

Alton to Become One of Eight Child Friendly Cities in the U.S.

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - The City of Alton unveiled its plans to become a child-friendly city through the UNICEF U.S.A Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). Alton will be one of eight cities in the country to achieve this designation.

“Sometimes you look in eyes and you see hope. Other times, you see despair. Other times, you see trauma. Through this Child Friendly City Initiative, what we want to do is be able to see the hope in their eyes and not despair,” Mayor David Goins said. “What I’d like to do is continue to work with the City Council and my administration as we strive to seek legislation, decisions that will positively impact children’s lives and health and wellbeing.”

The City Council has allocated \$1 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to “invest in our youth,” Goins said. The Council specifically approved \$50,000 from the American Rescue Plan Act to go toward CFCI in Alton.

CFCI focuses on promoting child rights, fighting discrimination and prioritizing the needs of young people in a community. Tracy Nájera, Vice President of U.S. Programs at UNICEF U.S.A., said that UNICEF has implemented CFCI in 40 countries, but Alton is one of only eight U.S. municipalities currently engaged in the initiative.

“This is really an opportunity for us to work together and think about how we want to envision communities centering child voice, centering youth voice, and helping local governments and other stakeholders come together to make this a reality for children,” Nájera said. “We want Alton to be a city that other cities want to model after, that look at Alton for inspiration and how you make child-responsive policies, practices and programs a reality here for children.

Nájera also expressed UNICEF U.S.A.’s commitment to the partnership with Alton and their plans to make a “measurable difference around issues of greatest priority among the lives of children and youth.”

Alton’s decision to become a child-friendly city has been several years in the making. Dr. Anne Scheer, professor at SIU School of Medicine’s Department of Population Science, has been conducting studies since February 2020 to understand the problems faced by young people in Alton. Her team has created several focus groups, surveyed over 1,600 Alton middle and high school students and spoken to “hundreds” of parents and caregivers in the region.

“A child-friendly city is a place where all young people can be happy, healthy, safe and respected. It is a place where young people have a seat at the table and a voice in matters that affect them,” Scheer said. “But a child-friendly city is not a state. It’s a process...The common denominator across all of the stories we’ve heard is the kids’ excitement to share, their eagerness to talk and their gratitude, expressed in so many different ways, that you’re listening to what they have to say.”

Scheer added that her team plans to create youth and family advisory groups so children and caregivers can share their challenges, successes and needs. The City of Alton and the City Council will use these conversations to inform their decisions. By making an effort to meet the basic needs of children in the community, the City hopes to see more children thriving into adulthood in Alton.

Dr. Kristie Baumgartner, Alton Community Unit School District #11 (ACUSD11) superintendent, noted that CFCI will also “create an important network of stakeholders” who will prioritize youth needs. The SIU School of Medicine Department of Population Science and Policy, Alton Works and Alton Forward, OSF St. Anthony’s, Alton Memorial Hospital and ACUSD11 have partnered with the City of Alton for this initiative.

“The most exciting part for me is that it provides a meaningful and powerful opportunity for our students to have a voice,” Baumgartner added. “In fact, they’ve already had an opportunity to share some of their thoughts, ideas, perspectives and input, and we know that is very critical...Our children certainly deserve no less.”