

ISLAMORADA GIVES \$50,000 TO HELP COVER KEYS AHEC'S BUDGET SHORTFALL FROM NO STATE FUNDING

By **Jim McCarthy** - June 29, 2022



AHEC CEO Michael Cunningham inside the new dental van during a ribbon-cutting at Key Largo School in January. KEYS WEEKLY FILE PHOTO

During a June 23 meeting, Islamorada Village Council members unanimously approved a \$50,000 request by Keys AHEC for health and dental services to medically vulnerable and underserved children. It comes after a \$650,000 request to the state legislature was left out of the approved budget, leaving the organization with no choice but to raise money or forgo providing vital services.

But thanks to local organizations and municipalities, the majority of the shortfall is covered, keeping health centers open and a new dental van traversing the Keys to various schools in order to provide cleanings and screenings. Michael Cunningham, CEO of AHEC, told the dais on June 23 that village funds will help meet a matching requirement from the Ocean Reef Community Foundation to obtain \$150,000.

"The impact this has literally means that we'd be closing down health centers, and nurse practitioners won't be working and dentists won't be working in some sort of capacity," Cunningham said before the dais made its decision.

Cunningham said funds will be used for medical and dental staff serving the three Upper Keys Schools.

Vice Mayor Henry Rosenthal proposed the village provide \$50,000, which is similar to the funds it provided I.CARE for coral restoration several months ago.

"It's a very important undertaking. Nobody can deny that," Rosenthal said before issuing a motion.

Keys AHEC received state funding for the past eight years. A funding request was filed by state Rep. Jim Mooney last November. It was reported favorably out of the House Health Care Appropriations Subcommittee in mid-January. But it didn't garner any movement after that. AHEC hired the lobbyist firm Metz Husband & Daughton to help secure the funding. AHEC has since gone with a new lobbyist firm in Johnson & Stewart Government Strategies.

Islamorada joins a list of organizations providing funds to cover the shortfall. They include the cities of Key West and Marathon, Health Foundation of South Florida, Monroe County's Human Services Advisory Board, Ocean Reef Community Foundation, Ocean Reef Children's Foundation, Monroe County School District, an anonymous donor, United Way of Collier and the Keys, Edward B. and Joan T. Knight Foundation, Monroe County Sheriff's Office, Florida Health Department of Monroe County, Florida Blue, Baptist Health South Florida, Florida Association of Free Charitable Clinics, Marathon Rotary, Key West Rotary and Golden Fleece Foundation.

JIM MCCARTHY

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Jim McCarthy is a northerner who escaped the snow and frigid temperatures for warm living by the water. A former crime & court reporter and city editor for two Western New York newspapers, Jim has been honing his craft since his graduation from St. Bonaventure University in 2014. In his 3 years in the Keys, Jim has enjoyed connecting with the community. "One of my college professors would always preach to be curious," he said. "Behind every person is a story that's unique to them, and one worth telling. Behind every community is resiliency and resolve in difficult times. As writers, we are the ones who paint the pictures in the readers minds of the emotions, the struggles and the triumphs." Jim serves as President of the Key Largo Sunset Rotary Club, which is composed of energetic members who serve the community's youth and older populations. "It's a group that lives by the motto 'Service Above Self,'" he says. "We've done service projects at the Tavernier nursing home, sitting down and socializing with residents. "We've also supplied cameras to young students exploring the Keys ecosystem." Jim loves sports, family and time exploring underneath the water depths.

