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State rising in child well-being

By ROBERT LEE LONG Community Editor Jul 6, 2018



Volunteers assist with laying the foundation of a community garden in DeSoto County.

File Photo

Mississippi is no longer in last place when it comes to the well being of children.

In a recent story published in the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, it was reported that Mississippi now ranks 48th in child well-being in the latest Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT report.

While there is great room for improvement — the state still ranks high in poverty with more than 30 percent or 211,000 children living in poverty — the recent rise is cause for encouragement.

Tom Pittman, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, said the focus on improving education, health and overall quality of life for Mississippi's children is paying dividends.

"Children and youth have always been a top priority for the Community Foundation with a focus on helping to improve their education and health," Pittman said. "We are delighted that Mississippi has finally risen from the bottom of the Kids Count national rankings. I hope that Northwest Mississippi and the rest of the state can continue rising, so that our children have as much opportunity to succeed as any children in America."

Pittman said the effort to improve the well-being of Mississippi children has been a joint enterprise.

"Many individuals and organizations throughout Mississippi have contributed to our state's success," added Pittman. "The Community Foundation is fortunate that generous donors have provided resources for us to help, too."

Endowments have enabled programs like Excel By 5 to flourish and make a major impact, according to Pittman.

"Our Early Childhood Education Endowment has enabled us to support a staff person for Excel By 5 to work in our region," said Pittman, referring to Mechelle Wallace who is headquartered in Bolivar County but serves the entire 11-county region which comprises the Community Foundation's service area.

"She has helped Hernando, Horn Lake, Olive Branch and other cities to organize local leaders to make sure their communities support their children becoming ready to succeed when they enter kindergarten," Pittman said.

Shelly Johnstone helped launch the Excel by 5 program in DeSoto County, in conjunction with the Community Foundation nearly a decade ago.

"The Community Foundation asked us to start an Excel by 5 program in Hernando and that work has been continued by Victoria Penny, Gia Matheny and others," said Johnstone, who now lives in Pontotoc. "I am thrilled to see Mississippi doing better. I think part of that is that kids are eating better and getting better nutrition and their brains are healthier and work better. I like Excel by 5 because it has a home component to it. Whether it's literacy or eating better or improving studying habits, it all starts in the home. What place is better than the home to get training?"

Johnstone said the improvement in Mississippi's ranking with regard to children has been years in the making.

"Everything that we do takes time," Johnstone said. "What folks do to improve the lives of our children is not often measured until some time later. There are an unlimited number of things that can be done to improve the lives of children."

The private sector has also played a major role in improving children's well-being, according to Pittman.

"An anonymous donor helped us create our Community Digital Scholars program where young people go online to learn critical skills such as personal finance. In our 11-county region, 25 percent of public school students in 4th-12th grades are participating in this program and learning valuable life lessons. For instance, the financial literacy students have consistently increased their knowledge of personal finance by more than 90 percent. This kind of knowledge enables even kids in poverty to achieve more control over their limited resources."

Pittman said state, federal and private funds all play a vital role in partnering to lift the nation's most vulnerable children off the economic bottom.

"A \$1.6 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has helped us to connect the University of Mississippi Medical Center and local community health centers to build a system for caring for extremely low birthweight babies, giving them a fighting chance for survival and success in life.

A small grant to conduct a community health survey in Tallahatchie County led to construction of a wellness center and a community-based program of health and wellness. It has helped Tallahatchie County rise in just seven years from 81st among Mississippi's 82 counties to 60th in the latest county health rankings."

Pittman said the Community Foundation, founded in 2002, continues its mission to partner with others to improve the lives of the people in the region.

"Our mission is to connect people who care with causes that matter, and

we cannot imagine anything more important than the education and health of our children. With the support of people who care, we will continue to help Mississippi rise in the ranking of our children's well-being."

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