



Special Needs Blueprint

FIU
Jorge M. Pérez
Metropolitan Center

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The **Florida International University Jorge M. Pérez Metropolitan Center** is Florida's leading urban policy think tank and solutions center. Established in 1997, the Center provides economic development, strategic planning, community revitalization, and performance improvement services to public, private, and non-profit organizations in South Florida. Its staff and senior researchers are leaders in their respective fields and bring extensive research, practical, and professional experience to each project. The Center's research has catalyzed major policy initiatives and projects in housing, economic redevelopment, transportation, social services, and health services throughout South Florida.



**Jorge M. Pérez
Metropolitan Center**



Report Author:

Helen Roldan, M.P.A.

Research and Outreach Coordinator

Contributing Researchers:

Maria Ilcheva, Ph.D.

Assistant Director, FIU Metropolitan Center

Camila Masson, M.P.A

Research Coordinator

Marilyn Escobar, MPA Candidate

Graduate Research Assistant

Town of Miami Lakes Collaborators:

Clarisell de Cardenas

Director, Department of Communications & Community Affairs

Mayor Manny Cid

Town of Miami Lakes

Brandon Diaz

Marketing and Digital Services Specialist

Report cover photo by Juan Carlos Garcia

Baseline analysis section photo by Daniel Rodriguez.

Findings section cover photo by Jose Alvarez.

Recommendations section cover photo by Andres Suarez.

Executive Summary

The Town of Miami Lakes and the Florida International University Jorge M. Perez Metropolitan Center collaborated to produce this Special Needs Blueprint for the Town of Miami Lakes. This initiative highlights the Town's commitment in becoming a model town for inclusion.

The report presents a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to understand the challenges, current efforts, and opportunities that exist within the Town of Miami Lakes for the special needs community. For the purposes of this study when we refer to "special needs," we are using the definition used by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), which considers disabilities as "an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions." This definition incorporates disabilities that are of communicative, physical, and cognitive characteristics. It also serves as the World Health Organization's framework to measure health and disabilities "at both individual and population levels."

The report's baseline analysis looks further into the Town's history in special needs issues, data related to existing populations and services, and benchmark comparisons with other cities in Florida. The research team met with individuals with special needs, Town officials, residents, business owners, medical providers, and other community members to obtain feedback and discuss issues that affect the special needs community. It is worth noting that the key issues that affect the Town of Miami Lakes are not unique to the Town, but exist, nonetheless.

While it is by no means an exhaustive list of what exists in the Town, the following special needs/disabilities came up in conversation:

- Ambulatory
- Auditory
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Cerebral Palsy
- Chromosomal Disorder
- Cognitive Disability
- Crohn's Disease
- Cystic Fibrosis
- Down Syndrome
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
- Intellectual Disability
- Parkinson's Disease
- Rheumatoid Arthritis
- Spina Bifida
- Sensory Sensitivity
- Speech impediment

Many issues affecting the quality of life of individuals with special needs were discussed; including, education, transportation, housing, and recreation. As we will discuss in more detail in the **Findings** section, the research team identified nine major themes across the conversations. These themes were then developed into recommendations, as detailed in the **Recommendations** section.

Key Themes:

- **Safety for Individuals with Special Needs** – *The safety concerns for families and individuals with special needs.*
- **Community Awareness** – *Understanding what special needs are and how members of the community can be more inclusive.*
- **Employment Opportunities** – *Challenging aspects of training businesses and obtaining employment for individuals with special needs.*
- **Social/Recreational Activities** – *Services and social and recreational activities that are needed for the special needs community.*
- **Mental Health Issues that Affect the Special Needs Community** – *The mental health challenges that accompany individuals with special needs and their families.*

- **Financial Strain in the Special Needs Community** – *The financial strains that are present with individuals with special needs and their families.*
- **Educational Needs** – *Educational needs and concerns for the special needs community.*
- **Accessibility and Transportation Needs** – *Accessing public spaces and utilizing transportation for individuals with special needs.*
- **The Need for Integrated Resources** – *Obtaining resources and being aware of the services that exist within the Town.*



Baseline Analysis

Baseline Analysis

In the United States, there are over 40 million individuals living with a disability, or 12 percent of the population¹. However, they are often overlooked. There is a long history of stigma, not just in the United States—but around the world². In fact, some cultures believe disabilities are connected to curses or diseases. These stigmas may lead to social avoidance, stereotyping, discrimination, condescension, blaming, internalization, hate crimes, and violence³.

Literature on the special needs community often brings up several challenges the community faces as they transition into adulthood—-independent living, personal financial responsibility, transportation, developing a sexual identity, and establishing intimate and social relationships. Sexual health education is a universal need for the community because individuals with developmental disabilities can easily be taken advantage of and are considered a vulnerable population. In addition, socialization opportunities are strongly needed. This idea was reinforced numerous times during the focus group and interviews conducted by the Metropolitan Center. When it concerns medical care, a gap exists in clinical training. There are not many practitioners who combine expertise in both internal medicine and psychiatry—which are most appropriate for the special needs community. There are also shortcomings due to financial strains and medical reimbursements. This leads to an over-reliance on pediatricians for individuals with special needs, even as they enter adulthood.

In Florida, there is over 2,838,000 individuals with disabilities—or 13.5% of the population. This figure is slightly higher than the national average (by 1.5%). With such a substantive portion of individuals with disabilities, there is a comprehensive need for services to the community.

The Florida budget for special needs has come into question numerous times over the years, with some officials considering cutting funding for individuals with special needs⁴. The special needs budget is frequently underfunded, which has caused deficits over the past several years. Governor DeSantis recently demonstrated a commitment to helping the special needs community through his recommendation of \$1.4 billion in funding for the Agency for Persons with Disabilities⁵, which is responsible for “serving the needs of Floridians with developmental disabilities.”⁶

Florida’s Medicaid Waiver—which provides necessary resources to individuals with special needs (as well as children 18 or under and adults over the age of 64), is one of the resources handled by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities that is severely underfunded. Florida is one of 14 states (including three that are in the process) that have not expanded Medicaid coverage for individuals with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level, even though it has been shown that expanded coverage prevents premature deaths by improving access to care.⁷

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 ACS 1-Year Estimates

² University of Washington, Healthy Aging and Physical Disability

³ University of Washington, Healthy Aging and Physical Disability

⁴ Miami Herald <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/state-politics/article234919802.html>

⁵ Agency for Persons with Disabilities <http://apd.myflorida.com/docs/APDBudget.pdf>

⁶ Agency for Persons with Disabilities <http://apd.myflorida.com/about/>

⁷ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2019

As shown in Table 1, there are over 21,600 people on the Medicaid Waiver waiting list for the state, meaning that at least two out of every three individuals who have applied for Medicaid Waiver

Table 1. Florida Medicaid Waiver and Waiting List

	Medicaid Waiver	Medicaid Waiver Waiting List
Florida	35,000	21,649

Source: Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 2019

are not getting the care that they need. A lack of care may cause other issues such as physical and mental health degradation, familial strife, and more. Medicaid waiver is just one instance of a disappointing resource for the special needs community. In addition to a complicated medical system, there tends to be a lack of job opportunities and a lack of social and recreational activities.

Survey research from a previous Metropolitan Center study shows that the preferred housing option for most individuals with disabilities is single-family homes but that preference may not be feasible economically or from a social perspective—particularly as costs of living continue rising in Miami-Dade County and wages remain stagnant. Instead, living at home tends to be the most cost-effective option. However, it may limit social development which may, in turn, limit their integration in the community. This was echoed by several participants in the Miami Lakes interviews. In addition, as caregivers age, individuals with special needs will have few, if any, options to care for themselves. This is another challenge for individuals with special needs, in addition to the transition to adulthood.

Town History on Special Needs

The Town of Miami Lakes was incorporated in December 2000, becoming the 31st municipality of Miami-Dade County. On April 12, 2011, the Town of Miami Lakes established the **Special Needs Committee**. This was part of a program brought before the council by former Mayor Michael Pizzi titled “No one left behind.” The committee met several times until it became inactive. However, research participants noted that in response to the demand of the community, the Town of Miami Lakes council, led by Councilmember Marilyn Ruano, re-initiated the committee. In 2018, the committee was re-formed and renamed to the **Special Needs Advisory Board**. Each Town councilmember may appoint one individual to the board, for a total of seven board members. The Board’s mission is “to create a model town for inclusion, by identifying specific Miami Lakes families with an interest in matters pertaining to individuals with special needs; connecting them to existing programs, services and events; and, serving the Town Council in an advisory capacity to identify unmet needs and assist with the discovery of possible solutions.” Since 2018, they have met monthly and have initiated several events, collaborations, and programs within the Town. Some of their initiatives include a workforce transition skills pilot program, disability awareness training for Town staff, a sensory friendly station at the Town’s annual Halloween event, and coordinating a FUNclusion event.

In addition to the Special Needs Advisory Board, the Town has an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator who is responsible for handling requests for appropriate aid and services to individuals with

**Americans with Disabilities Title II
State and Local Governments**

Title II applies to State and local government entities, and, in subtitle A, protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability in services, programs, and activities provided by State and local government entities. Title II extends the prohibition on discrimination established by section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. 794, to all activities of State and local governments regardless of whether these entities receive Federal financial assistance.

Source: United States Department of Justice

disabilities including “qualified sign language interpreters, documents in Braille, and other ways of making information and communications accessible to people who have speech, hearing, or vision impairments.”⁸ The coordinator is in charge of managing discrimination complaints related to Town services, activities, or programs. Over the years, the town has hired sign language interpreters to assist both Town employees and Town residents who request these services. For a brief period around 2013, the Town had a therapeutic recreation specialist in charge of programming for individuals with special needs. However, according to a Town representative, it was difficult for the programming to be successful as at the time it wasn’t understood what community’s need was. Moreover, since 2015 the Town has been working on its ADA Transition Plan for Sidewalks and Pedestrian Ramps. The purpose of this plan is to ensure that all sidewalks become ADA compliant. The Plan “identifies barriers that prevent persons with disabilities accessing programs and activities and identifies methods to provide equivalent access to the maximum extent feasible.”⁹ The Clerk’s department is responsible for maintaining and distributing official Town records. This department includes a staff member who converts official documents into ADA compliant versions. This process allows those with vision impairment to view official town documents.

Population

The Town of Miami Lakes has an estimated population of 31,050, as seen in Table 2. Of this, approximately 7.8% are believed to have a disability, which translates to approximately 2,437 individuals living with disabilities in the Town. We asked participants if they felt this number was an accurate representation of the special needs community, and the majority felt this number was low (71% of participants), while some (29%) believe this number is about right. There were no respondents who believed the number was high.

Table 2. Comparison of Population with a Disability

	Population	With a disability	%
Town of Miami Lakes	31,050	2,437	7.8%
Miami-Dade County	2,690,040	272,374	10.1%
Florida	20,288,268	2,720,957	13.4%

Source: ACS 5 Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau 2018

There are several reasons why participants felt the number was inaccurate. Due to the stigma towards the special needs community, individuals may be less inclined to mark themselves as living with a disability or may not believe they or a family member has a disability. Participants also shared that members of the community may be scared to mark that they have a disability for fear that they may lose any benefits they are receiving, such as Supplemental

Security Income or Medicaid Waiver. The implication for this is that the census figures, which relies predominantly on self-reported data, may be skewed.

For reference, the census defines disabilities in the following way “A long-lasting physical, mental, or emotional condition. This condition can make it difficult for a person to do activities such as walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, learning, or remembering. This condition can also impede a person from being able to go outside the home alone or to work at a job or business.”

As demonstrated in Table 3, disabilities tend to be more prevalent among older adults. Table 4 goes into further detail on the types of disabilities present by age (note: these figures are not additive, some individuals may have multiple disabilities so they numbers overlay). The census estimates that the top two age groups in Miami Lakes for those with disabilities is the **65 to 74** and the **75 and over** age groups. Combined, there are approximately 1,439 individuals (or 62.3% of the Town’s population with a disability)

⁸ Town of Miami Lakes https://www.miamilakes-fl.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=590:ada-notice&catid=2:about-us&Itemid=626

⁹ Town of Miami Lakes ADA Transition Plan for Sidewalks and Pedestrian Ramps, 2015

in these age groups. That being said, just 5 out of 45 interviewees spoke about the needs of the elderly in Miami Lakes as it relates to the special needs community. Their feedback was mostly positive, stating that the Town and its Elderly Affairs Committee does a tremendous job at providing resources, workshops, and social and recreational opportunities for the elderly. However, occasional physical access to Town Hall was an issue due to doors being locked near the parking spaces for individuals with disabilities. Several participants reported it being challenging to access this door during evening events as well. Furthermore, these participants shared the need for a senior housing village that could likewise accommodate individuals with disabilities of various ages. One resident brought up that there may be a need for support groups for elderly individuals who are experiencing quality of life issues. Support groups were a topic of conversation consistent throughout the interviews, which will be discussed in more detail in the **Findings** section. Table 4 denotes disability types by detailed age in the Town of Miami Lakes. As mentioned, disabilities are more prevalent among older adults in the 75 and over age group.

However, the 35 to 65 age group tends to have the second-highest numbers of individuals with disabilities across all the disability types: hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living difficulty. This is of note because, as will be discussed in the **Findings** section, this age group typically does not have as many services available to them as do individuals with special needs who are under the age of 22 or elderly individuals.

Table 3. Town of Miami Lakes Disability Breakdown by Age

Age	Total	With a disability	%
Under 5 years	1,879	18	1.00%
5 to 17 years	4,885	172	3.50%
18 to 34	6,751	228	3.40%
35 to 64	12,847	580	4.50%
65 to 74	2,404	333	13.90%
75 years and	2,284	1,106	48.40%

Source: ACS 5 Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau 2018

Table 4: Disability Type by Detailed Age

Disability Type	With a disability	%
With a hearing difficulty	588	1.90%
Under 18	36	
18 to 34	60	
35 to 64	81	
65 to 74	52	
75 and over	359	
With a vision difficulty	329	1.10%
Under 18	18	
18 to 34	13	
35 to 64	50	
65 to 74	37	
75 and over	211	
With a cognitive difficulty	1,167	4%
Under 18	135	
18 to 34	194	
35 to 64	234	
65 to 74	109	
75 and over	495	
With an ambulatory difficulty	1,481	5.10%
Under 18	18	
18 to 34	38	
35 to 64	326	
65 to 74	237	
75 and over	862	
With a self-care difficulty	647	2.20%
Under 18	63	
18 to 34	38	
35 to 64	130	
65 to 74	20	
75 and over	396	
With an independent living difficulty	1,145	4.70%
Under 18	N/A	
18 to 34	93	
35 to 64	213	
65 to 74	112	
75 and over	727	

Source: ACS 5 Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau 2018

Education

It is necessary to reiterate that census figures provide an estimate dependent on self-reported data. When we compare census data on youth with disabilities compared to numbers provided by the Miami-Dade County school board, higher numbers appear in the schoolboard data.

Table 5. Students with Disabilities in Miami Lakes and Miami-Dade-County (Public and Charter Schools)

	Total	%
Miami Lakes	917	10.3%
Miami-Dade County	39,119	11.3%

Source: Miami-Dade County Schoolboard, October 2019

Take the under **five years** and **5 to 17 years** age brackets for instance (shown in Table 3.) Combined, the census states that there are about 190 individuals living in the Town within these age groups that have a disability. However, the schoolboard provides different figures based on 2019 enrollment data. Table 5 demonstrates that there are 917 students with disabilities attending the six public schools in the Town of Miami Lakes. Compared to the census figures, that is a difference of about 700 students. Table 5 also shows the total number of students with disabilities in public schools across Miami-Dade County, a total of 39,119. The Town of Miami Lakes has a similar percentage of students with disabilities compared to the county, with just a 1% difference. Table 6 shows the breakdown of students with disabilities per each public school in Miami Lakes. Miami Lakes Educational Center has the lowest amount, with just 60 students with disabilities (5.3%). Whereas Hialeah-Miami Lakes has the highest with 237 students with disabilities (16.1%).

Students with Disabilities Defined

Section 1007.02, F.S., defines “student with a disability” as a student who is documented as having an intellectual disability; a hearing impairment, including deafness; a speech or language impairment; a visual impairment, including blindness; an emotional or behavioral disability; an orthopedic or other health impairment; an autism spectrum disorder; a traumatic brain injury; or a specific learning disability, including, but not limited to, dyslexia, dyscalculia, or developmental aphasia.

Table 6. Students with Disabilities per School in Miami Lakes

Students with Disabilities			
School	Total population	Students with disabilities	% of students with disabilities
Barbara Goleman Senior High	2,355	219	9.3%
Bob Graham Education Center	1,566	156	10%
Miami Lakes Middle School	1,199	125	10.4%
Miami Lakes K-8 Center	1,215	120	9.9%
Miami Lakes Educational Center	1,128	60	5.3%
Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High School	1,469	237	16.1%
Total	8,932	917	

Source: Miami-Dade County Schoolboard, October 2019

The figures in Tables 5 and 6 do not account for students with special needs who attend private schools within Miami-Dade County or students who attend any schools in Broward County. Because there isn't an entity that reports data for all the private schools in Miami-Dade County, it is difficult to ascertain the number of students with disabilities that reside in Miami Lakes and attend these schools. However, it is possible to

get an idea regarding the number of residents with disabilities who attend schools in Broward through the John M. McKay Scholarship program. According to the Florida Department of Education, “the John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities program allows parents of students with disabilities to choose the best academic environment for their children. This program provides eligible students the opportunity to attend a participating private school or transfer to another public school.” This program affords students with disabilities the opportunity to attend schools across county lines.

According to Broward County Schools, there are a total of ten students with special needs who live in Miami-Dade County but attend **public schools** in Broward County through a McKay Scholarship. One of the ten resides in Miami-Lakes, seven in Miami Gardens, one in Bal Harbour, and one in Homestead. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these figures only consider the zip code that was used when the parent applied for their child. In other words, if the family lived in another city in Miami-Dade County when their child got accepted into the McKay Scholarship program, but then they moved to Miami Lakes, they would not show up on this list. One of the residents interviewed affirmed their child was on the McKay Public School Scholarship, which validates the data that at least one student with this scholarship resides in Miami Lakes. As it concerns the number of students with disabilities from Miami-Dade County on a McKay **private** School scholarship that attends a school in Broward County, there are a total of 214¹⁰. Due to privacy concerns, the figures per zip code are unavailable. However, through our interviews, we know that at least two residents are part of this total. These Miami-Dade County residents are attending a total of 48 participating private schools across Broward County. If we operate under the assumption that the majority of students who attend a Broward **private** school under the McKay scholarship live close to the county border line (as the majority of **public** McKay scholarship students do), then there is certainly a presence of students with disabilities in the north Miami-Dade region who travel across county lines in order to receive the education they seek. This further demonstrates the need that families have in north Miami-Dade County.

McKay Program Requirements

- Public school students counted in the prior school year's October and February FTE surveys, with an IEP or a 504 Plan that is effective for more than six months.
- The student is a foster child or a dependent child of a member of the U.S. Armed Forces who transfers to Florida due to a parent's permanent change of station orders.
- Students who received Specialized Instructional Services (SIS) under the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program during the previous year.

Source: Florida Department of Education

Table 7 breaks down the number of students classified under Exceptional Student Education (ESE) in Miami-Dade County public schools. Each school district is required to provide services to students in ESE programs between the ages of 3-21¹¹. In total, there are 37,664 students with an ESE primary exceptionality. Of those, 22,425 are enrolled in ESE courses or consultative services. (**Note:** this list does not include gifted students, who are also considered to have an ESE primary exceptionality.)

¹⁰ Florida Department of Education, Bureau of PK-20 Education Reporting and Accessibility, 2019

¹¹ Florida Department of Education <http://www.fldoe.org/academics/exceptional-student-edu/>

Table 7: Exceptional Student Education: Number of students enrolled in courses, 2018-2019

Program	Students enrolled in ESE Courses or Consultative Services	Students with an ESE primary exceptionality
Autism spectrum disorder	4,459	5,839
Deaf/hard of hearing	370	467
Developmentally delayed	2,017	2,666
Dual sensory impaired	9	10
Emotional/behavioral disability	1,529	2,040
Established conditions	75	77
Hospital/homebound	334	334
Intellectual disabilities	2,289	2,352
Language impaired	1,282	1,713
Orthopedically impaired	146	231
Other health impaired	2,038	5,026
Specific learning disability	6,293	14,757
Speech impaired	1,468	1,982
Traumatic brain injured	20	36
Visually impaired	96	134
Total	22,425	37,664

Source: Miami-Dade County Schoolboard, 2019

According to the school board, the program with the highest number of students is the specific learning disability program, with 6,293 receiving services (though there are 14,757 classified with this ESE). The programs with the next highest students enrolled in ESE courses or consultative services are students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (4,459), students with intellectual disabilities (2,289), students with an "other" health impairment (2,038), students that are developmentally delayed (2,017) and students with an emotional/behavioral disability (1,529).

The programs with the least amount of students enrolled in ESE courses or consultative services include students that are dual sensory impaired (9), students with traumatic brain injuries (20), students with

established conditions (75), and students that have a visual impairment (96). This information is only available on a countywide level, to avoid individual student identification. As such, this breakdown by disability type is unavailable for schools in Miami Lakes. However, it can provide an idea of the common types of special needs that exist throughout the County.

Medicaid Waiver

Table 8 portrays the number of individuals receiving Medicaid Waiver and the number of individuals on the Medicaid Waiver waiting list in Miami-Dade County. In total, there are 5,112 individuals receiving Medicaid Waiver benefits in Miami-Dade County, while 3,828 are on the Medicaid Waiver waiting list. These figures demonstrate that at least 43% of individuals who have applied for Medicaid Waiver in Miami-Dade County are not receiving the care they need.

Table 8: Medicaid Waiver and Medicaid Waiver Waitlist by Region

Region	Medicaid Waiver	Waitlist	Total
Miami Lakes	28	16	44
Miami-Dade County	5,112	3,828	8,940

Source: Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 2019

Table 8 also shows the number of individuals in Miami Lakes who are receiving Medicaid Waiver (28) and those who are on the waiting list (16). It demonstrates that at least 36% of individuals in Miami Lakes who have applied for Medicaid Waiver are not receiving the care they need. When these figures were presented to the Town's Special Needs Advisory Board, members were adamant that the Miami Lakes figures were low. One member asserted she personally knew more than 28 individuals who are receiving Medicaid Waiver that reside in the Town. When asked, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities explained that the numbers represent the individuals who identified "Miami Lakes" as their city of residence in their Medicaid Waiver applications. If an individual stated they reside in "Hialeah" or "Miami," then they would not be counted in this breakdown.

Table 9 depicts the number of individuals receiving Medicaid Waiver by zip code. These three zip codes are the zip codes that include the Town of Miami Lakes. However, they go beyond the Town

Florida Medicaid

Program Description

Florida Medicaid is the state and federal partnership that provides health coverage for selected categories of people in Florida with low incomes. Its purpose is to improve the health of people who might otherwise go without medical care for themselves and their children.

Program Requirements

In order to qualify for this benefit program, you must be a resident of the state of Florida, in need of health care/insurance assistance, and whose financial situation would be characterized as low income or very low income. You must also be a U.S. national, citizen, or have satisfactory immigration status. To qualify for this benefit, you must:

- Be over the age of 64; or
- Be pregnant or have a child 18 or under; or
- Be blind or disabled; or
- Have a child, parent, or spouse in your household who is blind or disabled
- In order to qualify, you must have an annual household income (before taxes) that is less than or equal to the following amounts:

Household Size	Maximum Income (per year)
1	\$16,612
2	\$22,491
3	\$28,369
4	\$34,248
5	\$40,127
6	\$46,005
7	\$51,884
8	\$57,762

Source: Benefits.gov

boundaries and include individuals who reside in areas of Hialeah, Hialeah Gardens, and Miami Gardens. Despite this, it paints a more accurate picture of the number of individuals who are both receiving Medicaid Waiver benefits and who are on the waiting list for Medicaid Waiver in the area. Of note, it shows that in each of the three zip codes, there are more people on the waitlist than there are individuals who are receiving Medicaid Waiver benefits. This table further sheds light on existing service gaps in the north region of Miami-Dade County.

Table 9: Medicaid Waiver by Zip Code

ZIP Code	Waiver	Waitlist	Other Active	Grand Total
33014	61	64	3	128
33016	78	79	5	162
33018	75	99	5	179
Total	214	242	13	469

Source: Agency for Persons with Disabilities, 2019

Transportation

Table 10 shows ridership figures for the County’s Special Transportation Service (STS). STS offers door-to-door services for individuals with special needs throughout the County¹². The service is available 24/7 for a fee of \$3.50 one-way. As of December 2019, there is a total of 32,931 active STS clients in the County. According to the Department of Transportation and Public Works, STS provided over 1.7 million rides between October 2018 and September 2019. However, they do not track data based on cities or zip codes. Therefore, it is challenging to determine how often STS is used in Miami Lakes and how many active clients there are from within Miami Lakes.

A couple of participants mentioned they had used STS on occasion to pick them up within the Town. Unfortunately, they explained they do not use STS often due to unreliable wait times. In addition to STS and the County’s public transit, the Town also uses Freebee services to provide free transit to residents within the Town. To access Freebee’s services, residents can either call a driver

Table 10: STS Ridership Figures

Region	Active Clients	Total Rides in FY 18-19
Miami-Dade County	32,931	1.7 million
Miami Lakes	N/A	N/A

Source: Miami-Dade County Department of Transportation and Public Works, 2019

directly or request a ride using the Freebee app. The call feature accommodates older adults and individuals with disabilities. Transportation needs will be described in more detail in the **Accessibility and Transportation** section.

¹² Miami-Dade County Special Transportation Service
https://www.miamidade.gov/global/service.page?Mduid_service=ser1471890065439510

Employment

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a federal-state program that aids individuals with special needs in finding and maintaining employment¹³. VR stated that they are currently serving over 9,500 consumers in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties during the 2018-2019 fiscal year. They also stated they had placed over 900 individuals with special needs into employment during this time period. VR informed the research team that they do not have a waiting list for services. According to VR, statistics per city and zip codes are not maintained. They were solely able to provide information on Miami-Dade County and Monroe County combined. Thus, there isn't any VR data for the Town of Miami Lakes. When the Town's Special Needs Advisory Board received these figures, they asserted that VR does not provide enough services or resources for the special needs community. One parent further expressed that the reason VR does not have a waiting list is that they frequently turn people away who are trying to receive services. Another resident described that the lack of assistance VR provides is disheartening. Just one interviewee expressed a positive experience with VR offices.

Comparison with Benchmark Cities

For benchmarking purposes, the Town of Miami Lakes was compared to other cities in Florida of similar size. They were compared on the basis of: having an ordinance or resolution related to special needs, whether they have a specific inclusion policy, whether they have a board or committee related to special needs, and whether they offer social or recreational programs specifically for individuals with special needs. The majority of cities answered "no" to these questions. However, many of them stated they strive to be inclusive and individuals of all abilities are both welcomed and encouraged to participate in offered programming. Other cities like Key West, Rockledge, and Estero stated their respective counties handle social/recreational programs for individuals with special needs. Indeed, counties tend to offer services for the special needs community, though they tend to be centered in specific areas of the county. In Miami-Dade, for instance, many County provided services for the special needs community tend to be in the south Miami region. It is therefore difficult for individuals in Miami Lakes to regularly attend these programming opportunities.

Compared to the following cities in Table 11, the Town is one of two cities with a special needs board or committee. The Town is one of four cities with an ordinance or resolution related to individuals with special needs. Only one of the listed cities has an inclusion policy, though the Town of Miami Lakes' Special Needs Advisory Board is in the process of creating one, according to a Town representative. Moreover, three other cities stated they have social or recreational programming for individuals with special needs: Temple Terrace, Parkland, and Lauderdale Lakes. (**Note:** The City of Parkland stated their programming is adaptable to individuals with special needs, not necessarily solely for individuals with special needs. They also have a sports policy specifically for the inclusion of individuals with special needs.) The Town of Miami Lakes' workforce transition skills program and it's recently added parents support group are considered as a social/recreational program within the Town. However, the Town does not have sports or other types of activities for individuals with special needs. (**Note:** more cities were contacted in relation to Table 11 but did not return records requests in time.)

¹³ Florida Department of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation <http://www.rehabworks.org/>

Table 11: Cities of Similar Size in Comparison

City	Population Size	Ordinance/Resolution	Inclusion Policy	Boards or Committees	Social / Recreational Programs
Key West	24,565	No	No	No	N/A
Rockledge	24,926	Yes	No	No	N/A
Sebastian	25,719	No	No	Yes	No
Temple Terrace	26,471	No	No	No	Yes
New Smyrna Beach	27,229	No	No	No	No
Town of Miami Lakes	31,050	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Dania Beach	32,271	No	No	No	No
Estero	33,474	No	No	No	N/A
Parkland	33,631	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Lauderdale Lakes	36,324	Yes	No	No	Yes

Source: Public Records Requests



Findings

Findings

This section describes the findings from the focus group and interviews that were conducted by the Metropolitan Center with members of the Town of Miami Lakes community. There was a total of forty-five individuals who participated in the study. Of those, thirteen are caregivers or parents, twelve are medical/health providers, seven are individuals with special needs, six are Town officials (including Town staff, councilmembers, and law enforcement), five are educators, and two are business owners. For more information on the process used, please see the **Methodology** section. To see the questions that were asked, please see **Appendices A and B**.

What is inclusion?

To better understand the perspectives of those interviewed, participants were asked to define inclusion and what it means to them. For the most part, participants agree that inclusion means meaningful access to events and public spaces for individuals of all abilities. Inclusion also incorporates respect in a welcoming community. The word cloud below incorporates the different responses that were given to this question on inclusion.



The conversations we had were informative to the needs that exist amongst the local special needs community. We identified nine major themes throughout the discussions. This next section will explore each theme in more detail.

- Safety for Individuals with Special Needs
- Community Awareness
- Employment Opportunities
- Social/Recreational Activities
- Mental Health Issues that Affect the Special Needs Community
- Financial Strain in the Special Needs Community
- Educational Needs
- Accessibility and Transportation Needs
- The Need for Integrated Resources

Safety for Individuals with Special Needs

Safety came up frequently during resident interviews. When it concerns safety in public spaces—such as community centers, parks, roads, and sidewalks, participants shared positive experiences. When it comes to safety from local first responders, participants voiced their concerns. Most felt that local first responders might not be trained to identify an individual who has a special need or assist an individual with a special need. This concern for safety is based several instances locally and nationally that make the community feel frightened. Several years ago, there was a case in North Miami in which a caregiver was accidentally shot while police were aiming at an autistic adult who had a toy truck in his hand¹⁴. This case received national coverage, and because of its proximity may have alarmed the local special needs community. The Ruderman Family Foundation estimates that about half of individuals shot by police have some type of disability (this number includes those with mental health issues)¹⁵. The Town's police chief noted that there had not been local incidents when it comes to individuals with special needs, to his knowledge. Moreover, he informed us that officers had undergone autism training and they can choose to continue getting training through the police bureau's training department¹⁶. However, when focus group participants were made aware of this, they were still uncomfortable and were interested in understanding what the training curriculum entails. Moreover, they brought up that while the police may be trained to handle cases related to individuals with autism, they may not understand how to handle cases involving individuals with other special needs. Participants would like additional training to be prioritized.

"The community is unaware of what is safe and what isn't. If the community is equipped to know what to do in the event of an emergency, then that can relieve a burden on a family who wants to allow their teen/adult with special needs to spend time at a park by themselves, for instance. But families are scared, so they don't. In fact, many families do not take advantage of free services for this very reason."

– Local medical provider

There are serious ramifications to being concerned of a lack of safety and training in the community. It can affect a family's social life, their interactions with others, and their interactions with local businesses and public spaces. Some families reported having to stay indoors to avoid interacting with others in the event that their child is triggered and has a public episode. One caregiver stated that the individuals she assists tend to be taught to fear police enforcement. This tactic came up often in conversation as it is used by parents and caregivers to modify behaviors among individuals with special needs. However, it causes panic and may make an individual with special needs unlikely to seek out law enforcement for assistance. The aforementioned caregiver stated she often takes individuals with special needs on field trips to visit the Miccosukee police, so they are taught to be comfortable around police officers.

During an interview, one educator stated one of her students often asks her, "what if there is an active shooting, and I am in contact with a police officer? I already look suspicious, I talk to myself, and I pace. What do I do?" This apprehension speaks for many families and individuals with special needs. It is vital to numerous participants that Town staff and first responders are trained properly to accommodate individuals

¹⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/07/21/fla-police-shoot-black-man-with-his-hands-up-as-he-tries-to-help-autistic-patient/>

¹⁵ https://rudermanfoundation.org/white_papers/media-coverage-of-law-enforcement-use-of-force-and-disability/

¹⁶ FIU Metropolitan Center Interview, 2019

with special needs. They also suggested having workshops and public service announcements on social media to educate the community on special needs and how to be more understanding.

Community Awareness

The majority of those we interviewed believe that the community lacks awareness of the special needs population. Part of the issue is that individuals with special needs tend to be segregated in schools. They are also not typically integrated into local social/ recreational activities. Moreover, not many are employed and therefore there is a lack of representation in local businesses. For those that have invisible disabilities (disabilities that are not immediately apparent), it makes it even harder for others to be aware of their needs. All combined, the special needs population gets overlooked, which produces unfortunate and serious consequences. An owner of a local nonprofit that provides recreational services in the Town reported that on several occasions, parents have complained and informed them they would not allow their children to take any classes including kids with special needs. This is a prime example of the stigma that exists concerning the special needs community. Among other consequences, the non-profit owner mentioned this stigma keeps friendships from forming, permeates a lack of understanding in the community, and limits all parties from having a broader worldview. One parent shared a story of how her son with autism was able to complete his First Communion Class at Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Church. The church had experience in assisting individuals with autism and designed a modified curriculum to fit his needs, so he was able to succeed. This example showcases how awareness can contribute to inclusion.

Interviewees had several suggestions on how to address community awareness. One resident suggested the Special Needs Advisory Board could adopt or create a program similar to "Best Buddies® Citizens." This program would foster friendships amongst those with and without special needs, which creates a more inclusive community. As brought up in the **Safety** section, residents also mentioned it would be beneficial to produce public service announcements or workshops to better educate the community on special needs.

Employment Opportunities

There is a lack of employment opportunities for individuals with special needs. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 19.1% of those with a disability were employed in 2018. In contrast, 65.9% of individuals

Best Buddies Friendship Programs

These programs build one-to-one friendships between people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), offering social mentoring while improving the quality of life and level of inclusion for a population that is often isolated and excluded. Through their participation, people with IDD form meaningful connections with their peers, gain self-confidence and self-esteem, and share interests, experiences, and activities that many other individuals enjoy.

Best Buddies® Citizens

Supports the development of friendships between adults with and without IDD in corporate and civic communities. Many people with IDD have limited opportunities for social interactions after they leave the school environment. This program helps people with IDD become part of mainstream society and creates an inclusive and diverse community for all.

Source: Best Buddies®

without a disability were employed during the same time period¹⁷. This is a particularly challenging issue, especially for those with disabilities that are considered high functioning.

Employment can be a hurdle because there are caps to how much someone can earn, otherwise individuals may lose their benefits. In addition, one participant noted she does not mark that she has a disability when applying to jobs or at interviews for fear of being discriminated. Without access to employment, individuals with special needs often struggle with a sense of purpose. This may affect their mental health, as discussed in the **Mental Health** section. An individual stated, "I walk around Miami lakes and see tons of small shops and think, 'why can't people with special needs work here?'" Another participant expressed concern that local businesses may be unaware that there are tax breaks when hiring individuals with special needs. Moreover, they may be unaware there are organizations such as DMF Employment Opportunities that serve to job carve employment that fits the needs of both the organization as well as the individual with special needs. At least one Town resident uses DMF Employment Opportunity services and has employment within the Town. The local UM/NSU CARD Branch also stated they are willing to collaborate with the Town to educate local businesses on the benefits of hiring individuals with special needs and associated trainings for staff. In the last year, for instance, they provided trainings for staff at the local restaurant, Mayor's Café.

As briefly mentioned in the **Town History on Special Needs** section, the Special Needs Advisory Board started a workforce transition skills program. The purpose of this program is to provide skills for individuals with special needs leaving high school and entering the workforce. This endeavor had mixed reviews from individuals interviewed. Some mentioned that it was life-changing for the participants and taught them valuable skills. Others stated there was a definitive lack of wrap-around services. They mentioned the program would be more successful if there was more of an emphasis on employing participants after their completion of the program. Of the seven that participated in the pilot program, four were considered ready to be employed. Although the program connected these participants with organizations like Vocational Rehabilitation, interviewees noted it did not guarantee employment or specific skills for a specific industry. Moreover, some interviewees also mentioned that the program was limited in size and diversity of individuals with disabilities. They would like to see the program grow and expand to include more individuals with different disabilities to limit members of the community from being turned away. One participant suggested it would be beneficial for the Special Needs Advisory Board to partner with the Economic Development Committee and host an information session for local businesses to hire individuals from the special needs community. This partnership could encourage businesses to employ participants from the transition skills program.

Social and Recreational Activities

Within the Town of Miami Lakes, there exists a wide variety of organizations that provide services to the special needs community. Participants mentioned using such services offered by organizations like Nicklaus Children's Hospital, UM/NSU CARD, and Vocational Rehabilitation. They also mentioned using local applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapists, physical therapists, and mental health therapists, among others. However, many participants also brought up other cities that they visit for services, either at organizations located in these cities or by programming directly offered by cities, as shown in Table 12. This table describes the population size of the city, whether they have an ordinance or resolution related

"My sister is in an age group where there just isn't anything that exists for her. The elderly committee is too old, and other programs are geared towards the youth. Aside from family, she doesn't really have a social life. "

– Caregiver to a sibling with an intellectual disability

¹⁷ United States Department of Labor, Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics Summary. February 26,2019.

to special needs, whether they have an inclusion policy, whether they have a special needs board or committee, and whether the city provides social/recreational programs.

Table 12: Other Cities Participants Visit for Services

City	Population Size	Ordinance/Resolution	Inclusion policy	Boards or Committees	Social/Recreational Programs
Doral	61,824	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Weston	71,210	No	No	No	No
Miami Beach	91,718	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Miami Gardens	113,069	Yes	No	No	Yes
Hialeah	238,942	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Source: MC Interviews and Focus Group

The City of Doral was mentioned several times for instance. Like Miami Lakes, Doral also has a Special Needs Advisory Board. The City offers ample programming for individuals with special needs. Some of their programming includes dance classes, wellness and martial arts, and afterschool educational programs¹⁸. When asked, their Special Needs Coordinator stated their programs are typically filled to capacity with approximately 75% of participants residing within Doral and the other 25% residing in cities from various parts of Miami-Dade County.

Other cities that interviewees mentioned include Weston, Miami Beach, Miami Gardens, and Hialeah. Weston was the only city that stated they do not offer social or recreational programming specifically for individuals with special needs. However, participants mentioned they often go to Weston for services provided by nonprofits and other organizations in the area, such as the YMCA. The City of Miami Beach has a committee related to special needs. Their committee is called “Disability Access Committee” and their purpose is to “to review, formulate, and coordinate information, suggestions, proposals, and plans, and to address complaints from the general public to provide more conveniently accessible facilities, public buildings, streets, sidewalks, and programs for the persons with disabilities in the City¹⁹.” One of the accommodations the City offers includes free manual or motorized beach wheelchairs for those with mobility impairments to be able to access and enjoy the beach²⁰. The City

“Both of my children’s whole lives have been in other cities because of a lack of programming in the Town. One child does not have special needs but has had to partake in activities in other areas because of feasibility. As a result, neither of them get to spend time with kids in this community.”

– Parent of a child with an ambulatory disability

¹⁸ City of Doral, <https://www.cityofdoral.com/all-departments/parks-and-recreation/programs-and-sports/program-events/special-needs/>

¹⁹ City of Miami Beach, https://www.miamibeachfl.gov/city-hall/public-works/ada/americans-with-disability-act/#_d

²⁰ City of Miami Beach, <https://www.miamibeachfl.gov/city-hall/public-works/ada/beach-wheel-chair-access/>

of Miami Gardens holds a Special Olympics and they also have a program called Project Victory. This program is “designed to provide work related experiences for students with disabilities by developing social, emotional, and employability skills essential for employment and success in the workplace.²¹” Lastly, the City of Hialeah offers a multitude of social and recreational programming. They have the STEP Ahead Youth Enrichment Program, partially funded by the Children's Trust. This program offers free afterschool and summer camp activities for high school students with intellectual disabilities. The goal is to facilitate the shift from high school to the workforce. Another program they offer is the City's Special Populations Program, which is a day program for adults with disabilities between the ages of 16-65. The City states "parents of participants benefit from the shared community life that revolves around the center as well as a safe haven for their adults while they are away at work." In addition to several other programs offered, the City also participates in Project Victory.

Table 13 lists the various organizations and programming that participants mentioned regularly traveling to during the focus group or interviews. The types of service most prevalent from the list include education and recreation services. For organizations that are not within the Town of Miami Lakes, the average mileage to these destinations is 18 miles from the Town. While this is not an exhaustive list of the organizations participants travel to, it serves to provide an idea of the types of services they utilize and the distance these services are from the Town.

Table 13: Organizations and Programming Mentioned by Participants

Organization	Type of Service	City	Miles from Miami Lakes
Divine Academy of Broward	Education	Hollywood, FL	20
Angels Reach Academy	Education	Hialeah Gardens, FL	5.6
The Wow Center	Education	Miami, FL	20
Florida International	Education	Sweetwater, FL	15
Sandra Delucca Center	Recreation	Miami, FL	13
DMF Employment	Employment, Social	Miami, FL	25
UM/NSU CARD	Client and Family Support,	Miami Lakes, FL	0
JAFCO – Children's Ability	Arts, Recreation, Family	Sunrise, FL	28
UHealth Mailman Center for	Health and Wellness	Miami, FL	19
Vocational Rehabilitation	Employment, Social	Miami Lakes, FL	0
Arts for Autism	Arts, Recreation, Dance	Miami Lakes, FL	0
City of Miami Beach –	Recreation, Sport	Miami Beach, FL	
Hope for Autism	Family and Social Support	Miami Lakes, FL	0
Nikolaus Children's Hospital	Health and Wellness	Miami Lakes, FL	0
YMCA	Recreation	Weston, FL	22
City of Doral	Recreation, Sport	Doral, FL	10
City of Plantation	Recreation	Plantation, FL	28

Source: MC Interviews and Focus Group

²¹ Miami Dade County Schools

Unfortunately, many stated that the Town lacks accommodating services for individuals with special needs. Several times, the lack of accommodations at large events came up. Participants described that having an accommodations tent at major events would be helpful. This accommodations tent could include a sensory station, noise-canceling headphones, wheelchair rentals, or a small resting area. A golf cart to transport individuals to bathrooms or parking lots would be helpful as well. These accommodations work well because they are inclusive in nature. For instance, a resting area helps individuals who have physical limitations as well as those who are fatigued. As one caregiver mentioned, she enjoys sitting and escaping loud noises at times during events.

In addition to wanting more accommodating services, participants noted a definitive lack of social and recreational activities for the special needs community in the Town of Miami Lakes. This is not a unique issue to the Town—but it does speak to a problem that exists in the greater region. Individuals stated that they often must drive upwards of 40 minutes each way to get to other cities that have social or recreational activities for individuals with special needs. Some

"Every single student with special needs that I've assisted at my job is scared of making friends, even amongst others with special needs. They don't know how to talk to each other or with their classmates."

– Local educator

residents even stated they have considered moving away from the town in order to get the services they need for their loved ones. One caregiver mentioned that her family simply does not have the time to get their loved one to such activities because of the drive and hassle. Others are just unaware that any social/recreational activities exist, to begin with.

After speaking with the community, it was evident that more social and recreational services are needed—either within or near the Town. Social activities allow individuals with special needs to participate in their community, meet others, and have fun. It also allows for a safe and accommodating environment that relieves a burden on caregivers and family members. Many types of activities were suggested, including a variety of support groups, workshops, jobs and skills courses, and sports activities. As mentioned in the **Community Awareness** section, a program similar to Best Buddies® was discussed. One parent mentioned that the school her child attends has a Best Buddies® chapter. It has given her daughter the opportunity to make friends with kids of various abilities in her school. Another participant at noted that there are plenty of opportunities for individuals with special needs to volunteer at Town events. As mentioned, "the special needs population oftentimes struggles with having a sense of purpose. Volunteering opportunities allow them to be integrated into the neighborhood while giving adults and adolescents with special needs the chance to actively participate in their community." Recruiting individuals with special needs to volunteer at Town events may be beneficial in bringing together the community.

A social skills and job skills course could also offer specific tools so that teenagers and adults with special needs learn the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. As explored in the **Employment Opportunities** section, job opportunities for those with special needs are scarce. One adult with autism stated he would enjoy a computer class or a math class for individuals with special needs. These courses provide practical skills that could assist with employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the local library branch stated they would love to work with the Town in providing a space for special needs activities or collaborating on programming. However, much of the programming they can offer is dependent on funding and staff capabilities. They voiced that if training becomes available (through the Town or other funding sources), they are eager to offer related services for the special needs community. Some of the programming other branches have offered include sensory friendly storytime, (Coral Reef Branch) sensory friendly family films (Homestead Branch), music therapy (Naranja Branch), and art therapy (Pinecrest Branch). The library's commitment is just one example of an agency within the town who would be willing to collaborate on programming for special needs.

Mental Health Issues that Affect the Special Needs Community

Addressing mental health needs was of great importance to participants, particularly parents. Several expressed that mental health issues are common amongst individuals with special needs as well as their families. This finding is consistent with other studies. It is worth noting that seeking mental health treatment is stigmatized, particularly in the Hispanic community²² (which makes up 85.8% of the Miami Lakes population²³). Normalizing mental health counseling and providing opportunities that encourage people to speak about their struggles would make a difference for the community. According to a study, “social participation, made possible through the opportunities the neighborhood provides for social interaction as well as the social networks present within the neighborhood, is linked to improved mental health.”²⁴ In fact, families of individuals with special

needs who live in neighborhoods perceived to be friendly and socially supportive—through parks, services provided, local conditions, and more—tend to “fare better” than families in communities without this sort of social support. Additionally, there is a strong link between physical environments and mental health. Utilizing local parks to bring together individuals of all types of abilities is a helpful tool in addressing mental health issues.

"My daughter jumped off a second-story window. She is gifted, has autism, has held jobs—but she suffers from clinical depression and bipolar disorder. She struggles from the stress of meeting her own expectations. Thankfully, she survived and is receiving help, but there are others who aren't as lucky."

- Parent to a young adult with autism

"At times, I have comped sessions for families because I know they cannot afford my services—but I also know their child needs them."

- Local mental health therapist

In the Town of Miami Lakes, Psychology Today reports there are eleven therapists specialized to assist individuals with learning disabilities, six for individuals with Autism, six for individuals with developmental disorders, five for individuals with intellectual disabilities, and three who assist with chronic illnesses²⁵. Some of the mental health issues that we heard of from participants include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder. One parent stated that “high functioning kids get depressed once they realize they are different.” Another parent explained how there could be a great deal of stress and anxiety among adolescents with special needs that occur when they compare their abilities to their siblings or others at school with special needs. They further explained that it could lead to frustration and a lack of confidence. At the focus group, one

parent mentioned that their child's school only has a couple of counselors to assist the hundreds of students enrolled. This may implicate that even at the school level, resources for addressing mental health are not enough. A few caregivers, medical professionals, and parents also expressed how difficult it is to pay for mental health therapy. At times, even if it is covered by insurance, it can be hard to find a mental health

²² Caplan, S. (2019). Intersection of Cultural and Religious Beliefs About Mental Health: Latinos in the Faith-Based Setting. *Hispanic Health Care International*, 17(1), 4–10.

²³ 2018 U.S. Census Bureau ACS 5-Year Estimates

²⁴ Applied Research Quality Life (2017), Andrew Whitehead

²⁵ Psychology Today, January 2019

therapist that is specialized in assisting individuals with certain special needs. For those that have a cognitive disability, it may be even more difficult to find the right type of care.

Severe trauma can occur among youth with autism who have been “Baker-Acted,” according to a local autism services provider. They stated that, unfortunately, there had been instances throughout the county in which schools who do not understand how to handle a child with special needs and believe they are a threat to themselves have called the police, for children as young as eight years old. The child then gets taken and placed in a high-stress, unfamiliar environment that may cause them anguish. The Baker Act, initially established in 1971, was meant to protect those who suffer from mental health disorders from themselves and others, though it sometimes misses the mark if used as a first resort. According to the University of South Florida Baker Act Reporting Center, Miami-Dade County had a total of 28,611 baker act exams in FY16-17, resulting in 1,059 exams per 100,000 residents. This was higher than neighboring counties of Broward (798 per 100,000) and Palm Beach (668 per 100,000). Furthermore, almost half (48.7%) of the total Baker Act exams were a result of law enforcement requests, and there was a 5.7% increase from FY15-16 to FY16-17. A local police officer who was interviewed confirmed that he had responded to local calls, which resulted in using the Baker Act, though he explained that this does not occur with regularity. At the start of his career, he noted that using the Baker Act was seen as a solution to a problem, while now it is seen as a last resort. Although the Baker Act does not frequently occur in Miami Lakes, some parents expressed worry that it could be used against their child.

As mentioned earlier, families of individuals with special needs may also suffer mental health issues. One parent stated her marriage ended, largely due to the stress generated from caring for their child with special needs. In the focus group, several participants also reported knowing many families whose marriages have ended. One couple stated that although theirs has not ended, it *has* undergone much strain.

Suggestions for addressing mental health include a variety of support groups, mental health seminars, as well as social and recreational activities. A mental health therapist asserted that socializing with others undergoing similar issues can improve mental health significantly. A local speech pathologist shared her experience in starting a support group for stuttering adults. She stated it is a low-cost tool with tremendous benefits to those with special needs. During an interview, one mother stated that she attends a parent's support group at her child's school (in Broward); they discuss topics like nutrition, puberty, and social skills. She stated it had made a great impact on not just her life but also her child's life because of the tools she's gained and how she has learned to navigate certain topics. Several interviewees recommended it would be valuable for the community to have a support group for individuals with special needs as well as one for parents and caregivers. Focus group participants, as well as an employee from UM/NSU CARD, informed us that while the local autism community meets regularly through the Hope for Autism organization, they were unaware of any other type of support group related to special needs in the Town of Miami Lakes. Another medical professional indicated that exercise is incredibly important in

"Through my profession, I host a support group for the stuttering population. We meet once a month in south Miami; I set a topic for the meeting, and I let them know it is ahead of time. The results have been incredible. It has changed them emotionally; it is a release for them to talk and not feel judged. Many of them have become friends and meet up afterward. I can see something like this happening in Miami Lakes. Support groups don't take off immediately, so it is important to have a consistent time and date when they are being hosted. The day you cancel might be the day a newbie shows up. I started using social media to get people interested. It isn't as scary to join when you see other people's faces."

– Miami Lakes resident, Speech Pathologist

combatting mental health issues; as such, he highly recommended the Town incorporate sports programming for individuals with special needs. As we will discuss in the **Services** section, there are far and few social and recreational opportunities for individuals with special needs in the region. To get such services, residents with special needs often travel to other cities.

Financial Strains in the Special Needs Community

There are high costs associated with receiving medication, therapy, medical equipment, and other necessary resources for individuals with special needs. For elderly individuals, long-term care and functional declines like dementia carry a huge financial burden for families or for themselves. There is also a long waiting list for benefits such as Medicaid Waiver. Participants stated that it is difficult to qualify for benefits like Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This means that individuals who could be covered are not receiving the care or services they need. In order to receive SSI benefits, a person's assets must not be worth more than \$2,000, or up to \$3,000 as a couple. They must also have less than \$791 a month in unearned income (\$1177 as a couple). Earned income is limited to \$1,627 a month (\$2,399 as a couple). However, this number may be even lower if they are employed as employment affects SSI eligibility based on disability types.²⁶ In both the interviews and the focus group discussion, participants affirmed that they need

"I have begged, borrowed, done whatever I needed to do so I could help my daughter."
– Parent to an adult with special needs

"In our three-person household, we spend over \$17,000 a year on health insurance due to my son's special needs. I am lucky his ABA therapist and psychologist assist with sliding fees—otherwise, I don't know how we would manage. I am forever indebted to them."
– Parent to a teenager with special needs

advocacy to ensure that 1) those who have coverage continue to receive coverage, 2) those who are on waiting lists are able to get the care they need, and 3) those who are not currently covered, have a pathway to become covered. One mother we spoke to said she had to quit her job in order to qualify for Medicaid Waiver so her child could receive the services he requires. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. Parents often are forced to decide whether to continue working or quit so that they could fall under the income bracket that allows them to receive certain benefits. If their household income goes over the allowed amount, their child with special needs may not be able to receive proper medical care. During the focus group, a resident

stated he and his wife have filed for bankruptcy twice so they could afford to give their child proper resources. One interviewee also stated she has had to file for bankruptcy numerous times in her quest to provide her daughter with the therapies she needs.

As discussed in the **mental health** section, it can also be difficult to find the right type of care for a special need. According to one participant, it typically involves a great deal of trial and error and multiple types of therapies to assist an individual with special needs. A young adult in the focus group stated that in order to get her arthritis medication, she often spends several hours on the phone connecting with insurance companies and other agencies. She said, "it's even more complicated for me because I work full-time, and many of these companies are only open during business hours." In her case, she once spent 10 hours

²⁶ <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-11015.pdf>

"I applied for SSI, but because I have a job, my daughter's application was denied.

– Parent to a child with special needs

during her work week going back and forth with various agencies so she could get the medication she requires. Thankfully, her job was understanding—but others may not be. Without her arthritis medication, she risks the disease flaring, which can cause debilitating joint damage. In that particular instance, her insurance company only allowed her to have one month's worth of medication. This meant that several weeks after this 10-hour series of phone calls, she had to go through the process once again.

Another aspect affecting individuals with special needs is accessing their treatments. An interviewee shared, "after you

suffer a stroke, you typically only have access to six sessions of speech therapy covered by insurance. That is nowhere near enough, and there are major quality of life implications for those who do not have the means to continue with therapy." In addition, several participants stated that many specialized doctors might not accept Medicaid. To access specialized care, some participants expressed they must typically pay out of pocket.

Educational Needs

Students with special needs have access to many resources that are typically expensive and out of reach for families otherwise. Students with special needs can remain in the public-school system until they are 21 (to be exact, until the end of the school year in which the student turns 22)²⁷. Once students with special needs graduate high school, they are often capped out of many of the services they had at their disposal in primary and secondary education. However, as we will explore, even at schools, some parents stated the system can be difficult to navigate.

Recent figures show that Miami Lakes has **917 students** with disabilities enrolled in the six local public schools—Barbara Goleman Senior High School, Bob Graham Educational Center, Miami Lakes Middle School, Miami Lakes K-8 Center, Miami Lakes Educational Center, and Hialeah-Miami Lakes Senior High School (**note:** as stated in the **Data**

"I had to hire an advocate for my child's IEP meeting for her to get the resources she needs and to make sure the school was being compliant. Schools are either not educated, or do not care, about being compliant. Advocates are the only way schools listen, but many families can't afford it and they don't know their rights. It is important that students are given every opportunity to flourish—but I'm not seeing that in the public-school system of Miami-Dade County."

-Mother to a child with an intellectual disability

"Training is needed for parents to navigate the school system. Even the ones who are educated still face many challenges."

– Educator

Analysis Section, this does not include private school students or students who attend schools in Broward). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities can have "free appropriate public education."²⁸ These students are equipped with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is updated each year to keep track of a student's progress

²⁷ Florida Department of Education <http://www.fldoe.org/academics/exceptional-student-edu/ese-eligibility/>

²⁸ United States Department of Education <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>

throughout the school year. The IEP covers a student's level of performance, areas of strengths, their needs, and their measurable goals for the school year. Parents meet with school administrators to go over the document and make any necessary changes to it. The IEP also allows families and administrators to indicate the accommodations and services that will be provided for students to be able to succeed. Unfortunately, some families and educators noted that the IEP meetings are difficult to navigate. One parent stated she hired an advocate to attend her child's IEP meeting to ensure that her child was given the resources she needed and that the school was doing everything in its power to accommodate her. She was previously unaware she could request having her child be picked up in a bus with air conditioning, for instance.

When it comes to accommodations, parents and educators reported that students with disabilities tend to have classrooms in unfavorable locations within schools. One parent mentioned their child's classroom looked more like a storage facility. An educator stated, "integration of students is very important. But not only that, the students with special needs should be in prime locations in schools. They tend to be in rooms meant to be storage closets, portables, and back of the schools where it is harder to get to, especially if they have mobility issues. I shadowed at one of the local schools, and the students with emotional and other disabilities were in portables way in the back of the school. When it would rain these students would not have easy access to the bathroom. If a teacher needed help, they couldn't just go next door to another classroom because 'next door' is far away and they can't leave their children unattended. I believe the situation was remedied at this school, but it should have never been a problem to begin with." As this educator noted, students with special needs tend to be separated from typical students. Another parent noted that students with special needs often suffer bullying consequently due to the lack of

"My daughter was not invited to go to her 5th grade dance or 5th grade graduation due to her abilities [at a school in the Town]. The school would not accommodate her. The school she is at now, in Broward, does. The inclusive environment has made such a difference in her life. The school even gets upset if I accidentally exclude her from activities like field trips!"

– Parent to a child with an intellectual disability

"Individuals with special needs are not provided with the same opportunities as others in school. I have encountered schools that do not allow therapists to work with the client inside the classroom because they claim it is disruptive. But then the effect is these students engage in maladaptive behaviors without the guidance they need. As a result, some students may end up expelled from school."

– Educator

integration, and stated "how can these students participate in society if they are off in a corner somewhere? They need to be given opportunities and they need to be integrated." Another parent stated, "there should be self-contained classes for those that need the extra assistance, but the others should be integrated with the proper resources to make the transition successful."

Moreover, teachers tend to be overwhelmed. One speech pathologist stated she used to work at a nearby school and had an overwhelming number of 65 kids in her program. Another educator stated that when

“Principals set the tone for their schools. If they are educated and care about special needs, then those children are cared for and services are provided for them. Unfortunately, there is pressure in Dade for schools to be an ‘A school’ and anything that doesn’t lead you there becomes an afterthought. Although there are laws and policies and procedures, every school has its own culture and it comes from its staff and its principal.”

– Parent to a child with mobility difficulties

she was shadowing at a school located in the town, the special education teacher she assisted confided in her that she was looking for other jobs because there simply weren’t enough resources available to support her work. The conditions in schools are not encouraging for those entering the profession. One educator noted, “teachers feel burned out. I have witnessed many leaving the profession to pursue something else. They are forced to do the bare minimum because they are stretched so thin.” This point was affirmed by one educator who explained she chose to go into the private school system because she was dismayed

with the public-school system’s resources. This reinforces the reasons why some parents decide to move their child to private schools or to schools located in Broward (as brought up in the **Data Analysis** section).

Accessibility and Transportation Needs

The Town of Miami Lakes is considered a walkable community, particularly in proximity to Town center. The number of parks and green spaces located within the Town were often discussed positively. As mentioned in the **Town History on Special Needs** section, the Town has been working on implementing its ADA transition plan since 2015 to improve sidewalk accessibility throughout the Town’s neighborhoods. Participants shared mostly positive feedback as it concerns sidewalks and accessing both public and private spaces, especially considering the comfort provided by tree shade and greenery. However, there were some areas of dissatisfaction. For instance, at youth sporting events at Optimist Park or Royal Oaks Park, it can be hard for some individuals with physical disabilities to watch their loved one from the sideline. This may occur when the fields being used are far from sidewalks or restrooms. One resident shared that older adults with mobility issues may have a hard time getting their wheelchair to certain park areas to watch a grandchild play a game. A participant also noted that public restrooms are sometimes closed during the day. This can prove challenging for individuals with bladder issues or mobility issues to find a restroom in a timely manner. Another individual noted it would be helpful for events to have sensory disclaimers. They

“At the 4th of July event a few years ago, it started pouring rain, and everyone was running all around us. My sister has mobility issues, so we had to move slowly in the rain. It was a terrible experience. There weren’t special accommodations, and we were parked very far. At a private event that also took place at a local park, this mobility concern was better handled with the use of golf carts. The golf cart took my sister to the restroom when it otherwise would have been an ordeal due to her mobility issues.

– Caregiver to a sibling with an ambulatory disability

stated “disclaimers for events are important to notify families of individuals with sensory sensitivity. This can be the difference between a family joining the community or staying at home and not participating.” A participant stated that for those with hearing impairments, microphones should be standard for amplification purposes. While microphones are already used at most Town events, for the smaller scale ones this would be useful. Both a parent and an educator stated that such amplification methods also carry the dual benefit of assisting individuals with attention deficit disorders to better focus.

Freebee came up often in conversation. Freebee is a free, electric vehicle company that provides first and last mile connectivity for Town residents to be able to “live, learn, and play.”. When interviewing Freebee co-founder, Jason Spiegel, he mentioned that between 60-70% of Freebee riders in the Town are older adults, which was the original purpose for providing Freebee in the Town. Over time, Freebee became more popular and there were points during the day in which the system became overloaded. When this became apparent, the service was expanded to meet local demands. Now, it is available 7 days a week with more vehicles and more operating hours. Students are now also accommodated for services after-school hours.

However, Freebee services were recently featured in a Miami Laker article, which has made it so popular that drivers have stated there is a need for more vehicles as they are unable to keep up with the demand. This sentiment was echoed by various members of the community. Some residents told us they have had to wait over an hour for Freebee to pick them up—in one case, a resident stated she missed her medical appointment due to the wait. One caregiver stated that her sister, who has an ambulatory difficulty, has had issues with Freebee not arriving on time, or not being able to reach drivers over the phone, or having drivers that can’t assist her getting into the vehicle. Since she requires a lift, if the van is in use then the Freebee driver must be strong enough to carry her in—which is reliant on the driver’s strength and capacity. Unfortunately, she has had instances in which the driver was unable to carry her and had to leave her behind. These experiences have been disappointing. This resident is not as encouraged to use Freebee as she was with the Town’s former on-demand bus, which was replaced by Freebee. In spite of this experience, when a Freebee driver was asked, he stated the wheelchair lift is not often requested (in the regular Freebee vehicle, not the van). In the past six months, this driver estimated using it between 3-6 times. Another issue with Freebee is that due to the expansion of hours, students now use it almost exclusively once they are out of school. As a result, some residents have been told it is better to request Freebee during times the students are not using

STS and Eligibility

Special Transportation Service (STS) is a shared-ride public transportation service of Miami-Dade County in compliance with the complementary paratransit service provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. STS offers door-to-door transportation service from the main entrance of pick-up to the main entrance of drop-off locations.

The service operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be used throughout Miami-Dade County.

Miami-Dade County residents whose physical or mental disability prevents them from using accessible public transportation (Metrobus, Metrorail, or Metromover) independently.

Miami-Dade County residents with temporary disabilities are eligible for STS during the period of their disability.

People with disabilities from out-of-town that are presumed eligible under ADA jurisdiction.

The fee is \$3.50 per one-way trip, as well as for companions. Personal Care Attendants ride free and must be pre-certified.

Prepaid vouchers can also be purchased in advance by calling the STS Reservations Line.

Certified STS riders can use Metrobus and Metrorail free of charge.

Source: Miami Dade County

it. This limits residents' ability to use the services during times that may be more convenient for them. Overall, Freebee is seen as a good resource in the community. Another Freebee driver stated that at least three individuals with Autism regularly use the services to get to work. In order for the service to be even more accommodating for members of the community, it would be beneficial to expand the number of vehicles.

The Need for Integrated Resources

Local feedback showed that there is a need for integrated resources for the special needs community. Several participants noted that parents and caregivers may lack awareness of how to best care for persons with special needs. We heard accounts of individuals with special needs being kept from public spaces and rarely leaving their homes. Some of the specialized medical providers we interviewed shared examples of how their professions could change the lives of those with special needs but parents and caregivers may not know they exist or how an individual with special needs could benefit from their medical care (for instance: applied behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech pathology). Participants noted that many parents are also unaware their child can be put on the Medicaid Waiver waiting list starting at the child's diagnosis. In some cases, there is over a ten-year waiting period (with one participant reporting her child has been on the waiting list for over 12 years.) By not being aware that such resources exist, a family may suffer financial hardships as they wait to receive benefits after applying years after diagnosis.

"In an ideal world, to better integrate services, we would need a dedicated office within the Town or County to direct the resources and the service providers that exist effectively to members of the special needs community."

– Parent of a child with special needs

In addition, those with special needs may not be aware of how to navigate benefits or medical resources themselves. One individual with special needs stated she was not aware of her rights or how to advocate for herself. Because of a change in work status, she faced an obstacle familiar to many others with special needs: losing benefits. Essential resources like Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) were suddenly out of reach for her until she found assistance through a center for independent living, which helped her retrieve her benefits. Workshops for resources and navigating benefits would be useful to members of the special needs community. One male participant suggested the Town could host a meet and greet session so that the special needs community could have a chance to collect and exchange information on local resources. In fact, one focus group participant stated her purpose in coming to the discussion was motivated by the possibility of exchanging information with others facing similar challenges. Having access to a network of individuals experiencing similar situations is vital for the community. Several are fortunate to have found organizations like Hope for Autism; with at least two participants mentioning they have been members for over 20 years. This group has allowed them to receive contributions, support, and resources they need for their loved ones. Their experience demonstrates the impact an organized support group has in the community to allow individuals to share resources with one another. Most participants expressed the best medical services they rely on have been shared with them via word-of-mouth.

"I am lucky to have found great resources for my child, but only because of word-of-mouth from other parents."

– Parent of a child with an intellectual disability

Interestingly, even back in 2011, when the Special Needs Committee was formed, there was discussion related to integrated resources. Councilmember Mary Collins recommended that the Town add some sort of component to integrate resources for the special needs community; such as by having a volunteer in charge of answering calls and directing residents to local services. However, it is difficult to rely on volunteers to be available at consistent times and to answer all questions related to the special needs community. Moreover, the countywide 211 phone line provides this service already and is available 24/7. However, their lists are not exhaustive, and some individuals may be unaware that the 211 service exists.

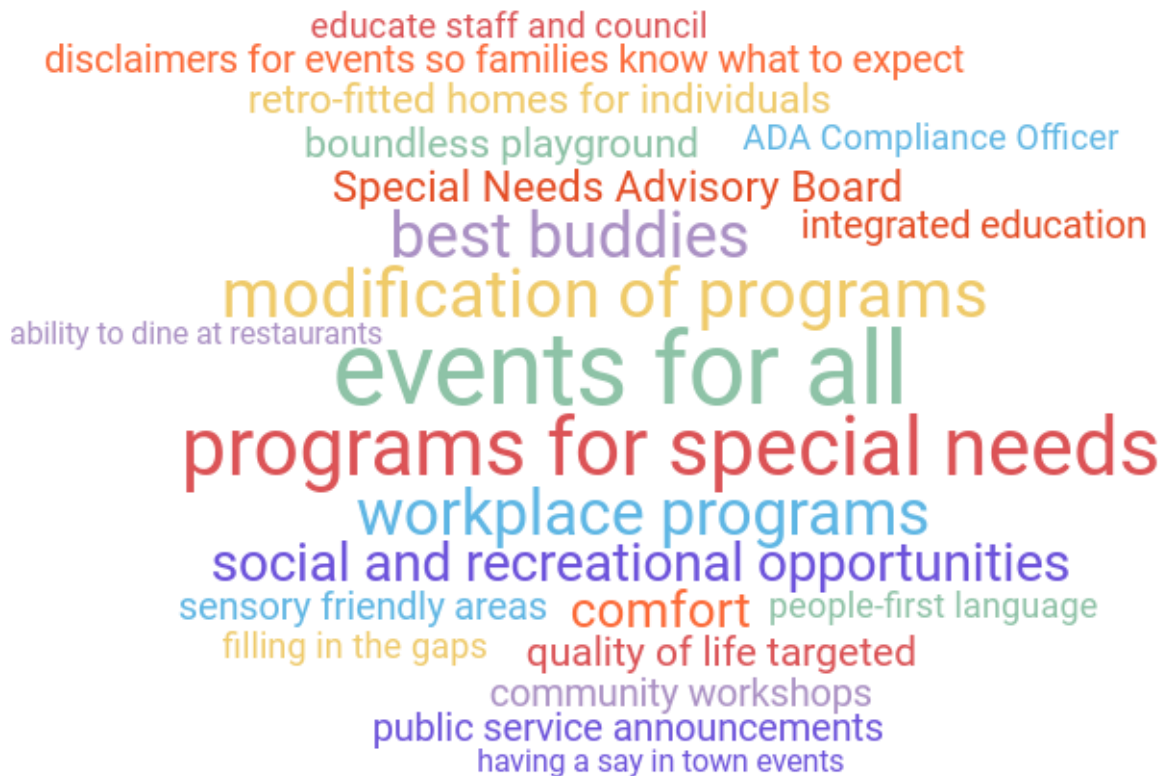
Some recommendations for integrated resources include ample support groups, workshops, having a services coordinator within the Town, and having a dedicated portion of the Town's website centered on services and resources for the special needs community. With the help of the community and a Town employee, this page could be updated periodically and organized based on types of services offered and for which disabilities.



Recommendations

Recommendations

When describing an ideal model town for inclusion, participants had an assortment of ideas, with the most prevalent being a friendly town that hosts events for individuals of all abilities (as seen in the word cloud below). This next section incorporates recommendations for the Town of Miami Lakes according to the themes described in the **Findings** section.



1. Safety for Individuals with Special Needs

It is imperative that safety is prioritized, and that Town staff and first responders are required to periodically get training on special needs. Doing so would reduce concerns from parents/caregivers/and those with special needs, create an atmosphere of safety and inclusion, and could potentially prevent catastrophic situations from occurring.

2. Community Awareness

It is recommended that the Town and the Special Needs Advisory Board work to spread awareness about the special needs community and services available to them in the Town. This would invite the special needs community to participate more within the Town. It would also allow for the rest of the community to be more understanding and educated on special needs

3. Employment Opportunities

It would be conducive for the Town to partner with local businesses and organizations like UM/NSU CARD to provide training for businesses on hiring individuals with special needs. This partnership could serve as a pipeline method for the Special Needs Advisory Board's workforce transition program so that they have partnerships available to funnel program participants in to. The workforce transition program should also incorporate an evaluation method to ensure participants are satisfied with the curriculum and to measure the success of the program (i.e. track participants after the completion of the program).

4. Social/Recreational Activities

Exploring opportunities to partner with the County, non-profits, businesses, and other providers would be advantageous to address the need for social/recreational activities. As one participant stated “there are agencies that exist, but they don’t exist here. Let’s connect with them.” For instance, several participants brought up the idea of an adult day center. Some stated that the Town itself is not in the business to run such a program due to the specialized care that is needed, but it has the space for other organizations to use its facilities during times they are not being used. Moreover, while schools and other organizations offer programs for children and elderly individuals, adults between the ages of 22-65 tend to get left behind. To address their needs, support groups, arts activities, sports recreation, and skills courses would be helpful. For kids, summer programs, arts and sports, and skill courses would be beneficial and current programs could be modified through a therapeutic recreation specialist.

5. Mental Health Issues that Affect the Special Needs Community

Mental health issues are prevalent in the special needs community. It would be helpful for the Town of Miami Lakes and the Special Needs Advisory Board to host monthly support groups for the special needs community. In addition to having support groups for parents and caregivers, it would be helpful to have groups for individuals of different ages or by disability type/severity. Workshops and partnerships with local mental health providers would also be beneficial.

6. Financial Strain in the Special Needs Community

The Town’s special needs community would benefit by having workshops for how to navigate the medical system including: benefits, employment, and financial coaching. The Town’s elected officials could also advocate at a State and County level to ensure more funding, programs, and partnerships are created for the benefit of the special needs community. If the Town offers social and recreational programming, being mindful of the cost to participants is important. Individuals in the special needs community may be limited in what they can afford due to high healthcare costs.

7. Educational Needs

As discussed in the **Education** section, advocacy for children is often missing. One parent suggested that having a contracted advocate who can assist families in the town would be a wonderful way to provide services to the community. Families may not be aware that advocates exist, understand what they can help with, or may not have the resources to hire on. The Town could also host workshops to help parents navigate the school system and work with local schools to ensure they are providing appropriate resources for the local special needs community.

8. Accessibility and Transportation Needs

It would be beneficial for the Town to expand Freebee services by adding at least one other vehicle to accommodate individuals that need the ADA lift. An expansion would help reduce wait times while also ensuring the special needs community has more resources available to get around in the community. As mentioned in the **Accessibility and Transportation Needs** section, at least three individuals with special needs regularly use Freebee services to get to work within the Town of Miami Lakes.

9. The Need for Integrated Resources

As many participants noted, there is a lack of integrated resources for individuals with special needs. It can be confusing for those navigating the systems. Having a portion of the Town’s website dedicated to listing local resources would be helpful for the community. With the help of the community, this page could be updated periodically and organized based on types of services offered and for which disabilities.

Methodology

This section explains our approach used to recruit participants and solicit information from them related to the special needs community of the Town of Miami Lakes.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were primarily recruited via flyers promoted by the Town of Miami Lakes across social media channels and newsletters. The Miami Herald also wrote a piece about the project, which garnered more attention to the study and facilitated more individuals reaching out to the research team.

Participants from various backgrounds were recruited, including individuals with special needs, caregivers to individuals with special needs, parents to individuals with special needs, medical providers, councilmembers, business owners, and town staff. It was important to reach out to individuals from various backgrounds so that the research offered well-rounded insight. The participants were heterogeneous in terms of background, gender, occupation, and other demographic characteristics. Participants were only pre-screened to ensure a relationship with the special needs community. The research was gathered through interviews and one focus group. There were 35 individual interviews conducted by the research team and one focus group with a total of 10 participants. Altogether, there were 45 participants in the study. **Appendix A** shows the questions that were asked in the interviews, and **Appendix B** shows the questions asked in the focus group.

Refreshments and snacks were provided during the focus groups. Participation was voluntary, and participants were advised at the beginning of each session that their individual responses would remain anonymous. Deception was not used at any point, and the moderators disclosed the purpose of the interviews/focus group and how the information the participants provided would be used. The MC staff took detailed notes which were later compiled and transcribed for analysis.

Facilitation

MC staff moderated the discussions and solicited responses from each participant using open-ended interview protocol. The MC staff was fluent in English and Spanish, but there was no request to interpret any of the questions as all participants were fluent English speakers.

Analysis

To begin the data analysis process, facilitators transcribed the notes from all note-takers, tallied responses on ranking questions, and conducted a preliminary review of the overall discussions. A preliminary analysis provided a general understanding of the data, and the facilitators then reflected on its meaning. An individual summary was drafted for that analyzed major themes. These themes or key findings helped determine the interconnectedness of issues and explain the differences in responses to some items. The themes were then turned into key findings, which were then turned into recommendations.

Limitations

The research described in this report relies on qualitative data from various interviews and one focus group. There are certain limitations pertaining to this method of data collection. First and foremost, the results may not be representative of the larger special needs population, or of specific groups. Participants are self-selected and study results are therefore harder to generalize to the larger special needs population. Secondly, some people may not wish to publicly share their views on sensitive topics. Therefore, complete disclosure of all participants knowledge and views cannot be ascertained from their answers. However, a major advantage of the interview and focus group method is that it yields rich qualitative information about experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. It also allows participants to share ideas and suggestions. Some of the specific limitations discussed in this section relate to quantitative data and types of special needs.

Quantitative Data

Much of the information collected was through qualitative methods. Of the data that was quantitative, there were rich pieces of information collected. However, some agencies do not track data by zip codes or specific communities (for instance Special Transportation Services and Vocational Rehabilitation). Moreover, to protect individual privacy, some information could not be disclosed (for instance, the types of disabilities present at each local school and the number of students attending Broward private schools via the McKay scholarship.) Therefore, it is difficult to measure some of the needs of those who are using these services.

Types of Special Needs and Participants

Altogether, there were 16 types of special needs/disabilities that were discussed in the interviews and focus group. However, the majority discussed youth and young adults with special needs. There was little focus on middle age and older adults with special needs. There were also few participants who had special needs who signed up for the interviews and focus group (7 out of the 45 total participants). While their views echoed those of the numerous parents, caregivers, medical providers, business owners, and more, it may have benefited the study to get more feedback directly from individuals with special needs.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Miami Lakes Special Needs Assessment – Interview Questions

Hello. We are researchers with Florida International University's Jorge M. Perez Metropolitan Center and we are studying the needs of people living with disabilities/ the special needs community in the Town of Miami lakes. Disabilities/special needs can mean many different things to different people including the medical community, government agencies, advocates, and others. For the purposes of this study, when we refer to the special needs community, we are using the definition used by the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health* (ICF), which considers disabilities as "an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions." This definition incorporates disabilities that are of communicative, physical and cognitive characteristics. The purpose of our study is to understand the challenges, current efforts, and opportunities that exist within the Town of Miami lakes for the special needs community.

1. What does inclusion mean to you?
2. What does the special needs community mean to you?
3. What is your experience with the special needs community in Miami Lakes?
4. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was adopted almost 30 years ago. It prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life (schools, jobs, transportation, and all areas open to the public) to make sure that people living with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as others.
 - a. Do you believe the ADA has been effective for the local special needs community?
 - b. If not, what improvements can be made?
 - c. Do local schools, employers, businesses, etc. operate within the spirit of the law?
5. Do you know of any local policies and programs that have proven effective in increasing inclusion of and improving the quality of life for the special needs community?
6. What are some unique financial challenges faced by people with special needs, particularly those who rely on government assistance? How can they be overcome?
7. Few individuals with special needs are employed. How can this be address in the Town of Miami Lakes?
 - a. What kind of services?
 - b. What kind of resources?
8. What are the needs for this community in regards to social and recreational activities?
 - a. What services can be provided by the Town?
9. What are the mental health challenges for the special needs community, if any? (can include caregivers and parents)
10. What are the biggest quality of life challenges that these individuals encounter in Miami Lakes?
11. How can Miami Lakes improve the access to life improvement activities for the special needs community?
12. Services for those with special needs tends to be fragmented. How can the community better integrate services for people with special needs? (medical providers, educators, business owners, the town, the county)

Appendix B: Focus Group Script

Miami Lakes Special Needs Blueprint – Focus Group Script

I. Introduction

Hello. Thank you all for coming this evening. We are researchers with Florida International University's Jorge M. Perez Metropolitan Center and we are studying the needs of people living with disabilities/ the special needs community in the Town of Miami lakes. The Town of Miami Lakes is funding this study to understand how it can better meet the needs of the community. Disabilities/special needs can mean many different things to different people including the medical community, government agencies, advocates, and others.

For the purposes of this study, when we refer to the special needs community, we are using the disabilities definition used by the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health* (ICF), which considers disabilities as “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.” This definition incorporates disabilities that are of communicative, physical and cognitive characteristics. They may range from low to severe and anywhere in between. The purpose of our study is to understand the challenges, current efforts, and opportunities that exist within the Town of Miami lakes for the special needs community.

We will be taking notes on the things you share today, but they will be anonymous and will only serve as a reference as we write our report on the needs of the community. This evening, the goal is not to agree with one another. If you disagree with something that is being shared, it is important for us to hear your perspective because you may represent a lot of people. Similarly, if you agree with something that is being said, we would like to hear that too. I am here to listen to you and encourage conversation.

Before we get started, please turn off your cell phone or switch it to silent mode so we can be respectful of each other's time and the discussion.

Let's start by introducing ourselves to each other. Please tell us: (1) your first name, (2) how long you have lived in this area, (3) what brought you here this evening.

I'll go first. [Moderator introduces self]. Thank you all, I am glad to meet you. Let's begin the discussion.

II. Inclusion and Experiences

I'd like to start by discussion the idea of inclusion. Inclusion means many different things to different people.

1. When I say the word inclusion, what comes to mind?
2. The Town of Miami Lakes created the Special Needs Committee in 2011. It was dormant for some years but returned recently in 2018 and became the Special Needs Advisory Board. Some of you here tonight are members of the board. The board's mission is to create a model town for inclusion.
 - o How many of you are board members by show of hands?
 - o For everyone: what does being a model town for inclusion mean?
3. When we talk about the special needs community, should it be all-encompassing or should we break it down into specific groups?
 - o For instance based on age, location, type of disability
4. What types of disabilities/special needs are present in the town?
 - o Which group is most underserved?
5. The Census estimates that about 2,500 people live with disabilities in the Town of Miami Lakes. Would you say that this number is low, about right, or high?
6. **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was adopted almost 30 years ago. It prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life (schools, jobs,**

transportation, and all areas open to the public) to make sure that people living with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as others.

- How can ADA be enhanced with local support?
- 7. What are some unique financial challenges faced by people with special needs, particularly those who rely on government assistance?
 - How many here are receiving assistance from government sources?
- 8. Are more resources spent on a particular disability or age group?

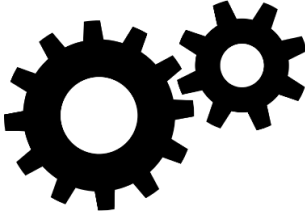


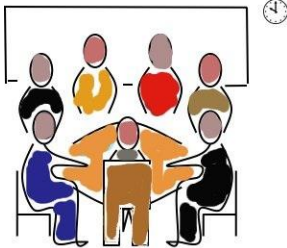



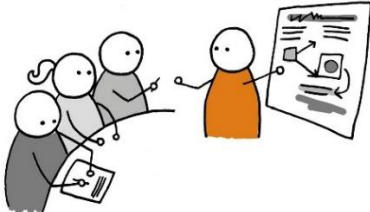

III. Services

Now, let's discuss services. As we mentioned before, special needs can range from low to severe and not everyone has the same needs. Some individuals may have the ability to live independently, some individuals may require low levels of support, others require moderate supervision, and some individuals may need 24/7 supervision and support.

1. If you had to choose two dominant quality of life challenges for the special needs community, what would those be within the Town? Remember, these can all be different depending on the disabilities you are identifying.
 - *Transportation*
 - *Employment*
 - *Access to parks and recreation*
 - *Entertainment (movies, etc.)*
 - *Healthcare*
 - *Independence*
 - *Housing*
2. The special needs community faces myriad mental and physical challenges. How does the system for medical care work for these individuals?
3. Few individuals with special needs are employed. Those that are employed, tend to have lower earnings than those without special needs. Is it the responsibility of the Town to address employment needs? What is the role of the Town?
 - *What kind of services?*
 - *What kind of resources?*
4. What kind of a support system can address the special needs community's need for social and recreational activities?
 - What are the needs?
 - What services can be provided by the Town?
5. Throughout our interviews, we have learned that services for those with special needs tends to be fragmented.
 - Would you agree?
 - i. If So, how can it be corrected?
 - Who should take responsibility for integration of services?
 - What agencies exist?
 - If agencies currently exist, is an overhaul needed?

As I mentioned, we have interviewed other key stakeholders of the community and residents. So far, they have mentioned a few recommendations for the Town to consider for the special needs community. We have brought a worksheet that lists these recommendations so we can discuss. **[Pass out handout. Discuss the top priority items and items of least priority.]**

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. It has been a pleasure to speak with you all and receive your valuable input. This concludes our discussion.

<p>Integrated services (one-stop shop for services, a website, a coordinator of services)</p> 	<p>Workshops open to the community (emotional intelligence, empathy, autism workshops for businesses, everyday needs like home chores, cultural sensitivity)</p> 	<p>Day center for adults with severe needs</p> 
<p>Support Groups (for caregivers/adults, high-functioning individuals with disabilities, and lower functioning individuals with disabilities)</p> 	<p>Social and recreational programs for adults with special needs</p> 	<p>More accommodations (physical access to buildings, more parking spaces for special needs, sign-language interpretation at events, wheelchair availability at events)</p> 
<p>Community awareness of special needs and accommodations</p> 	<p>Training for Miami Lakes officials/staff/first responders</p> 	<p>After-school/ weekend program for life and job skills</p> 

ARE YOU A...



Medical Provider **Business Owner** **Educator**

*Do you have experience serving individuals with special needs/disabilities?
Participate and provide feedback in our upcoming community discussion!*

The Town of Miami Lakes, in partnership with the Jorge M. Pérez Metropolitan Center, is conducting a needs assessment for individuals with special need. To register to be part of our assessment, or for more information, please email hroldan@fiu.edu or call (954) 438-8656.

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IF YOU...



live with disabilities or are a caregiver to an individual living with disabilities.



Participate and provide feedback in our upcoming community discussion!

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