

THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION, OKLAHOMA CITY BECOMES A SOCCER HUB

November 2019



As the sun beat down its summer heat in Oklahoma City in 2019, more than 100 kids were in the throes of playing indoor soccer.

Many of these children came from areas of Oklahoma City that struggle with issues like poverty, high crime, food scarcity, and childhood obesity. Instead of sweltering in the heat, they were learning the fundamentals of a team-based game and learning life skills on top of that.

In July 2019, Oklahoma City hosted its first *Soccer for Success* summer camp, a program that not only teaches kids the sport of soccer, but also about eating right and other ways to stay healthy. In addition, participants gain important decision-making and relationship skills from their interactions with coach-mentors and peers.

The opportunity to be active and learn about healthy nutrition was especially important in the underserved parts of Oklahoma City. In Oklahoma, it is estimated that one in six people struggles with hunger. The fact that certain low-income communities are without ready access to healthy and affordable food options such as fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods creates additional challenges for kids experiencing food insecurity.

Additionally, close to 19 percent of Oklahoma kids ages 10 to 17 suffered from childhood obesity in 2016 and 2017, according to a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Could soccer reverse those trends? A group of diverse partners in Oklahoma City thinks so, and those partners all came together in a unique way to make healthy lifestyles, soccer, and safer places to play the game accessible to children in Oklahoma's largest school district.

CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The road to a vibrant soccer program for youth in the city started with OKC Energy FC, a professional soccer team in Oklahoma City that competes in the United Soccer League (USL). As part of its involvement in the city, Energy FC also created Energy Assist Foundation, the 501(c)3 charitable arm of Energy FC.

"Energy Assist Foundation's main objective is to make sure that kids in the metro and close to the metro in Oklahoma City have safe places to play and the equipment to excel at the highest level," said Mickey Dollens, executive director for Energy Assist Foundation.



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With the goal to build more safe places for kids to play soccer, Energy Assist Foundation reached out to the U.S. Soccer Foundation. When Dollens learned about its *Soccer for Success* program, he knew it would be a perfect fit with Energy Assist Foundation's mission. In the summer of 2019, Energy Assist introduced the first *Soccer for Success* camp in Oklahoma City.

"I came in with the expectation that we wanted to implement programming, but we didn't know exactly what type of programming," Dollens said. "So, when I saw the U.S. Soccer Foundation's presentation on *Soccer for Success*, I knew we had found our programming piece and I was excited that it was that easy, too."

"We wanted to ensure that all kids could receive quality coaching," Dollens continued. "One of the ways we addressed that was offering a free, 10-week *Soccer for Success* summer camp. Each kid got a soccer ball, really great coaching, and a holistic approach to health. We are the only entity in Oklahoma that's adopted the *Soccer for Success* curriculum from the U.S. Soccer Foundation."

The program is offered free to participants and is proven to help kids establish healthy habits and develop critical life skills through trained coach-mentors and community engagement. Though normally an after-school program, Energy

Assist Foundation adapted the *Soccer for Success* curriculum to fit its needs.

During the debut *Soccer for Success* camp, 10 coach-mentors from Energy Assist led 180 kids from four Oklahoma City elementary schools through activities that incorporated health and nutrition lessons.

Energy FC co-owner Tim McLaughlin used his wide network to help recruit participants. Community member and school advocate Larry Augustus went to college with McLaughlin, and together, they helped create their college's soccer club in 1982. That friendship continued throughout the years, and because Augustus was involved with the local schools, he was able to connect Energy Assist Foundation with the Oklahoma City Public Schools to get the ball rolling and attract the 180 participants for the inaugural camp.

"Larry was the one who went into the schools with the flyers and gave them to the P.E. coaches and the teachers and the kids," Dollens said.

Augustus also worked with the public schools to arrange free bus transportation to the camps for the students.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES ON AND OFF THE PITCH: A SHARED VISION

While Dollens and other partners knew *Soccer for Success* would provide fun for Oklahoma City's youth, they were stunned by the health outcomes the program achieved.

"We had a lot of success with healthier outcomes. At the beginning of camp, we do a pacer test, which is a conditioning test, and we also measured height and weight. From that, we get a baseline BMI (Body Mass Index) number and then we compare that to the BMI number at the end of the 10 weeks," said Dollens. "Every kid scored better on their conditioning test and had better health outcomes. So, we know the *Soccer for Success* program works really well."



Like other Soccer for Success programs offered during the school year, the camp was held three times a week. To offset costs, Energy Assist partnered with Indoor Soccer Arenas, which donated the indoor soccer space for the camp. The Oklahoma City-County Health Department (OCCHD) also donated \$1,000 for the camp.

“The Wellness Now Coalition’s Physical Activity and Nutrition Workgroup donated these funds to Energy Assist Foundation because of the shared vision of improving the lives of the people of Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County,” said LaToya Knighten, executive director of OCCHD.

Energy Assist Foundation also partnered with OKCity Center to provide nutritionally-sound meals for the kids. Local businessman and restaurateur Mark Goss donated grass-fed beef and farm-raised chickens from his own farm to OKCity Center for the meals provided to camp participants.

“It was 100 percent free for the kids,” Dollens said.

INSPIRING MENTORS

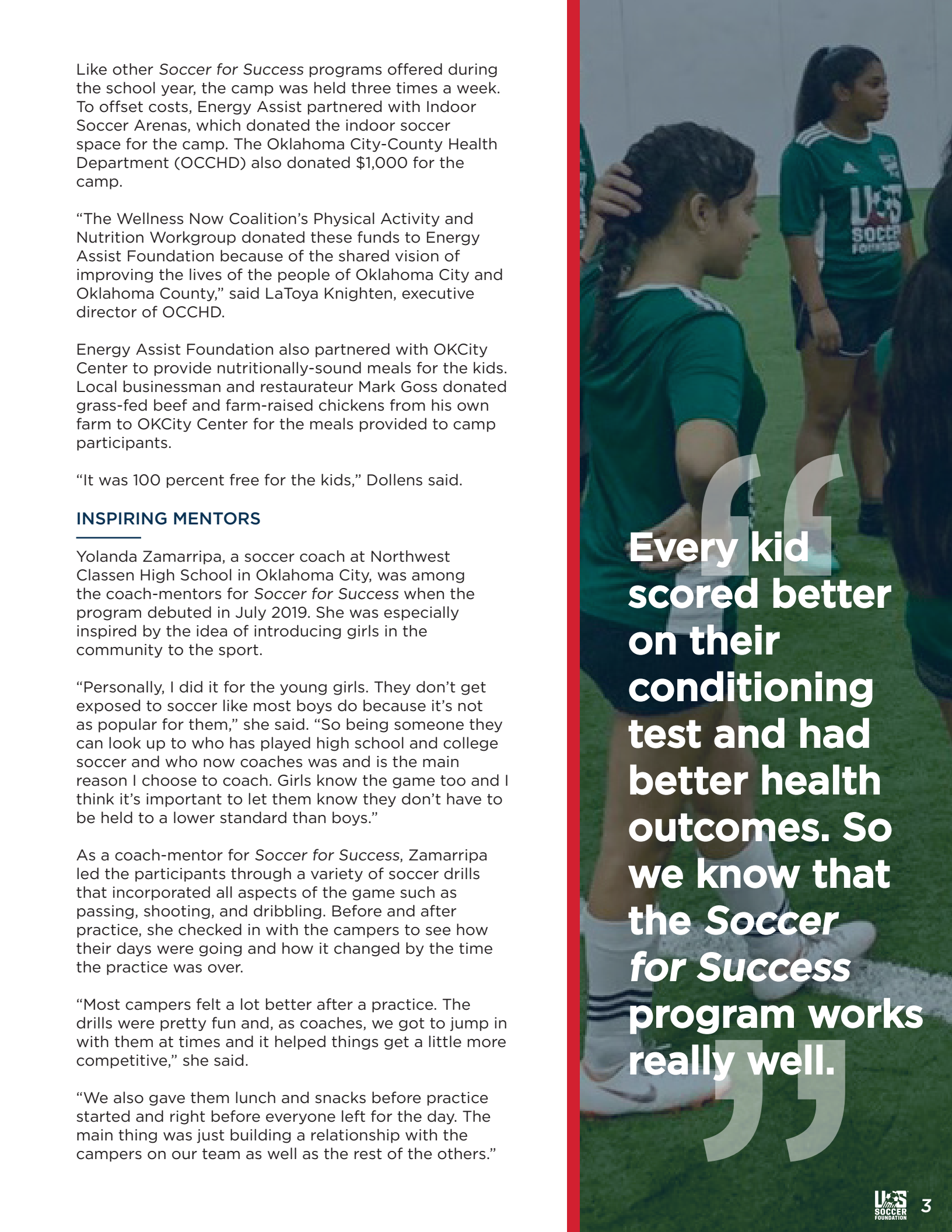
Yolanda Zamarripa, a soccer coach at Northwest Classen High School in Oklahoma City, was among the coach-mentors for Soccer for Success when the program debuted in July 2019. She was especially inspired by the idea of introducing girls in the community to the sport.

“Personally, I did it for the young girls. They don’t get exposed to soccer like most boys do because it’s not as popular for them,” she said. “So being someone they can look up to who has played high school and college soccer and who now coaches was and is the main reason I choose to coach. Girls know the game too and I think it’s important to let them know they don’t have to be held to a lower standard than boys.”

As a coach-mentor for Soccer for Success, Zamarripa led the participants through a variety of soccer drills that incorporated all aspects of the game such as passing, shooting, and dribbling. Before and after practice, she checked in with the campers to see how their days were going and how it changed by the time the practice was over.

“Most campers felt a lot better after a practice. The drills were pretty fun and, as coaches, we got to jump in with them at times and it helped things get a little more competitive,” she said.

“We also gave them lunch and snacks before practice started and right before everyone left for the day. The main thing was just building a relationship with the campers on our team as well as the rest of the others.”



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thanks to the Oklahoma City Public Schools and an organization called Fields & Futures.

Fields & Futures, founded by Energy FC's McLaughlin and his wife, Liz, in 2012, is dedicated to building and maintaining athletic fields across the Oklahoma City school district in an effort to grow student participation in sports. A registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the organization addresses the connection between the district's below-national-average rates for graduation and sports participation.

One day during the camp, most of Oklahoma City was flooded due to a major storm and the organizers debated whether they should cancel camp that day. They decided to hold camp, assuming many children would not be able to attend.

"Once we got to camp, there were a lot more kids than we expected," she said. "They were so excited we didn't cancel camp. I think this camp is important because it gives kids something to look forward to and most importantly, keeps them out of trouble. The age range we worked with is an age that I feel we could impact the most, mainly because most of the people I grew up with were influenced by negative people at the ages of the kids we hosted at camp. I feel like this was an escape where they could be fed, have fun, make friends, and learn soccer."

Fields & Futures has rebuilt 11 soccer fields across the district, with four more under construction. With each new pitch, rosters grow and more students benefit from the resources and attention of a caring, committed coach.

As co-owner of Energy FC and founder of Fields & Futures, McLaughlin established a relationship with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and began exploring ways collaborate with its *Safe Places to Play* program.

CREATING A SOCCER LEGACY THROUGH SAFE PLACES TO PLAY

The introduction of soccer to a young generation started long before the inaugural camp, however,



“I was at the MLS All-Star game in Chicago in 2017 and heard there the U.S. Soccer Foundation had a ‘1,000 mini-pitch initiative.’ I heard about the cities where the pitches were being built, and because we were already building pitches in Oklahoma City, I thought it would be a great partnership,” said McLaughlin. “And I thought, ‘Wow. They want to build 1,000 mini-pitches? They will need help with that.’ I sat down with the Foundation team that night to talk about it.”

“We were inspired by what the U.S. Soccer Foundation was doing. It just so happened that the Oklahoma City Public Schools announced their Pathways to Greatness initiative, and a bunch of elementary schools were being converted to middle schools,” McLaughlin said.

To make the outdoor spaces more age-appropriate, Fields & Futures and the school district decided to replace elementary school playgrounds with mini-pitches at 10 new middle schools.

To help build these new mini-pitches, the U.S. Soccer Foundation, through their partnership with Musco Lighting, joined in the effort. At the time, the U.S. Soccer Foundation and Musco Lighting had just developed a new sports solution, the Mini-Pitch System™.

“We were looking for partners who weren’t afraid to try a different concept,” said Jeff Rogers, Vice President of

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Developmental Sales for Musco Lighting. “We wanted to find organizations that were open to what the company was proposing: an all-in-one modular solution that includes goals, fencing, benches, storage, and lights.”

“We just felt Oklahoma City was a really great fit. We are passionate about the fundamental purpose of *Soccer for Success* and its mission to impact the lives of one million kids through this program and the mini-pitch initiative. “We want to be able to provide playing opportunities and access to as many kids as possible. We felt that Fields & Futures and Energy Assist Foundation shared those same values.”

“We think it’s fantastic. It’s a great example of what can happen when you have organizations across multiple sectors working together toward a common goal,” said Rogers.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

As soon as the 10 new mini-pitches are installed, Fields & Futures will work with the U.S. Soccer Foundation and Energy Assist Foundation to run *Soccer for Success* on a total of 12 middle school mini-pitches.

According to McLaughlin, the success of the first summer camp showed the community what *Soccer for Success* could do.



“I would drive by the camp just to go check on things, and it was amazing to see all these kids running and sweating and high-fiving their coaches,” McLaughlin said. “It was really powerful to see the results, and the camp set a great precedent for next year. It was a litmus test, and just to see the results is amazing. Soccer really is a game for everyone, and the bigger result was all the friendships that were built. The skills they learned outside the classroom can be applied in the classroom and in their home lives.”

Oklahoma City Public Schools Associate Athletic Director for Strategic Partnerships Michael McDaniel said he welcomes the possibility of the *Soccer for Success* program coming to the schools.

“Anything that offers those kinds of skills like nutrition, active lifestyles, and mentorship is a valuable program,” he said. “Any program that helps our kids grow academically and with all-around health is needed. Soccer is a popular sport in Oklahoma City. It’s in the top three for participation.”

With existing futsal courts at Taft and Roosevelt Middle Schools, these 10 new pitches will ensure every OKCPS middle school will have access to this fast-growing sport, as well as another resource to encourage student participation in

sports, said McLaughlin.

U.S. Soccer Foundation President & CEO Ed Foster-Simeon said Oklahoma City’s plan helps combat one of the biggest barriers to the sport: the lack of safe places to play.

“These 10 new mini-pitches at Oklahoma City Public Schools will dramatically increase opportunities to play the game,” he said. “These new spaces coupled with evidence-based soccer programming means that more children will not only enjoy soccer, but also develop critical life skills that come with playing the game.”

When not being used by each respective school, these pitches will be available for community use, subject to availability and school approvals.

All of these activities have created a ripple effect for the future of youth soccer in the





Foundation, and the Oklahoma City Public Schools come together, it's like stone soup. Everyone adds something to it."

city. For instance, Oklahoma Gas and Electric made a sizeable gift to Fields & Futures to create and program an OKCPS district-wide futsal tournament in spring 2020, with the championship game to be played on the new downtown futsal court at Together Square, an Energy Assist project. Convenience store giant 7-Eleven also contributed \$100,000 toward development of the futsal courts, McLaughlin said.

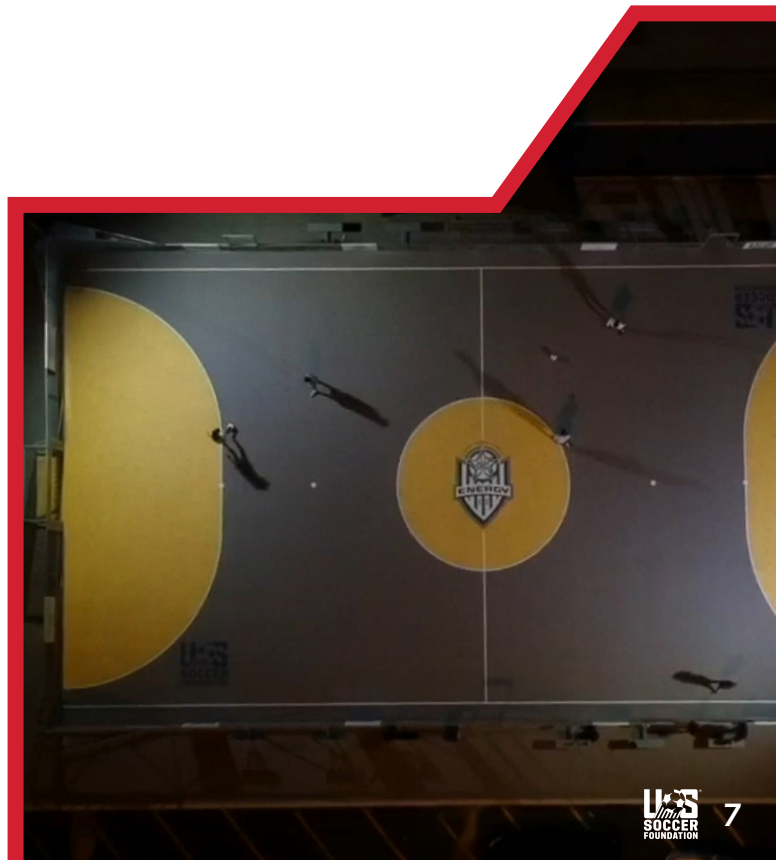
"The bigger story is that we can build more. And companies like 7-Eleven saw that and are stepping in to help," McLaughlin said.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Poverty, food deserts, and childhood obesity are challenges in certain zip codes in Oklahoma City, McLaughlin said, but all partners involved in *Soccer for Success* and the building of mini-pitches are on board to tackle those challenges.

"Making soccer accessible to the kids in their own neighborhoods is something we can do that will result in positive outcomes," McLaughlin said. "The school district has been amazing to work with and is 100 percent on board. When you have partners like Energy Assist, Musco, Fields & Futures, 7-Eleven, the U.S. Soccer

"The power of this sport to impact youth is undeniable," said McLaughlin. "What's really astounding is that we are just getting started. With each new field, mini-pitch, soccer camp, and other opportunity created through these partnerships, more young students are able to participate and benefit from all the experience has to offer. It's an exciting time for Oklahoma City and we're just happy to be part of the story."





As the national leader in sports-based youth development, the U.S. Soccer Foundation is committed to helping young people embrace active and healthy lifestyles, using soccer to cultivate critical life skills that pave the path to a better future.

The Foundation is working to make soccer everyone's game by pledging to engage one million children in *Soccer for Success* and create 1,000 mini-pitches by 2026.



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