The challenges of addressing health care for the poor in Florida remains an ongoing, chronic problem. Basic to the economic issues associated with health care for the poor are the stressors of human health caused by environmental degradation, often accentuated in metropolitan areas (Dadvand et al., 2013).

The societal services provided by healthy, well-managed urban forest are far-reaching and extensively documented. More than 40 years of research across a range of disciplines demonstrates many health and well-being services between people and the environment (Jackson, 2012). Research concerning the beneficial aspects of nature on human health has significant implications for cost effective approaches to the maintenance of human health and related reduction of health care costs (St Leger, 2013).

Using the EPA Environmental Benefits Mapping and Analysis Program (BenMAP) University of Florida researchers estimated the health impacts and associated economic benefits occurring when populations experience changes in air quality due to the urban forest. In 2011, reduced health impacts and economic benefits for Hillsborough County amounted to nearly $30 million per year. The City of Tampa experiences a total of $5,240,340 in reduced health impacts and economic benefits per year (Andreu et al. 2013). These health related economic benefits are in addition to the reduction in cooling costs, increased property values, increased tax base, and amelioration of stormwater water quality and flows.

The considerable body of evidence that demonstrates a positive correlation between human health and nature in our metropolitan regions emphasizes the need to be vigilant in ensuring that parks and other semi-natural areas can be easily accessed by our citizens. To support these interactions with nature, urban conservation will need to take a more prominent position in land use decisions and health promotion policy development. Active planning and design to enhance human health and well-being benefits derived from urban forests can create places that provide better human habitat, reduce government health costs and encourage targeted economic growth.

The University of Florida offers a variety of programs and services to help municipal and county and city governments in the restoration and management of urban forests and associated natural resources that support human health and well-being. Programs include technical/professional training on tree care and horticulture for park staff, as well as urban lawn, garden and tree care classes for citizens through the Master Gardener Program and the Florida Friendly Landscapes Program. Services vary by county but may include one on one consultation with private citizens and public agencies, and expert assistance with the development of comprehensive urban forest and natural resource management plans.


(For more information contact your local Extension office)

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