

Job creation lacking; grant return requested

By Maria Perez

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The Immokalee Community Redevelopment Agency expects to have to return \$268,901 in federal grant money the agency received to run a business development center.

Although the center helped small local businesses, it failed to help create seven full-time permanent jobs for residents with low and moderate income, as required in the two grant agree-

The Immokalee Community Redevelopment Agency said some jobs were created, but HUD said the agency has not demonstrated five long-term jobs were created for the first grant, as required.

ments that funded the center during its first years, according to Collier County Community and Human Services Division.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is

requesting the money back from the county, which oversees the program and passes the aid on to the Immokalee agency.

County officials will recommend to commissioners at their

Tuesday meeting that the county pay back the HUD money the county already has drawn and ask the Immokalee agency to repay the county in installments of at least \$30,000 per year.

The CRA got a \$212,000 Community Development Block Grant from HUD in 2010 to pay to start the business development center in Immokalee.

In 2012, the agency received another grant, worth \$61,087, to pay for the salary of a key employee at the business develop-

ment center.

The agency said some jobs were created, but HUD said the agency has not demonstrated five permanent — as opposed to temporary or seasonal — jobs were created for the first grant, as required.

HUD said the county could not add more than two part-time construction workers to meet the full-time employment requirement.

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Sights, sounds, tastes of India

By Kelly Farrell

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Naples India Fest offered a blast of colors, music and fragrant foods Saturday to almost 1,800 visitors at Fleischmann Park.

The fifth annual India Fest attracted the most attendees ever.

Performers took to the stage with skits and dances highlighting a year's worth of India's most celebrated festivals all in one day.

"Last year, we had about 1,200 people. We've had between 1,700 and 1,800 today. This is even better than expected," said Chetan Dihenia, past president of the India Association of Naples.

MORE VENDORS, TOO

This year's event attracted twice as many vendors as the previous year's, including a photo booth for trying on bright Indian fashions, a restaurant from as far away as Tampa, Mayuri Indian Restaurant, and a sari vendor from Miami, Rupees Sarees, among about 25 other art, fashion and food vendors from Naples and Fort Myers.

Several Indian-Americans appeared stoic as they meandered through the crowds in 80-plus-degree heat wrapped in yards of fabric, called saris, or other warm traditional Indian garb. Others wore more Westernized clothes.

Many visitors, including vacationers from Northern states, said it was their first experience of Indian culture beyond a taste of curry.

SMALL LOCAL POPULATION

The India Association of Naples estimates there are about 250 Indian-American families living in the Naples area, and the festival allowed new and young members a chance to meet each other and learn about their heritage.

Non-Indians got an opportunity to learn more about the culture from about 70 volunteer participants.

Neha Kejriwah, 29, of Naples, offered orange or red tikkas, or dots of powdered color placed between the eyebrows, as a welcome to guests as they arrived. Even dogs weren't

See INDIA FEST, 9A

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Subscribers can see a video and more photos of Naples India Fest.



ABOVE: Sandra Jose, 10, center, dances a traditional Diwali dance Saturday at Naples India Fest at Fleischmann Park.

LEFT: Julia Jose, of Naples, performs a traditional prayer dance Saturday at India Fest.

DAVID ALBERS/STAFF (2)

Special Olympics Athletes compete, with pals at their sides

By Melhor Marie Leonor

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In the 3,000-meter race, Stephanie Pappas and Alex Avery run shoulder to shoulder.

From the sidelines, it looks as if they're racing against each other, until you hear Alex say, "Speed up," or "Stay with me."

Attentive, Stephanie follows.

The dynamic — a student with special needs and one without competing together — was replicated throughout the field Saturday at the Area 9 Special Olympics at Golden Gate High School.

"Every once in a while, you encourage your partner as you would from the sidelines," said Alex, 16, a junior at Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers.

300 ATHLETES

Alex and Stephanie have been training together since January for Saturday's event, which was hosted by the Collier County chapter and welcomed about 300 athletes from Lee, Charlotte, Manatee and Sarasota counties for track and field, tennis, cycling and soccer.

"It keeps me faster," Stephanie, 21, said.

'UNIFIED' EVENTS

In almost every sport, "unified" events brought athletes with and without special needs to compete side by side. It is the result of a heightened push by local and national organizers to create a culture

See OLYMPICS, 16A

“They get to feel a part of their high school.”

Kelly Stevenson-Crews, who teaches special-needs students at Immokalee and oversees "Project Unify" at the school

Human trafficking expands beyond immigrants, young people and sexual work

Accounts earlier this month of a sex trafficking ring operating in Southwest Florida described a problem firmly rooted in the Hispanic community.

Victims brought into the U.S. illegally, held captive by Hispanic traffickers. Language barriers, a fear of deportation and a distrust of authorities all conspiring to keep the victims from accessing help.

But victim advocates say they have seen a shift



BRENT BATTEN

OPINION

in the nature of human trafficking in the region.

Operations such as the one uncovered through a two-year investigation in Collier, Lee, Hendry, Polk

and Miami-Dade counties still exist, as evidenced by the arrests of 15 people and the rescues of six victims who were brought to the U.S. illegally. But no longer is the crime confined to the immigrant community, according to advocates who routinely work with sex trafficking victims.

Over the past several years, more and more victims are women who were born in the U.S., they say. "When we first started

in 2004-2005, we saw almost all the victims were foreign-born," said Nola Theiss, executive director of the Human Trafficking Awareness Partnership in Fort Myers.

"Now a lot of the victims are our own children," Theiss said. "Traffickers realize it's cheaper to get someone who's already here than paying to smuggle them into the country."

Linda Oberhaus, executive director of the Shelter

for Abused Women and Children in Collier County, has seen the same thing.

"People seem to think it's international," she said. "When I first saw the story, I thought, 'That's going to perpetuate the stereotype (that human trafficking is isolated to the immigrant community),' " Oberhaus said.

But at the shelter, which has served more than two dozen victims of sex trafficking in the past few

years, the majority of victims are women from the United States.

About 17 percent of the cases originated in Collier County, 25 percent originated elsewhere in Florida, 50 percent elsewhere in the United States and only 7 percent were international cases, Oberhaus said.

"It hasn't always been that way," Oberhaus said.

See BATTEN, 16A

REPAY AID

from 7A

The Collier County Community and Human Services Division concluded that the CRA also couldn't demonstrate that it created two permanent, full-time jobs with the second grant.

The CRA sent periodic reports about its work with local businesses, and the Collier Community and Human Services Division and the Collier County Clerk of Court's Office approved using the grant money to refund the CRA's expenses.

The first questions about the CRA's documentation were raised at the end of 2012. The clerk's finance department, which approves the release of federal grant money, raised questions then about the backup documentation, said Kimberley Grant, Collier's housing department director in July. Since then, the agency has tried to gather documentation to prove the creation of the jobs.

The positions the business development center said were created include: the owner and an employee of a cleaning company, the president of a barbecue catering business, several jobs at a construction company and the president and an employee of a day care, according to county records.

Marie Capita, who directed the center while it operated under the umbrella of the Immokalee agency and during a several months after it became independent in August, declined to comment.

Bradley Muckel, the CRA's interim director since February 2013, could not be reached for comment, but he said in a letter to the Collier Community and Human Services Division in June 2014 that the CRA staff helped create more than five full-time jobs with the first grant.

He cited changing levels of scrutiny and changing technical guidance from the county over the life of the grant.

Grant said her department provided many hours of assistance to the Immokalee agency and scrutiny consistent with the type of grant.

Frank Nappo, member of the CRA advisory board, said Capita helped businesses to create jobs, but he doesn't think anyone understood the jobs had to be sustainable for two years, and then they couldn't prove the new jobs complied with that.

"Job creation is a very difficult thing to do and to measure long term," he said.



MELHOR LEONOR/STAFF

Joey Galagher, 11, gets ready for the 100-meter sprint. In the background, his mom, Caryn, cheers, "Joey, Joey, Guacamole!"

OLYMPICS

from 7A

of inclusion for special-needs individuals among the rest of their peers.

The movement is taking shape at many Collier schools, starting with Immokalee High.

Kelly Stevenson-Crews teaches special-needs students at Immokalee and oversees "Project Unify" at the school. Through the program, she coaches unified soccer, track and field and flag football.

"For soccer and flag football, you always have to have three athletes with special needs, and two 'unified partners,'" she said.

The results, she said, go beyond a good time on the field.

"For athletes with special needs, it builds their sense of community. They get to feel a part of their high school because they are playing for Immokalee High," Stevenson-Crews said.

Students without a disability become leaders exemplifying acceptance.

"It's a win-win," she said.

The push goes beyond schools, as many Special Olympics athletes are beyond school age.

Luis Amico, 28, and John Luchansky, 54, demonstrated the dynamic on the tennis court Saturday.

Amico and Luchansky have been playing doubles for two years. The duo competes against another pair made up of one special-needs athlete and a "unified partner."

"During training, I help him with strategy. I try to give him some instruction," said Luchansky, of Amico, who has a learning disability. "When we're competing, I just treat Luis as my doubles partner."

As they hit the yellow tennis ball back and forth across the net, Luchansky sounds like a hybrid of coach, tennis partner and friend.

"Come on Luis," he said throughout the game.

When the game ends — they were defeated in an exhibition match — Amico rushes for a drink.

"I always enjoy playing this game," he said.

Luchansky also coaches uni-

fied basketball and flag football, and says that in practice, it's a win for everyone involved.

"It gives the athlete a sense of being a little more competitive," he said.

Saturday's event attracted 150 volunteers and 17 unified partners. Organizers say they hope that inclusion in their sporting events will attract more people to participate in Special Olympics events and foster more acceptance for individuals with disabilities.

"It makes our events much bigger," Collier County Special Olympics Director David McKenzie said. "There's more competition, more friendships."

Special Olympics is a non-profit founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968 in an effort to provide year-round sports training and athletic competitions in Olympic-type sports for those 8 years old and older with intellectual disabilities.

STATE EVENT

Winners in each sporting event will move on to the state competition, which will feature more than 3,000 athletes, May 15-17 in Orlando.

BATTEN

from 7A

"It's flip-flopped. Since 2010, it's been largely domestic victims of human trafficking."

She agrees with the assessment that traffickers find it's cheaper to exploit victims already here.

"Traffickers know what to look for. They're not looking for bright, college-bound girls. They're looking for girls with vulnerabilities," she said.

Young women who have been abused, run away from home, have addictions or mental health issues are prime targets for traffickers.

"There are so many vulnerable people walking among us," Oberhaus said.

"There are a lot of ways victims can be manipulated by the traffickers," Theiss said.

Anna Rodriguez, founder of the Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking, cautions that other stereotypes about human trafficking don't always bear out in real life.

Victims aren't always young.

"Everybody has concentrated so much on the minors," Rodriguez said. "There's very little services for the adult victims."

And while sex trafficking grabs headlines and turns stomachs, most victims of human trafficking are forced into other types of labor, including in the hotel, restaurant and construction industries, Rodriguez said.

Theiss said traffickers share common traits.

"They're evil people who are looking for victims because every victim brings them money. They don't care about the well-being of the victims."

The recent case in Southwest Florida, while not necessarily indicative of the trends the advocates are seeing, can elevate awareness of the problem, Theiss said.

"This is a prime time to teach people about human trafficking. People need to know," she said.

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