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BCC Grants Department has reeled in \$37 million this year, \$106 million overall

State, local money benefits projects like building new library, addressing traffic concerns in Oakleaf

By Jack Randall
jack@claytodayonline.com

CLAY COUNTY – Without grant money, the 250-acre plot of land near the intersection of State Roads 16 and 21 would be home to lizards, swampy marsh, moss-draped trees and isolation.

Instead, the first of several phases has opened with eight multipurpose fields, a walking trail, a parking lot, shade structures and restrooms that thousands have already enjoyed in the first three months – all because county leaders learned to get big government to foot most of the bill.

The Board of County Commissioners Grants Department was created during the COVID-19 pandemic to capture its share of federal economic stimulus packages. Throughout the pandemic, which was the deadliest in U.S. history, Clay County suffered from over 67,933 confirmed cases and 352 deaths, according to USAFacts.

Industries struggled to transition to remote work. In response to the pandem-



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Clay County grants team has been responsible for garnering about \$37 million in grants this year. The county currently has \$106 million in grants in operation.

ic's disastrous downturn on the economy, the federal government passed the largest economic stimulus relief in U.S. history.

The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act was signed

into law by President Donald Trump, a \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus package. ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) was signed into law by Joe Biden, an ad-

SEE GRANTS, 5

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Election qualifying deadline passes; 35 contests already decided

GREEN COVE SPRINGS — At the stroke of noon last Friday, 35 unopposed candidates, including County Commissioners Jim Renninger and Kristen Burke, Superintendent of Schools David Broskie, Property Appraiser Tracy Drake, Tax Collector Diane

Hutchings, Clerk of the Court Tara Green, Supervisor of Elections Chris Chambless, County Judge Kristina Mobley and School Board Member Beth Clark, won automatic re-elections when the deadline to file passed.

St. Johns Country Day School Athletics Director John Sgromolo won the District 1 seat on the Board of County Commission as an unopposed candidate. He will

replace Mike Cella, who termed out.

While many offices have been decided, some races still need to be determined, including the race between current Sheriff Michelle Cook and former Sheriff Darryl Daniels. Since Cook is running as a Republican and Daniels is listed as a No Political Affiliation, they won't meet until the General Election on Nov. 5.

Others will be in a runoff on Aug. 20.

The largest group of candidates will be for School Board in District 2, which includes Oakleaf. Robert Alvero, Sharon E. Flowers, James Jim Hughes and Elijah Matthew Mitchell will be in a runoff, and the winner will get the seat held by Mary Bolla, who decided to retire.

Helana Joanne Cormier, Tanya Kacsan and Erin Skipper will contend for a seat as a Republican State Committeewoman.



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Groups dedicated to breaking through the stigma, addiction of opioids

Grieving mother astonished to learn about success of Community Paramedicine programs

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

MIDDLEBURG – The longer Tatyana McCall listened to the opioid addiction programs offered and successfully delivered in Clay County, the more difficult it was for her to sit quietly.

There was too much pain, too much angst pent inside a mother's soul to not say something. Her words were more profound than anything printed on a pamphlet.

"I'm taking off my chapter president, my service organization hat and putting on my mom hat," she said. "I will share stuff

that impacted me relatively recently. I'm the mother of three biological sons and one adopted son, and I share these with Ray Lewis, an NFL Hall of Famer. We lost our oldest son, Ray Lewis III, god, next month will be one year. So many things you said resonated on many



Naloxone Coordinator for Community Paramedicine
Lisa Rogers.

different levels, but one pill can kill. As a parent, not knowing that there was this, you know, that he was engaging in these recreational activities."

McCall drove from Orlando to represent the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority at the monthly Clay County SafetyNet Alliance meeting at Mercy Support Services. SafetyNet is a group of service partners among faith-based, nonprofit, for-profit and local government groups to avoid duplication and create partnerships to find solutions and improve services within the county.

In May, the topic was fighting the two-front opioid battle—addiction and stigma. The meeting included representatives of



Clay County Community Services Department, Clay County Fire Rescue Paramedicine Team, Clay Behavioral Health Center, Clay Action Coalition and Phoenix House.

McCall wanted to see how SafetyNet operated and to expand her sorority's efforts to Northeast Florida. Her visit,

SEE NARCAN, 4

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Sheriff's Office to begin testing, evaluating body-worn cameras

For The Oakleaf

CLAY COUNTY—Sheriff Michelle Cook announced her commitment to enhancing transparency, accountability and safety within law enforcement by implementing body-worn cameras.

In a landmark move toward modern policing practices, CCSO is set to initiate the testing and evaluation of body-worn camera technology, with a full implementation to follow the evaluation phase. Recognizing the potential of body-worn cameras to impact law enforcement procedures significantly, CCSO is partnering with potential vendors to conduct comprehensive testing of both hardware and software solutions. This systematic approach aims to identify the most cost-efficient and beneficial option for the agency and the county's citizens.

Body-worn cameras have been proven to increase transparency, accountability, deputy and citizen safety, and the quality of evidence, thereby positively impacting prosecutions. These devices are crucial in promoting trust and confidence in the criminal justice system by capturing real-time interactions between law enforcement deputies and the community.

"Our decision to implement body-worn cameras underscores our unwavering



commitment to fostering transparency, accountability, and safety within our communities while also increasing the safety of our deputies," Cook said. "We recognize that this represents a significant investment of capital, and thus, we are taking a deliberate and systematic approach to ensure that we select the most effective solution for our agency and our community. We are currently pursuing grants to offset some of the costs associated with a body-worn camera program."

In January 2023, the Orange Park Police Department used money from the American Rescue Plan to offset the \$229,000 price tag for equipment and five years of video storage for its body-worn cameras.

Narcan

from page 3

however, created a resounding effect on everyone – particularly her.

Her son, "Ray-Ray" was found "unresponsive" last June 15. His cause of death was listed as an accidental overdose. McCall said he took an unprescribed pill laced with fentanyl.

"I did see that he had these erratic behaviors," she said. "He suffered from headaches and those sorts of things. He was a lifelong football player. He played football from 5 years old, and he played contact football until he passed away. So, in donating his brain after he passed, we learned that he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, CTE, which we took as a degenerative brain disease, from the trauma from football impacted those things like substance misuse/substance abuse, so not knowing as a parent was very hard."

Those who deal with opioid addiction said there also are challenges with stigmas. Many feel administering Narcan during an overdose is enabling them to get high again. Some parents, spouses, and friends are embarrassed that their loved one needs help.

"Substance abuse is a disease of the brain," said Lisa Rogers, Naloxone Coordinator Community Paramedicine with Clay County Fire Rescue. "For our program, with the stigma, the most important thing we found has been education. We talked to people, and we let them know that substance use and opioid use disorders are diseases of the brain. And that people are not using it to get high. They're using it just so they're not sick anymore. And once we can educate them with statistics, data and hard evidence, we can change their minds."

Narcan is a nasal spray that helps a person breathe normally during an overdose, and it is harmless if the person is not in drug-induced distress. The paramedicine program offers free Narcan kits at all 13 fire stations, including Orange Park, and at its Paramedicine office at 2710 Blanding Blvd., Suite 8, in the Winn-Dixie shopping center on the corner of County Road 281 in Middleburg. Moreover, they offer free lessons on how to recognize an overdose, how to administer Narcan and how to deal with the stigma linked to addiction.

Officials are adjusting to the stigmas of addictions. At the 2023 Clay County Agricultural Fair, one guest emailed Fire



Tatyana S. McCall broke her silence during the monthly Clay County SafetyNet Alliance meeting last week when

experts warned of the dangers of opioid stigma. The mother of Ray Lewis III originally wanted to work with other nonprofits in the county, but she suddenly felt compelled to share the story of Hall of Fame linebacker Ray Lewis and her son, who died nearly a year ago of an accidental drug overdose.

Rescue about the Community Paramedicine Program agency offering free Narcan kits, telling people how to recognize an overdose and where to get help. The person said the program was reviving addicts so they could get high again.

They were ordered to put their Narcan kits under the counter and only give them away if someone asked for them.

Rogers and Clay Behavioral Medical Center's Glenn East said that more than 80% of those who became addicted to opioids started on pain medication following an injury.

Others stay addicted by stealing pills from family members. Rogers said anyone who has unused or outdated pills can drop them off at a fire station or a pharmacy or pick up a free drug deactivation system offered by the Community Coalition Alliance at the paramedicine office on Thursdays. You can place pills in the bag, add water and close the bag. The chemicals inside will dissolve the pills.

"The way you deal with stigma is with education," East said.

That includes educating the public you won't be criminally or civilly responsible for calling 911 or administering Narcan to someone who is overdosing.

At this year's fair, the Community

SEE NARCAN, 6

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Grants

from page 1

additional \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus.

The BCC reeled in \$38.2 million from CARES and spent it all in six months to fund public health projects. Next, the BCC got \$42.5 million from ARPA.

Some of that money – \$3 million in legislative matching funds and \$2.5 million in legislative appropriations – was spent on the Clay County Regional Sports Complex, a one-of-a-kind complex in Northeast Florida that is already booked for a host of national soccer, flag football, field hockey, spike football and ultimate disk golf



Megan Covey

events.

The commissioners recognized the importance of taking advantage of these relief packages and other grants, so the grants management department was founded in 2021.

Megan Covey now serves as the Grants Program Coordinator.

“There was not a grants department (before COVID),” she said. “That responsibility fell across all the departments.”

With a dedicated grants program, other departments can take advantage of sponsorships and donations, which are additional functions of the grants department.

The grants department is managing about \$106 million in awards, with \$37 million coming this fiscal year.

That is a significant figure. The grants department set a lofty goal of \$100 million in funding in five years. The team is working ahead of schedule.

Green Cove Springs and Orange Park apply for grants both directly and through the county. Keystone Heights relies primarily on the county to disperse some of its winning state and federal bids. The

county also works on behalf of nonprofits, helping to secure funding for programs like The Way Medical Center, Quigley House, Waste Not Want Not, Challenge Enterprises and Lake Area Ministries.

“Since the pandemic, we’ve actually diversified our grant portfolio,” said The Way Executive Director Don Fann. “The biggest challenge is grants are never guaranteed. You have to keep going, applying for more than you think you might need because you never know which ones you’re going to get.”

“In addition to applying to state and federal, the county is also working on your behalf. The county has developed an excellent grant-writing capacity. They’re constantly looking for opportunities to access grant funds that aren’t accessible to the private sector. What the county is doing is a tremendous help going forward.”

Covey said her staff could think of funding sources years in advance because the county created a blueprint of future needs.

“I would say another thing that brought this together is the strategic plan the board just adopted in December. For

grants, that has been wonderful,” Covey said. “That is our new roadmap. It sets the priorities and projects for what we’re looking to fund. We’re excited about the growth we’ve seen in the department over the past couple of years.”

“And as we transition out of ARPA, we’re looking for other ways to fill those funding gaps and just keep the county moving forward on the right track,” Covey said.

Easy dollars from CARES and ARPA are gone. Covey knows the competition to earn grants is more challenging as more local, state and federal governments scramble to fill budgetary voids.

“Frequently at the federal level, they may only fund the top 20% of applicants. And so one grant we’re particularly excited about right now is our Safe Streets For All Program through USDOT (U.S. Department of Transportation),” she said. “That’s our first competitive federal grant we received to put together a county-wide Safety Action Plan. That look at all kinds of different things like road signage, pedestrian walkways, sidewalks, and all kinds of things for emergency services.”

Don Coble contributed to this story.

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SPORT SHORTS *with Randy*

'Chevys' rock state weightlifting

By Randy Lefko
randy@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF – Oakleaf High weightlifting brothers Elijah and Noah Shevchook put the weight of the Class 3A state weightlifting championships on their shoulders and both answered with big days in April with a pair of state titles and a pair of top five finishes.

State title jumper



Takoda Brown

Also earning a state title, senior triple jumper Takoda Brown, who has been a top state ranked jumper all season, finished off his four year high school career with a Class 4A state title and a sixth place finish in long jump.

Outstanding weightlifter

Elijah Shevchook, a senior and middle brother of a threesome of outstanding athletes that have been at Oakleaf High; big brother Isaiah; a football, weightlifting athlete from 2023, and little brother Noah, who, as a first time invite as a freshman to the state weightlifting event, finished impressively in his weight class; 129 pounds, with two third place finishes.

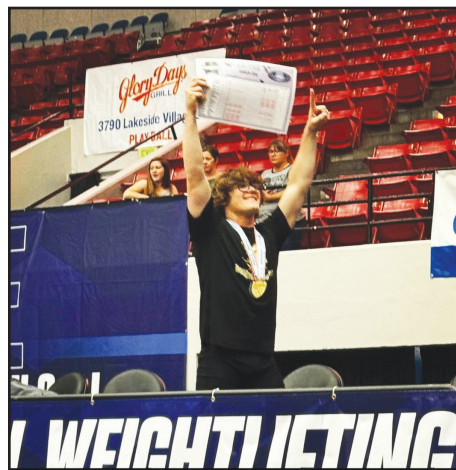
In the Olympics lifts, Noah Shevchook



Elijah Shevchook

was third by weight with a tie at 415 with Sam Lewis of Nease. Bryson Brown of Milton won with a 455 total. In Tradition, Lewis won by five pounds over Brown with Shevchook third.

Elijah Shevchook won in the 154 weight class with a 10 pound difference; 560, better by 10 pounds of St. Cloud's Jonathan Morales. Morales hit a 295 bench press on his second lift with Shevchook hitting 295 on his final lift, but Morales missed at 310. Morales missed at 265 in clean and jerk with Shevchook successful opening at 265; missing twice at 275. The difference was Morales hitting 255 on clean and jerk, but missing 265 on his final lift. Shevchook also finished fourth in Olympics. Also making runs toward state



titles and rankings, the Oakleaf softball team won its third district title and had the only win over top ranked Baldwin (3A Final Four finisher) in regular season play behind strong pitching from Charley Maddox and eye-widening baserunning from Jaydyn Beall in front of a monster batting lineup led by Maddox and bolstered by Amya Mirelez and Meshayla Pettaway. Oakleaf finished their season in the Region 1-6A semifinal with a loss to Hagerty. In baseball, the Knights were the dragon slayers of 2024 with upset wins over Class 2A champions St. Johns Country Day School and 4A Final Four finisher Trinity Christian Academy. Oakleaf was led by the high-energy play of Jordan Clarke who pitched and led a strong batting lineup for coach Matt Carter. The Knights finished with a region 1-6A quarterfinal loss to Hagerty.

Spring football

In the final competition of the high school season, the Oakleaf High football team took a 17-0 spring game win over Class 1A runnerup Madison County with second year coach Chris Foy utilizing an array of scoring weapons led by son Chris Foy II at running back and sophomore Micheal Collins at wide receiver with two scoring passes.



Chris Foy

Narcan

from page 4

Paramedicine Program had a prominent booth in front of the Exhibition Halls, and they were allowed to display literature and Narcan kits.

"And we handed out 1,545 Narcan kits," Rogers said. "We can't save them if we can't get them the help they need."

There are 164 people currently undergoing addiction treatment at Clay Behavioral, and all but one came through the paramedicine program, according to Gabrielle Gunn, Director of Community and Social Services with the Clay County Board of County Commissioners.

"I talk to people all over the state, health programs all over the state," East said. "I don't think anybody has the network we developed for our community."

For McCall, the trip to Clay County was so enlightening that it helped her gain a little more insight into her son's dark secrets.

"He passed away in the Central Florida area in Orlando, which is in a big city, you know, and the point you made, there was nothing like this there, no information accessible or visible," she said. "We were a very prominent family with access to resources and information. But as a mother of sons, I didn't have this information connected to me."

"I just want to commend each of you and your organization for what you're doing. As I sat here this morning, I was going to introduce our local chapter that we just chartered here in Clay County to the services we provide. But this is commendable. So keep doing what you're doing. I hope there is a way to share the pathway you all are creating with other organizations. Other counties can learn from what you're doing here."

Ways to recognize an overdose:

- Pinpoint pupils
- Person starts turning purple or blue if they're white; gray or ashy if they're Black
- Slow, labored or not breathing. If they're breathing, it may be gurgly
- Person is unresponsive
- Use your knuckles and rub the sternum briskly to see if they recognize pain, or use a hard object and press against a fingernail to see if they recognize pain
- Cold or clammy skin

If any of these signs are prevalent, administer Narcan by spraying one quick burst into one nostril. If the condition doesn't change, spray another Narcan dispenser in the other nostril. If the person is not suffering an overdose, Narcan won't hurt them.

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