



# MUNICIPALITIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS ARE UTILIZING SOCCER PROGRAMS TO CHANGE THE LIVES OF CHILDREN FROM UNDERSERVED NEIGHBORHOODS

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## INTRODUCTION

Several factors contribute to the problem of sedentary, unhealthy children: neighborhoods with high crime rates; television; video games; social media; smart phones and iPads; working parents; single parents; and processed food.

In response to these disturbing trends, the U.S. Soccer Foundation is working closely with local organizations and businesses across the country to create easy and affordable access to soccer and safe places to play the game.

Now in its fourth year of partnering with Miami-area organizations, the U.S. Soccer Foundation is giving thousands of children from underserved neighborhoods free access to its *Soccer for Success* program. Through the program, children learn valuable life skills like teamwork, perseverance, and the importance of persistence in reaching personal goals both on and off the pitch. To achieve this, *Soccer for Success* takes a five-component approach, incorporating 1) physical activity, 2) health & wellness, 3) safe spaces, 4) mentorship, and 5) community engagement to help shape healthy and active citizens.

Local organizations and municipalities — namely The Children’s Trust, City of North Miami Parks and Recreation, FLIPANY, Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department, Target, and YMCA of South Florida — are key in making this program available to children living in Miami-Dade County and beyond. As a result, this cross-sector collaboration is favorably affecting the wellbeing of Miami-area families and their communities: the kids are healthier and exhibit improved social development outcomes.

## THE BIRTH OF A SOCCER MINI-PITCH

Community members looked on as Target and the U.S. Soccer Foundation unveiled a new set of mini-pitches at South Dade Park in Homestead in January 2019. “What a great way to help kick off Parks’ 90th anniversary. Thank you to the U.S. Soccer Foundation and Target for making this possible,” said Miami-Dade Parks Director Maria Nardi at the event.

Since entering into a \$6 million partnership with the U.S. Soccer Foundation in 2017 to support its *Safe Places to Play* program, Target has installed four soccer mini-pitches in the Miami-Dade area. They’re part of the company’s stated mission to build 100 new mini-pitches with the Foundation across the country by the end of 2020.



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Eric Hansen, Chief of Recreation Programs and Services, explains how Miami-Dade County went about converting two infrequently-used tennis courts into two soccer mini-pitches.

"I was asked to identify some courts that we might consider refurbishing into mini-pitches," Hansen says. "The Commissioner had to be convinced that it was a good idea. That required me holding community meetings."

The next step was to advertise his intentions to the community via flyers and meetings. "Everyone was really receptive to the idea," says Hansen, noting to the group that the mini-pitches would provide the opportunity to teach soccer in a smaller group setting where young people could be more successful in learning soccer fundamentals.

"I used a baseball analogy," he notes. "If you put a child at home plate at Yankee Stadium and pitch him a ball and expect success to be hitting the ball over the wall, they won't be successful. But if you put them in a small court and they hit the ball and have success, then they will want to continue to play. The mini-pitches allow success to happen."

Hansen adds, "At first, I thought only the physical courts were part of it. It was only after I became a little more involved that I understood there was a

programming component attached to it: Soccer for Success."

Once he got everyone's approval, Hansen's next step was to identify likely after-school program sites where his staff would be able to run Soccer for Success. From there, the U.S. Soccer Foundation team stepped in to train local staff as coach-mentors, who would operate six sites in the fall and spring.

The staff had been teaching the fundamentals and skills of tennis and golf, but soccer was a new addition to the popular after-school program.

"This is a flexible program, and that's what I like about it best — you're able to plug it in. As long as the staff understands what they're supposed to do, you plug Soccer for Success in for that six to eight weeks. It's been very successful."

## FUNDING VIA THE CHILDREN'S TRUST

For the past several years, a major amount of funding for Soccer for Success has come via The Children's Trust, a youth social services organization in Miami. The organization has been integral in helping the Foundation implement the program and find new sites for mini-pitches across Miami.

The Children's Trust is a dedicated source of revenue derived from property taxes established by voter referendum in 2002. Its mission is to partner with the community to plan, advocate for, and fund strategic investments that improve the lives of all children and families in Miami-Dade County.

Donovan Lee-Sin, MPA, Public Policy & Community Engagement Officer at The Children's Trust, points out that soccer is a popular sport among Miami's Latin-American communities, but pay-to-play programs are inaccessible for many members of the community.

"In our neighborhoods where we have a higher demographic of those who are less fortunate economically, kids don't have access to programs like this, even though soccer is a cultural love here," says Lee-Sin. "We wanted to place these programs in neighborhoods where



we knew there was an underserved population and we didn't already have after-school programming that's like this."

The response was overwhelming. In just the first year, more than 1,000 kids participated. Now in its third year, the program serves more than 2,200 participants across 73 sites.

In the beginning, there were just four partners funding *Soccer for Success* programs in Miami: the U.S. Soccer Foundation, The Children's Trust, the Health Foundation, and the City of Miami. Since then, Target, Anthem Inc., the City of North Miami, and The Miami Foundation have joined local efforts to make soccer more accessible for youth, amassing approximately \$640,000 in contributions.

"This money is dedicated to the support of *Soccer for Success* because we believe in the evidence and we believe in being able to provide access to quality programming," Lee-Sin explains.

#### **MUNICIPALITIES MAKE GREAT PARTNERS**

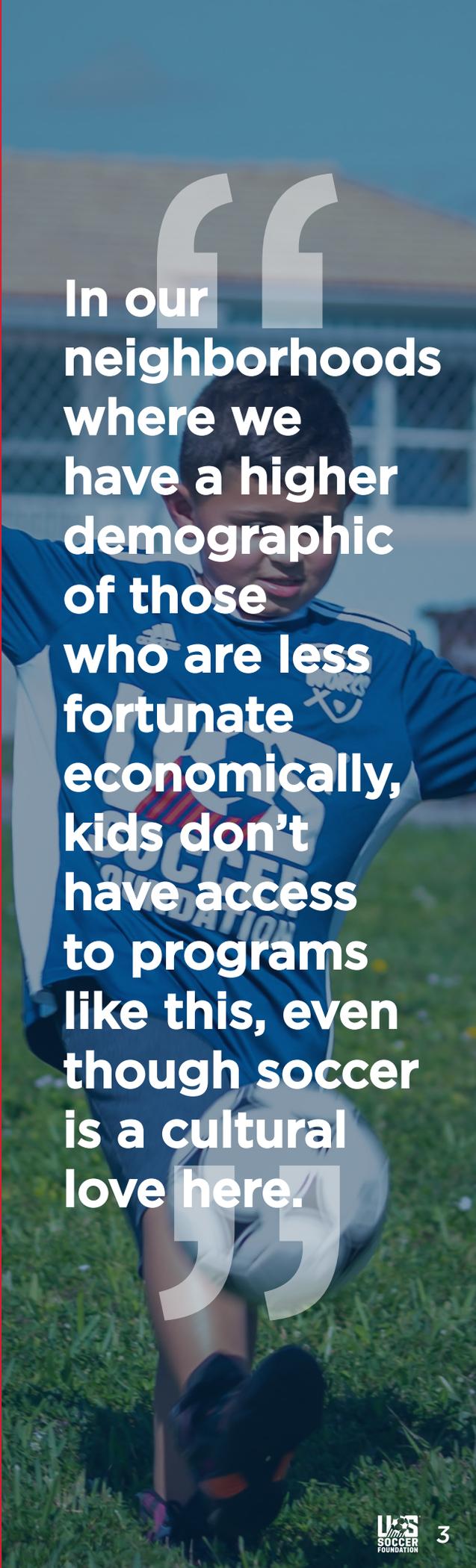
North Miami has a large population of Haitian, Caribbean-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos who prefer soccer to American-based sports such as baseball, football, and basketball.

Now in its third year with *Soccer for Success*, the municipality serves all of the communities surrounding North Miami, as well as North Miami residents.

According to Recreation Coordinator Roy Smith, word-of-mouth has contributed to the *Soccer for Success* program's wide-spread appeal. "We have people coming from different communities all over the Miami area just because they hear about our soccer program," he says, adding, "It's drawing people from outside of the city to come into the city just to play soccer and be a part of a program that's giving back so much to the community."

Derrick Corker, Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of North Miami points out that municipalities are in a better position than most to implement *Soccer for Success* programs because they already have the resources.

The municipality already owns suitable fields, which are maintained by its personnel. "A lot of organizations come to us to utilize our fields, so why not offer what we've already given away?" he points out. "Our employees, our volunteers, and our resources are utilized by *Soccer for Success*. Our maintenance guys are cutting the grass and lining the fields and making sure that they're safe so our kids don't run into potholes or any trip hazards. That allows us to have a leg up on everyone else."



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“You have the capability, you have the staff, you have the fields, you have the maintenance crew. Some of the equipment may be a concern, and that’s where the U.S. Soccer Foundation comes in. They provide the equipment, the training, and the curriculum,” he says, adding, “Everybody plays a part—from the coaches to the mentors to your administration office. I think it’s a positive thing. It’s well worth the effort.”

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY REQUIRES SOUND NUTRITION**

Physical activity works up an appetite and knowing what to eat is just as important. Food is fuel.

Until Lynne Kunins founded FLIPANY (Florida Introduces Physical Activity and Nutrition to Youth) in 2005, children growing up in Miami’s blighted neighborhoods had little to no access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

“We started out focused on fitness, but nobody wanted it, so we switched more to nutrition with a fitness component,” Kunins recalls of the program’s early days. “We did a lot of nutrition education, but then I noticed that structured

physical fitness in schools was falling off. We had to do something.”

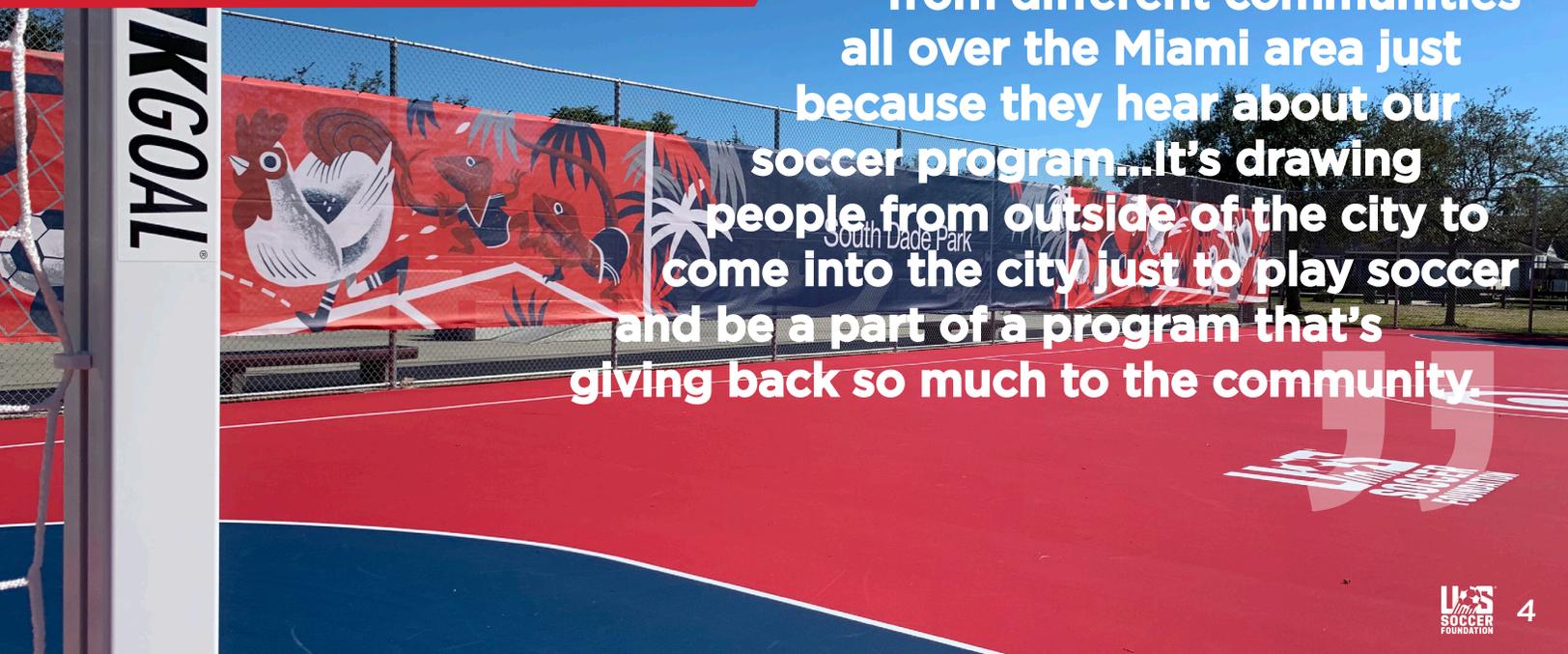
*Soccer for Success* was the answer.

Soccer is a fun game that includes a lot of hidden benefits, says Kunins, explaining that this is especially true of the Foundation’s curriculum due to the incorporation of core components like health and wellness, mentorship, and community engagement, among others. FLIPANY currently serves approximately 750 kids pre-K to 8th grade.

FLIPANY Afterschool Program Director Autrell Reid points out that *Soccer for Success* participants take their lessons home. “Whatever they learn here, they get to take back home to their families, and they begin asking their parents, ‘Can we have vegetables? Can we have fruit?’ because they want to grow up and be strong. Then, this healthy food is in the kitchen, and the parents end up tasting that banana, tasting that celery, and they begin to eat healthier food as well. It affects the whole family.”

Because of its partnership with the U.S. Soccer Foundation, FLIPANY has been able to offer

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a valuable service at approximately 40 sites throughout South Florida. “If you want to increase physical activity for the youth that you serve at your location, we can help you,” says Kunins, adding that children who might not be part of a larger organization still have access to Soccer for Success programming.

### **IT'S SAFE TO PLAY**

North Miami coach Mike Leon says he works with kids who sometimes use soccer as an escape from problems at home. “One boy was not understanding certain things at school and was getting in trouble a lot. I tried to tell him ‘you can use soccer as an escape from your problems, but when you get home, you still have to face them,’” he recalls, noting that problem-solving while playing soccer teaches kids to address the negatives in life and find a positive way out.

“On the field, kids can be themselves. All of the things they’ve been holding in all day or all week, that’s the place where they can let all of that energy out in a positive way, rather than doing something crazy outside or just staying inside balling it up,” Leon adds.

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says Kunins. “This is why the U.S. Soccer Foundation is so important in our partnership, because they’re creating safe spaces where these children can play. We want our children to go where there’s a caring coach, a structured program, and other people are there.”

### **COACHES AND MENTORS ARE THE PROGRAM'S BACKBONE**

YMCA of South Florida is the Foundation’s longest-standing Soccer for Success partner in Florida, offering two, three-month sessions per year in the fall and spring.

The majority of coaches are in their early twenties and thirties. Most have been to Washington, D.C. to participate in the Foundation’s annual coach-mentor training, and they can’t say enough good things about it. Over the course of four days, coach-mentors from across the country come to National Training in Washington, D.C. to learn the Foundation’s new Soccer for Success curriculum. At the end of the event, they become certified to train their own staff — and even other local organizations’ staff — on how to deliver the program to local youth.

“They can share in the curriculum and the equipment that we receive. Or, if we need to, we can work together to hire a coach-mentor to come to your location and actually teach the program to the kids in your care so that you’re building value in the services that you’re providing to the community, and the kids are in a safe space. This translates to a better, stronger, more well-connected community,” says Kunins.

FLIPANY recruits mentors who are caring, compassionate adults. “Maybe they’re part-time students who are transitioning in their careers, or maybe they have extra time because they are retired,” says Kunins. “These people want to have more impact on their community.”

Research shows that children who have a connection to a caring adult are more successful in life. “That caring adult might not be a teacher or a family member, but all of the research points to a caring connection with an adult,” says Kunins, who tells her coaches, “You never know who that adult is going to be—it could be you!”

Beyond connecting coaches across communities in the Miami area, the mentorship component of *Soccer for Success* has played an integral role in shaping both the coaches’ and children’s lives.

Sports coordinator Jorge Piriyaikul is 25 and has been working for YMCA for six years. “John, Keyla, and I have all been to the training more than once, so we understand how good the program is and how much good can come of it,” he says, referring to his co-workers. “Training gives us more of an initiative and because we already work with kids, we already have that drive to make things better for them. The training program helps serve as another medium for us to use to help children in the community.”

Javier Villón has been with YMCA for five years and says he loves being a mentor to young kids who look up to him. “We also want to foster trust in our kids, so once they trust us, the more engaged they are going to be toward us and more willing to be an active participant in the program.”

Piriyaikul says the mentoring relationship leads to kids becoming responsible members of the community. “I have my mentors, who are my trainers, and the kids that I trained are their mentors, and those kids have their mentors. It’s a chain. It’s a close-knit family.”

He adds, “Once you get that one kid who really connects with you and connects with the program, all of the other kids see this and think, ‘That looks like fun! I want to be like that, too!’”

FLIPANY Support Specialist Michelle McCaw credits the Foundation’s training program for teaching her how to be a better coach and mentor.

“Training was amazing because it enhanced and solidified the lessons I was teaching. It made me feel more connected with individuals and a lot more confident in communicating on all different levels,” she says. “We are a team, and we are always going to need each other’s support. Sometimes, things get hard, and we’re going through our own situations, but supporting each other also gives an example for what we want the children to see.”

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Organizations, staff, and participants are not the only ones to benefit from the implementation of the Foundation’s *Soccer for Success* and *Safe Places to Play* programs. Positive outcomes extend beyond those who are directly involved.

“The community’s reaction to this program is through-the-roof unbelievable,” says FLIPANY’s Reid. “Sometimes, they say they can’t believe that they actually see kids outside playing. They’re used to seeing kids’ faces glued to a phone or a tablet, so it actually encourages the community to look at them in a different light.”





The best time to get the parents involved is during events. “Those end-of-summer celebrations, where they get awards, or any time we’re able to put games together for the participants, that’s when you get the family involved,” says YMCA’s Piriyakul. “A lot of parents use the after-school space because they are working families, so the afternoons are really hard to try to engage the parents and keep them around. We implement those family events so that they have one or two times a season when they can get away from work and just focus on the kids and what they’re doing in the program.”

Lee-Sin of The Children’s Trust says that parents are more likely to get involved when there’s a high level of confidence in a national, evidence-based program like *Soccer for Success*.

“In Liberty City, for example, one of the ways we recruit kids for the program is to get parents to be involved and buy in, but that means they’re only going to folks who they already trust. Liberty City kids are in an underserved neighborhood where they don’t really play soccer or have access to it. We provide additional support and a complementary way of continually engaging all of those kids.”

“Society is looking at what we’re doing. They can see the kids on the field,” says YMCA Associate Executive Director John Ortega, MBA. “It’s nice to see a bunch of kids running around, having fun and laughing together. It brightens up your day.”

## CONCLUSION

As the proverb goes, “it takes a village.” It would not be without the funding from The Children’s Trust that *Soccer for Success* could operate at

so many sites across the Miami-Dade area; it would not be without leaders like Lynne Kunins that communities feel as though they have a program to call their own; it would not be without organizations and their committed coach-mentors that children would have a place to learn soccer fundamentals and about healthy living under the guidance of a mentor; and it would not be without the generous donations of Target that children in the Miami area — and beyond — have a safe place to play the game they love.

With so many committed players involved, it’s not surprising that the results have been so positive.

- 98% of community partners report that people in their community are more active after the installation of a mini-pitch
- 96% of community partners say their community feels safer after the installation of a mini-pitch
- 88% of *Soccer for Success* participants work better on a team
- 86% of *Soccer for Success* participants stay away from anti-social behavior
- 83% of *Soccer for Success* participants improve their health outcomes

Anecdotal evidence from partners also shows that after participation in the program, kids are better able to regulate when faced with conflict and figure out how to avoid fighting. In addition, because the program is mixed-gender, it also allows for peer-to-peer relationship development amongst girls and boys.

When the village comes together to nurture communities and to support the next generation, the positive outcomes cannot be denied.



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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