

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Early Steps Marks 25 Years of Developmental Intervention

PENSACOLA, Fla. — In 1993, Pensacola's Irma Cofield was one of the first family resource specialists hired for the state of Florida's newly established "Early Steps" program for children with developmental delays. Now, as Early Steps celebrates its 25th anniversary, Cofield continues to serve as a family resource specialist for the state-funded program, run in Northwest Florida by The Studer Family Children's Hospital at Sacred Heart.

Cofield knows well the struggles families face in caring for a child with developmental delays. Her own child, Ashley, was born with a congenital heart defect and developmental delays. Ashley went through early-intervention services, including speech and physical therapy from birth to age 3. Cofield credits Ashley's therapists with helping her progress developmentally and achieve milestones, such as sitting up at 14-months-old, that she wouldn't have otherwise in her nine-and-a-half years of life.

"My experience as Ashley's mom gave me the understanding of how parents feel," said Cofield. "The broken dreams, the fears and the joys of having a child with complex medical and developmental needs. There are many unique challenges that these families face, from stress on a marriage to the endless medical questions and concerns about the future."

Each year, the Western Panhandle Early Steps program at The Children's Hospital provides early intervention services to more than 800 children from birth to 3-years-old from Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton counties. Services are provided at no cost to families.

While each child grows at an individual pace, research shows that a child's first three years are the most important time for development. Beginning intervention services before age three provides children with the best opportunity to reach their full potential. The Early Steps team starts by evaluating each child's physical, cognitive, communication, social, emotional, adaptive and motor-skill development. Families are then paired with a service coordinator, family resource specialist and – if needed – a development specialist, occupational therapist, physical therapist or speech-language pathologist. Some services are provided in a family's home, and others are provided at Sacred Heart locations.

When Early Steps first launched, Cofield was the natural choice for the first family resource specialist. She knew many of the local families from classes and support groups she'd attended with her own daughter, and she found it easy to connect with other parents – parents like Tiffany Geri.

Geri's son, Joshua, was 1-year-old when a story about autism on Good Morning America caught Geri's attention. She said she knew instantly that this story explained issues she'd seen in her son, how Joshua never made eye contact, how he loved lining his toys up neatly, how he seemed to have trouble hearing, though audiology tests showed no issue.

Joshua began speech and occupational therapy, and the Geri family soon met Cofield and the Early Steps team.

"Joshua was so different from any other child I'd ever been around," said Geri. "We didn't know how to raise him, how to discipline him, how to interact with him, how to live with him. This team really taught us how to live and how to have a relationship with our son."

Decades later, Cofield remains close with Geri and Joshua. She says the biggest change her job has seen in 25 years has been with technology, which has helped her stay increasingly connected to Early Steps families through e-mail, e-newsletters and social media.

As the rate of children with autism and related disorders continues to rise, Geri and Cofield have provided encouragement to countless families.

"No matter the diagnosis, many parents come to Early Steps with the mindset that we need to fix their child. But our goal is very different," said Cofield. "We want to provide these families with the tools they need, so children can live life to the fullest potential."

For information about Early Steps, please call 850-416-7656 or visit earlystepsatsacredheart.org.

The Studer Family Children's Hospital at Sacred Heart is a 117-bed facility that serves as the only children's hospital in Northwest Florida. The Children's Hospital offers a wide range of services to meet all of a child's medical needs, from a pediatric emergency room and neonatal intensive care unit to a medical staff of more than 120 board-certified physicians across 30 pediatric specialties. The Children's Hospital provides quality, compassionate care to children, regardless of their parents' ability to pay. Sacred Heart Health System is a member of Ascension, the largest non-profit health system in the U.S. and the world's largest Catholic health system. For more information about the services available at The Studer Family Children's Hospital at Sacred Heart, visit StuderFamilyChildrensHospital.com.

About Sacred Heart Health System

In Florida, Ascension operates Sacred Heart Health System based in Pensacola and St. Vincent's HealthCare based in Jacksonville. Together, Ascension operates seven hospitals in Florida and more than 100 other sites of care, and they employ more than 10,000 associates. Across the region, Sacred Heart and St. Vincent's have served North Florida communities for more than 145 years. In fiscal year 2017, they provided \$168 million in community benefit and care of persons living in poverty. Ascension (www.ascension.org) is a faith-based healthcare organization dedicated to transformation through innovation across the continuum of care. As the largest non-profit health system in the U.S. and the world's largest Catholic health system, Ascension is committed to delivering compassionate, personalized care to all, with special attention to persons living in poverty and those most vulnerable.

Ascension includes approximately 156,000 associates and 34,000 aligned providers. Ascension's Healthcare Division operates more than 2,600 sites of care – including 151 hospitals and more than 50 senior living facilities – in 21 states and the District of Columbia, while its Solutions Division provides a variety of services and solutions including physician practice management, venture capital investing, investment management, biomedical engineering, facilities management, clinical care management, information services, risk management, and contracting through Ascension's own group purchasing organization. For more information on Sacred Heart Health System, visit www.sacred-heart.org.

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