



Safety Net Story Feeding the South Suburbs During a Pandemic

A trip to Blue Cap Pantry is a lifeline for Florida Mosely, a senior resident of Blue Island. Each month, she receives just \$16 in food stamp benefits to purchase groceries. **She also lives in an area that lacks stores with fresh, healthy grocery options—known as a “food desert”.**

“It’s a blessing to me,” Ms. Florida said about her monthly trips to Blue Cap Pantry.

Years ago, partners of the Blue Island-Robbins Neighborhood Network agreed that issues facing children, seniors and families in the area, like poor health and high poverty, were rooted in a lack of access to healthy foods.

Creating a pantry would be a critical first step to resolving those problems.

Now, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, Blue Cap Pantry is even more vital. Workers’ hours are being cut and they’re losing their jobs, compounding households’ existing financial struggles. The crisis is also deepening long-standing racial and economic inequities, particularly when it comes to accessing nutritious food and quality health care.

The food Blue Cap is providing through this pandemic is helping our neighbors meet their most basic needs. In this time of isolation, they’re also creating a sense of connection to the community.

Howard Brown, a frequent shopper at the pantry, said he doesn’t just go to the pantry for food, he goes “to receive hope.”

“Blue Cap is more than just a food pantry,” he said. ■

“People will go there to get fresh fruits and vegetables... but they also go there because they’re treated with respect. They’re treated with care.”

—Howard Brown, Pantry Customer

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Education Story **Cicero Moms Teach Importance of Early Ed**

As a child, Sofia Gutierrez was told she wouldn't need an education beyond elementary school, so she never pursued it. But as she moved through life and became a parent to two curious children, she came to realize education wasn't frivolous, but a necessity. **Today, Sofia volunteers as a parent ambassador in Cicero, teaching local caregivers this life-changing lesson.**



"I think if my father's mentality was 'Yes, you're able to study or further your education,' I would've succeeded or gone further in life," Sofia said through a translator. "I wish I had that—someone telling me 'You can do more.'"

"This is why I focus on [education], in order to tell other community members...that their support means a lot in their child's life," she added.

“I like the unity of the group. I like that we're all close together. I feel as though we're a family.”

—Sofia Gutierrez, Parent Mentor

By going door-to-door and visiting local sites, Sofia and other parent ambassadors work together to inform families about the importance of early learning and share information about educational services available in their west-side community. They also host Café Conchas, or parent cafes, to create supportive relationships between parents and educate them about issues important to their children's learning.

The Cicero Neighborhood Network—a coalition of residents, schools, government leaders, social service providers and other stakeholders—brought this initiative to life. With support from United Way of Metro Chicago, Neighborhood Network partners work collaboratively to improve academic outcomes for Cicero students and meet their families' basic needs.

Local moms like Sofia drive this work.

"I like the unity of the group. I like that we're all close together. I feel as though we're a family," Sofia said. "We're all headed towards the same direction—to bring children to programs—and we all have something good to contribute. Together, we can make a difference." ■

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Neighborhood Story

South Chicago Heals Together



South Chicago is known to many, but its greatest attributes—its resilience and history of service—are too often overlooked. Located 10 miles south of downtown Chicago, South Chicago is situated along the shores of Lake Michigan at the mouth of the Calumet River. The neighborhood sits at the intersection of rail, water and road infrastructure that once built this city.

It's also home to residents, nonprofits and community leaders who are dedicated to overcoming a long history of disinvestment, violence and segregation to build a better future for their neighbors. These stakeholders make up the South Chicago Neighborhood Network.

Network partners work closely to create a trauma-informed community that meets the needs of youth, seniors and families. They're able to do so with support from United Way of Metro Chicago.

"Our Neighborhood Network wants to make sure people can identify trauma and find ways to heal from it," said Tevonne Ellis, the Network's coordinator. "It's important for us to connect and understand how trauma shows up in our lives."

Through the Network, residents can participate in peace circles and trauma-informed trainings to help their neighbors cope with crises, as well as to grief groups and counseling programs that help them begin to heal after a traumatic event.

To break cycles of violence, the Network's partners also create opportunities for youth and young adults to get involved in their community. They learn to be leaders, host events and build parks, while setting a positive example for the next generation.

"My hope for South Chicago is that one day, instead of being on the news as a bad place, it will be on the news as a redeemed place. It can come back from the worst. It can be a place of hope again," said David Stinson, a young man who participates in its programs. ■

"It's important for us to connect and understand how trauma shows up in our lives."



Tevonne Ellis,
Neighborhood
Network Coordinator

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Education Story Leadership Training Empowers Local Parents

Prior to last school year, Luisa Valadez, a seven-year resident of Brighton Park, spent her days as a housewife, caring for her three children and home. Some days when her older children returned from school and asked her how her day was, **she became frustrated that she had little to share.**

"Sometimes, I felt like I can do nothing. [What am I] here for? What can I do?" said Luisa, reflecting on the past. "And in the night, when the day is done, I didn't do anything."

“We don’t know all the things we can do...when this program came to my life, everything changed.”

—Luisa Valadez, Brighton Park Mom

After talking to a friend, Luisa was invited to join a parent-mentorship program. Though at first hesitant, Luisa opted to give it a try.


Through our Neighborhood Network Initiative, we support the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council as they train parents to work alongside teachers in local classrooms. In this way, they play a more active role in their children's education.

"Parent leadership programs are a great way for parents to get to know each other and to get more involved in their community," said Jessica Lucas, a senior program manager with United Way of Metro Chicago. "It gives parents a voice and the confidence to speak up for their children and advocate for them within the school system and their communities."

The benefits of the program are felt throughout the community. "Parents and teachers working together is probably the best formula for student success," said Richard Morris, principal of Burroughs Elementary School.

A year since her training, Luisa has seen significant personal growth. The parent leadership program not only increased her self-confidence, it's motivated her to return to school to earn her GED.

"Mothers like me, we always think that we were made to be home, to clean the house, to make dinner, and do laundry. We don't know all the things we can do," Luisa said. "When this program came to my life, everything changed." ■

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