, according to recent studies, Fortune cited, women are twice as likely to report being depressed than men—a condition that worsens if left unchecked.

The new grant-funded program at Golden Gate Senior Center targets women 60 and over and with no social support in the Naples area. They are invited each week into a circle of friends—called Friends Connection—in a creative and relaxed environment to talk about topics and issues central to everyone’s life, build meaningful relationships, and receive counseling.

The grant funds the Friends Connection coordinator and activity materials. Participants discuss topics such as mental health, past experiences and memories, and how close relationships can lead to a better quality of life. Since launching the program in October, 32 women have enrolled, with a goal of 80 participants, Fortune estimates. “I think we’ll most likely supersede that—that’s the goal,” she said.

As the need to serve the aging sector became crystal-clear, Collier Senior Resources converted a former library in the Golden Gate community into the cheery center, which opened in 2014. The center has 1,400 members, Fortune said, up from 800 two years ago.

The center partners with many organizations and agencies to provide hot lunches, classes, activities and programs, a food pantry, and employment and healthcare benefit assistance. Many members enjoy quilting, sharpening their English skills, strengthening their minds and bodies with tai chi or yoga, studying to become naturalized citizens, or socializing over bingo and dominos.

Others may come—alone—for a warm meal. In addition to tapping into retirees, Fortune said outreach efforts are underway to spread the word about Friends Connection at area churches, through referrals, social media, and elsewhere. “This is a program people will have to express self-interest in. They have to want to participate and choose it for themselves,” Fortune said, adding she hopes neighbors or others recognizing their plight will steer them to the program.

The women who have already joined have begun to brighten and show excitement as they open to the case manager and make friends. Fortune said. “We are very grateful for the support of the Women’s Foundation. We definitely couldn’t do this meaningful work without their support. It goes a long way toward increasing our impact.” Fortune said. “We’re talking about a very vulnerable population here.”

Messer, chair of the Women’s Foundation, is looking forward to seeing the impact of the grant. “It’s really going to enable the women there to connect with other people and help create opportunities for engagement with others and have meaningful interactions. They have the ability to talk with a counselor who will monitor them,” she said. “I think it’s going to make a world of difference.”

**UPSLIDE GRANT FOR GOLDEN GATE SENIORS**

**GRANTS MAKING A COMMUNITY-WIDE IMPACT**

From the community’s littlest ones to the eldest, Women’s Foundation of Collier County has distributed more than $550,000 in grants to nonprofit critical initiatives in the past five years.

Next month, when The Shelter for Abused Women & Children’s 21,000-square-foot Shelly Stayer Shelter in Immokalee opens its doors, visitors will sign in at the reception area funded by a $25,000 grant from the Women’s Foundation. The 43rd domestic violence shelter in Florida will have 48 beds for domestic violence survivors, eight beds for human trafficking victims, and four beds for special-needs victims. Almost doubling the Shelter’s current capacity of 60 beds at its Naples shelter, it’s a much-needed expansion in a county where over 1,600 domestic violence calls to 911 were made in 2018—though only about half of all victims call for help, said Shelter CEO, Linda Oberhaus. The Shelter is consistently at maximum capacity; it provided more than 21,000 nights of shelter and transitional housing to adults and children in 2018-2019.

“It is important to understand that domestic violence and human trafficking are crimes against all of us because violence at home does not stop at the front door. It infects our workplaces, schools, social circles, and places of worship,” Oberhaus said. “Failure to recognize and report domestic violence puts the entire community at risk.”

The Women’s Foundation also provided generous grants to the David Lawrence Center and the Naples Senior Center at JFCS for programs impacting vulnerable women.
Last year, a $20,000 grant supported a program designed for pregnant and postpartum at-risk women struggling with addiction at the David Lawrence Center. Alcohol and drug use during pregnancy can result in preterm birth, miscarriage, and a variety of behavioral and cognitive problems for newborns that can last well into adulthood.

Nationally and in Florida, pregnant and postpartum women with addictions are considered a priority population under state guidelines. In addition to residential treatment at Crossroads and outpatient services for six women, the program included clinical assessment, case management, trauma, group, and individual therapy, and OB/GYN and other medical expenses.

The Women's Foundation also provided $25,000 from a grant from the Women's Foundation of Collier County to increase support group meetings from monthly to weekly, said Naples Senior Center President/CEO Jaclynn Oberhaus. "Failure to recognize and report all of us because violence at home does not affect adults and children in 2018-2019. 25,000 nights of Shelter and transitional housing were used in a county where over 1,600 domestic violence cases were handled by the Shelter. It's a much-needed expansion of the Shelter's current capacity of 60 beds at its Naples shelter, it's a much-needed expansion. Over half of all victims call for help, said Shelter Director Nancy Baldwin. "It's essential to teach caregivers about coping skills. They have a tough time expressing emotion. We're teaching them how to use their hands to work through the process." To date, the new shelter has distributed more than $550,000 in grants to non-profit organizations to assist homeless seniors, dementia patients, and individualized case management.

Celebrating the 19th Amendment, International Women's Day, Women's History Month

March is an all-encompassing month for women's empowerment. It marks Women's History Month, while International Women's Day, today, March 8, celebrates on a global scale the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women—a call to action for accelerating women's equality. This year also marks the 100th anniversary of the August 18, 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granting women the right to vote following the century-long suffrage movement. The Women's Foundation of Collier County kicked off this historic milestone during the Power of the Purse 2020 Centennial Event fundraiser in December, which included a "Suffrage Roll Call" featuring 25 representatives from local women's organizations. Attendees at the sold-out luncheon also wore white to symbolize the suffrage movement. The event featured drawings for high-end handbags, sponsored by Waterside Shops. Anne Fleming, general manager of Waterside Shops, has served on the board of the Women's Foundation for two years and has advocated women's issues for decades. Fleming was involved with planning the Power of the Purse event, and believes the Women's Foundation is making a significant impact in Collier County by "bringing awareness to the numerous unmet needs for women and girls—healthcare, education, safety, nutrition, loneliness, mental health, financial security, abuse and pay gap (between men's and women's salaries)," she said.

Architectural rendering of the new Shelly Stayer Shelter reception area funded by a Women's Foundation of Collier County grant.

wfcollier.org
Scott Burgess, President and CEO of David Lawrence Center, discusses treatment programs with Kim Esworthy and Jessica Siefer.

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County alleviates unmet needs and empowers women and girls in Collier County. Grants are made possible through your generous giving and by attending our signature events. Thanks to our donors, we have granted more than $550,000 in the past five years alone.

By making a gift - today, or through your will - you can help empower, invest and inspire women and girls in our community for years to come. Consider creating a fund in your name, or making a gift to help us to reach our goal of $5 million to build a permanent endowment for local grantmaking for women and girls in perpetuity.

Celebrate International Women’s Day today, March 8, by honoring the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment. The Women’s Foundation of Collier County is calling on 100 women to donate $100 for grantmaking in honor of the 100th anniversary of women’s right to vote.

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County is calling on 100 women to donate $100 for grantmaking in honor of the 100th anniversary of women’s right to vote. Answer the call and make a difference in the lives of girls and women in Collier County—today and tomorrow. Send a check to the Women’s Foundation of Collier County at 1110 Pine Ridge Road, Suite 200, Naples, FL 34108, call us at 239-649-5000, or donate online at wfcollier.org.

WOMEN HELPING WOMEN:
100 WOMEN/100 DOLLARS/100 YEARS

Calling 100 Women for $100
to support grantmaking for local women and girls
in honor of the 100th anniversary of women’s right to vote.

The Women’s Foundation of Collier County is celebrating International Women’s Day on March 8, 2020, by honoring the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, women’s right to vote. We are counting on you to answer the call and make a difference by donating $100 to the Women’s Foundation of Collier County today. Funds collected will be used for grantmaking to local nonprofits that support women and girls.

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Please send completed form along with donation to:
Women’s Foundation of Collier County
1110 Pine Ridge Road, Suite 200
Naples, FL 34108

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Payment Method:  
☐ Check/Money Order  ☐ MasterCard  ☐ VISA  ☐ Discover  ☐ American Express
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Card #: __________________________ Expiration Date: / /

Signature: __________________________

☐ Please contact me about creating fund in my name
☐ Please contact me to plan an estate gift for the Women’s Foundation of Collier County

Amount: $100 to support 100 Women/100 Dollars/100 Years

Women’s Foundation of Collier County
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