

Spotlight on Northeast Louisiana's Home Visiting and Community Response to COVID-19

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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 the list down to select five communities to engage in a case study.

As a result of this process, East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes in Louisiana were selected as case study communities. Once East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes were selected, our team began reviewing policies and news articles to see how the community responded to the pandemic. Our team also met regularly with staff from the Louisiana Bureau of Family Health, which runs the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program—the MIECHV-funded local implementing agency in northeast Louisiana—to learn more about the community, plan for a site visit, and identify key partners in the parishes and across Louisiana to interview for additional 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 their community. The project team was also advised by a board consisting of MIECHV awardees, equity experts, COVID-19 researchers, and parents/families.

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](#).

Parents as Teachers Program

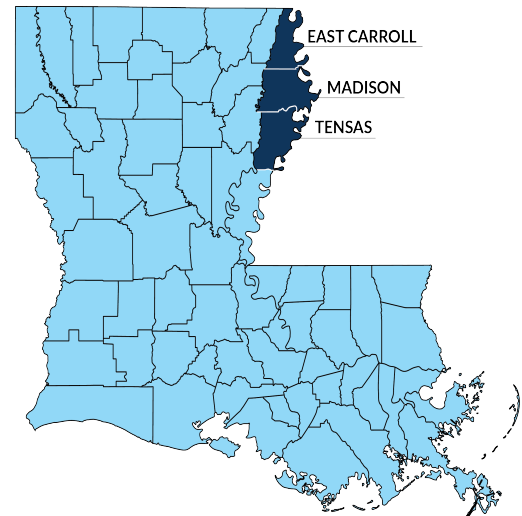
Connecting with families and providers in Louisiana would have been difficult without a collaboration with the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program. Since 2013, the PAT program has provided home visiting services to families in the area starting from pregnancy through the child's beginning of kindergarten.¹ Through home visiting, PAT educators focus on parent-child interactions, development-centered parenting, and family well-being to ensure that a child's early years create the foundation for a healthy, happy life.¹

Our project team visited the East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes from May 23-24, 2023. During the site visit, we conducted focus groups with home visitors and a community service provider. This profile was developed based on what we learned during these activities, and from virtual focus groups with families.

All three parishes pride themselves on being self-reliant while navigating the unique challenges that come with living in a rural area.

Along the northeastern edge of Louisiana, East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes lie in the Mississippi River Valley, bordering Mississippi and Arkansas. As someone who works in the area describes it, Madison is known for community pride, East Carroll for its resiliency, and Tensas for a mayor who works hard to improve the community. A sense of community is consistently a part of the area's culture, but so is the love of food. Across the parishes, you'll find that residents are more than happy to provide local restaurant recommendations with menus that boast Louisiana staples like shrimp po' boys, red beans and rice, and gumbo, among many other favorites.

These three parishes are home to 20,314 residents⁵, with between 6 and 18 percent of households having at least one child under age 6. Distinct in their own way, each parish adds a flavor that if taken away would alter the recipe that makes up Louisiana. A community service provider describes the relationship between parishes and the state as, "*Louisiana, we're like, you know what gumbo is. We are gumbo. Our culture is a gumbo.*"



Map of East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas parishes highlighted on a map of all Louisiana parishes^{2,3,4}

Source: Benbennick, D. (2006). [East Carroll Parish](#), [Madison Parish](#), [Tensas Parish](#)



A mural in Lake Providence, Louisiana

With a multitude of ways to prepare and controversy over which ingredients to include, gumbo specifically illustrates an amalgamation of ideas, experiences, and cultures unique to Louisiana.⁶ Gumbo is a famous Louisiana dish with ties to different West African, Native American, and European cultures, reflecting the racial makeup in the region.⁷ As of 2020, over 50 percent of the residents in each parish identify as Black and between 25 and 40 percent of residents in each parish identify as White only.⁵ Less than 1 percent of the residents in each parish identify as American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, or Native Hawai'ian or other Pacific Islander.

Gumbo has been touted as a dish to bring people together, as summarized by the proclaimed queen of Creole cuisine chef Leah Chase, *"There've been a lot of problems solved in that dining room over a bowl of gumbo."*⁹ To that end, gumbo illustrates the power behind acknowledging the differences, strengths, and resources of each parish.



Picture of crawfish gumbo⁶
Source: Sullivan, J. (2013). [Crawfish gumbo](#)

Community landscape

The area and its economy are reliant upon agriculture, supported by the Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter Northeast Research Station. When you drive into the region from the west, you are greeted by field after field of corn and soybeans. In 2022, all three parishes combined contributed over \$336,000,000 in plant enterprises.^{10,11,12} Tensas tops all three parishes in the dollar amount of plant enterprises at \$115,737,388.¹² About 70 percent of East Carroll Parish's land is devoted to agriculture¹⁰ and Madison Parish is known to lead in the state in corn production.¹¹ It takes about an hour and a half to drive between all three parishes, and you can go miles without seeing another car. Every so often you will see glimpses of different bodies of water, remnants of roadside attractions, and repurposed plantations.



Louisiana cornfield

In comparison to the largest parish in Louisiana, East Baton Rouge with a population of almost 457,000 in 2020¹³; Tensas, Madison, and East Carroll Parishes are, as one community service provider put it, *"our rural areas. Those three areas are always being left out because they are so small."* There has been a consistent population decline in all three parishes since 1970. Since 2010, these parishes saw population decreases of 23 percent, 19 percent, and 7 percent (East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas, respectively).¹⁴ As a state, Louisiana also experiences a heightened number of natural disasters. Since 1980 the state has seen 93 weather/climate disaster events including severe storms, tropical cyclones, and droughts.¹⁵ The estimated cost of natural disasters has reached \$290 billion, and Louisiana specifically is adversely affected due to its economy and the size of its population.¹⁶ The East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes have also seen multiple instances of natural disasters. Community service providers noted hurricanes in 2020 that swept the region and ice storms in 2021 that led to massive power outages for days.

One impact of the widespread agriculture and natural disasters in the state is water pollution. The land runoff pollution from farms and home sewage systems is not systematically addressed or prevented, in large part due to piecemeal regulation and intervention.¹⁷ Storms also have led to system outages because of inadequate backup power.¹⁸ Tallulah, a city in Madison Parish, specifically experiences a high number of boil water advisories and outages mainly due to the infrastructure of its water system, which was built before 1960.¹⁸ There have been recent efforts from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to update Tallulah's water system and tackle the source of the outages.¹⁸



Louisiana National Guard respond after Hurricane Laura¹⁷
Source: Pugh, J. (2020). [Hurricane Laura](#)

Community strengths

What makes up community across these three parishes is its people. Residents in East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas often rely on each other to make it through tough times or day-to-day struggles. A home visitor reflected how communities get by: *“One another. Resiliency. Kind of like, ‘Okay, if I got some potatoes and you got some meals, maybe an exchange or something like that.’”* When asked to describe their communities, a local service provider said, *“geographically where I live, but also the health care providers, the people that reside in the community and what they contribute and how they support one another.”* Events, usually with plenty of food, typically bring the communities together. In East Carroll and Madison, families will usually gather at the courthouse square because it is easily accessible to most people even by walking or riding a bike. Additionally, each parish also has its own unique traditions people celebrate.



A community garden in Tensas Parish, Louisiana



Courthouse square in Madison Parish, Louisiana

In East Carroll, there's an annual Lake Providence Levee Festival where local food vendors, arts and goods makers, and musicians gather in celebration of the community. Community events in Madison Parish such as health fairs²⁰, summer camps, and Juneteenth Festivals²¹ are consistently hosted in the Tallulah-Madison Community Center. Tensas Parish has an active Farmer's Market every Saturday during the summer in downtown St. Joseph.²² One home visitor noticed that one factor that helps people in the area cope with difficult times is, *“Love of family. Yeah. I'm just about to say parents doing whatever they can to provide for their children. We'll see. There are a lot of strength[s] in communities as well. So you do see communities coming together, neighborhoods helping other parents out, different things like that.”*

Northeast Louisiana's resource network affected how families interacted with their environment pre-COVID-19.



Unemployment rates in all three parishes remain consistently higher than the state average employment rate.²³ While Louisiana went from an unemployment rate of 5 percent in 2019 to 9 percent in 2020; East Carroll's unemployment rate rose from 10 percent in 2019 to 12 percent in 2020. Similarly, Madison Parish saw an increase from 8 percent in 2019 to 9 percent in 2020 and Tensas Parish saw an increase from 8 percent in 2019 to 9 percent in 2020. One factor that contributes to the higher unemployment rates in northeast Louisiana is the lack of availability of jobs in the area. One community

service provider described the phenomenon by saying, *"There's not a lot of jobs out there either, so they may have to travel out of the parish to get a job, but they can't afford that if they can't get a job in the first place. So [...] it's really hard. I think that's why [...] it's kind of like this revolving process is we want people to come out of poverty, but there's no way for them to come out of poverty in those parishes because there's no opportunities."*



Over 69 percent of residents in the East Carroll and Madison Parishes have access to broadband **internet** in comparison to 53 percent of Tensas Parish residents.²⁴ One community service provider noted, *"You know you have people living in rural areas that still don't have the Internet and no one knew this before COVID, these people were just existing or just going along with the status quo for their area."* Additional challenges to widespread internet are compounded by low digital literacy rates and lack of

affordability. Internet providers in the area are charging premium prices for internet services residents are not receiving.²⁵ There has been a recent push across the state to expand Internet access through the Granting Unserved Municipalities Broadband Opportunities (GUMBO) grant program which provides funds to private providers of broadband services to expand service to underserved areas of the state.²⁶ As of late 2023, there are plans for all parishes to receive expanded Internet access within the next few years.²⁷



Due to the limited **child care** options in the area, most families chose to keep their children at home. One home visitor reflected that, *"There's only one Class A daycare in East Carroll. In*

Madison, there's a couple of Class A, several in-home. Tensas? I don't think Tensas has any Class A daycare centers. And I'm not sure about in-home because the families that I have served there, their family just keeps their kids." Additionally, the high cost of child care in the area presents another barrier to seeking care outside of the home. All three parishes are seeing families spend around 43 percent of their income on child care²⁸, and as another home visitor said: *"If you do call the centers, there's a long waitlist. Very long wait list and it's just really expensive. Really expensive."*



A child care facility in East Carroll, Louisiana



The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) considers East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas Parishes to all be medically underserved areas (MUAs) because of the minimal **health care** facilities.²⁹ Across all three parishes, there are no obstetrics and gynecology (OB-GYN) providers and no hospitals with obstetrics care. While East Carroll and Madison have less than 15 family medicine providers per 100,000 people each, Tensas has zero registered family medicine providers in the parish.

As a result of the lack of medical providers, patients experience long wait times, rushed appointments, and constant provider turnover. Community members also do not have the luxury of “shopping around” for a new provider even after a negative experience due to the limited options for health care. As one community service provider mentioned, *“They [families] don't have any other options, either. So, if this provider is not meeting our needs, I don't have anywhere else to go.”*



Families often must travel out of their parish to shop for groceries or seek hunger relief. In 2019 across Louisiana, 16 percent of individuals were experiencing **food insecurity**. Higher rates of food insecurity were seen in the

East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas parishes at 25 percent, 22 percent, and 20 percent, respectively.³⁰ Food banks and grocery stores are not local to the parishes, so many families drive an hour just to access a grocery store.

Instead of traditional grocery stores, families may also turn to convenience stores or dollar stores. When comparing the parishes' hunger relief resources, one home visitor said, *“Just like in Monroe here, there's a big food bank. But if I'm in Tallulah or I'm in Lake Providence, it doesn't matter that there's a warehouse full of free food because I can't get to it. And if I could afford to pay you to take me, I could take that money and buy groceries. And I mean, the food banks do come to the rural communities, but it's like once a month.”*



A Family Dollar in Madison Parish, Louisiana



Having reliable **transportation** is a necessity in northeast Louisiana if you want to access resources. Community service providers noted that medical clinics and food banks may be an hour drive away and there is no public transportation to ease the burden on residents. As one community service provider highlighted, *“In northeast Louisiana, there's one public transportation, it's here in Monroe and this is our most populated area. So, to not have public transportation anywhere else is very, very taxing on the community.”* Lack of public transportation is another barrier to connection, especially when community, relationships, and bonding over food are so important in the region.



Louisiana has the highest **incarceration** rate of any democratic society at 1,094 per 100,000 people in comparison to the national average of 664 per 100,000 people.³¹ Not only are Black residents disproportionately incarcerated in comparison to all other races, but for the last 40 years, incarceration rates across the state have continued to rise.³¹

Factors such as law enforcement decisions and judicial responses to illegal behavior influence the overrepresentation of incarcerated Black individuals.³² Although the largest cities in Louisiana are incarcerating the most people, all three parishes experience imprisonment rates above 400 per 100,000 people which affects the total number of residents.³³

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Northeast Louisiana, existing challenges were exacerbated.

Infection and perception of vaccinations

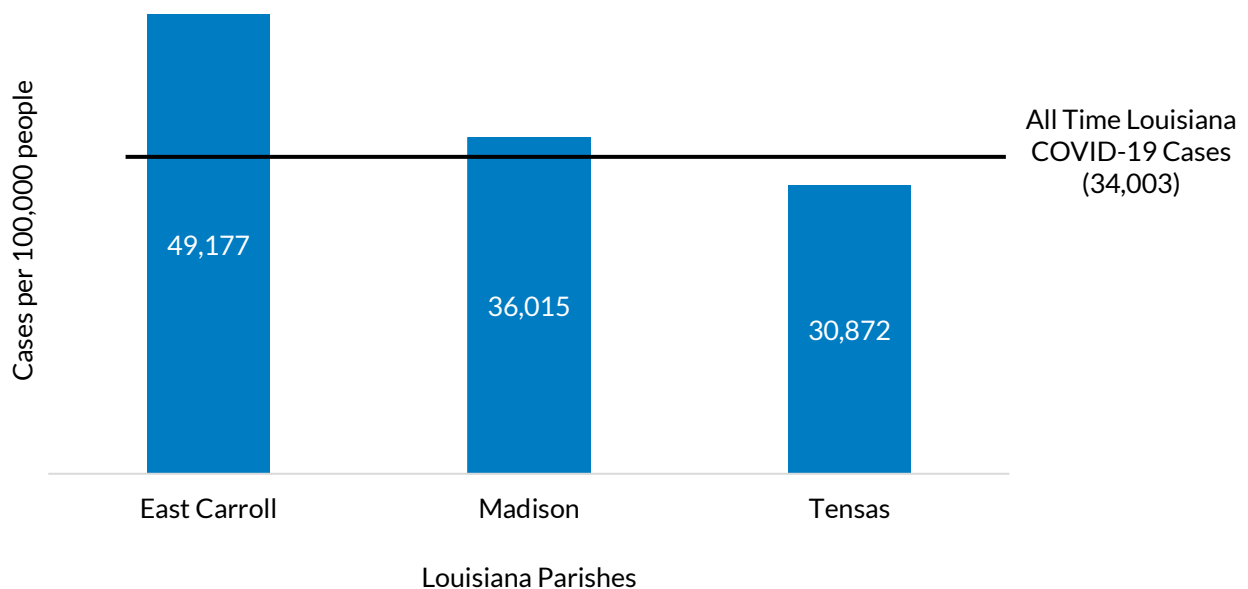
Both East Carroll and Madison Parishes experienced higher numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths per 100,000 people in comparison to the state of Louisiana overall.³⁴ Figure 1 shows the number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people in each parish since 2020. Across the state of Louisiana, there were 405 COVID-19 related deaths per 100,000 people while East Carroll and Madison saw 583 and 594 deaths per 100,000 people, respectively. Tensas had a lower number of COVID-19 related deaths at 323 per 100,000 people.

In their own words: Resiliency in Northeast Louisiana

"I think because there has been a lack of resources so long, even pre-pandemic in this area, they've had to be resilient, and yeah, just kind of adaptable to whatever."

–Community Service Provider

Figure 1. All Time COVID-19 Cases per 100,000 people in East Carroll, Madison, and Tensas, LA



Source: Allen et al., 2023

Members of the community generally were concerned with their families and loved ones contracting COVID-19. Specifically for individuals who were due to give birth during the height of the pandemic, community service providers saw an additional wrinkle to their worry: *“And then a lot of fear, I think, from clients of if I test positive, what is this going to mean? Am I going to have a negative outcome?”*

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, vaccines became available. Yet many questions about them remained, contributing to hesitancy, fear, and misinformation. The state of Louisiana’s overall COVID-19 vaccination rate is 55 percent while East Carroll and Madison have less than a 50 percent vaccination rate. Still, over 60 percent of the residents in Tensas are vaccinated.³⁴ Families were concerned with the speed at which the vaccine was created as well as the composition of the vaccine. As one family said, *“How they just came up with that vaccine so fast? But it’s been other stuff out that they don’t have a vaccine for.”* Families wanted to be sure of the vaccine and its potential impact before exposing themselves or their children. As a result, many families chose to forego the vaccine until additional information became available.

In their own words: Vaccination concerns

“Uh, I didn’t get vaccinated and I didn’t get my children vaccinated because I say they just came out with this vaccine. I didn’t know how good it’ll work, and plus I was taking other medications. I ain’t know how it will affect me. Some people got sick off of it but some people didn’t, but I don’t know it would affect me. So I didn’t wanna take it.”

–Parent

Access to health care

A combination of limited health care options as well as uncertainty around COVID-19 brought an atmosphere of fear and distrust to the rural communities. Families also worried about quickly accessing health care due to the widespread closures. One family reflected that, *“[...] during that COVID I was really concerned about my family. Yeah, because the reason being most facilities, most health facilities weren’t accessible during [...] COVID due to lock down.”* Even before the pandemic, one community service provider noted the tension between families and community service providers in accessing needed services, *“So they’re putting their trust in the providers. Which you should trust your provider, but they’re not getting the quality or the needed services. And they don’t know how to say, ‘No. This isn’t what I need. My child needs XYZ,’ because they don’t want to— I feel like they don’t want to offend the provider, or again they feel like, okay, the provider knows.”*

In their own words: Family isolation

“But although those children needed to be around other children and to socialize, they are missing a lot due to the fear of COVID, and they actually lost someone very close to them. And so it’s more of— it’s psychological now. It’s more of— that’s hurt, you lost someone really close to us, and we’re just going to do our own thing in our own little corners. And so I’ve been seeing the increase in families being isolated like that due to COVID.”

–PAT Home Visitor

Community service providers also recognized the nuances associated with changes to hospital visitation which limited support for individuals giving birth. The intersection of child care and health care also meant that due to limited child care options, families either had to keep children at home or take them to medical appointments. Yet, when families needed to bring their children to medical appointments, they often received pushback from providers.

Spotlight: East Carroll Parish Health Unit

Local health facilities were one resource accessed by families during the pandemic. Families reported positive experiences with both the East Carroll Parish Health Unit, located in Lake Providence, Louisiana and the Madison Parish Rural Health Clinic, located in Tallulah, Louisiana. The clinics offer services from birth control to prenatal care to telehealth.³⁵



East Carroll Parish Health Unit

Outside of the threat of COVID-19, transportation was already a barrier in northeast Louisiana. Medicaid transportation facilitated through the Louisiana Department of Health was one resource designed to support medical transportation throughout the region.³⁵ Eligible Medicaid beneficiaries could schedule transportation to and from Medicaid covered services. Yet, Medicaid transportation was not without its own set of challenges. Once COVID-19-related shutdowns occurred in 2020, families were even more limited in their ability to reach providers. Any transportation that could be provided had new restrictions in the number of passengers, disallowing families to bring children and overall, many families were simply afraid to leave their homes. Home visitors also saw an increase in isolation among rural communities and fear of accessing medical care.

In their own words: Support during perinatal care

“For our pregnant clients, they were having to access health care alone. They couldn't have their partner or a family member go with them for their appointment. So there was a lot of concern about potential attachment even amongst caregivers. They were isolated in the hospital, so then that was one area that we really focused on.”

–Community Service Provider

Spotlight: Tuft Pediatric Dentistry and Dr. Eason at Affinity Pediatrics

When asked about providers that ease access to care in the northeastern Louisiana community, Tuft Pediatric Dentistry³⁷ and Dr. Eason³⁸ at Affinity Pediatrics both came up. Reasons for their high praise ranged from the fact that the providers *“take the time to answer questions,” “sit down and listen to them and talk to the family and try to help them work through whatever's going on,”* and *“[are] very thorough.”* Additionally, not only are community service providers making referrals directly to those providers, but they also take their own children and family members there for care.

Home visitors, community service providers, and families described facilitators to positive experiences with providers, outlined in Figure 2. These factors make it easier for families to access health care in the region. Ultimately, one community service provider summarized the experience: *“I’m presenting a concern to you, and you actually listen to me. That’s what we hear from clients, that’s when they feel validated and feel like this was a good experience. Even if they had to wait maybe a little bit longer.”*

Impact of stay-at-home orders and quarantines

Aside from the fear of getting sick with COVID-19, families also encountered a variety of experiences related to closures and quarantines. The inability to see one another in person strained some familial relationships that are still in the process of repair.

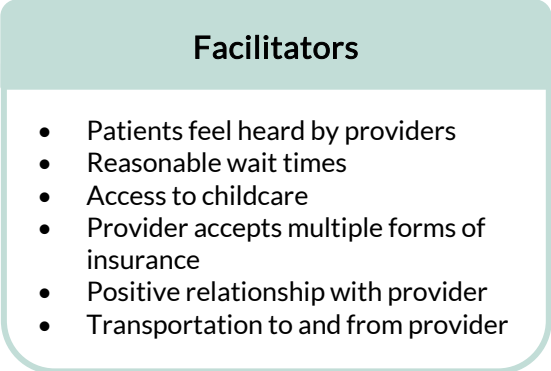
Additionally, the reality of needing to stay at home also meant decreased employment opportunities. During the pandemic, Louisiana increased access to unemployment insurance through waiving the work search requirements and waiting period.³⁶

Both families and home visitors felt the impact of resource scarcity due to the pandemic. One family noted that they needed to stock food and supplies, which a community service provider also shared when they highlighted the supply issues that decreased access to groceries and led to many families running out of baby formula. As a result, families turned to home recipes and baby food to feed their babies. Local resources such as churches, schools, and hunger relief organizations stepped up to address increases in food insecurity. Schools in the region started to provide breakfast and lunch for all children under age 18 in the household. Families also accessed the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and weekend food stamps to meet their hunger needs.

Aftermath

The pandemic caused lasting impacts that families and communities are still dealing with such as the rollback of federal benefits. In March 2020 the Food and Nutrition Service implemented an emergency allotment which increased household SNAP benefits by household size to the maximum monthly allotment.³⁷ The expansion ended in March 2023.³⁸ One home visitor’s family immediately noticed the effect of the policy termination as their usual \$300-400 benefit decreased to \$23. The end of the emergency allotment combined with an increased household income meant a drastic decline in benefits, even though the increased income resulted from a minimum wage job that did not fully cover the family’s needs.

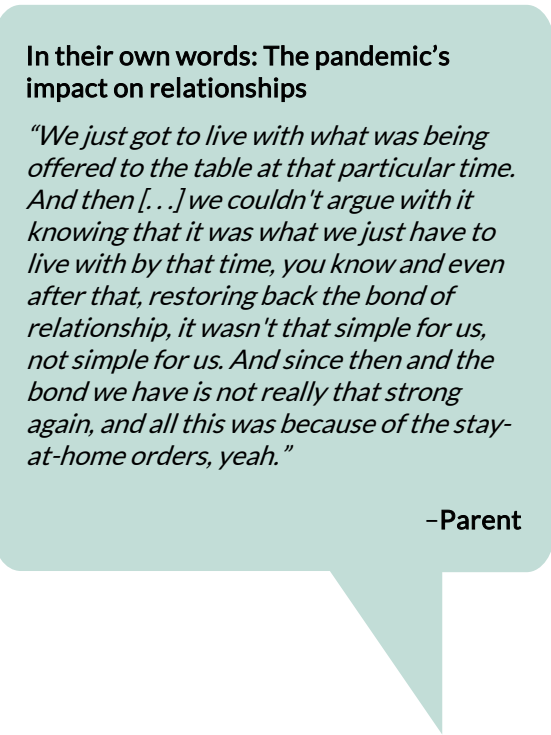
Figure 2. Facilitators to Positive Experiences with Medical Providers



A light green rounded rectangular box with a white background. The title "Facilitators" is centered at the top in bold black text. Below the title is a bulleted list of seven items.

Facilitators

- Patients feel heard by providers
- Reasonable wait times
- Access to childcare
- Provider accepts multiple forms of insurance
- Positive relationship with provider
- Transportation to and from provider



A light green rounded rectangular box with a white background. The title "In their own words: The pandemic's impact on relationships" is centered at the top in bold black text. Below the title is a quote in italics. At the bottom right of the box is the attribution "-Parent".

In their own words: The pandemic's impact on relationships

“We just got to live with what was being offered to the table at that particular time. And then [...] we couldn't argue with it knowing that it was what we just have to live with by that time, you know and even after that, restoring back the bond of relationship, it wasn't that simple for us, not simple for us. And since then and the bond we have is not really that strong again, and all this was because of the stay-at-home orders, yeah.”

-Parent

Although the pandemic brought new complexities, home visitors did not see a vast difference in the resource needs of their families. As one home visitor shared, *“it’s easy for someone who’s already in survival mode to continue to stay in survival mode. And so, I still saw parents providing for their families, children being fed. I still saw people where they didn’t lose their homes that I know of because they were already in government-assisted housing service, different things like that. So, I didn’t really experience a lot of that [increased need] with the families that I was serving.”* Families continue to move forward and look to the future. What kept them going through the pandemic was the company of their loved ones and the assurance that their family was healthy. As a result, the services provided by home visitors during that time prioritized advocacy, education, and emotional support.

In their own words: Remaining needs

“You know, the [basic] needs that my family has right now is kind of seeing how we will reconnect back the old relationships that we have lost. And also to get back financially stable like before. You know, during this period we aren’t financially stable anymore and I believe with time, we’re gonna grind up and remain financially stable again, yeah.”

–Parent

Spotlight: Joetta Shields

Joetta Shields, pictured at right, is a PAT educator based in Lake Providence, Louisiana and serves families across northeast Louisiana. She was invaluable in providing her insight as an educator and experience with gaining the trust of her families and working in the area. As a fierce advocate, she prioritizes ensuring her families know their rights regarding navigating the medical system: “You have rights, your children have rights. If you’re not comfortable with something or someone, then you don’t have to return back there for a particular service or be mistreated.”



Joetta Shields, Parents as Teachers Educator

During the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, home visitors remained a constant resource and supported families through connection to resources, emotional support, and education.

In northeast Louisiana, it is not easy for providers to immediately deliver services due to deeply entrenched distrust of new providers. To build trust, home visitors prioritize *“being willing to learn, to ask the questions”* or *“to learn about the culture.”* Families appreciated it when their home visitors were readily accessible and able to connect them to needed resources. Home visitors were an especially helpful resource when connecting families to services they were not aware of or connecting them directly to main points of contact.

Additionally, home visiting benefited not only the children but also the parents by providing advice on certain topics. Frustrations with home visiting arose when families were not able to contact their home visitor or worried that they were a burden.

Home visitors also prioritized advocacy and education when supporting their families. Home visitors emphasized families knowing their rights and understanding the difference between a good and bad experience, especially when interacting with medical providers. When families told stories of bad experiences, home visitors speculated that there may be biases due to income, race, education level, family name and reputation, or a combination of factors.

In their own words: Home visitors connecting families to resources

“Like for an example, we got this [...] got this question quite a few times. Some new parents probably weren’t aware of what to do in order to get in touch with the WIC office that’s providing WIC for their children. So we’re right there in the office so we lead them right to the phone number and some of them don’t even know how to look up the phone number, they don’t even know exactly the name, the information. So that’s why I say we can get them right to it as opposed to Google, social media, whatever.”

–PAT Home Visitor

In their own words: Family engagement during the pandemic

“Well, from my experience, during COVID, we lost a lot of clients. Not due to death, but everyone, they were in survival mode. So, meeting with someone who couldn’t help you financially or couldn’t help you deal with COVID was someone that would be put on the back burner. So, we lost a lot of clients due to that, and it was hard to get in contact with some of the families. A lot of the phones were off, a lot of people were unemployed. People lost their jobs, children not in school. So it was a chaotic time for us.”

–PAT Home Visitor

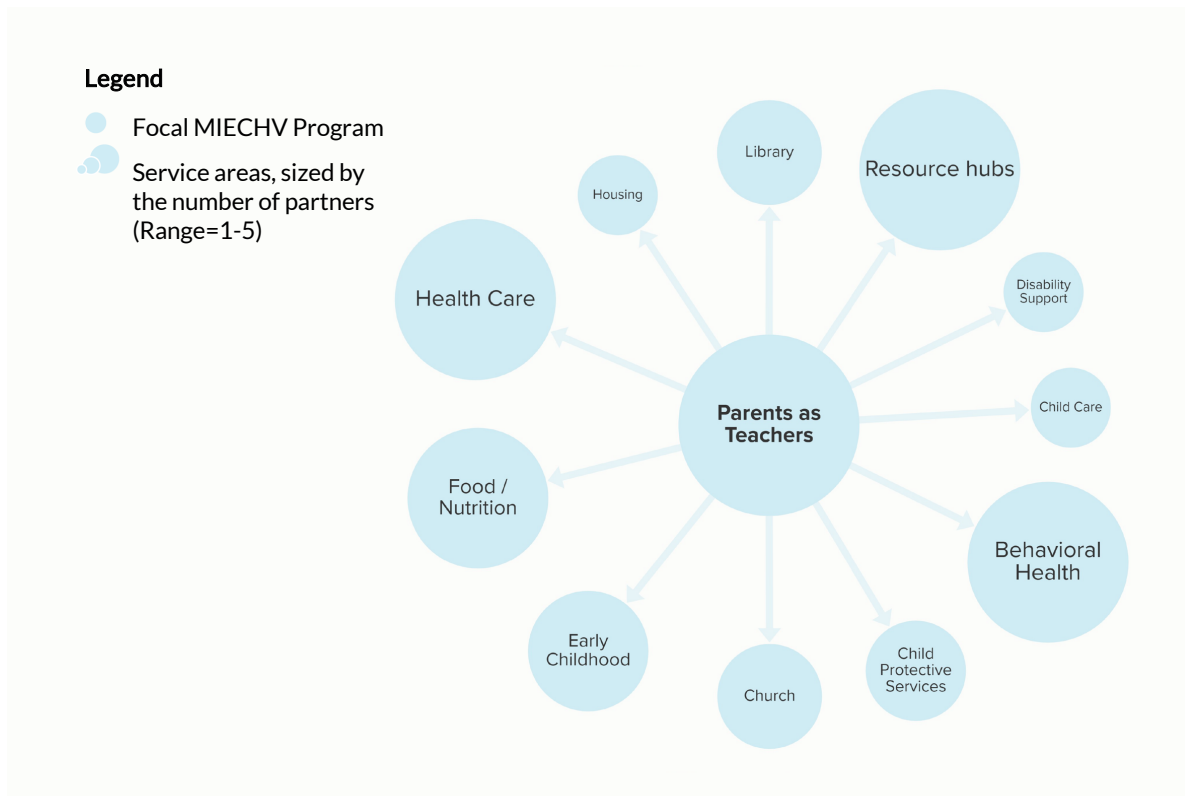
Home visitors needed to navigate the complexities of COVID-19, both on behalf of the families they served, as well as for themselves and their loved ones. Home visitors saw the transition to telework as a *“big plus.”* Increased support from employers also helped ease the effects of COVID-19. Although there was greater flexibility for families to conduct home visits with video calls or phone calls, one home visitor noted, *“I think they [families] really missed us not coming into the home, too. The phone calls were okay, but a*

lot of them missed that. "Like their clients, some home visitors also lost family members during the pandemic, which meant additional considerations from their colleagues. As noted by the supervisor of a home visiting team, "We did statewide have home visitors who had [...] lost family members, and so they were trying to manage that and support their families."

One unintended consequence of moving to a more virtual world meant fluctuations in the number of families engaging with home visiting. Some providers saw decreased referrals: "Prior to COVID-19 we had more referrals coming in from multiple agencies. During that time the referrals decreased, even with returning to the office we have not seen the uptick in referrals. We are continuing outreach and going out to check out the agencies to see if we can find the reason and as of yet no luck." Based on administrative data provided by the Parents as Teachers program, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was an increase in continuing participants that started to wane in 2021 and has returned to early pandemic levels in 2023.

COVID-19 changes created more opportunities for community service providers to collaborate. There was an increase in local health fairs put on by the Louisiana Department of Health, which was a good place for families to learn about health and local resources. Home visitors attended to recruit families and network with other providers. Additionally, community service providers relied on collaborations between local organizations and community members, leveraging local leaders (e.g., pastors, the mayor, nurses, community health workers) to distribute information or vouch for providers. Figure 3 illustrates the resources PAT educators connected their families with during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. Parents as Teachers Educators Referred Families to Other Community Services



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 Parents as Teachers

Looking ahead in Northeast Louisiana

Despite persistent inequities and the ever-shifting circumstances from COVID-19, Northeast Louisiana communities persisted. Residents found resilience through their experience of surviving multiple crises in the past and carried that knowledge through the COVID-19 pandemic. Though community service providers would sometimes identify needs or try to connect clients to resources, residents would still hesitate to ask for help even if needed. As one community service provider described, *“But it’s like we’re identifying, ‘Well, you need X, Y, Z.’ And they’re like, ‘But we have these things, and so we’re okay.’”*

The Parents as Teachers program, local health clinics, GUMBO grant, and public libraries are all doing great work in the area to support families in meeting their everyday needs. Home visitors specifically are a stalwart resource and addressed service gaps that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated. However, the structural foundation of Louisiana means that residents in the community have no choice but to be resilient and get by with what they already have due to geographic isolation, lack of economic mobility, and historic gaps in infrastructure. Moving forward, home visiting has the opportunity to serve as a much-needed resource by providing families not only emotional support, but material support as well. To continue supporting families in the area, home visitors will also need structural support, similar to what was seen during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accommodating working conditions, mental health considerations, and flexible funding opportunities can ensure that home visitors are best positioned to address the needs of families in northeast Louisiana.

Contributions

The authors would like to thank Susannah Boudreaux at Louisiana Department of Health in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Joetta Shields at Parents as Teachers in Lake Providence, Louisiana, and community researcher Amber Williams for their contributions and review of this profile. Project team members, Sarah Crowne, Dianne Maglaque, and Winnie Li contributed to the review and figure development of this profile.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank project consultants Bitu Amani, Karen Howard, and Deborah Stark for their contributions to the implementation of this project. The authors would also like to thank the project’s Community Advisor Workgroup who provided input on the project design and reviewed project products. The authors also thank the following project team members who contributed to the conceptualization and implementation of this project: Deana Around Him, Erin Bultinck, Madeline Carter, Sarah Crowne, Katy Falletta, Jessica Goldberg, Ilana Huz, Alison McClay, Christina Padilla, Katelyn Rust, and Jessica Warren. Lastly, the authors would like to thank all of the participating families and staff in northeast Louisiana who shared their perspectives during data collection.

This document was prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), by Child Trends, under HRSA contract number 75R60219D00026. The views expressed do not reflect the position of HRSA or HHS.

Suggested citation

Omonuwa, K., Hegseth, D., Davis Schoch, A., & Day, M. (2023). *Spotlight on northeast Louisiana’s home visiting and community response to COVID-19*. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/4837h5714q

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