



# Children's Home & Aid

## COVID-19 Response- Winter 2021 Update

### The Need

Since 1883, Children's Home & Aid has been meeting every child and family where their need is greatest and doing whatever it takes to help them thrive. Over the past year, we have seen firsthand the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the 30,000 children and families we partner with, many living in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the virus. The pandemic not only exacerbated the issues that our families already face—including poverty, chronic stress and mental health issues, and joblessness—but has layered on new challenges. As an agency, we are working with our families, communities, and advocates across the state to better address the many issues that have emerged and worsened due to the crisis:

- **Racial Disproportion:** Black Americans are twice as likely as White Americans to die of COVID-19; infection and death rates have disproportionately impacted many of the low income and communities of color we serve across Illinois, including Chicago, Rockford, and East St. Louis. Our families and staff have gone through the devastation of losing loved ones due to COVID.
- **Social Determinants of Health:** Our families continue to face intensifying challenges like access to quality health care (including COVID testing and vaccines), education, poor transportation, food deserts, and other pre-existing structural issues, which adversely shaped the social determinants of health in their communities.
- **Food Insecurity:** Food insecurity is rising rampantly. Feeding America estimated that nearly 800,000 people in Cook County in 2020 were food insecure, a 51% increase from 2018. Researchers predict food insecurity may impact over 40% of residents in Chicago's Englewood community, where we serve thousands of children and families.
- **Mental Health:** Existing stress, diminishing social supports, isolation, and state-wide school closures have all contributed to an increase in mental health issues among our youth and families. Over 40% of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety or depression last year; mental health issues continue to go untreated in under-resourced communities in Chicago, which face an ongoing shortage of community clinics and mental health resources.
- **Domestic Violence:** The Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline reported increased calls for help during 2020, receiving over 150 calls during its busiest days.

### Our Response

To address the complex issues faced by our families and communities, we are using a multipronged approach. First, we are meeting the immediate crisis needs for food and other essential goods that have resulted from the economic strain caused by COVID-19. Second, we are providing virtual and safe in-person services when possible to continue the long-term work of strengthening children and families through mental health services, quality early education, violence intervention, and preventative family support programs like home visiting. Finally, we must, together with the families we serve, continue to advocate, innovate, and lead the call for better public policies and practices that are rooted in equity given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on black and brown communities.



**Addressing Critical Needs:** Since the start of the pandemic, we have helped at least **4,000 families meet basic needs** including food, cleaning supplies, education kits, and PPE. We've helped more than **1,000 families stay connected** in rural and city neighborhoods with tablets and internet hotspots. Additionally, we provided direct financial assistance to more than **400 families in order to meet rent and utility bills** in the face of



unemployment and rising poverty. We set up distribution hubs to provide food and other essential goods for our families at familiar and accessible sites including our early childhood centers and crisis nurseries. We are also delivering essential items to youth and families that do not have the ability to reach these hubs. We continue to work with community partners and donors to ensure we can restock the highest need items and link families to other resources such as food banks.

**Continued Virtual and In Person Programming:** Children’s Home & Aid’s essential sites, including our Rice Child + Family Center in Evanston, our crisis nurseries in Bloomington and Rockford, and

foster care have remained opened throughout the pandemic. Our five early childhood centers were able to re-open to the public in late July with the highest level of safety precautions. However, most of our offices and program sites have remained closed for regular business and most other programming has continued on virtual platforms. Below are updates for several key program areas:

### Early Childhood and Home Visiting

- Continuing to **serve over 1,000 children 0-5 and their families** across five early childhood centers.
- Center-based programming reopened in late July 2020; reopening plan was designed in partnership with our families, health and education experts, and community leaders.
- Class-room capacity limited to 15 children (20 children pre COVID)
- Increased cleaning and safety procedures for children and staff in place (mask-wearing for children over 2, PPE, increased outdoor play, etc.)
- Remote learning option available for families not comfortable or able to return to center programming.
- Enhanced mental health support for parents experiencing increased trauma and stress from issues like unemployment, loss of loved ones to COVID, and unstable housing.
- Home Visiting and Doula programs continue to support families with young children and pregnant moms, who suddenly faced the possibility of delivering babies with no support person to be with them during their labor and delivery. Workers have attended births virtually, using iPads and FaceTime to be with moms so they wouldn’t go through the experience alone.



### Behavioral Health and Violence Prevention

- Continuing to serve **over 200 youth through school and community-based mental health services via telehealth platforms** through our partnership with Chicago Public Schools and other community agencies
- As schools have gradually reopened, some are allowing our therapists back in for in-person sessions while others are continuing virtually; we continue to work with CPS and school partners to best support our youth.
- Choose to Change youth violence prevention programming is currently serving 128 youth through virtual platforms for mentoring and group therapy; CPS reports that youth have engaged at higher levels with Choose to Change programming as compared to other services on their platform.
- Last summer some Choose to Change youth participated in the “You Are Not Alone” project, which paired youth and seniors and gave youth the opportunity to create and record a memoir of the senior’s life virtually.
- Behavioral Health staff continue to deliver groceries and help families stay connected and understand how to use telehealth platforms safely in a time of increased stress and mental health needs.

## Crisis Nurseries

- Both MotherHouse Crisis Nursery in Rockford and Bloomington Crisis Nursery remained open to provide emergency childcare and support services for families in crisis, **reaching nearly 300 children and their families facing homelessness, mental health issues, domestic violence, and other emergencies.**
- Nurseries report a sharp rise in calls for help with essential goods, especially infant supplies like formula, diapers, and wipes. **On one day alone MotherHouse received 110 calls** for help from the community.

## Foster Care Programs and the Rice Child + Family Center

- Continuing to serve **over 1,000 children in foster care** statewide
- The child welfare system overall faces delays in finding foster placements and/or returning children to their families, including lag times in the court system due to COVID restrictions.
- Our **Rice Child + Family therapeutic residential center remained open to serve the approximately 30 children residing there** at any given time throughout the pandemic.
- Rice has experienced periodic quarantines over the past year due to staff and resident positive cases.
- With support from donors, we were able to provide extra treats, such as games, art kits and electronics, that help children cope with being isolated from school and peers.
- Rice staff were creative in helping children learn and heal through the pandemic. Piven Theatre offered virtual hip-hop and improv classes to Rice children. The children also participated in woodworking classes where they learned how to use tools and built creative new projects for their living units such as a life-size Jenga set. At Halloween Rice held outdoor “trunk-or-treating” and a decorating contest at the holidays.
- Some normalcy is returning as the on-site Rice school recently reopened for in person learning.



**Making the Holidays Bright:** In 2020 our annual **Chicago Metro Holiday Gift Drive** went virtual, using donations to purchase gift cards for families for the holidays. Gift cards supported caregivers to use as needed—be it to put groceries on the table, to buy warm winter clothing, or to buy gifts for their children. An astonishing **\$146,000 dollars was raised to support more than 2,200 kids and families** in need. Additional funds raised through the holidays helped establish an **Emergency Assistance Fund**, which will allow Children’s Home & Aid to support families throughout 2021.



## Call to Action

Children’s Home & Aid pivoted all in-person fundraising events from March 2020 through now to virtual platforms. In 2021 our Champions for Children Luncheon, the largest source of general operating support for the agency, will be replaced by our new virtual symposium **“Breaking Barriers. Centering Families. Transforming Systems,”** an afternoon of meaningful conversation and collaborative learning. This June 8<sup>th</sup> event will explore the existing child welfare system, and what it will take to create a child and family well-being system that centers efforts on racial equity and on the voice of those most impacted as a root source of knowledge.

While the increased rollout of vaccinations is providing hope for a COVID-19 free future, the pandemic’s impact over the past year will be lasting even as we move into recovery and beyond. Children and families have experienced unimaginable loss that has impacted nearly every facet of their livelihood, and Children’s Home & Aid will remain dedicated to pursuing an aggressive resource development plan to continue supporting children and families now and well into recovery efforts. Now more than ever, funding is needed to maintain and expand our ongoing programs to ensure our families continue to receive the best possible care.