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## Healthy Futures Start Here: Building a Stronger Lee County, One Partnership at a Time

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Lee County's health is changing. While the life expectancy is higher than the national average, the rate of infant death is worse than the national average. This showcases the divide between a population with retirees and young families. Historically, the focus on health for Lee County residents has been one that government agencies and local health care organizations have been leading. However recent changes have had detrimental impacts on health care access and funding, requiring a shift in focus to community partnerships.

### **Collaboration works:**

A new narrative is taking hold, local organizations, schools, and residents are creating partnerships to transform the health of Lee County. Lee Health, the Florida Department of Health, local school districts, and nonprofits are bringing healthcare to residents in underserved neighborhoods through mobile health units, community centers, telemedicine expansion, outreach, and health fairs. Not only do these collaborative efforts provide much needed health services directly to residents, but they help to strengthen community bonds.

### **Prevention is powerful:**

Prevention with an emphasis on wellness is growing. Community gardens in Fort Myers and Lehigh Acres are providing fresh produce, nutrition education, and gardening tips for local families. School wellness programs are also focusing on teaching kids to eat healthy and stay physically active. Access to vaccines can prevent or minimize illness. These tactics can help the community residents build healthier habits that can transform health.

### **Civic action matters:**

Real change does not happen exclusively in hospitals. Community government, school boards, and neighborhood associations have the power to transform communities. Local budgeting and zoning affects housing, water quality, park access, and public transportation. For example, access to green space is decreasing with expanded development, affecting access to community outdoor activity. In addition, decreasing vaccine rates for public schools will also have drastic impact. Public health must now be a focus for Lee county's leaders to ensure everyone has access to a healthy lifestyle.

### **Health Equity Builds Resilience:**

Health depends on more than medical care, it depends on a foundation of equal access and opportunity. When communities address poverty, housing, and

environmental concerns, they strengthen the health of all residents. A high amount of uninsured impacts healthcare for the entire community. The bottom line is that hospitals cannot afford new equipment unless they are profitable. Health equity is not simply a moral goal, it is paramount to provide the best care to residents of Lee County and close the gaps that have long divided our communities.

**A Call to Action:**

The future in Lee County lies in the hands of the residents. You can make a difference by volunteering with local wellness programs, joining advocacy groups, supporting community gardens, and voting for candidates and policies that advocate for improved public health through health equity. We can build a healthier Lee County, one partnership at a time.

**Some resource links:**

<https://www.naplesnews.com/story/news/local/communities/the-banner/2025/07/21/lee-health-community-benefit-report-illustrates-our-commitment/85276038007/>

<https://echonet.org/echo-news/community-gardens-provide-food-and-hope/>

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