



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Florida Blue Foundation honors nine with Sapphire Awards for addressing mental well-being, provides \$525,000 in funding

April 13, 2023 (ORLANDO, FL) - The Florida Blue Foundation, the philanthropic affiliate of [Florida Blue](#), is honoring nine recipients who are doing exemplary work to provide mental health care services and support to those who otherwise may not have access to this type of care.

The Florida Blue Foundation announced the winners at its annual Sapphire Awards ceremony on April 12 in Orlando. The awardees will share \$525,000 that will allow them to continue to focus on ideas and programs to improve access to mental well-being services in their communities.

“As a mission-driven company focused on helping people and communities achieve better health, we are committed to improving access to care, including mental health support, to reduce the stressors that often impact entire families and communities,” said Susan Towler, executive director of the Florida Blue Foundation. “We are truly impressed with the results these nine awardees have achieved and look forward to working with them as they continue to make a difference for the individuals and communities they serve.”

According to NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, one in five adults experiences a mental illness each year and one in six children experiences an episode of mental health disorder each year. Given the growing mental health crisis, it is difficult for many people to get the care they need. Fortunately, there are people, programs and organizations within the state of Florida that are addressing mental well-being challenges and improving outcomes.

Each of the programs, organizations, and individuals honored with a Sapphire Award was selected through a robust external review process for their exemplary leadership, innovative ideas, demonstrated outcomes, and excellence. They all have a track record of improving mental well-being outcomes, which directly impact people’s overall health and quality of life.

Below are the individuals who were honored:

- Connie Bookman (Pensacola) is a licensed clinical social worker and the founder and CEO of [Pathways for Change](#), a nonprofit that provides mental health, social services and re-entry support for those who have served time in prison. A champion for creating a more equitable community, Bookman has long focused on providing practical, life, health and vocational skills to

individuals in need while preserving each person's dignity and hope for a better future. The \$100,000 award will support Pathways for Change. Watch her video [here](#).

- Raquel Tapia-Bell (Winter Park) is the senior director of operations and programs for the [Foundation for Foster Children](#), a nonprofit that provides opportunities for children in foster care in Central Florida. Leveraging her education and experience in mental health case management and counseling, Tapia-Bell created customized programming to help young individuals navigate mental health challenges. Tapia-Bell received a second-place award and the \$50,000 will be directed to the programs at the Foundation for Foster Children. Watch her video [here](#).
- Brenda Lopez (Boynton Beach) is the social services manager for the [Caridad Center](#), the largest free health care clinic in Florida offering medical, vision, dental and behavioral health care for uninsured children and families of Palm Beach County. Lopez leads a multi-disciplinary team of volunteer mental health providers and support staff who provide care in a culturally sensitive and understanding way. In addition to creating a support group for new women immigrants and survivors of domestic violence, Lopez has created tailored solutions and multi-language programs for the unique populations Caridad serves, including Haitian immigrants. Lopez received a third-place award and the \$25,000 will be directed to Caridad's Behavioral Health Department. Watch her video [here](#).

Below are the organizations that were honored:

- The [Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center](#) (Jacksonville) is considered a leader in advocating for the rights of at-risk girls and young women. Born out of the Justice for Girls Reform Movement, the Policy Center is focused on changing laws, policies and practices to prevent girls' initial or deeper involvement in the justice system. The center aims to improve outcomes and drive the equitable treatment of young women. This organization received a first-place award and \$100,000. Watch their video [here](#).
- [Families First of Palm Beach County](#) (West Palm Beach) is a children's case management organization that serves children from birth to age 22, as well as their families, by providing health, mental health, family strengthening and housing programs. Families First early intervention programs are shown to reduce rates of domestic violence, poverty, homelessness and addiction. By introducing behavioral health services early in life, families receive holistic support that helps them become physically and emotionally self-sufficient, helping them change the life trajectory for themselves, their children and future generations. The organization received a second-place award and \$50,000. Watch their video [here](#).
- [Seniors in Service](#) (Tampa) is a nonprofit that engages volunteers aged 55+ to help meet the needs and challenges of at-risk seniors, veterans, and children throughout Tampa Bay. By harnessing the talents of highly trained volunteers, they provide access to mental health and other social services, helping to reduce health disparities. During the last service year, 1,375 volunteers contributed nearly 222,000 hours valued at nearly \$5.1 million. Since its founding,

this organization has provided over 5 million hours of assistance with fair-market value exceeding \$131.6 million. This organization received a third-place award and \$25,000. Watch their video [here](#).

Below are the programs that were honored:

- [The Health Care District of Palm Beach County \(HCDPBC\) Addiction Model](#) (Palm Beach) is an innovative public-private partnership with a local hospital and the Palm Beach County Commission. The evidence-based medical treatment addiction-specialized program involves a hospital's emergency department and the outpatient clinic of the nearby HCDPBC Federally Qualified Health Clinic (FQHC). Once ER patients receive initial treatment for their Substance Use Disorder (SUD), they are discharged to the FQHC to receive further treatment regardless of their ability to pay. The Addiction Model of Palm Beach County program was honored with a first-place award and \$100,000. Watch their video [here](#).
- The Mental Health Support is an [Alliance for LGBTQ Youth](#) program (West Palm Beach) that provides a comprehensive system of care to address the specific needs of LGBTQ youth, their families and community organizations throughout Miami-Dade County. Highly trained clinicians provide, at no cost, care coordination, individual and group counseling, family support and family therapy to youth and family members. The holistic therapeutic approach effectively supports youth in strengthening their mental health, coping skills, resilience and family functioning, as well as increasing their connectedness by identifying needed supports and services in the community. This program was honored with a second-place award and \$50,000. Watch their video [here](#).
- The Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team model is a housing and treatment program offered by [Camillus House](#) (Miami), a homeless services provider in South Florida. The ACT's team of licensed psychiatrists, nurses, clinicians and case managers help homeless individuals struggling with addiction and mental illnesses by providing housing and wrap around support to help turn lives around. This program was honored with a third-place award and \$25,000. Watch their video [here](#).

This is the 19th year the Florida Blue Foundation has presented the Sapphire Awards to individuals, programs, and organizations in community health. Since 2005, the Foundation has presented 139 Sapphire Awards, totaling nearly \$7 million.

Florida Blue Foundation presented the Sapphire Awards during its annual two-day Community Health Symposium. This year's event focused on mental well-being and attracted nearly 700 people from the health care, government, higher education and nonprofit sectors.

The event featured national and statewide speakers, panel discussions, and networking opportunities focused on identifying solutions to address mental well-being, improve affordability, and increase access to high-quality care.

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About Florida Blue Foundation

Florida Blue Foundation enables healthy communities by making grants, building coalitions, and embracing solutions that create a meaningful impact in our communities. More than 8 million Floridians have received services as a result of our community investments since its founding in 2001. Florida Blue Foundation is committed to improve health equity by impacting food security, advancing mental well-being, growing healthy communities, and addressing health disparities. Florida Blue Foundation is a trade name of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida Foundation, Inc., an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. For more information, please visit www.FloridaBlueFoundation.com.

About Florida Blue

Florida Blue, Florida's Blue Cross and Blue Shield company, has been providing health insurance to residents of Florida for more than 75 years. Driven by its mission of helping people and communities achieve better health, the company serves more than 5 million health care members across the state. In total, Florida Blue and its affiliated companies serve more than 46 million people in 45 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Headquartered in Jacksonville, Fla., it is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.