

MEDIA ALERT

Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County
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EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF SARASOTA COUNTY EARNS \$110,419 IN COMMUNITY INVESTMENT FUNDING FROM UNITED WAY SUNCOAST

The UWS award, part of a \$6.05 million investment in the community, will support two of the coalition's key initiatives.

TAMPA – The push to help Sarasota's littlest learners enjoy a high-quality, well rounded, enriching childcare experience will continue thanks to the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County and an infusion of support from the United Way Suncoast.

Two of the ELC of Sarasota's initiatives received support in the United Way Suncoast's latest round of community investment funding. The \$110,419 granted by UWS will help spur two programs: *Better Tomorrow - Mental Health Starts Early* and *LENA Grow - Building Brains Through Early Talk* programs.

Launched in 2020, LENA Grow facilitates an effective, researched base model of early childhood mental health consultation that benefits both the children and teachers in preschool programs. It provides much needed on-site intervention to children experiencing mental health needs that manifest through troubling behavior and offers much needed support and strategies for preschool teachers.

"The focus on toxic stress, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed care have been game changers in the field of early learning," said Janet Kahn, ELC of Sarasota County executive director. "We are grateful the United Way Suncoast continues to recognize this critical need among babies, toddlers and preschoolers in Sarasota County. Thanks to UWS support, we can not only continue, but also expand and enhance our classroom-based, teacher and child-focused intervention program using contracted mental health clinicians."

LENA Grow is a 12-week structured program that uses LENA's "talk pedometer" technology with weekly coaching sessions. It evaluates teacher child interaction specifically in language within a selected classroom. Both the teacher and children wear small microphones that tabulate the number of appropriate interactions that research has shown to positively impact early language development. The results are captured in real time, so teachers are coached immediately to improve positive interactions.

"The results from our initial implementation of the tech-driven, data-proven program were remarkable," Kahn said. "In fact, our extraordinary outcomes were featured in the Colorado-based nonprofit's national blog."

"Thanks to the support of the United Way Suncoast, the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County can now keep the momentum going on a highly successful language and literacy preschool program," Kahn added. "Money awarded from the Community Initiative Fund will allow us to extend LENA into a second year, thereby offering this incredible opportunity to more children and preschool teachers in our community."

The ELC of Sarasota's lasting community impact aligns with United Way's priorities. As households continue to grapple with the financial fallout of the pandemic and parents strive to navigate a challenging educational year, United Way Suncoast has stepped up with a \$6.05 million boost to 77 area nonprofits for the 2022 fiscal year.

UWS continues its 97-year mission of lifting up the community by sustaining its focus on four priority areas: early learning, youth success, financial stability and asset development. The investment extends to all five counties in UWS' region – DeSoto, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas and Sarasota – and underscores the organization's long-time commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

"We are proud to support high-impact programs that will do so much good across our region," said United Way Suncoast CEO Jessica Muroff. "As we look to emerge from the pandemic and strengthen our commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion with a new strategic vision, it's never been more important to advocate for our community. Through our partnerships and expertise, we will continue to create bold solutions to our biggest challenges – uplifting lives and achieving equity for generations to come."

For the second consecutive year, the organization convened a group of dedicated volunteers who conducted a thoughtful and thorough job in choosing the nonprofits. The allocation, an increase of more than \$400,000 from the 2020 allocation, will impact nearly 150,000 people in UWS' five-county region. UWS also raised and distributed \$1.9 million for pandemic relief over a six-week period in 2020.

Each grant will fund specific programs that support the interconnected priority areas and help ALICE (Asset, Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) families who stand just one unexpected expense from enduring hardship.

About Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota

The Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County is a legislatively designated entity that oversees the local early care and education system with a focus on ensuring access to high quality early education for all young children. Serving more than 4,000 children and 175 childcare providers every year, the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County prepares local infants, toddlers and preschool children for lifelong success through access to quality early learning programs, with a particular focus on assisting those families most in need.

About United Way Suncoast

United Way Suncoast severs the constraints that prevent families from thriving. We dismantle the barriers to human prosperity, uniting our community along the way. When we provide pathways to early learning, financial stability and youth success, we lift up families as they cultivate a future beyond circumstantial constraints. We provide choices. We provide opportunities. We create space for families to grow without limitations, elevating communities by building a future with equity for all. We are proud to serve the people of DeSoto, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas and Sarasota counties by operating and funding services and programs to help our community have the Freedom To Rise.

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