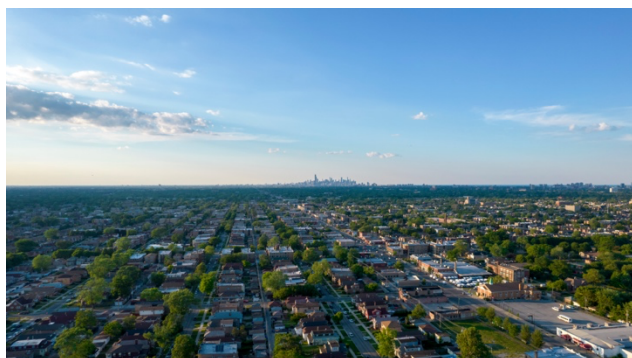


Spotlight on Greater Englewood's Home Visiting and Community Response to COVID-19

Erin Bultinck, Katy Falletta, and Jessica Goldberg



Aerial view of Chicago.

As part of the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Health Equity COVID Response Project, our team identified a subset of counties across the United States with disproportionate COVID-19 impacts that are served by MIECHV-funded evidence-based home visiting programs. Using a range of social determinants of health data, COVID-19 outcomes, and demographic characteristics, we identified 70 counties across the United States that were especially vulnerable to disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and challenges related to social determinants of health. The project team, in partnership with the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), further narrowed this list down to select five communities to engage in a case study.

As a result of this process, Cook County, IL— and specifically the Greater Englewood neighborhood of Englewood and West Englewood— was selected as a case study community. Once Englewood was selected, our team began reviewing policies and news articles to see how the community responded to the pandemic. We partnered with the MIECHV-funded home visiting program Parents as Teachers (PAT), housed in multi-service center [Family Focus Englewood](#), to learn more about the community, plan for a site visit, and identify key leaders in Greater Englewood and

What is home visiting?

Home visiting is a voluntary support provided to pregnant people and new parents. Providers regularly come to the family and provide information about prenatal and early childhood care and general socioemotional support. Home visiting aims to meet families where they're at and provide support where families say they need it. Home visitors are often connected to an extensive network of community supports and are seen as a trustworthy source of information.

The MIECHV Program.

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), administers home visiting through the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. MIECHV aims to provide support specifically to families and children who live in communities that face greater barriers to achieving positive maternal and child health outcomes.

MIECHV Health Equity COVID Response Project.

This project examined how lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic in communities with MIECHV-funded home visiting programs can help us understand the role home visiting plays in advancing health equity. All of the case study profiles produced through this work are available [here](#).

across Illinois to interview for greater context. To support a community-engaged approach, a local community member was hired as a community researcher to assist with on the ground recruitment and to provide the project team with information about the community. The project team was also advised by a board consisting of MIECHV awardees, equity experts, COVID-19 researchers, and parents/families.

Our project team visited Englewood from May 28-29, 2023. During the site visit we conducted focus groups with home visitors and community service providers, toured Family Focus Englewood, and worked with our community researcher, PAT supervisor Bella Mucino, to learn more about the program and the Englewood community. This profile reflects what we learned during these activities, and from virtual focus groups with families.



A mural by local South Side artist Max Sansing, located at the Sweet Water Foundation's Think-Do House in Englewood.

Welcome to Greater Englewood on Chicago's South Side!

Located on the shore of Lake Michigan, Chicago is the third largest city in the United States and is home to nearly 3 million people living in 50 wards and 100 neighborhoods. The Greater Englewood neighborhood, comprising Englewood and West Englewood, is located in the city's Southwest Side.

Chicago's South Side is famous (and infamous) around the world. It's the home of the Chicago White Sox, the amazing Museum of Science and Industry, and the University of Chicago. It's the birthplace of First Lady Michelle Obama and the future site of the Obama Presidential Center. The South Side also is frequently invoked as a symbol of American urban gun violence—and while it is true that a history of segregation, economic disenfranchisement, and a host of racial inequities have contributed to higher violent crime rates in this neighborhood, it is also true that media portrayals have perpetuated a



reputation of Chicago violence that is worse than the reality.¹

Interestingly enough, none of the people we spoke with in Englewood mentioned crime or safety as a main concern. When we asked participants to describe Englewood, most described a warm and vital community, a place where people work, take care of young children, go to the park, shop for groceries, and live their lives like in most communities. It's "very active," one parent said; another described Englewood as "unique." A home visitor who works there explained, "Everyone is warming, is welcoming. I think it's resourceful in a sense, going into different parts of Englewood and West Englewood... Overall the participants, the families, the community, I think they're really watchful and they can welcome you."

Located in the heart of the community, [Family Focus Englewood](#) is one of many organizations working to promote well-being and improve outcomes for residents there. It is a multi-service site that serves families in the Greater Englewood area and those from the nearby Auburn Gresham, Chicago Lawn, Washington Heights, New City, Chatham, and Woodlawn neighborhoods. Family Focus services include after-school programs, doulas, home visiting (using the Parents As Teachers model), family advocacy centers, a fatherhood program, and therapy for children and families. The organization also brings together parents across programs for monthly parent groups, which function as a "bonding experience" for participants. One PAT home visitor described the dynamic among Family Focus staff and families: "[t]hey're always willing to help one another. And I love that. They don't gatekeep [or] keep information from one another." Another described the organization, saying, "Family Focus means community, too. When you think about community, you think about Family Focus."



Family Focus Englewood entrance

Spotlight on Miss Sheree Davis

Miss Sheree is a mainstay of Family Focus Englewood and the Englewood community. She has lived in Englewood her whole life and worked at the organization for more than 30 years in various roles, including as a doula and home visitor, and worked in the afterschool program. She described the impact of her involvement with Family Focus saying,

"I came in as a participant. I didn't know anything about Family Focus or of the programs or anything. I was a young mother and this was my fourth child... They came in and they did parent and child activities and they asked you 'What are your goals? What do you want?' And I told them I need to get out of this house... and before I knew it, someone called me from the agency and said, 'Come for an interview' and they just hired me. And I've been here ever since, and I brought all my children through the program. Every after school program that I had, they were here. And one thing I always tell people, Family Focus took me through the trainings, then I knew how to talk and react to my children as far as their development and such... I knew... who to call when I was stressed and I thank God I had a lot of people here."



Miss Sheree Davis, Program Administrator

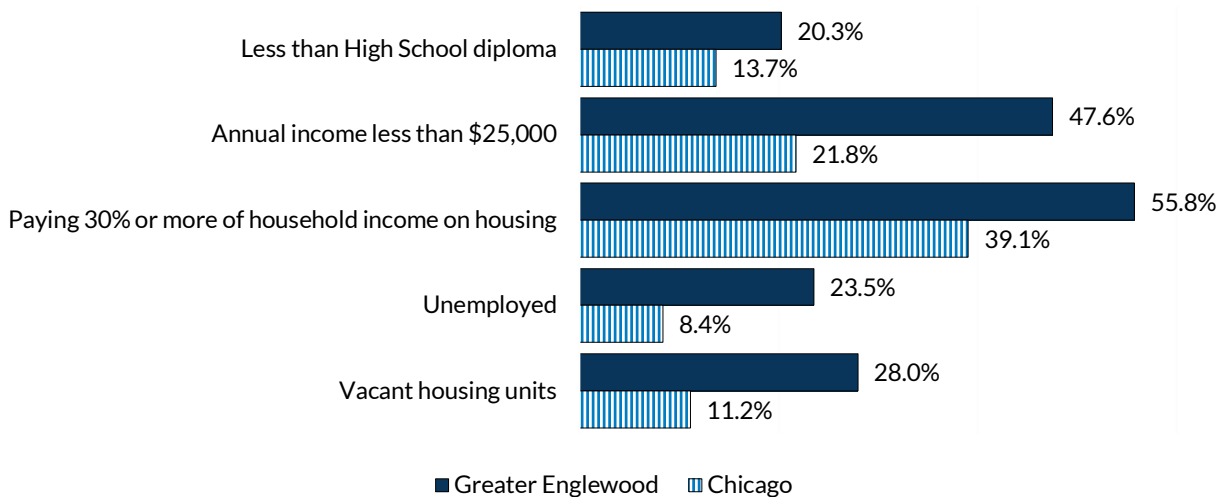
A history of economic disenfranchisement creates challenges for Englewood residents today.

Chicago has one of the highest levels of Black-White segregation in the country, and the history of Englewood, which currently has a population that is 87.4 percent Black, is one of systemic racial discrimination. In the 1920s, Englewood was home to one of Chicago’s busiest shopping districts, but since then the area has witnessed a steady economic decline. This has been the result of decades of racist policies and practices such as redlining, restrictive covenants, and predatory lending practices,² as well as the “white flight” to the suburbs that flowed in large part from these policies.³ This history of discrimination can be witnessed in the challenges residents experience today. As shown in Figure 1, when compared with Chicago overall, Englewood residents are less likely to have a high school diploma, earn less income, pay a higher share of their income toward housing, are more likely to be unemployed, and are more likely to live in neighborhoods with vacant lots and units.^{4,5}

Redlining

Established in the context of government homeownership programs that were created as part of the 1930s-era New Deal, redlining was the practice of ranking neighborhoods by the amount of financial risk loan-making in that area would supposedly carry. Given the structural racism that undergirded this practice, the neighborhoods the federal government (and, later, private lenders as well) deemed least worthy of inclusion in lending programs were those in which Black people lived. The intent and effect of redlining was to systematically deny Black people the economic opportunities that come with property and home ownership.

Figure 1. Outcomes for Greater Englewood Compared to Chicago Overall



Source: Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Englewood and West Englewood Community Data Snapshot: Chicago Community Area Series. 2023.

Reflections on structural racism in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder

Focus group participants agreed that the filmed murder of George Floyd by a White police officer on May 25, 2020 was a critical turning point during the pandemic. The community service providers we spoke with described how these events have continued to prompt intense personal and organizational reflection on their roles in advancing racial equity.

“It was like the elephant in the room, because it is a difficult conversation. We all have some kind of implicit bias whether we want to believe it or not, right? ... Going through ‘the reckoning’ or whatever they want to call it, it put people at tables who maybe never would have been at the table before and [to] kind of start unpacking things, which are very difficult to talk about.”

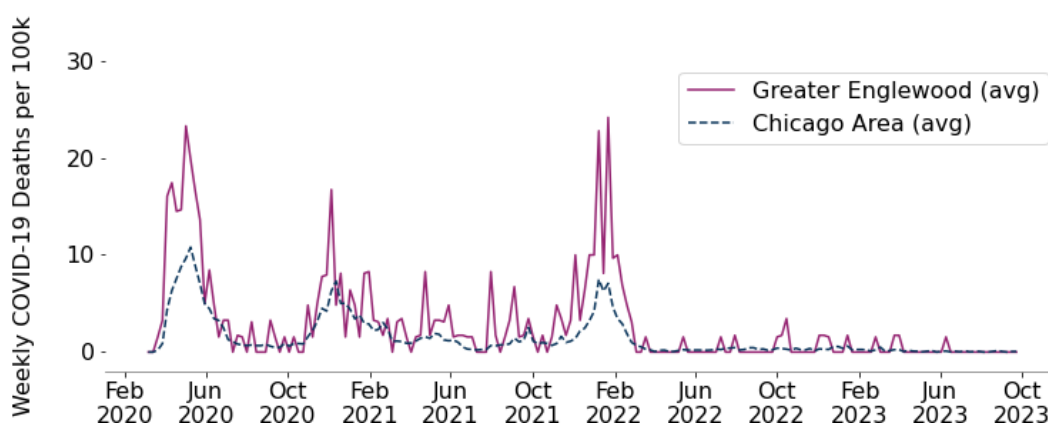
– Family Focus Englewood staff member

Related to these social determinants of health, Greater Englewood is subject to dramatic health disparities.⁶ Average life expectancy is just 68 years in Englewood and 69 in West Englewood, compared to 82 years in the Hyde Park neighborhood just five miles away. The area has among the highest rates of infant mortality,⁷ hypertension,⁸ adult asthma,⁹ and child lead poisoning¹⁰ in Chicago. It also has among the lowest rates of early and adequate prenatal care.¹¹

When the pandemic hit Greater Englewood, existing challenges were exacerbated.

Against the backdrop of these inequities, residents of Greater Englewood had among the highest rates of COVID-19 hospitalization in Chicago (ranking 2nd and 5th, respectively) and among the highest rates of death due to COVID-19 (ranking 2nd and 7th, respectively; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. COVID-19 deaths per 100K in Greater Englewood compared to the Chicago Area overall



Source: Illinois Department of Public Health, Chicago Data Portal, 2023. <https://data.cityofchicago.org/>

When we asked families about their experiences during the pandemic, they described feeling an overwhelming sense of heightened anxiety and isolation. They talked about how concerned they were about getting COVID-19 themselves and spreading it to their children and other family members, particularly

early in the pandemic, and particularly during pregnancy. One parent explained, *“I didn’t want to be in contact with anyone because I was pregnant and I didn’t know how [COVID-19] would affect me.”* Many specifically expressed concern for themselves or their family members with asthma, which disproportionately affects Greater Englewood residents.¹² As one parent explained, *“I already got asthma, I already had some underlying health conditions, so I was just scared. Like, is this going to kill me? Because my oxygen level already drops when I get sick because I have asthma.”* Another parent described how her daughter, who was asthma-free prior to contracting COVID-19, now has asthma as part of what seems to be long COVID-19.

In their own words: Long COVID

“Ever since I had COVID I feel like a brain fog from time to time. ... I also feel like a lot more lethargic, like exhausted ... and it’s not every day but I never had any of that before having COVID...My mom, brother, and dad all have that brain fog. My mom in particular has had trouble remembering ... it only started after she got COVID. My dad recently developed a really bad skin rash, and [doctors] told him it was a side effect of having had COVID.” - Parent

Spotlight on health disparities: Air pollution and asthma in the South Side of Chicago

One of the starkest health inequities in the United States, and particularly in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, is air pollution. Cook County falls in the 36th percentile for air quality among US counties; in addition, Chicago’s South and West Sides ranked third highest in Illinois for the most polluted places to live. Compared to 10.3 percent in Chicago overall, 16.7 percent of adults in Englewood and 13.0 percent in West Englewood have asthma. Indeed, the vast majority of participants (including home visitors and parents) mentioned asthma as one of their primary health concerns. In the context of these and other health inequities, connecting families to a “medical home”—a consistent and comprehensive source of health care—is critical. The home visitors and other Family Focus staff we spoke with highlighted how important it has been to establish and maintain relationships with medical providers in the community so as to better facilitate these connections for families.

Challenges to COVID-19 vaccinations in Englewood

While vaccination rates in Englewood were lower than in the rest of Chicago,¹³ the Family Focus Englewood staff members and parents we spoke with generally considered COVID-19 vaccinations to be accessible. One staff member shared, *“I feel like the City of Chicago did a great job of just having opportunities available to get the COVID shot. You could pretty much go anywhere at one point and get it for free.”* A home visitor also shared, *“With the COVID pods, where they were giving the shots, they were basically every week, we had a different location that people were able to go and [get] the vaccination.”*

Many families expressed reluctance to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Those that did get vaccinated often cited work mandates as a motivating factor for being vaccinated and expressed ambivalence over having been vaccinated. One parent shared her perspective saying, *“After I got the vaccine, I got sick with COVID. I’m like, what was the point of getting the vaccine if I’m still going to catch it? Isn’t a vaccine supposed to prevent you from getting it?”*

Families expressed particular reluctance to vaccinate their children. One parent described her rationale saying, *“I don’t necessarily agree with vaccines. I don’t agree with injecting any part of anything into your body to make you immune to it. My son gets really, really, really sick just for the flu vaccine that I’m not going to make him even sicker with the COVID vaccine.”* Another parent explained how important it was for her to have control over her own decision-making: *“It’s always great to have a subject matter expert on these things, but I also like to do my own research and it’ll influence the type of questions that I have ... I feel like vaccines play a big role in their development for health, so I need to know what I’m putting into my son’s body and what’s the pros and cons of it.”*

In their own words: Rampant misinformation about the vaccine

“It was a message that Black people or African American and another [group] were less likely to get [COVID-19]... there was so much misinformation out there. People were saying it wasn’t real. Like there were so many conspiracy theories around it, and I feel like the communities that we work in, that a lot of people were believing the information even when it was time to start doing vaccines and things like that. People were so fearful and they were just refusing like, ‘no I’m not doing it.’ Even some of our staff.”

– Family Focus Englewood staff member

In the midst of uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 vaccine due to medical distrust and poor access to information, community service providers described varying approaches to discussing the vaccine, finding a balance between being responsive to families’ concerns and beliefs and providing them with accurate information. One community service provider described engaging with the topic directly, saying *“The conversation is mandatory for me. I do talk to the pregnant moms about it. And I always redirect them back to their OBGYN who does their primary care. Because I know that population is vulnerable.”* Another took a different approach, explaining, *“Once you have [families’] trust...give them respect, and once they’re comfortable, then you can start sliding in some of the hard questions. Did you and you baby get a shot? Why? Find out what’s going on with them. I never made judgements as far as how they raised [children] or whatever. I just give them information that we have.”*

One parent described being on the receiving end of this conversation, saying *“So my home visitor just basically, she doesn’t like, impose her views, but she kind of just like picks me to see like what I want to do. Like she asked me questions to help me get to a better understanding of where I see it either being beneficial or not so that’s how she assisted me.”*

The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges in the community, though new policy supports helped some families manage.

Families and staff mentioned a number of social determinants of health that had been negatively affected by the pandemic. Critical determinants are listed below, along with the new COVID-era supports provided by the federal, state, and local government that were accessible to many families. In this section, the hourglass symbol (⌚) is used to denote policies and programs that have since been discontinued.



Families experienced challenges **accessing health care** due to unresponsive providers; long wait times to schedule appointments, especially with OB/GYNs and mental health providers; challenges transferring records amidst a hospital acquisition¹⁴; and not feeling understood by providers. As one parent shared, *“[When I was pregnant] I really couldn’t get into a doctor’s office until maybe six or seven months before I even got an ultrasound done. That was really hard because I had suffered from a miscarriage before my son, so it was really stressful, not knowing, what if something was wrong and they could have found it sooner, just the different worries and questions.”*

Medicaid expansion in the Affordable Care Act and the temporary continuous enrollment provision ∇ created by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provided some support to families by making it easier for them to access health insurance. The proportion of Family Focus PAT families with health insurance through Medicaid or CHIP increased from approximately 88 percent in March 2020 to 95 percent in February 2023.



The pandemic also posed a challenge for families' **mental health**, exacerbating existing feelings of anxiety and depression. One parent shared, "I've already been through anxiety and depression and [COVID] just made that

10 times worse. So like I was going through the depression on my own and then postpartum depression and then my anxiety is up to here like it was just a lot and I had to learn how to deal with it all. Like find a way to find my peace again through all of it."

Many families struggled with isolation due to social distancing and stay-at-home orders; expectant parents experienced heightened isolation throughout doctor's appointments and even birth due to hospital regulations that limited the presence of partners and support teams. One parent described her experiences through pregnancy and delivery saying, "I had to wear a mask; only I could be there when they were doing ultrasounds, taking blood... If I wanted somebody to come and be my support friend... they can't come, and I am already doing it alone."

Working from home also affected families' mental health. Another parent explained, "It's just the concept of merging your job and your house so you don't get a break. [There's] no relaxation period. Like when I come home from work, I'm rewinding. Like I don't have to think about work, but then you merge both stress levels of both parts in your house."



Some families experienced **food insecurity** at the height of the pandemic when grocery stores closed. One parent shared, "When the grocery stores started closing early, it was hard for us because some of [us] work early in

the day, and then we couldn't go later on in the day because they were closed." (Translated from Spanish).

Many families relied on local food banks such as the [Greater Chicago Food Depository](#) and free meals provided by Chicago Public Schools throughout the pandemic. Additionally, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provided expedited food benefits through an [Emergency Allotments](#) ∇ program, which added a minimum of \$95 to each qualified family's monthly benefits. One parent expressed how helpful this program was: "It helps a lot that they were giving us the EBT cards for our kids from the public school... because I was not getting any income."

In their own words: Challenges accessing mental health care

"I feel like postpartum for me was like times 100. I haven't been on my meds, my baby is freshly new and I have to find something before I'm going to snap...but COVID, you still got to wait this long for an appointment, another month... I don't think I have another month! COVID made it to the point where you had to beg for help because they was only helping the people that was dying from that disease, like all the other health concerns didn't go away because COVID came." - Parent

Spotlight on unmet needs: Barriers to accessing services

Even when programs and benefits are in place, they can often be difficult for families to find and access. Some of the families we spoke with reported experiencing challenges meeting their needs, in part because they were not aware of what resources were available to them.

"There are a lot of resources in all parts of Chicago, but a lot of times we're not informed about which they are. I've seen a lot of organizations I didn't even know about." (Translated from Spanish). - Parent

"I think systemically a lot of people of color just don't know about the resources and aren't told about them. Half of the people in my family that had babies didn't know you could get [early intervention services] for free through the state for the first 3 years... I don't know how much outreach there is for these services, but I think it's why so many people are struggling just because they don't know about the resources in general." - Parent

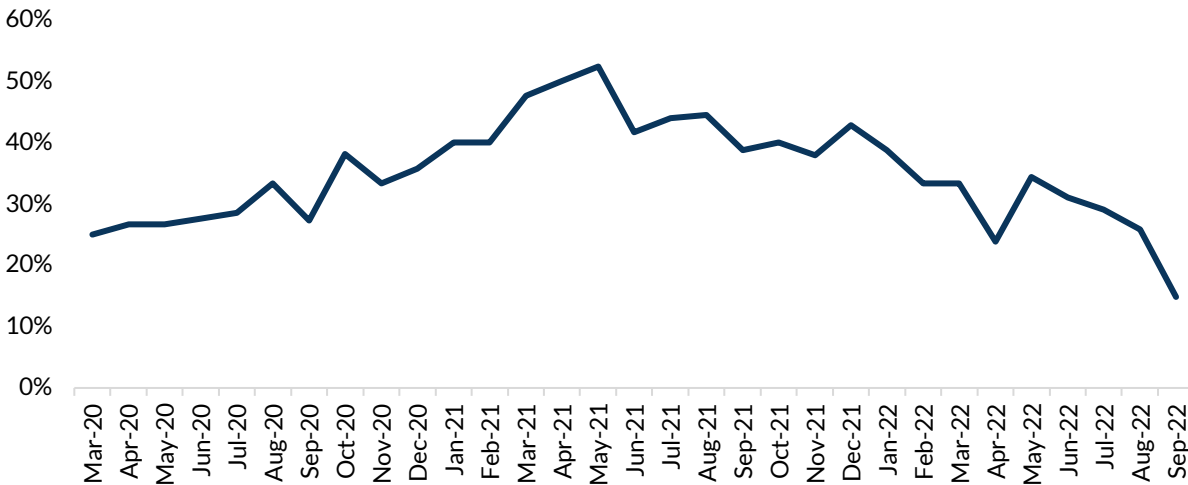


The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the **housing insecurity** many families were already experiencing. One parent explained her situation saying, *“The housing, it really affected me. COVID affected [it] because I couldn’t get the paperwork in time and it seemed like nothing was coming back ... by the grace of God, they let me move in [to my current home] without having the information because they knew that [with] COVID, it was going to take a while.”* A

home visitor observed, *“Rent in Chicago is just ridiculous ... It’s just been really hard for them to find that. Housing, specifically, it’s the one thing that I feel like the most defeated on. The waitlists are super long for all the low-income housing. There’s just not much we can do.”* In March 2020, one-quarter of the families (8 out of 32) participating in Family Focus’s MIECHV-funded PAT program were experiencing homelessness. This number rose to around 50 percent in spring of 2021 before beginning to fall (see Figure 3).

In June 2020, the [COVID-19 Eviction Protections Ordinance](#) protected tenants unable to pay their rent due to a “COVID-19 impact” through the fall of 2021. Other COVID-era mortgage and rental assistance programs were available to qualified families. In April 2022, [the Illinois Homeowner Assistance Fund](#) (ILHAF) provided financial mortgage assistance to homeowners at risk of default, foreclosure, or displacement as a result of financial hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One parent shared, *“Luckily, there was a lot of programs out there that would help you. Like for example with our mortgage, you know, they gave us like credit for like 2 months or something like that. Whatever we qualified for.”* The [Emergency Rental Assistance](#) program provided Cook County residents up to 18 months of rent and/or utility payments.

Figure 3. Percentage of Family Focus PAT families experiencing homelessness from March 2020-September 2022



Source: Administrative data provided by Family Focus Englewood’s PAT’s management information system.



Home visitors working with families during the pandemic noticed that cases of **domestic violence** increased. One home visitor described this saying, *“We had a lot of families experiencing a large amount of DV [domestic violence]. We even had a participant pass away from a situation, so it was a really difficult first for the team and for the participant’s family ... we attended a lot of trainings and extra help just to make sure we were okay...”* She

added that while under normal circumstances home visitors would screen families for domestic violence, they were unable to do so when they had to conduct visits virtually rather than in person because of the pandemic, explaining, *“[Families] were in this program that is meant to be talking about these things, and because of COVID, we weren’t able to see those things as often.”*



Families also experienced reductions in their work hours and unemployment as a result of the pandemic. One parent described the impact of this on her **economic stability** and mental health, saying, *“COVID in a sense started out destroying my life ... We were getting hours cut drastically. ... There was so much stuff and the stress merged into my house so that part was terrible ... Not to mention checks were really short at the time, so I fell behind on bills.”* Family Focus Englewood staff noted the impact of unemployment on other family members as well. *“[We kept] unemployment applications right here at the front of the desk ... we had parents, grandmothers come through here [for help].”*

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act)² expanded unemployment insurance benefits from 2020 to 2021 for people experiencing unemployment for reasons related to the pandemic, including self-quarantining and caring for children out of school. Families also found support through direct relief payments offered through the CARES Act. Two additional payments were provided through the Tax Relief Act of 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (i.e., [Child Tax Credit](#)³). One parent shared, *“The Child Tax Credit helped a lot ... Along with the stimulus.”*



Home visitors noted that, during the height of the pandemic, families felt increased responsibility for their older children’s **schooling** due to school closures. The COVID-19 pandemic also affected teen parents’ education. One home visitor shared, *“They were so focused on their child, it was difficult to kind of talk about school. I feel a lot of them actually just didn’t go ... A lot of them said they lost motivation. They didn’t have access to computers. By the time they did get access, they just felt so behind and out of touch.”* A community service provider observed that teen parents had *“expectations and responsibilities to provide finances”* to support their household. *“A lot of them want to do more entrepreneurial business-related things. Some of them are doing lash business, hair business ... just trying to figure out anything to make more money.”*

As pandemic-era benefits and supports were phasing out, families’ needs persisted.

While the pandemic subsided, families’ needs had not, and home visitors reported that many of the families they work with now need more material supports (e.g., food, formula, diapers, wipes), mental health supports, housing, health care coverage, child care, and unemployment than they had even prior to the pandemic. These needs have likely been exacerbated by the precipitous end of many of the COVID-era policy supports outlined above, which offered families a lifeline and in some cases helped them achieve more stability than they had previously.

In their own words: Loss of benefits

“It gave them a sense of false hope, almost ... But with the loss of all these [relief funds] ... a lot of them are frustrated.”

– PAT Home Visitor

“We do still have some families that obviously are in need of food and things. A lot of them don’t have that extra income or that COVID relief ... It’s been hard just finding a job and being able to maintain whatever it is that they needed.”

– PAT Home Visitor

PAT home visitors played a critical role in supporting families during the pandemic and were part of the broader community that came together to help.

Due to COVID-19 safety restrictions, home visitors were forced to pivot and engage with families virtually. See Figure 4. One Family Focus Englewood staff member explained, “I remember those first few months, just trying to figure out technology; the key program, going and calling families, telling them we’re still here for them.” Family Focus Englewood home visitors continued to provide services to families in Englewood and neighboring communities throughout the pandemic, using a mix of video visits as well as drop-off visits to support families. “We were all so nervous because this was all new for us... what can home visiting look like?... We all worked really hard to figure out what would work best for the families.” Later, as the height of the pandemic subsided, the program resumed in-person visits in combination with video visits.

In their own words: The pandemic’s impact on home visitors

“I was so paranoid to get sick. Even now, I feel like I’m still paranoid.” – PAT Home Visitor

“My boundaries really got pushed during COVID because they would call me at all times, and I would answer.” – PAT Home Visitor

“The work is emotionally intensive. When working from home, with fewer boundaries between living space and working space, check-ins and informal conversations outside of visits extended into a broader window of time. [This was] especially hard if families are reaching out in need of help for specific needs.” – Community Service Provider

Figure 4. Home visits by visit type from March 2020 – February 2023



Source: Administrative data provided by Family Focus Englewood’s PAT’s management information system.

Home visitors provided families invaluable emotional support

In some cases, families reported that their home visitors functioned as one of the sole sources of external support they had access to during the mandatory stay-at-home orders that characterized the early stages of the pandemic. One parent described the immense support she received following an unfortunate car accident which resulted in a broken arm: *“It was a lot I couldn’t do for my son, like I couldn’t lift my son up; I couldn’t change his diapers; I couldn’t cook... I was getting overwhelmed with everything that I couldn’t do, so it got the point where [my home visitor] was like, ‘This is not working... I need to come where you’re at and we need to figure it out.’ She felt like I physically needed someone more than a video call can give.”*

In their own words: Home visitors as lifelines

“[My home visitor] was very supportive during COVID. The FaceTimes were really like a savior, just to know that like somebody was thinking of me...making sure that I’m doing things to take care of myself. ... She did like little drop offs and stuff like that, kind of like spur of the moment. So it was like surprising but ... reminder that someone was there in your corner.” – Parent

“[My home visitor] is a spiritual woman. So, just her, like, encouraging words and just knowing, like, OK, I heard that ... that just kind of helped me cope.” – Parent

Spotlight on Bella Mucino, MIECHV PAT Supervisor and Project Community Researcher

Bella Mucino, PAT Supervisor, has worked at Family Focus Englewood (FFE) for six years, serving as a home visitor and family support specialist in addition to supervisor. She is a fierce advocate for her families and the FFE program. She prioritizes seeking new information and experiences to enhance the services she provides families by attending community outreach and networking events and engaging in professional development opportunities. She describes her approach working with families saying,

“I’m very honest and transparent with all of my participants. I don’t have kids, I don’t know any better than you all. We’re going to work together to make sure that you are learning, you’re growing, and helping your baby develop in the best way possible. I feel like my transparency makes a big difference in my relationship with the participants.”

To hear what Bella has to say about her community, view this video: <https://youtu.be/VJKddfng5Os>



Bella Mucino, MIECHV PAT Supervisor and Project Community Researcher

Home visitors also played a critical role in helping families identify and access *material support*.

Home visitors connected families to necessary resources like baby supplies (e.g., diapers, formula), therapists, furniture banks, [Grant a Wish Baby Program](#) for baby clothing, furniture, and toys, [Illinois Link card](#) for cash assistance and SNAP, bus passes, grocery store gift cards, and more. They provided these supports to extended families and friends as well. One Family Focus Englewood staff member explained, *“We had parents, grandparents come through here...the parents and grandparents and family members needed services, too.”*

Bella showed us some of the graduation gifts purchased for the PAT graduates.



Queen Mom” tote bags



“Super Star” gold medals



Family Focus parent educator’s desk

Family Focus Englewood staff member’s desks are overflowing with donated items that will be distributed to families during home visits.



Family Focus diaper closet

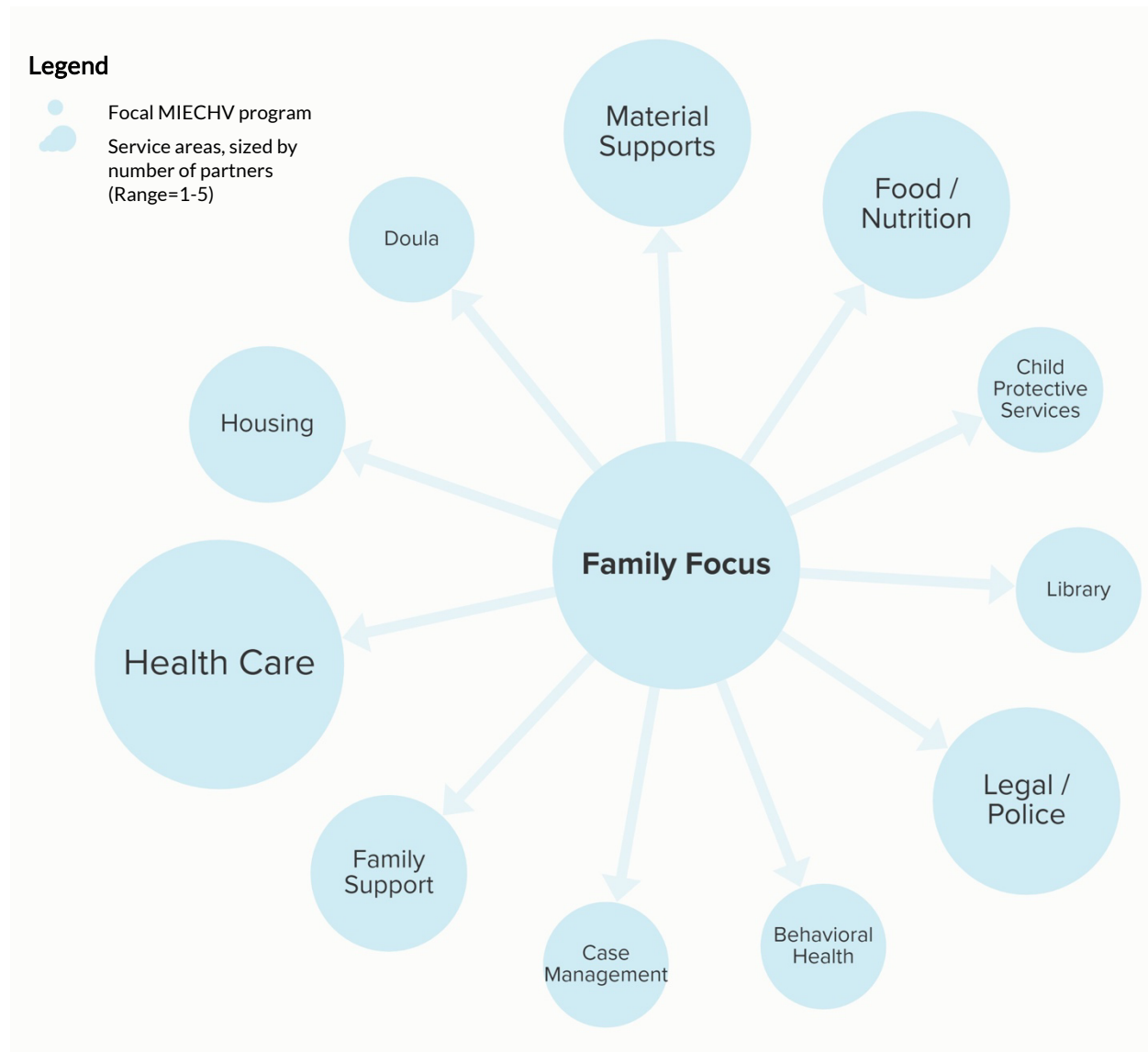
Every Friday, Family Focus Englewood staff pick up diapers from [Share our Spare](#) and stock the diaper closet so whoever needs some can have them for free.

“During the pandemic, we...received way more diapers – it filled the conference room.”
– PAT Home Visitor

The community worked together to support families during the pandemic.

A key strength of Englewood’s response to the pandemic was the tight collaborations that existed, and continue to exist, among the community’s service providers. Service providers across sectors worked closely together to meet families’ changing needs, building upon and expanding existing relationships, as well as developing new partnerships. To learn more about these collaborations, we engaged Family Focus staff in an activity where they mapped out all of the community organizations with which they partner, and then coded the organizations by their service type. Figure 5 shows the wide array of services Family Focus works with in the Greater Englewood community.

Figure 5. Service network map for Family Focus



Source: Information provided during a systems mapping activity that was conducted as part of the focus groups with home visitors, community service providers, and families served by Family Focus Englewood.

Home visitors described these collaborations as critical for improving communication and tackling barriers: *“When we had meetings with the [community organization], we would actually talk about any obstacles that we were encountering or ways to support the families.”* Another community service provider noted, *“[I]t does something very good, especially in a smaller agency. It keeps the lines of communication clear. You’re not going in all directions all at once. You’re making sure you’re aligned.”* Families also appreciated the support of the community working together. As one parent described, *“Sometimes they would do community events in our area and they would offer or give us little packages with like ... sanitizing wipes, hand sanitizer, masks ... just a little bag of essentials that we needed at the moment.”* Community members also came together to help each other during this time. *“A lot of participants donate some stuff to us, after babies grew out of stuff. So it’s a great exchange.”*

In addition to the supports provided by community organizations, families also relied on local churches and their family and friends for material and emotional support. For example, one parent who both overcame homelessness and graduated college during the pandemic credited her close mentor and childhood friend saying, *“Those people are part of my success.”*

Spotlight on Freedom® Families

[The Freedom Road Foundation](#) and Family Focus Englewood are members of a thriving partnership. The Freedom Road program provides families with young children three and under new books and educational materials to support families in building home libraries, as well as connect families to local libraries.

“These brand-new books aren’t just geared in interest to the families, but we’re making sure they’re high quality. ... Connected to our greater vision that education is connected to economics. It’s a way out of poverty and a way into living life where ... you have the resources you need to live a happy and productive life.”-Maria Hayley, Director of Freedom Road Foundation



Bella and Maria Hayley in front of the Family Focus Englewood library.

Looking ahead in Englewood

The COVID-19 pandemic had wide-ranging impacts on Greater Englewood and the families and the community service providers who live and work there. The community faced multiple, overlapping challenges even before the pandemic, and these were exacerbated as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Throughout the pandemic, families in Englewood benefitted from expanded local, state, and federal benefits. They also benefitted from the close collaboration between community service providers, including home visiting, with these providers acting as lifelines by connecting them with the emotional and material supports that helped them survive and even thrive. Today, though the precipitous phase-out of government benefits threatens many families' stability, home visiting and other services continue to act as a resource in the community. One parent shared her view on Family Focus's home visiting program saying, *"[I]t's a great program and I feel that, you know, funding should be continued...[I]t should be more expressed that we need more funding so that more families can be helped, [so] more families can benefit from it."*



Leslie and Chontrale, PAT Home Visitors, with a recent PAT graduate.

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