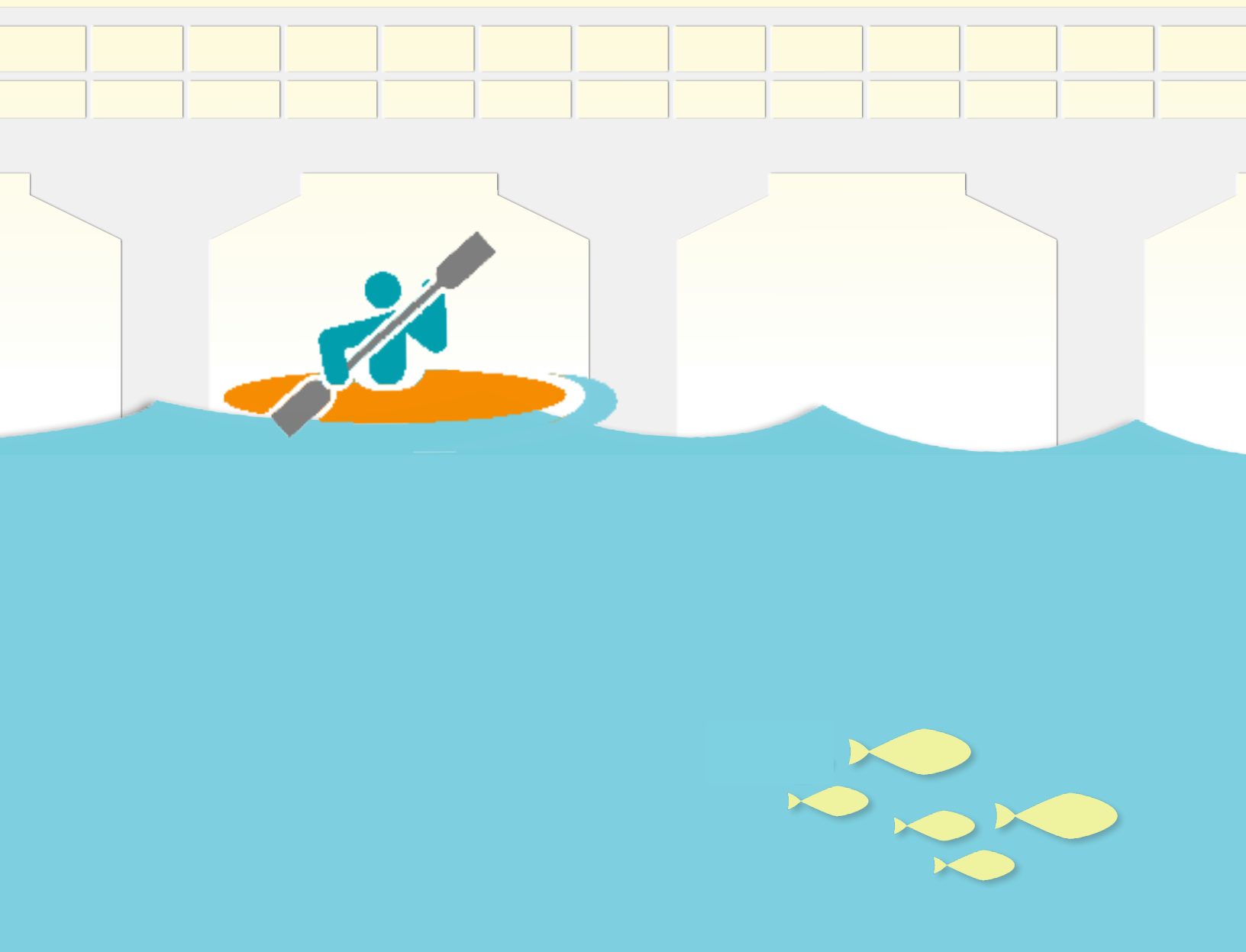


# OKALOOSA COUNTY

## Community Health Assessment

### 2023 Update





# Letter to the Community

The Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County (DOH-Okaloosa) is pleased to present the 2023 update to the Community Health Assessment (CHA). The mission of DOH-Okaloosa is to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Okaloosa County through integrated state, county and community efforts. This update to the assessment prioritizes data related to our four health priority areas and includes information on the health of our community and other factors that impact health.

The 2023 CHA Update identifies disparities influencing the health status of individuals and groups in our community. These disparities include economic and social conditions, as well as individual risk factors, such as health behaviors or genetics influencing the risk for disease or injury.

This document represents data collected from area agencies and partners, identifying the community's strengths and challenges related to the priority health issues selected by our community. The CHA is a foundation for the creation of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). The CHIP follows a strategic methodology to address the identified health priorities in the CHA by aligning our goals with those of our community partners, medical providers, and local government agencies.

The CHA not only presents challenges for us as a community, but also allows the opportunity to work collaboratively toward solutions that result in lasting and meaningful change. The Okaloosa County Health Improvement Partnership (OCHIP) works diligently to exemplify this by establishing multisectoral partnerships to reduce health disparities and the negative impacts of the priority health issues outlined in this document. Their accomplishments over the past year are highlighted within this updated report.

DOH-Okaloosa is committed to working alongside our partners to improve the wellness, health, and quality of life for Okaloosa County residents and visitors.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth "Beth" Smith, MSN, RN  
Health Officer

*Elizabeth Smith*



# Okaloosa County Community Health Assessment 2023 Update

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# Overview

In 2022, the Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County (DOH-Okaloosa) published the third Community Health Assessment (CHA) using the **Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) model**. The CHA uses data to tell the story of public health in Okaloosa County. It shares both good things about our communities and the ways in which we can improve.

DOH-Okaloosa held the Okaloosa Health Summit on September 8, 2022. The Summit served to launch the 2022 CHA and form the Okaloosa County Health Improvement Partnership (OCHIP). More than 80 community members attended the summit. After learning about the CHA findings, attendees voted to select the top four priority areas. Healthy Behaviors, Healthy Children, Healthy Communities, and Healthy Moms & Babies were chosen.

These priorities were used to form OCHIP groups, which are responsible for implementing the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). The CHIP is a community-driven and collectively owned health improvement plan that includes goals, objectives, and evidence-based strategies to enact positive change regarding priority health issues.

OCHIP groups are community-led with more than 100 members and 39 organizations represented. DOH-Okaloosa worked to increase participation in OCHIP by partnering with a greater number of organizations with varying local perspectives. Over the past year, these groups have worked diligently to improve the health of all Okaloosans. Their work has led to many successes, including improving the lives and wellbeing of Okaloosa children and infants through collaborative efforts like Handle with Care and the Charlie's Kids safe sleep initiative.

As you read the 2023 CHA Update, consider how you can become involved. **Everyone has a role to play in improving the health of all residents.** Together, we can make Okaloosa County a healthier place to live, learn, work, play, age, and worship.

## Symbol Key



These symbols are used to highlight positives and negatives in our communities.



This “Did You Know?” symbol is used to highlight facts and important data points.



This symbol is used throughout the CHA update to highlight disparities, or areas that need improvement. We focus on the issues that need improvement so we can work together on solutions!

# Healthy Behaviors

## OKALOOSA OPINIONS

### Addiction

**54%** of residents ranked street opioids/fentanyl as one of the top 3 risky behaviors in Okaloosa County.<sup>2</sup>

**“We’ve got [to] take the stigma out of it, and we can’t shame people.** Addiction is just another illness. It’s not to be shamed, it’s to be helped.” – Fort Walton Beach resident

**38%** of residents ranked drug overdoses as one of the top 3 health issues in Okaloosa County.<sup>2</sup>



The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners, City of Fort Walton Beach, and City of Destin implemented a Tobacco Free Parks and Beaches policy. This protects residents and visitors from secondhand smoke exposure.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

In Okaloosa County, the top substances the Florida Poison Control Center Network receives calls about are **alcohol and benzodiazepines**.<sup>1</sup>



23% of Okaloosa men and 15% of Okaloosa women say they engage in binge drinking. Adults ages 18 to 44-years-old are more likely to binge drink than those 45-years-old and up.<sup>3</sup>

There are **8 facilities** in Okaloosa County that help people experiencing drug addiction. Some are treatment facilities and others provide support or housing.<sup>4</sup>



### Impact of Substance Use<sup>8</sup>

Substance use causes harm to people, families, and entire communities. It can lead to:

- Increased healthcare costs, crime, and violence
- Poor mental health
- Motor vehicle crashes and injuries
- Spread of infectious disease

Many organizations across Okaloosa County are working together to reduce the burden of substance use and support residents in need.



In March 2023, the Okaloosa County School District launched their Anti-Vaping Campaign to support awareness for middle and high school students.<sup>9</sup>



**10%** of Florida adults report living with someone while growing up who was sentenced to serve time in prison, jail, or another correctional facility.<sup>3</sup>



Since 2016, Okaloosa has had a **significantly higher rate of rape and forcible sex offenses** compared to Florida overall.<sup>3</sup> From 2019 to 2022, there were 59 cases of sexual battery and 34 total convictions.<sup>33</sup>

In 2022, Okaloosa County Emergency Medical Services responded to 1,204 drug overdoses. **1 in 3 responses were from opioids alone.**<sup>3</sup>



“[It is important to] encourage our community members to engage in healthy behaviors. [This] starts with **knowledge and access to assistance.**”  
- Deb Willis, West Florida Area Health Education Center

Group members hosted a virtual Cost of Poverty Experience (COPE) training. **Members of the partnership attended to learn about reintegration into the community, including barriers.** COPE facilitators offered practical, evidence-based solutions to support those released from prison, jail, or other facilities.

The group worked to develop a card sharing facts and resources for people experiencing substance use. The card includes mental health, substance use, housing, health, and health care resources. These resources are also listed on the DOH-Okaloosa webpage. The card will be distributed throughout the county along with a QR code for easy access.

The recidivism rate decreased for Okaloosans released from a correctional facility between 2016 and 2018. The current return rate is 19%. **Recidivism is when someone returns to prison or jail, either because of a new conviction or a violation of their previous release, within three years of their release date.** Some key facts include:<sup>10</sup>

- Men are more likely to recidivate than women.
- Likelihood decreases with age at release.
- Those convicted of burglary, sexual/lewd offenses, and robbery are more likely to return.



## HEALTHY BEHAVIORS GROUP PROGRESS

# Healthy Children



Female students in Okaloosa County report **struggling with their mental health more than two times as often** as their male classmates.<sup>3</sup>

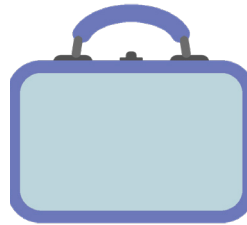
**Florida ranks 35th** out of 50 states in overall child well-being.<sup>31</sup>



**Okaloosa ranks 21st** out of 67 counties in overall child well-being.<sup>31</sup>



The number of juvenile drug arrests in Okaloosa County has been decreasing since 2018. The number of youth arrested for possession or sale of illegal drugs **decreased by 80% from 2018 to 2022**. Okaloosa County now matches Florida's overall rate for juvenile drug arrests.<sup>3</sup>



Nearly half of all elementary students in Okaloosa County come from families who do not make enough money to pay for their school lunches.<sup>3</sup>

In 2022, the Okaloosa County School District added additional mental health counselors serving elementary, middle, and high school students. There are now **41 mental health providers across the district**.<sup>12</sup>

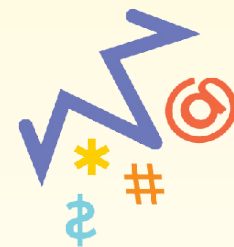


## Violence Against Children

**More than 9,000 children aged 5 to 11-years-old were abused** in Florida each year.<sup>3</sup>

Okaloosa children aged 5 to 11-years-old are **80% more likely to experience abuse** than other children of the same age in Florida.<sup>3</sup>

The rate of Okaloosa children aged 5 to 11-years-old who have **experienced sexual violence is nearly two times higher** than other children of the same age in Florida.<sup>3</sup>







In 2022, the Okaloosa County School District added a Hope Squad group to each middle and high school. This is a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program.<sup>12</sup>

From 2020 to 2022, 923 Okaloosa children were in foster care. Okaloosa County has **significantly more youth** in foster care compared to the Florida average.<sup>3</sup>



**22%** of Okaloosa high school students report having experienced four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).<sup>3</sup> ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use in adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

The Florida Department of Children and Families reports the most common types of abuse experienced by Okaloosa youth are related to:<sup>14</sup>

- Substance use
- Domestic violence
- Lack of supervision
- Physical injury
- Environmental hazards

In 2021, 540 youth ages 10 to 17-years-old were arrested.<sup>3</sup>

**Okaloosa's youth arrest rate is nearly three times higher than Florida's overall rate.** Nearly half of these arrests were

from alcohol offenses and assault/battery.<sup>35</sup>



## HEALTHY CHILDREN

# GROUP PROGRESS

"It's great to see community partners coming together to ensure we have **happy, healthy, and safe children free from the negative impacts of substance use and drug activity**," says Sgt. Jessica Trimboli of the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. "It's important that we work collaboratively to identify drug endangered children in our community," adds Danielle Wilson with the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center.

**On April 7, 2023, the group launched the Handle with Care video.** Handle with Care is a partnership with first responders and educators. Schools are notified when a child experiences a traumatic event and are asked to handle them with care. The Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Fort Walton Beach Police Department, and Okaloosa County School District are currently involved in the partnership. The group plans to add more local law enforcement, emergency medical services, and early childhood educators in the future.

**36 people received training from the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children.** This increased the number of Drug Endangered Children Trainers by 14.

In 2022, children under the age of five had the highest number of deaths reported to the Florida Abuse Hotline.

**The most common causes of preventable death in children under five are sleep-related infant death, drowning, and inflicted trauma.**<sup>36</sup>

# Healthy Communities

## Okaloosa Rent Burden

In Okaloosa County, **54% of renters are cost burdened**. This means that their rent price takes up more than 30% of their household income.<sup>3</sup>

**17% are severely rent burdened**, meaning their rent is more than 50% of their household income.<sup>15</sup>

**28% are considered low-income and rent burdened**. Most of these residents are employed full-time and are between 15 and 54 years old.<sup>16</sup>

In Florida, these drugs caused the most deaths during 2021:<sup>19</sup>

Fentanyl  
Cocaine  
Methamphetamine  
Alcohol  
Fentanyl Analogues  
Amphetamine  
Alprazolam  
Morphine



**In Okaloosa County, 538 doses of Narcan were administered in 2022:**

- 309 doses were given by emergency medical services (EMS).
- 229 doses were given before EMS arrived by another first responder.

**Narcan is a life-saving medication that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose.**<sup>17</sup>

## Pedestrian Injury Deaths

In 2021 and 2022, California, Florida, and Texas had **more than one-third of all pedestrian deaths in the United States**.<sup>20</sup>

Florida had the **highest rate of pedestrian fatalities** per 100,000 population in the United States in 2021 and 2022.<sup>20</sup>

From 2020 to 2022, **31 pedestrians and bicyclists were killed** in Okaloosa County by motor vehicles. There were 479 crashes and 65 serious injuries involving this group.<sup>21</sup>

## Older Adult Falls

From 2019 to 2021, over 17,000 visits were made by Okaloosans to emergency rooms due to an unintentional fall injury.<sup>3</sup>

**The leading cause of fatal injury for Okaloosans ages 65+ is falls.** This increased by 107% from 2020 to 2021.<sup>3</sup>





Okaloosa County would need to add 1,824 housing units to meet the needs of households making up to 60% of the area median income (AMI), or \$40,434 per year.<sup>16</sup>



Black residents are **more likely to be cost burdened or severely cost-burdened** than White Okaloosans.<sup>15</sup>

In 2022, DOH-Okaloosa began distributing Narcan to the community for free. Nearly 1,000 kits have been given out so far. Anyone 18+ can receive up to three boxes at the Fort Walton Beach or Crestview location.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly 24,000 Floridians died from a fatal drug overdose between 2020 and 2022.<sup>3</sup> From 2020 to 2021, the **number of fentanyl-related opioid deaths increased by 50% across the state.**<sup>19</sup>



In 2021, there were 85 drug-related deaths in Okaloosa County.<sup>3</sup> Fentanyl was a cause of 57 of those deaths. **This means two-thirds of overdose deaths involved fentanyl** in 2021. This is a 30% increase from 2020.<sup>32</sup>

## HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

# GROUP PROGRESS

“No one entity in the county can solve the community health issues we are facing, but **through our collective efforts we can build a healthier, stronger, and more resilient community.**”  
- Chief Robert Bage, Fort Walton Beach Police Department

The group began developing a Best Practices Guide for pedestrian injuries and infrastructure needs. They plan to disseminate it to local leaders over the next year to guide policy development.

Crestview Mayor JB Whitten says, “The Overdose Summit that was hosted by the City of Crestview, the Northwest Florida League of Cities, the Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County, and Project Opioid was **the most impactful event about drugs during this past year.**”

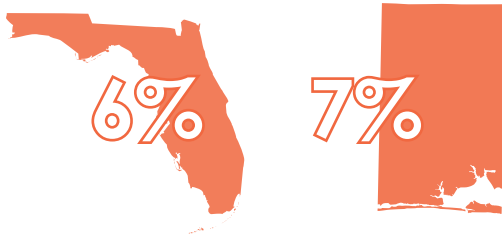
The Overdose Summit was held on January 18, 2023 at the Crestview Community Center. More than 200 community members and leaders gathered to learn about the impacts of substance use on the local community.



In 2022, the Fort Walton Beach Fire Department launched a Community Assistance Referral and Education Services (CARES) program. They conduct outreach and help residents who may frequently call 9-1-1. They work to prevent falls and other incidents that can place a burden on the local health care system.<sup>22</sup>

# Healthy Moms & Babies

## Infants Born Preterm with Low Birth Weight <sup>3</sup>



This includes babies weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces who were born before 37 weeks. **Preterm and low birth weight babies have an increased risk of death.**<sup>3</sup>

40% of Okaloosa households led by moms with children under the age of 18 are living in poverty.<sup>3</sup>



In 2021, 28% of births in Okaloosa County were to moms who were not at a healthy weight before becoming pregnant.<sup>3</sup>

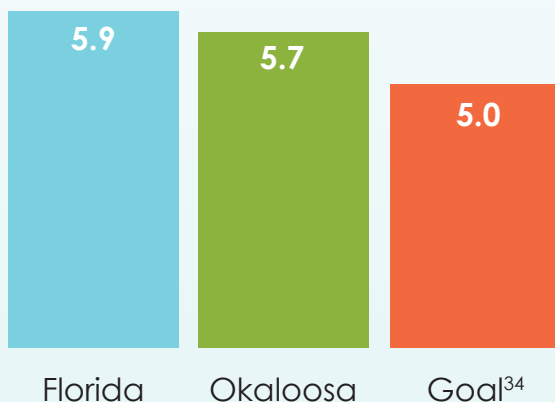


Florida welcomed the Count the Kicks stillbirth prevention program in 2022. It teaches expectant parents how to track their baby's movement each day during the third trimester of pregnancy.<sup>23</sup>

In 2021, **26% of Okaloosa County mothers did not receive adequate prenatal care** during their pregnancy.<sup>3</sup>

According to research, babies of moms who had prenatal care have a 38% lower risk of being born too early and a 37% lower risk of being born too small.<sup>24</sup>

## Infant Mortality Rate Per 1,000 Births <sup>3</sup>



## Breastfeeding

**87% of Okaloosa mothers initiate breastfeeding.**<sup>3</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "breastfeeding provides unmatched health benefits for babies and mothers. It is the clinical gold standard for infant feeding and nutrition, with breast milk uniquely tailored to meet the health needs of a growing baby."<sup>25</sup>



Black babies born in Okaloosa County are **more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday** than White babies. They are also more likely to be born preterm with low birthweight.<sup>3</sup>



Pregnant women in Okaloosa County are more than **twice as likely to smoke** than all other pregnant women in Florida.<sup>3</sup> Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of low birth weight and/or preterm delivery.<sup>27</sup>



In 2021, 5% of births were to mothers who did not have health insurance. This can negatively impact her follow-up care and the future health of her baby.<sup>3</sup>

Okaloosa infants are **nearly twice as likely** to die from unintentional suffocation or strangulation in bed than other Florida infants. These deaths are **most commonly due to unsafe sleep practices**.<sup>3</sup>



In 2023, Healthy Start launched two new programs. Their T.E.A.M. Dad program encourages fathers to be more engaged by promoting responsible fatherhood. Their Doula Program helps mothers access care from trained professionals during their pregnancy.<sup>26</sup>

## HEALTHY MOMS & BABIES

# GROUP PROGRESS

“I got involved because of the disparities between Black and White maternal and child health outcomes. I wanted to be part of **making Okaloosa County a healthier place for all moms and all babies.**” - Crystal Harrison, Florida Housing Coalition

Over the past year, the group worked to share infant safe sleep education with **641 new parents** in Okaloosa County. Four local hospitals provide educational board books, then survey parents to determine what they learned. **Around 11% reported learning something new about safe sleep and 84% said they plan to share the information with others who may care for their baby.**

Healthy Start Coalition of Okaloosa and Walton Counties launched the Fetal and Infant Mortality Review in 2022. **The Healthy Moms & Babies OCHIP group serves as the Community Action Group.** These members are described as the “champions for change.” Healthy Start Executive Director Ardelle Bush adds, “ensuring that all babies survive and thrive should be the concern of the whole community. It is an issue too multidisciplinary for responsibility to rest in any one place.”

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**Turkey Creek Nature Trail** offers a space for recreational activities like walking, kayaking, and tubing in Niceville.<sup>28</sup>

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\*For the specific ranges or metrics used to collect the asterisked data, please contact [HealthyOkaloosa@flhealth.gov](mailto:HealthyOkaloosa@flhealth.gov) or 850-344-0662.

# Acknowledgments



The **Fred Gannon Rocky Bayou State Park** gives residents and visitors an opportunity to bike, boat, geocache, and camp in Niceville.<sup>29</sup>



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Deb Willis, West Florida Area Health Education Center  
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Mayor JB Whitten, City of Crestview  
Sergeant Jessica Trimboli, Okaloosa County Sheriff’s Office



The John T. Brooks Bridge, located over the **Santa Rosa Sound**, connects the City of Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa Island.<sup>30</sup>

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