

Manatee Children's Services

Healing Paws, Helping Hands: Coordinating Treatment and Compassion for Child Abuse Victims

Manatee Children's Services mission is to advocate for and provide the resources, skills, and shelter to alleviate abuse through prevention and intervention for all children and their families. Its initiative, ***Healing Paws, Helping Hands: Coordinating Treatment and Compassion for Child Abuse Victims*** supports this mission by hiring a full-time Volunteer Coordinator to manage, expand, and sustain its volunteer network, including the coordination of therapy dog visits for 200–300 children, ages 6–17, per year across its residential, clinical, and advocacy programs.

The total initiative budget is \$135,817, with the additional \$27,817 pending. Our grant would fund 80% of the Volunteer Coordinator's salary and benefits for two years.

Children who have experienced abuse or neglect face overwhelming emotional and psychological challenges including poor health, unstable relationships, poverty, and increased reliance on public systems. Many feel isolated, fearful, and distrustful of adults. No child should have to face these moments alone. Manatee Children's Services would bridge that gap and ensure therapy dogs are available to comfort children during forensic interviews, counseling sessions, and transitions into shelter care. This initiative would fund a Volunteer Coordinator to increase volunteer recruitment by 50%, strengthen retention, lead onboarding and training, launch a therapy dog program, and place skilled volunteers where they are most needed.

When children are interviewed about deeply painful experiences or placed into emergency shelter settings, the presence of a trained therapy dog or compassionate volunteer can be transformative. Research shows that therapy animals lower stress hormones, lower heart rate and blood pressure, and help children feel calmer and more secure, making it easier for them to share their stories and begin to heal.

To address sustainability, Manatee Children's Services would demonstrate the initiative's impact through measurable outcomes and compelling testimonials that inform a clear and effective fundraising strategy. The organization plans to seek future funding from another organization, following the successful volunteer and therapy dog program model of its sister Child Advocacy Center in Fort Myers. In addition, Manatee Children's Services would pursue grant opportunities from an organization that currently funds another pet therapy program.

By investing in trauma-informed interventions like therapy dogs and supportive volunteer programming, Manatee Children's Services would help 200–300 children each year heal from trauma and foster a healthier, safer, and more resilient community for all.