



# Cenla Parents are Finding Opportunity Through Early Childhood Education Support

aving access to quality childcare has made all the difference for Ananda Flanagan of Alexandria. Thanks to a unique funding partnership led by The Rapides Foundation, Flanagan can focus on her work at United Way of Central Louisiana while her 1-year-old son, Noah, receives excellent care and early learning at Heavenly Care Child Development Center, with tuition fully covered.

"As a single mom, I know all too well the challenges of balancing work, raising my children, and keeping up with the endless stream of bills. It can be overwhelming, especially working in the nonprofit sector, a career of passion and purpose, but not one of financial security," she said. "When I heard about the Early Childhood Education

Program, I applied without hesitation. The tuition waiver has been an absolute game changer for my family. Not only does it ease the burden of deciding which bills to pay or whether I need to take on another job, but it also gives me something truly priceless, more time with my kids."

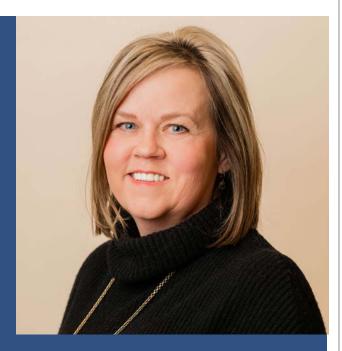
Flanagan is among hundreds of Central Louisiana parents benefiting from the Foundation's Cenla Early Childhood Education Access Program Grant, which is helping families afford high-quality care while preparing young children for long-term success.

### A Two-Phase Commitment to Early Learning

In late 2023, The Rapides Foundation's Board of Trustees made an initial investment of \$2.1



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Shana Delrie, Elementary Supervisor for Grant Parish Schools

million to help early childhood education networks in Rapides, Grant and Natchitoches parishes draw down matching dollars from the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund. That first round of funding allowed the networks to provide up to 380 early childhood seats for the 2024–25 school year.

To expand the reach, the Foundation also pledged to match local contributions raised by communities. By the January 31, 2024, deadline, local partners raised \$510,700, unlocking additional Foundation and state funding and resulting in a \$6.3 million total investment in early childhood education.

Building on this momentum, in late 2024, The Rapides Foundation Board approved a second, long-term commitment: \$8 million over the next three years to continue and grow the initiative across the region.

In 2024, Cenla Early Childhood Education Access Grants were awarded to the early childhood education lead agencies of four networks: Rapides Parish School Board, Grant Parish School Board, Natchitoches Parish School Board and the Volunteers of America South Central Louisiana (Avoyelles Parish). These four entities are receiving funding based on the number of spots available at childcare centers in the 2025–26 school year.

"The long-term impact of early childhood education reaches far beyond the classroom. It affects our future workforce, increases graduation rates and family incomes, and improves the overall health of a community," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation.

Summer Montgomery, an Executive Director of Heavenly Care Child Development Center III, where Flanagan sends Noah, said about 90% of families at the center are recipients of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Tuition Waiver. When the ECE program was introduced in early 2024, Montgomery encouraged all parents to apply.

"We told them this is a program that can cover 100% of your tuition, so sign up for it. The worst they can tell you is that you don't qualify," she said.

"Most of them were kind of shocked that they got approved because they had this mindset that it was for low, low income, but it's not. So once they got approved, they were excited because daycare is expensive."

The center has a few two-income families benefiting from the free-tuition program, "but for the most part it is single moms," Montgomery said. "Moms who are working full-time or who are in school and working but still need financial help."

### **Supporting Parents and Preparing Children**

The Cenla Early Childhood Education Access
Program Grant is part of the Foundation's School
Readiness Initiative, which aims to increase
kindergarten readiness by expanding or supporting
programs that promote high-quality teacher-child
and family-child interactions.

"Children who attend high-quality early childhood programs before kindergarten are more likely to complete high school and go through their school careers without repeating a grade, which sets them up for success beyond graduation. This project also allows parents and guardians to attend school or go to work while their children receive quality education in the daycare setting," Rosier said.

Shana Delrie, Elementary Supervisor for Grant Parish Schools, said districts benefit when children enter K-12 schools ready to learn.

"Research shows that brain development and social-emotional growth are critical during the first three years of life. Although parents are the child's first teacher, early education centers are an option for families who need support while working or going to school," she said.

"When children begin kindergarten ready to learn, they are more likely to do well in school, get along with their peers, and stay on track with their education. The early childhood settings use developmentally appropriate strategies and practices that enrich the learning experiences for young children and prepare them for success in kindergarten."

### **Community Champions**

The Foundation structured its grant to encourage communities to raise additional dollars to be matched by both the Foundation and state of Louisiana, amplifying the overall impact. The Rotary Club of Alexandria, with businessman and Rotarian Patrick Moore leading the efforts, became an early champion, spearheading an early childhood education project to raise awareness and support for early childhood education opportunities. Efforts of the Rapides Early Childhood Network (RECN), community leaders and the Rotary Club of Alexandria raised close to \$500,000 in just one month through individual and corporate donations. Organizations and individual



donors are continuing the momentum, which is the overall intent of the three-year grant as the Foundation's share will decrease each year.

"The Rotary Club is a great example of communities taking charge," Rosier said. "We're seeing other communities step up and recognize the importance of making sure all children are prepared for kindergarten."

Cindy Rushing, Early Childhood Director of the Rapides Parish School District, said the Foundation has helped pave the way for early childhood education and care in the parish. She emphasized that three key components are essential to our children's future: high-quality education, access and community support.

"Through the Cenla Early Childhood Education Access Program Grant initiative, the Rapides Early Childhood Network (RECN) has achieved unprecedented milestones, driving significant improvements in early childhood education and setting new records for the network's success," Rushing said.

### "It's truly a blessing" — A Parent's Perspective from Grant Parish

Christie Powell, a single mother of four from Dry Prong, knows how expensive childcare can be. Her youngest, Macie, attends Dogwood Learning Academy in Grant Parish tuition free, thanks to the ECE program.

"I haven't had to pay anything since sometime last year," Powell said. "Daycare is expensive — probably around \$500 a month — so this has made a huge difference financially. It's been a blessing."

Powell first heard about the program from Misty Poole, Dogwood Learning Academy's owner, who encouraged her to apply. "It was easy to sign up, and I was surprised it worked," Powell said. "I've

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Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation



never had luck getting childcare assistance before."

Macie is the first of Powell's children to attend daycare, and the difference is already clear. "She learned sign language before she could even talk, and I didn't teach her that," Powell said. "She's learning so much, and I feel completely comfortable knowing she's in a safe and loving environment while I'm at work."

### **Helping Providers Help Families**

Poole said the program has been transformative, not only for the children at Dogwood Learning Academy, but for the Grant Parish community as well.

"Some of the parents said that without the assistance and the help, that they wouldn't have been able to pay for childcare," Poole said. "They would have had to stop working or made other cuts somewhere in their family life. It's opening the doors for new opportunities and definitely helping the community as we know it."

Delrie said the program is particularly helpful in rural parishes like Grant.

"In rural communities, families often face limited childcare options. The Rapides Foundation has been a valued partner in our early childhood efforts, especially in helping expand access to quality care and education. Since the launch of our Ready Start Network Council a little over a year ago, we have successfully expanded access for parents by welcoming two new centers into our network this summer, increasing the quality and availability of early childhood education and care in our community. We appreciate The Rapides Foundation and their continued commitment to early childhood education," Delrie said.

For parents like Flanagan, the benefits are both immediate and lasting.

"Thanks to this program, my child is thriving in a high-quality childcare environment, Heavenly Care Child Development Center Number Three, and I can focus on my work knowing he's in good hands. It's taken a huge weight off my shoulders," Flanagan said. "It's made all the difference in our lives."



### 2025 RAPIDES FOUNDATION SYMPOSIUM







### THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION SYMPOSIUM

An annual gathering around a topic of importance.

# Annual Symposium Highlights Economic Development

or 30 years, The Rapides Foundation has worked to improve the health status of Central Louisiana by providing access to high-quality healthcare and community services – and as part of that mission, the Foundation has also devoted substantial resources to the region's economic development.

During the Foundation's 2025 Symposium — Building on Progress. Shaping What's Next — on Thursday, Sept. 4, at the Randolph Riverfront Center, more than 200 attendees heard state and local presenters explain the past, present and future of Central Louisiana's economic development and how decades of strategic investment have positioned Central Louisiana for growth.

The annual symposium recognizes the Foundation's Sept. 1, 1994, creation and provides information on a topic of importance to the Central Louisiana community. The creation was the result of a joint venture partnership between Rapides Regional Medical Center and HCA. Today, the Foundation owns 26% of the hospital and has grown its assets from \$140 million in 1994 to \$373 million.

Since its inception in 1994, the Foundation has awarded \$281 million in grants.

"People may ask, 'Why does a health-focused foundation focus on economic development?'" said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. "While the mission of The Rapides Foundation is to improve the health status of





## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### BUILDING ON PROGRESS, SHAPING WHAT'S NEXT

Central Louisiana, our vision is to positively impact Central Louisiana by deploying resources to improve key health factors across our nine-parish service area."

Studies show that populations who are more educated, with higher incomes, often live longer and free from disease diagnoses.

"In our most recent grant cycle, just under 40% of funding will be spent on healthcare access and healthy behaviors, while 43% will be spent on education," Rosier said. "Our goal is to have more children graduate high school and ready for the next stage of life, whether it be a four-year university, technical college or employment in local industry."

The Foundation allocates 16% of its funding to economic environment, focusing on "increasing median household income by growing income and wealth across the board."

Strategies used by the Foundation to accomplish that goal include workforce development, business startup and expansion and regional economic development.

Jim Clinton served as President and CEO of Louisiana Central, the regional economic

development organization representing a 10-parish area, from 2008 to 2025. In his speech, he reflected on his tenure and pointed to several key developments already at work in the region.

"The Rapides Foundation's work in the K–12 area and early childhood education has reverberated through Central Louisiana and throughout the state," Clinton said.

While other areas of the state have benefited greatly from the oil and gas industry, or from the generation of university–based research, Central Louisiana, Clinton said, is solidly rooted in healthcare, manufacturing and entrepreneurship and is in a unique position for renewable energy and emerging opportunities in the Al space.

Clinton thanked the Central Louisiana community "for giving me the chance to do this work" over the past 17 years.

He also thanked The Rapides Foundation "for its remarkable commitment to using best practices and for investing in best practices. They've got more discipline about connecting individual grant decisions to the purpose of the organization and to the long-term interest of the community than any

"They've got more discipline about connecting individual grant decisions to the purpose of the organization and to the long-term interest of the community than any organization I've ever dealt with. They're the best funder I've ever worked with."

– Jim Clinton, Outgoing President and CEO Louisiana Central

### 2025 RAPIDES FOUNDATION SYMPOSIUM





organization I've ever dealt with," he said. "They're the best funder I've ever worked with, and I've taken a lot of money from a lot of organizations."

Susan Bourgeois, Secretary of Louisiana Economic Development, outlined the state's plans to invest in and elevate rural communities, ensuring that regions like Central Louisiana are part of the state's economic future.

When Bourgeois took on her role in Louisiana Economic Development, she was confronted with one important statistic.

"Louisiana was the only state in the South over the last five years that was losing population and this was a trend we had to reverse," Bourgeois said. And that meant change across the board.

"The reception I received was incredible," Bourgeois said. "Leadership said, change it all."

Statewide, three areas of focus were education, public safety and tax reform. Changes in those spaces, Bourgeois said, make Louisiana more attractive to industry and investors. In the last 18 months, Bourgeois' team put 54 projects on the board and brought in approximately \$70 billion in capital investment, and created 23,000 new jobs.

"And we are far from done," Bourgeois said. With a new leadership team, and representation from eight Louisiana regions, Bourgeois has implemented a "Nine by Ninety" plan with specific, measurable goals to achieve by December 2026. Industries on her list include life sciences, technology, professional services, agribusiness, logistics, aerospace and defense, and energy/processing.

Chris Masingill, the incoming President and CEO of Louisiana Central, says the future of Central Louisiana is bright.

"I am honored to have this opportunity and I'm excited to get to work with the type of legacy companies we have in this community, companies that have been investing in our community for decades," Masingill said. "I grew up in a community just like Alexandria. This is a community that has faith, that loves their family, that loves their people, that has grit, that is resilient, that is strong. This is a region and a people that are hungry for opportunity and what the future holds."

Masingill unveiled his plan for Louisiana Central in his first 100 days on the job. The plans include



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> - Chris Masingill, Incoming President and CEO Louisiana Central



Organizational Excellence: Building

upon staff expertise and capacity; enhancing operational effectiveness; raising resources

Economic Development Strategy: Positioning the existing industrial and business base to grow and reinvest; recruiting new business investment and job creation; talent attraction; wrap-around entrepreneurship support

- Strategic Initiatives & Partnerships: Scaling strategies focused on labor force participation and workforce development, place-based development, and quality of life; breaking down silos to maximize impact; identifying cutting-edge best practices to address ongoing challenges
- Marketing and Engagement: Proactively telling Central Louisiana's story to the world; elevating partnerships; enhancing collaborations.

"We have a competitive advantage," Masingill said. "The way we are geographically positioned is a strategic advantage, and the work ethic of our region is one of the best in the nation."













Valerie Aymond, Vice Chair of The Rapides Foundation's Board

of Trustees, welcomes guests to the luncheon.



undreds of Central Louisiana students focused on moving more, eating well and living clean as they gathered for the Annual Youth Summit on Healthy Behaviors September 23–25 in Alexandria.

The Summit, now in its 14th year, is part of The Rapides Foundation's Healthy Behaviors Initiative and the teachers and students who attended are part of the Foundation's Healthy Behaviors School District Partnership Grant.

More than 150 students, teachers and staff from seven Central Louisiana school districts attended the one–day event each day at the Holiday Inn Downtown Alexandria. All of the students in attendance are members of their schools' Youth Health Advocates clubs.

Headlining each day's program was Julie Franks Gill, Professor of Kinesiology at Louisiana State University of Alexandria. Gill explained the benefits of healthy eating, the importance of physical activity, the risks of substance and alcohol misuse, the consequences of tobacco/vaping and ways students can advocate for healthy choices and positive changes in their schools and communities.

"People want to be leaders, but it takes energy, planning and time," Gill said. "That is why you are here. Your voice matters. Be kind. Model healthy behaviors. Our words can turn people away from our message, so be intentional about lifting others up. And think about what you will do to make a difference in your home, your school and your community."

In addition to Gill's opening session, students enjoyed "energizer breaks" by JiggAerobics and breakout sessions:

- Substance and Alcohol Misuse Prevention by Dominique Teasley and Jarvis Fountaine, who shared their personal stories of overcoming addiction.
- **Healthy Eating/Active Living** led by Kayli Franklin and Ann Herbert, two graduate-level students, with oversight from Simone Camel,

"I think kids are coming into college with a healthier viewpoint. They are drinking more water and asking for healthier food choices. They have all of this information at their fingertips. They ask more questions because they know more and they aren't afraid to challenge the narrative."

– Julie Gill, Professor of Kinesiology Louisiana State University of Alexandria







"Through the Youth Advocacy Council, I learned about community health and nutrition, and I discovered that really interested me. It really opened my eyes and made me realize this is what I wanted to do. It makes me proud that I'm out there doing what I've always wanted to do."

 Kayli Franklin, Dietetics Graduate Student Louisiana Tech University



Associate Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at Louisiana Tech University.

 Tobacco Prevention and Control led by Tracey Antee of Opelousas, whose background includes serving as Community Development Manager for the American Cancer Society.

"We recognize that schools are an important part of most young people's lives and therefore provide a critical setting for many prevention and intervention efforts under our Healthy Behaviors Initiative," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation.

One of the goals of the Summit is to increase students' knowledge of healthy eating and active living, substance and alcohol misuse prevention and tobacco prevention and control. In addition, the Summit is intended to present students with healthy strategies they can implement in their schools and communities.

The program, Gill said, is working.

"I think kids are coming into college with a healthier viewpoint," Gill said. "They are drinking more water and asking for healthier food choices. They have all of this information at their fingertips. They ask more questions because they know more and they aren't afraid to challenge the narrative."

Kayli Franklin is a great example of what the Youth Summit is designed to do. A former student at Scott M. Brame Middle School and Alexandria Senior High School, and now a graduate student in dietetics at Louisiana Tech University, Franklin credits her time on The Rapides Foundation's Youth Advocacy Council, and attendance at several Youth Summits, for where she is today. She was one of two graduate students who presented the Healthy Eating/Active Living breakout session.

"I was on the Youth Advocacy Council in high school," Franklin said. "It encouraged me to get up and speak and I feel like that really helped me. Through the Youth Advocacy Council, I learned about community health and nutrition, and I discovered that really interested me.

"It really opened my eyes and made me realize this is what I wanted to do. It makes me proud that I'm out there doing what I've always wanted to do." For Williams Layton of Natchitoches Junior



High, attendance at this year's Summit means a chance to teach and mentor others.

"I like it when we go back to school and we can teach our classmates what we've learned," Layton said. "Plus, it's always fun teaching the kids who are new to the Summit about what we do here and why it is important."

Of course, there's a good bit of fun thrown into the mix, too, said Aunestie Brown from Natchitoches Magnet.

"I learned how much healthy eating, tobacco and vaping impacts our health and how much of an impact it has had on other people's lives," Brown said. "It's fun and informational at the same time. They don't just bring us in here and have us sitting there listening to speakers. They get us involved."

Students also learn to value community centered around shared goals and values.

Aubree Anable, a 10th-grade student from Leesville High School has attended the Summit three times in a row.

"I like the community here," Anable said. "You see a lot of the same people here every year so we're able to connect and catch up.

"We're learning about how the decisions we make now can harm us in the future. As a teenager. we don't really think about that. But we're learning that if you start small, you can move on to bigger things."















# TEACHERS GAIN INSIGHTS AT SUMMER WEE CAMPS

ducators from across Central Louisiana stepped out of the classroom and into the workplace this summer to better understand the careers their students may one day enter.

Through a series of weeklong Workplace Experience Exchange (WEE) Camps, participants toured job sites, heard from industry professionals and took part in hands-on activities designed to connect classroom learning with real-world opportunities.

The camps are part of the Career and Postsecondary Readiness component of The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative, which focuses on helping students achieve success beyond high school. The camps are administered by its education affiliate, The Orchard Foundation. Participants are made up of a select group of

educators from high schools, middle schools and elementary schools from nine Central Louisiana parishes. The program includes WEE Camp I, WEE Camp II and WEE Camp Elementary.

The goal is to help educators develop a broader, real-world perspective they can pass on to their students. There is no cost to attend WEE Camp. Educators apply to attend.

"As a rural school with only a caution light and volunteer fire department, our kids can sometimes miss out on the bigger picture of what's available to them, especially when they're younger like the ones in my classroom," said WEE Camp Elementary participant Hanna Perry, who teaches fourth and fifth grades at Plainview High School. "I really look forward to broadening their worldview with the knowledge I've gained at WEE Camp."

At camp, educators are hosted by local

### THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION



employers, touring different sites and learning about what it takes to be successful in each workplace. Company representatives share their industry's trends and workforce needs, and then explain what kinds of skills and characteristics they look for in future employees.

"Because of WEE Camp, I now have resources to make what I teach relevant to the future career choices of my students," said WEE Camp I participant Ashley Ford, a Winnfield Middle School teacher who is already looking forward to attending WEE Camp II next summer.

Some educators planned to update their curriculum to incorporate new, necessary skills in the classroom while others plan to include careerexploration part of their classroom learning.

Part of WEE Camp's success comes from the participation of its industry partners, who provided educators with direct, hands-on experiences during their visits.





2025 WEE Camp industry partners were:

- AFCO Industries
- Alexandria International Airport
- Alexandria Zoological Park
- Avant Organics, a company of Crest Industries
- Central Management Company
- Career Compass
- Central Louisiana Technical Community College
- CHRISTUS St. Frances Cabrini Hospital
- · City of Alexandria, Public Works
- Crain Ponthieux Companies
- Dark Woods Adventure Park
- Dis-Tran Packaged Substations, a company of Crest Industries
- Elite Physical Therapy
- Jenkins Companies
- Louisiana Central
- Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
- · Rapides Regional Medical Center
- Region 6, La. STEM Center
- RoyOMartin
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- UTLX, Union Tank Car

The application process for 2026 WEE camps will be in the spring. Businesses interested in participating are asked to call Aubrey Flynn at The Orchard Foundation at (318) 787-6561.















eenagers across Central Louisiana served their communities through a variety of projects and activities this summer on their way to becoming lifelong leaders and volunteers.

Under the Youth Volunteer Summer Service Grant program, grants of up to \$5,000 were awarded to nonprofits, municipalities and community-based organizations to facilitate volunteer service opportunities. Projects included animal rescue, trash pick-up, nursing home visits and food bank distribution.

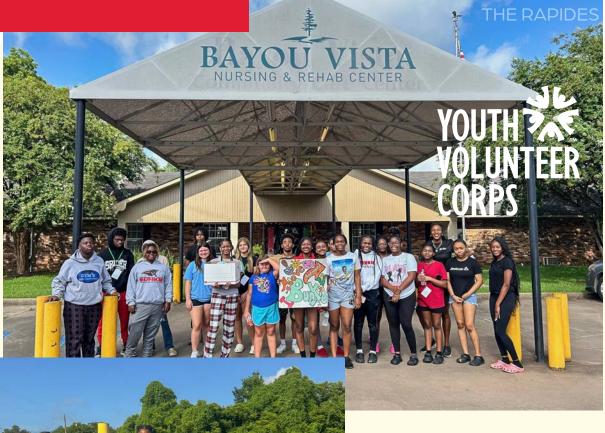
The grants are part of the Foundation's Social Environment Initiative, which seeks to support leadership and nonprofit development along with increased community and civic engagement.

The Foundation launched the My Civic Life program in 2016 to provide Central Louisiana

youth volunteers with service opportunities and resources, in hopes they will become engaged in their communities and make volunteerism a lifelong habit. The Foundation continues to provide school districts with funding to offer service clubs for students in grades 7–12. The clubs follow the evidence–based model developed by Youth Volunteer Corps.

The Foundation expanded the program in 2023 by offering Youth Volunteer Summer Service Grants to help organizations fund community-based service opportunities for youth ages 11 to 18 during the summer.

Move Bunkie Forward welcomed 27 youth participants who completed six community projects, including revitalizing the garden beds at Tom Roy Community Garden, painting the entrance gate and shade coverings at Sheppard's Park,

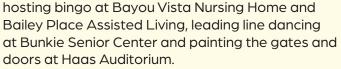


so engaging that they want to stay – additionally, the students select our community projects themselves, which boosts their willingness to see the projects through to completion."

Organizations receiving Youth Volunteer Summer Service Grants in 2025 were:

- Alexandria Affordable Housing Corporation
- B22 Sports Complex
- Clifton-Choctaw Reservation
- Limitless Christian Academy
- Morning Star Baptist Church
- The Health Enrichment Network Wellness Center
- Town of Bunkie Move Bunkie Forward
- Zion Hill Missionary Baptist Church

"We are so grateful for the incredible efforts of the students who volunteered through The Rapides Foundation's Youth Volunteer Corps," said Carole Stafford, Food Bank of Central Louisiana volunteer coordinator. "Their dedication not only helps us prepare and package food for distribution to food-insecure households across Central Louisiana but also instills in them a deep sense of civic responsibility. These young volunteers are gaining valuable experience in community service while making a real impact on the lives of families in need."



"When selecting volunteers and students for our Move Bunkie Forward program this summer, we chose volunteer projects that could be scheduled during two one-week summer camps," said Michelle Reynolds, Move Bunkie Forward director. "After working a two-hour paid shift, teenagers were given the option to participate in community projects. My goal is to create an environment that's



**How Healthy is** Your Community?

ind out where your community ranks when it comes to tobacco use. heart disease, mental health and more.

The Rapides Foundation's Community Health Needs Assessment, conducted every three to five years, is a comprehensive data-driven report that studies the health, behaviors and needs of people living in the nine-parish service area.



The report identifies health problems and gaps in services that affect Central Louisiana residents, and it compares that information to other parishes across the state, and other states around the country.

The results are used to inform the Foundation's strategies and goals for improving the health of our community. Nonprofit organizations often use the information to make informed decisions and guide efforts to improve community health and wellness.

View the full report at Community Health Needs Assessments on the Foundation's website under the Newsroom tab.





The Rapides Foundation continues a legacy of community healthcare initiated in 1903.

President/CEO: Joe Rosier, CFA, CPA (Inactive)

> **Editorial Team:** Kathy Gunn Raven Smith Sarah Clancy

For additional copies or to be added to the mailing list, contact: The Rapides Foundation 1101 Fourth Street, Suite 300 Alexandria, LA 71301

> Tel: 318-443-3394 1-800-994-3394 Fax: 318-443-8312

www.rapidesfoundation.org grantinfo@rapidesfoundation.org



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