



December 1, 2021

Lisa Shelley
Village Manager
Village of Oak Park
123 Madison Street
Oak Park, IL 60304

Ms. Shelley,

On behalf of Hephzibah Children's Association, I am pleased to submit the following request for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Village of Oak Park. As outlined in detail in the attached narrative, we are respectfully requesting \$525,000 from the Village of Oak Park ARPA funds. This funding will ensure our ability to support necessary programming for Oak Park children including our critical comprehensive therapeutic services for severely traumatized young children who reside at Hephzibah Home, as well as our sliding-scale after school and summer day care program which serves hundreds of Oak Park elementary school children and their families.

We are grateful for your thoughtful consideration of this request and welcome the opportunity to answer any further questions you may have regarding this request or our organizational needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Merry Beth Sheets", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Merry Beth Sheets
Executive Director
Direct Line: 708-649-7103
E-mail: mbsheets@hephzibahhome.org

About Hephzibah Children's Association

Hephzibah Children's Association has a rich and esteemed history of caring for vulnerable children and helping families in need. Hephzibah is Oak Park's oldest social service agency, founded in 1897 when village resident Mary Wessels opened her home to two young boys. When a local orphanage was destroyed by fire, Mary took in dozens of orphans and made it her calling to care for society's most vulnerable children. She named the children's home after her mother as an expression of her mission to create a nurturing haven for children in need. What began with the group home has grown and expanded over the years to meet the changing needs of the community and clients. With a focus on keeping children safe by strengthening, healing, and keeping families together, we provide both prevention and intervention child welfare services. In addition to Hephzibah Home, which each year provides extensive care and therapeutic services for up to 60 severely abused and neglected children ages 3-11, Hephzibah also provides:

- family-based services for more than 200 foster care children and families who require extensive behavioral and psychological support;
- intensive case management and support services for nearly 300 low-income families in crisis due to poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and other factors;
- after school and summer day care services for more than 600 Oak Park children;
- a Positive Parenting abuse and neglect prevention program;
- and an adoption program for children who cannot return to their biological families.

Hephzibah's mission is to help children thrive and families flourish through innovative, community-based programs. The organization maintains the highest level of professional accreditation by the National Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services and Hephzibah is recognized statewide for our comprehensive, transformative programming that far exceeds state requirements; a highly trained and experienced staff; and strong and engaged community support. Embedded in our mission and operations is a commitment to provide for needs of every child who comes to us; thus, our services far exceed state requirements.

Hephzibah Group Home

Hephzibah Home serves the most vulnerable young children in Illinois and is the only group home program in the state designated to care for the most extreme cases of abuse and neglect of young children, ages 3-11. The home's 16-bed Diagnostic Treatment Center (DTC) is the only designated diagnostic treatment center for young children in the state. When children arrive at Hephzibah, they receive intensive stabilization and therapeutic care in the DTC typically for six to nine months. In addition, they receive a comprehensive assessment to analyze the individual impact trauma has had in a variety of areas of each child's life, including social/emotional wellbeing, physical health, mental health, educational progress, etc. Children who are not ready to move to family-based care, transition to our residential therapeutic program located on the upper level of the home. Children in this longer-term program live in Hephzibah Home for up to several years while they continue to receive the therapeutic support and services they need to heal. These services include a structured, safe, trauma-informed environment; individual therapy from a variety of modalities, including cognitive-behavioral, play therapy and pet therapy; group therapy focused on social skill development and self-management; and psychiatric services. In addition, each child receives year-round educational enrichment, advocacy, and support; and comprehensive wraparound supports providing opportunities to engage in the community and participate in normal childhood activities like swimming, camping, and field trips. All children are

youth in care meaning that they are in the custody of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, all are low or extremely low income, and all are Medicaid recipients.

Hephzibah After School and Summer Day Care Program

For more than 40 years, Hephzibah has provided essential after-school and full-day summer day care services for more than 700 Oak Park elementary school-aged children from over 500 families. We offer a nurturing, enriching, and dynamic day care experience for children in grades K-5 after school, on school holidays, and during the summer months. Our day care activities are designed to help children achieve their full social, emotional, and intellectual potential by fostering the development of a wide variety of skills, as well as social competence and a positive self-image. As part of delivering comprehensive program services, Hephzibah provides social work services to address the needs of children and families in the program. The children and families are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, fulfilling a critical need in the Oak Park community for affordable, school-age day care.

A vital component of Hephzibah's after school and summer day care program is the Family Support Program providing a range of short and long-term services designed to stabilize and strengthen families that may be experiencing a crisis or stress in the family unit. In addition to addressing the individual needs of the children in the program, the program's social worker provides support to at-risk families. The social worker works with the children addressing issues of physical and verbal aggression; developing self-control and managing impulses in large group settings; trusting adults; and developing healthy relationships with peers. She also helps identify and support academic needs that can be addressed in the day care setting through tutoring and homework help and she provides training to the day care staff on the social and emotional needs of the children served.

Fees are assessed on a sliding scale and offset by financial aid when necessary to ensure that every family in our community has access to high-quality day care. Hephzibah's Day Care Program is a critical resource for working families, and especially during the pandemic, for single-parent households, and for essential workers. The program prioritizes admission for low-income families and more than a third of those served are low to moderate income households.

Statement of Need

As an essential service provider, Hephzibah has been on the front lines of providing support to children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic in all our programs, and the pandemic has had a significant financial impact on operations. We have experienced tremendous increase in cost of doing business simply to keep our children and families safe as we comply with all local, state, and federal regulations as set by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Illinois Department of Health, the Cook County Department of Health, and the Oak Park Department of Health. In addition, Hephzibah's Day Care Program complies with all District 97 requirements.

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Hephzibah has spent more than \$590,000 on COVID-specific expenses to meet these guidelines including, but not limited to:

- PPE for staff and families
- daily disinfecting and cleaning
- incentive pay for our essential workers

- upgraded technology for mobile workforce adaptations including cell phones, laptops, network broadband extensions and WIFI connections
- emergency financial support for at-risk families
- additional equipment and staff to meet COVID safety requirements
- costs associated with supporting e-learning needs for children and families

Many of the added COVID-related expenditures specifically at our 24 hour/7 day per week group home are mandated for the agency to meet all local, state, and federal health and safety requirements. These expenses will continue for the foreseeable future until the State of Illinois moves to pre-pandemic operations. The ongoing costs for Hephzibah Home alone exceed \$6,000 per month.

Compounding the increase in expenses, Hephzibah has experienced – and continues to experience – a significant loss of revenue especially in both the group home and day care programs.

Since March 2020, throughout FY 21 and the first half of FY 22, the length of stay for the children in the Hephzibah Home has been longer than normal directly due to multiple COVID complications. Children were simply not moving to and from placements as many foster parents and other programs were reluctant to accept new children into their homes. Longer lengths of stay prolong the healing process and the children's difficult journey to recovery, and many pandemic-related protocols and disruptions further impact their therapeutic progress. Hephzibah maintains low staff-to-child ratios and this year, we were not able to introduce additional high needs children into the program for two months due to the lack of qualified staff resulting from the workforce crisis. Subsequently, to ensure the health, safety, and protection of the children and staff, Hephzibah's staff of essential workers have taken additional shifts, including working overtime. While the operating expenses for maintaining our high-level of care are increasing, the lower census means lower reimbursement from the State of Illinois. In addition, the daily mandated enhanced cleaning and sanitation requirements for this 24-hour, seven-days-per-week program and related expenses are fixed costs that the agency must absorb. **On average, we typically serve 60 children per year in the Hephzibah Home, however, in FY20, we only served 35 children and 43 in FY21.**

Hephzibah's After School and Summer Day Care Program has weathered incredible challenges resulting from the pandemic. The program closed entirely while schools were closed for in-school learning. The subsequent transitions between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning resulted in fewer children and families enrolling in the program and required Hephzibah to institute many expensive program modifications to protect children and staff, allow for social distancing, and ensure appropriate staff to child ratios. **In 2019, before the pandemic, the program served 773 children. In 2021, we served 484 and this year we have served roughly 325 children – a 58% reduction in children served.**

Current COVID safety protocols and space availability limit the number of children enrolled in each school program, and additional staff are required for each group of children. Two additional supervisory staff were hired to meet requirements, and, because staff who are exposed to COVID-19 are required to quarantine, more substitute staff members are needed. During the 2020-2021 school year when District 97 had both remote and in-person learning during the school day, Hephzibah provided a remote learning option for working parents which required increasing the number of full-time staff to accommodate both remote learning and after school childcare. Additionally, during this time, the social/emotional/behavioral needs of children enrolled in the program were much higher than normal and required the regular attention and intervention of the program's social worker and supervisors.

The many changes resulted in high staff turnover, and the workforce shortage resulted in not having sufficient qualified staffed to open three of Hephzibah's eight, day care sites at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. These sites remain closed, impacting hundreds of working families in Oak Park who are struggling to secure safe, high-quality childcare for their children. The program currently operates at 63% capacity, so revenue is currently 63% of budget. However, fixed costs remain and cannot be reduced, leading to a budget deficit. Ongoing COVID disruptions affect program capacity which further impacts the revenue stream, further adding to the budget deficit.

Hephzibah relies on the strong Oak Park community for support to ensure our ability to deliver a critical level of care and service and we need that support now more than ever. During this very challenging time, Hephzibah respectfully requests \$525,000 in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to offset \$1,240,000 in current fiscal year budget deficits resulting from increased expenditures and reduction of revenue incurred since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hephzibah continues to incur approximately \$15,000 in additional monthly expenses related to the pandemic, as well as \$120,000 in lost revenue.

Hephzibah will use ARPA funds to stabilize two of our core programs: Day Care and Hephzibah Home, which are both continuing to experience significant budget deficits resulting from increased and ongoing COVID-specific expenses, and the loss of revenue due to COVID-specific and COVID-related issues including the nationwide workforce shortage. These funds will also assist us to stabilize our workforce through a variety of mitigation efforts including:

- an incentivized employee referral program
- offering a sign-on bonus for key positions
- increase in starting pay and subsequent cascade for current staff

Impact Statement

Ensuring the stability of Hephzibah Home is essential for the most severely traumatized children in the State of Illinois because they require a safe, supportive, and therapeutic place to live in order to stabilize and heal. A loss or reduction in services for these children, would result in them not receiving the care they so desperately need, remaining in unstable, often times unsupportive living arrangements that cannot meet their needs, and lingering in psychiatric hospitals for much longer than is medically necessary (there are currently 57 Illinois youth in care in psychiatric hospitals beyond medical necessity). Hephzibah provides exceptional care, yet we recognize that it is in the best interest of every child to be raised in a home with a family, not in a group home setting. Enabling children to progress on their healing journey and move into a family setting as quickly as possible is essential for their progress. For every child that remains in the home longer than necessary to meet their therapeutic goals, another child goes unserved.

In the absence of ARPA funding, Hephzibah faces an ongoing and significant reduction in services, particularly affecting Oak Park working families served by our after-school program and the community's most vulnerable children residing in or awaiting placement at Hephzibah Home. Service reductions include the continued shuttering of three after-school program sites and even the potential closure of additional sites of Hephzibah's after-school and summer day program which typically serves more than 700 children attending Oak Park District 97 schools. A significant portion of these families are single-parent households, and more than one-third are low-to-moderate income who pay on a sliding scale fee basis. Many are essential workers who do not have the option of working from home and need reliable, high-quality childcare to maintain employment. The further loss or reduction of stable, affordable childcare in Oak Park will have a profound impact on Oak Park families and may result in loss of employment and increased stressors in the household, placing vulnerable, school-aged children at greater risk.

Pedraza, Arlene

From: Jan Arnold <Jan.Arnold@pdop.org>
Sent: Thursday, October 28, 2021 3:22 PM
To: ARPAComments
Cc: Shelley, Lisa; Jan Arnold
Subject: Park District of Oak Park - ARPA Fund Request

WARNING- EXTERNAL EMAIL: If unknown sender, do not click links/attachments. Never give out your user ID or password.

To Whom It May Concern,

Please accept this email as an official request from the Park District of Oak Park for the Village of Oak Park to consider allocating \$2M of the ARPA funds to the Park District of Oak Park.

Per my conversation on Monday with Lisa Shelley, I looked at GFOA's guide and it took me to the <http://treasury.gov> site (<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/state-and-local-fiscal-recovery-funds>) which listed five (5) eligible spending categories for governments, one of which being: ***Address negative economic impacts caused by the public health emergency, including economic harms to workers, households, small businesses, impacted industries, and the public sector***

The Park District thinks it is important to note that the public sector is specifically listed and that it is separate from the lost revenue calculation, which is another one of the other five eligible categories.

Below the list the treasury also states, "within these overall categories, recipients have broad flexibility to decide how best to use this funding to meet the needs of their communities." And even though a lost revenue calculation would not be required for this, we believe it's pretty easy to show how the Park District of Oak Park had severe economic impacts due to the pandemic. The District generated approximately \$6M fewer dollars in 2020 than in 2019 due to closures of facilities and reduced size of groups in our programs all caused by Covid-19.

Based on the District's review of the ARPA language, it appears that the transfer of funding to another unit of government is an allowed use of funds (hence the addressing economic impacts in the public sector).

The Park District of Oak Park respectfully requests \$2M to help support our agency's efforts to continue to support program access and expanded facilities that address the needs of our community's youth, teen, adult and senior populations. The amount of \$2M is equal to the amount of funding that the Park District of Oak Park was not able to add to our CIP in 2020 due to the huge drop in revenue from the pandemic. The funds would be requested for distribution in calendar year 2022.

Please let me know if there is any additional information needed to assist in the Village's evaluation process.

Thanks in advance for your consideration.

Best,

Jan

Jan R. Arnold
Executive Director
Park District of Oak Park
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Oak Park, IL 60302
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O: (708) 725-2020
jan.arnold@pdop.org



ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



Collaboration for
Early Childhood
Strong Start, Bright Future

PROPOSAL

Name of Applying Organization: Collaboration for Early Childhood
Agency Website www.collab4kids.org
Contact Person: John Borrero, Executive Director
Address: 171 S. Oak Park Avenue
Oak Park, IL 60302
Contact Phone: 708-613-6122
Contact Email: jborrero@collab4kids.org



ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE

OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



Collaboration for
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OVERVIEW

For the past twenty years, the Collaboration for Early Childhood has worked in partnership with more than sixty agencies to narrow the opportunity gap that begins in the first few years of a child's life. We leverage our relationships to integrate all of our community resources to better meet the needs of our youngest children, their families, and the complex network of people that mobilizes around their success.

Families and Children Need Support

COVID-19 has represented an unprecedented time of need in our community. Families have relied upon the Collaboration for Early Childhood more than ever before. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Collaboration has seen an increase in the number of families qualifying and enrolling in publicly funded preschools. We have also seen a nearly 300% jump in families who qualify for assistance. In response to these signs of need, we have increased our efforts to help families to find support. In 2021, we secured outside grants to increase our outreach to new and prenatal mothers and to support their access to health and wellness services, mental health supports. These efforts have helped to bridge some of the existing gaps. [This proposal seeks to further close gaps in support for some of Oak Park's most fragile families: those families enrolled in intensive home visiting services.](#)

Searching for Wellness

The Oak Park community relies heavily upon childcare. Because Oak Park is a place where people come to raise families, access to early childhood education is an integral and necessary part of our identity. For this reason, much of our support has gone towards ensuring that preschool programs are still able to function. Early in the pandemic, the Collaboration provided reopening support and guidance to programs, as well as PPE delivery and guidance around accessing Illinois State resources. As the pandemic's child care crisis deepened, we became a major support, a central source of information, and a lifeline to many of our program directors and family child care professionals. We also offered free, credited professional development opportunities focusing on trauma-informed practice, mental wellness and mindfulness. Although we offered as much support as we could, we were limited and many needs went unmet.

Solid and consistent support around skills-building has mitigated some of the potential harm that teachers and directors could experience, as they navigate a health pandemic and a time of social unrest. Although much of the

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community survived this period, the effects of this stress and trauma are ongoing. In households and classrooms, both teachers and families have needed support in understanding and responding to their own emotional needs, as well as the needs of children in their care. Children have nuanced emotional lives and have been strongly impacted by the pandemic. Adults, in turn, have needed support in understanding children's social and emotional development, and the behaviors that are manifested as a result of the pandemic. The Collaboration has worked on a small scale to give some parents and teachers tools for understanding challenging behaviors. In doing so, we have provided what we believe is a vital tool in our community's efforts to keep children in school and decrease the incidence of preschool suspension and expulsion. The more adults understand children, the more successful children will be. There is a need to offer this kind of support more broadly in our community. [This proposal seeks support to build mechanisms for offering mental health and wellness support to teachers as well as resources to enhance classroom practice.](#)

A Struggling System

Outside of the classroom, before the pandemic caused businesses and schools to close, our child care system was already fragile. From the perspective of early childhood professionals, it is a difficult and costly business to run, and one that often relies solely on the tuition that parents are able to pay. Working families with young children, on the other hand, have long relied on a patchwork of care, shuttling their children from family members to preschool programs to afterschool programs, just to get through each work day. Child care is expensive, often with limited hours. It was a tenuous network before 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic further strained this system of care. Programs struggled at first with State mandated lower enrollments, teacher fears, family concerns and the very complicated task of creating a safe environment for a population that it not eligible to be vaccinated. Our preschool programs continued working with an entirely unvaccinated student body. It is a difficult time for child care. Added to this stress are the ways in which our economy has relied heavily upon the ability of child care programs to open, so that adults could return to work. In order for our economy to work, child care has to work.

Oak Park has approximately 3,800 children under the age of five. Prior to the pandemic, Oak Park had a network of 39 child care programs and 617 people working in early childhood. Seven of these programs were unable to weather the pandemic and have closed their doors. This is a nearly 20% drop in the number of programs available

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to families and a dramatic decrease in the number of Oak Park children who will find quality preschool in our community. The programs that survived remain universally understaffed and under-enrolled.

Women of color have been hit especially hard: the labor force participation rate for Black women has fallen by 3.2 percentage points during the pandemic as compared to 1.0 percentage points for Black men and 2.0 percentage points for White women. Add to this the fact that the child care workforce is 92% women¹ and that she, often a parent herself, typically earns less than \$12 dollars an hour².

During this crucial time for children, our early childhood system needs to be able to attract and recruit new families and staff. We need to create a network of early childhood programs that are resilient and which operated sustainably, skilled and able to seek out and apply for funding to continue to run and enhance their programs. [This proposal includes a request for support to build a Village-wide system for recruiting and retaining talented educators and leaders to Oak Park and attracting families to our programs. In addition, this proposal includes a request for funding to build capacity in our community for grant-writing and grant-seeking, to enable Oak Park programs to build and grow in their capacity to sustain themselves.](#)



¹ <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/childcare-workers>

² <https://theconversation.com/the-typical-child-care-worker-in-the-us-earns-less-than-12-an-hour-160146>

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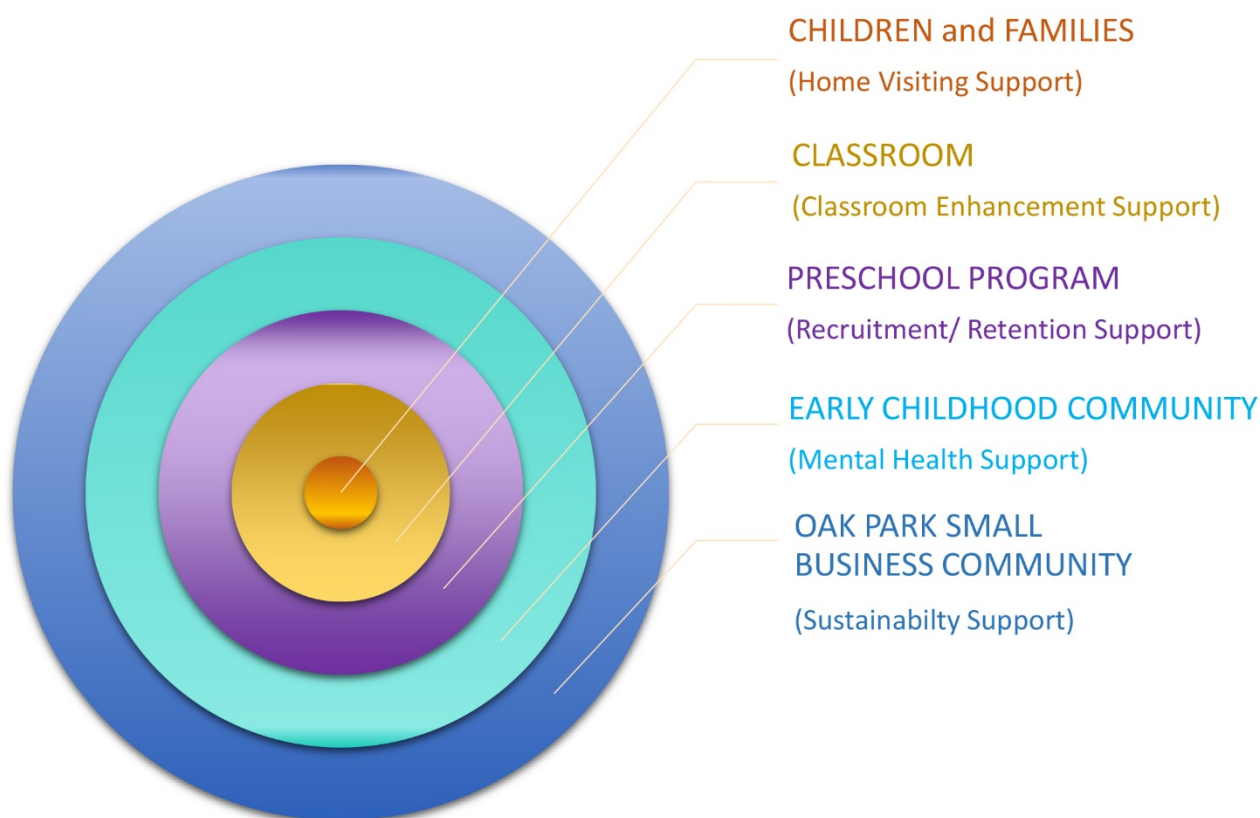
MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



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Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



The Way Forward

The pandemic is not yet in the rearview mirror. ARPA funds have the potential to revitalize our child care workforce, empower families to re-enter the workforce, enhance the healthy development of our littlest citizens, and stabilize our future. Throughout the pandemic we have remained connected to the Oak Park community. Through group support sessions, focus groups and workshops, we have observed their struggles, heard their laments and listened to their worries. We ask the Village to join us in being a champion for the needs of our young children. It is in that spirit that we submit this proposal to the Village of Oak Park. We request funding to support the early childhood community in the areas outlined above.

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY

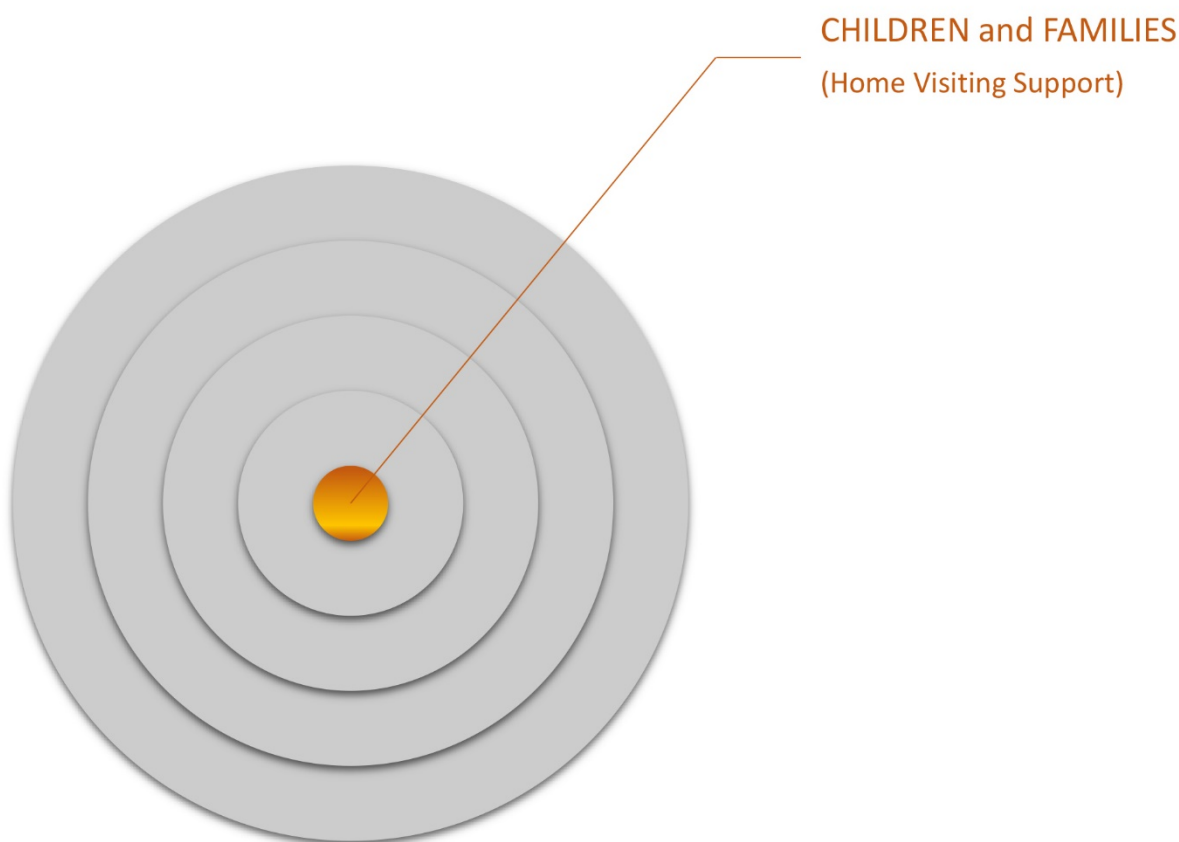


Collaboration for
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1. SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: HOME VISITING

Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



APPROACH

Home visiting is a prevention strategy used to support pregnant moms and new parents to promote infant and child health, foster educational development and school readiness, and help prevent child abuse and neglect. There are currently four home visiting providers that serve Oak Park: Easterseals, New Moms, Kids Above All, and Children's Home & Aid Society. These programs collect demographic and income information and track the developmental, health and mental health needs of the families in their care. Home visiting and the related

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services are specifically targeted in the ARPA funding guidelines. Additionally, there are approximately 25 home visiting families in Oak Park whose income levels make them unable to purchase basic health and emergency supplies, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), groceries, sanitizing supplies, diapers and baby wipes.

A yearly commitment of \$19,250 would provide assistance with monthly groceries, diapers, wipes and personal protective equipment for the 25 Oak Park families in need. It would also provide assistance in purchasing school supplies for their children. Of the \$19,250, \$5,000 would go towards the purchase of PPEs, \$6,000 would cover a year of grocery assistance for the 25 families, and \$7500 would supply families with diapers and wipes for part of the year. The remaining \$750 would be divided across the 25 families for the purchase of school supplies.

CRITERIA

	Priority & Timeline	Cost & Resources	Implementer	ARPA Category
Home Visiting Support	High Priority Quick to implement	Basic necessities = \$14,250/year PPE = \$5,000/year	Collaboration for Early Childhood, Easterseals	<i>Programs to provide home visits ... to individuals with young children to provide education and assistance for economic support, health needs, or child development³</i>
Total Request	\$19,250/ year			

ARPA PRONG

Programs to provide home visits ... to individuals with young children to provide education and assistance for economic support, health needs, or child development.

³ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26822
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

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POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

This initiative could engage the following community entities and leaders:

- Easterseals
- New Moms
- Children's Home and Aid Society
- Kids Above All



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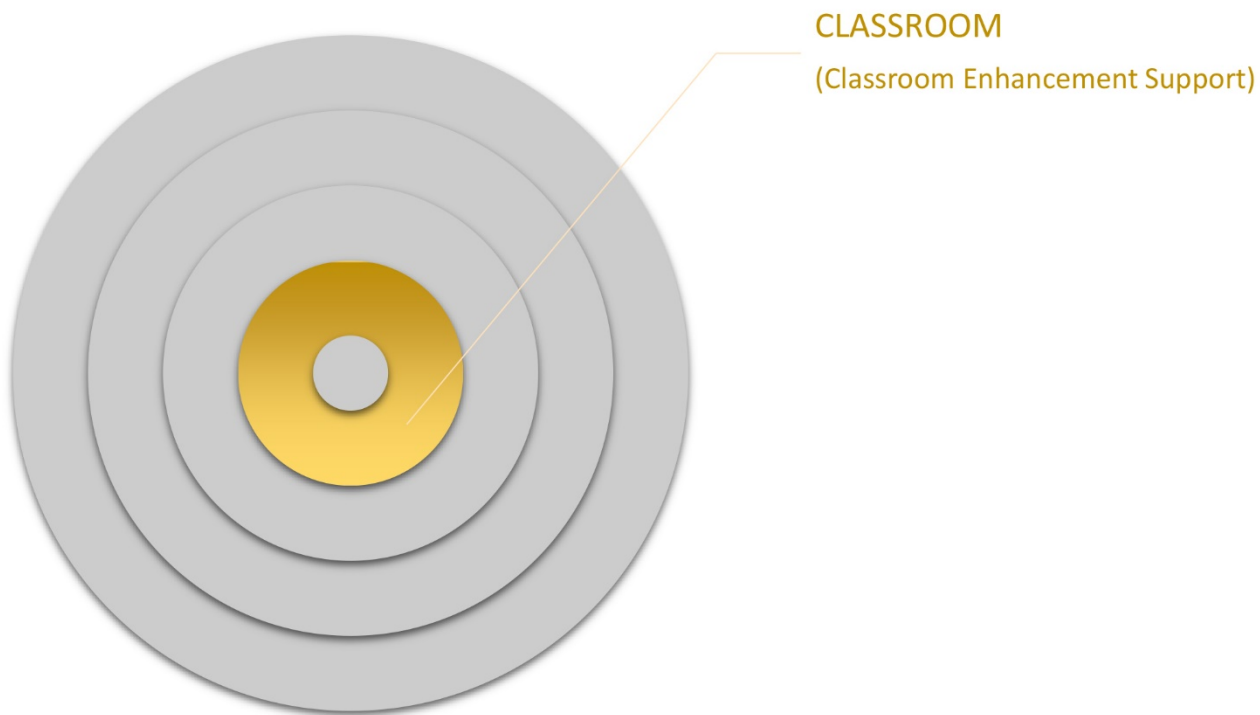


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2. SUPPORTING CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



APPROACH

A strong and responsive preschool classroom is a student-centered environment, utilizing a social and emotional learning approach to teaching and discipline. It is comprised of a set of research- and evidence-based practices designed to create safe, joyful, and engaging classroom and school communities for both students and teachers. Schools and teachers focus on creating optimal learning conditions for students to develop the academic, social, and emotional skills needed for success in and out of school, and building positive school and classroom communities where students learn, behave, hope, and set and achieve goals.

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Social-Emotional Learning is the process by which children and adults understand and manage emotions; set and achieve positive goals; learn, observe and model empathy; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make responsible decisions. Learning to manage feelings, respond positively to stressful situations, and get along with others is a vital part of childhood development. There can be no doubt that what teachers believe, know, and can do powerfully influences student learning. Teachers working in the environment, and navigating the effects of a global health pandemic must be able to pivot and their beliefs about children and learning.

An early childhood community that supports their work will equip them with new knowledge and skills, and encourages them to transform their teaching by putting their new beliefs and knowledge into action. We must help preschool educators to access social-emotional learning resources that will enable them to bring highly interactive, hands-on tools to the classroom. Social emotional learning materials are a part of a healthy classroom setting, and are needed today more than ever before. Preparation for this elevated level of practice involves learning materials and children's literature around social and emotional development; adaptive materials for children with developmental needs; and professional development for adults around the proper development and use of a social emotional curriculum.

A. SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND SENSORY MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOMS

Developmentally appropriate materials for early childhood providers to use with children with IEPs and/or children who need emotional or developmental support.

EXAMPLES

- *Provide sensory "calming boxes" for programs to use in their classrooms and potentially lend to families.*
- *Increase early childhood educators' knowledge and skills to support children with disabilities and social emotional support needs in their classrooms.*

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B. BOOKS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Literacy materials that focus on topics of social-emotional development, trauma, etc.

EXAMPLES

- *Provide social-emotional learning books to every provider.*

C. MONTHLY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFERINGS

Regular responsive group training events to support early childhood provider needs.

EXAMPLES

- *Compile the social-emotional learning resources available in the community to share with early education staff.*
- *Provide teacher education on how to support the social-emotional needs of students.*
- *Subsidize pay for teachers for time spent in consultation and training to reduce/avoid cost to programs (i.e. substitutes or after hour work time expectations).*



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CRITERIA

	Priority & Timeline	Cost & Resources	Implementer	ARPA Category
Sensory and Social Emotional Materials	High priority. Implementation is quick since this is already in place on a smaller scale. It involves identifying, purchasing, and distributing materials. Staff training is minimal.	Sensory materials = \$31,500 one-time cost to equip Oak Park programs with sensory materials.	Collaboration for Early Childhood, Oak-Leyden Developmental Services	<i>(xviii) ... other behavioral health services⁴</i>
Social Emotional Curriculum Books and Children's Literature	High priority. Implementation is quick. It involves identifying, purchasing, and distributing materials. Staff training is minimal.	Books = \$10,000/yearly expense	Collaboration for Early Childhood, Oak Park Public Library, Wonder Works	<i>Evidence-based practices to address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students⁵</i>
Professional Development	High priority. Implementation is quick. Workshops can be added onto an existing system of professional development.	Workshops = \$12,000/yearly expense	Collaboration for Early Childhood, Wonder Works	<i>New or expanded high-quality childcare to provide safe and supportive care for children⁶</i>
Total Request	\$22,000 per year. <i>((\$53,500 for year one, for one time purchase of sensory and social emotional materials for classrooms.)</i>			

⁴ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26822

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

⁵ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26796

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

⁶ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26796

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



Collaboration for
Early Childhood
Strong Start, Bright Future

ARPA PRONG

Addressing Educational Disparities as well as Promoting Healthy Childhood Environments

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

This initiative could engage the following community entities and leaders:

- Oak-Leyden Developmental Services
- Oak Park Public Library
- Wonder Works Children's Museum



ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



Collaboration for
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3. EARLY CHILDHOOD RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

(Recruitment/ Retention Support)

APPROACH

Recruitment and retention focuses on attracting new early childhood practitioners and keeping experienced, veteran early childhood practitioners, ensuring efforts are being made to fill position vacancies with qualified personnel and maintain existing personnel. Recruiting and retaining highly-qualified professionals has been a long-standing challenge in early childhood education. Working in a historically low-paying field with limited to no benefits, early childhood professionals are often unable to support themselves and/or a family and need to find a different job. Sometimes that means that highly-qualified educator, upon completing a degree or certification program, moves to a K-12 setting where benefits and salary are much greater.

ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE

OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



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Other times, it means that the professional leaves the education field altogether in search of greater compensation. With an ever-changing workforce, providing professional development is a vital—yet costly—endeavor, with no guarantee that the investment of time and money will result in retention of the newly prepared workforce.

The ability to keep the same staff for years is important, because young children require consistency of caregivers, settings, and experiences to have a strong foundation from which to grow and develop. Staff turnover or children moving from one program to another because of quality issues and/or staffing shortages means that young children do not have the benefit of that necessary consistency. Children's development and growth can be negatively affected when young children repeatedly start over with building new relationships or learning new environments and routines.

In the Oak Park community, COVID-19 has negatively impacted the small businesses that provide early learning and care before kindergarten. Child care providers are reporting reduced enrollment even now that space restrictions have been lifted. Families are hesitant to rely upon child care, because centers may close occasionally to quarantine, parents may be un- or under-employed, they may be caring for children while working from home, or they may be concerned about safety since children under 5 are not yet vaccinated. We know about this dip in enrollment from local child care administrators and research⁷.

To complicate this issue, low staff wages have made it difficult for early learning programs to retain staff when competing with other employers for less demanding, higher paying positions. A preschool teacher makes between \$11 and \$15 per hour, but a deliver driver for Amazon begins at \$17 per hour in Chicago. In addition, early childhood staff are at higher risk of COVID-19 exposure due to the nature of their work and the fact that young children cannot yet be vaccinated. We propose a two-pronged approach: Enroll more children into early learning programs and recruit and retain qualified teachers.

⁷ <https://chicago.chalkbeat.org/2021/10/29/22751615/illinois-student-enrollment-pandemic-decline-prekindergarten-early-education>

ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE

OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



Collaboration for
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A. ENROLLMENT SUPPORT

Assistance and maintenance of community initiatives to promote child enrollment in local early childhood programs.

EXAMPLES

- *Implement an extensive campaign to promote the importance of early learning prior to Kindergarten.*
- *Ensure families are aware of financial assistance for early childhood education.*
- *Implement a tuition loss mitigation subsidy to programs and families who qualify based on income.*

B. EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF RECRUITMENT & RETENTION SUPPORT

Directed support to recruit and retain talented early childhood staff to short-term and long-term early childhood program staff vacancies.

EXAMPLES

- *Provide access to online platforms that address staffing challenges for substitutes and full-time staff.*
- *Create a local early childhood job opening platform that programs and providers could access and to help alleviate staff shortages.*
- *Identify and support volunteer opportunities to support early childhood programs.*
- *Host an annual job fair for programs to showcase their schools and talk with interested parties. Coordinate with local education institutions to send their early childhood graduates and students to it.*
- *Work with local colleges who offer early childhood coursework to increase internship opportunities.*
- *Ensure professional development trainings are meeting the needs of the workforce or programs.*

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CRITERIA

	Priority & Timeline	Cost & Resources	Implementer	ARPA Category
Enrollment Support	High priority. Enrollment for Fall 2022 begins in February 2022.	Campaign = \$5,000 Tuition stipends = \$10,000/year	Collaboration for Early Childhood	<i>Promoting Healthy Childhood Environments⁸ and/or Small Businesses and Non-profits⁹</i>
Staff Recruitment Support	High priority. Full implementation requires additional staff support in a p/t staff role. Partial implementation can be done with existing resources.	Sub service = \$6,000/year .5 FTE = \$24,000/year	Collaboration for Early Childhood	<i>Promoting Healthy Childhood Environments¹⁰ and/or Small Businesses and Non-profits¹¹</i>
Total Request	\$45,000 yearly			

ARPA PRONG

Promoting high-quality child care, especially for families experiencing financial hardship.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

This initiative could engage the following community entities and leaders:

- Local Preschool programs
- Higher Education Institutions in Greater Chicagoland

⁸ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26796
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds
⁹ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26794
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds
¹⁰ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26796
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¹¹ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26794
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ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY

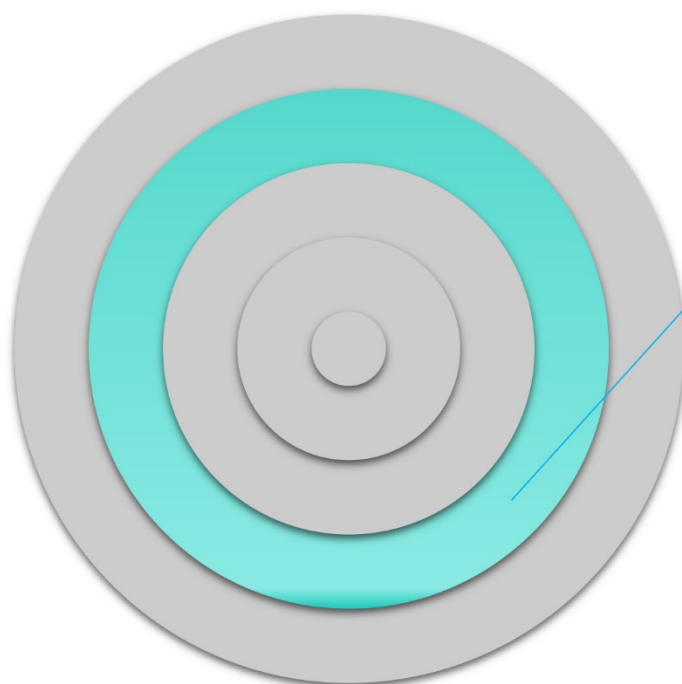


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Early Childhood
Strong Start, Bright Future

4. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY
(Mental Health Support)

APPROACH

Early childhood mental health refers to the healthy social, emotional and behavioral well-being of young children. Early childhood mental health can look differently depending on the individual child, their family and their community or culture. Young children are learning how to experience, express and regulate their own emotions and understanding, so there is some trial and error. They need to be able to experiment and learn while in a safe relationship with caring adults, who can give them guidance.

Current public and political attention to early childhood education and universal pre-K reflects a growing interest in making sure that children have strong early childhood education that prepares them for future success.

ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

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Research emphasizes that children need consistent, sensitive, caring, and stable relationships with adults in order to thrive. Adults who are well, physically and mentally, are likely to have better relationships with children and other adults than educators who are dealing with the effects of stress and trauma, or struggling with depression or chronic illness. It is critical that we pay attention to, invest in, and be compassionate about the well-being of the adults who provide early care and education.

Our focus on mental health support is on relieving some of the emotional load of early childhood teaching and care by offering general wellness, mindfulness, and support to mitigate significant mental health events and emergencies. *While intensive mental health services and counseling are certainly needed for families and people working in child care, we are relying on the mental health providers in our community to provide ongoing counselling and crisis management.*

We are proposing a referral system for mental health support (similar to the coordinated intake referrals we already provide for home visiting or public preschool guidance), where we build capacity in the community to offer this support, and subsidize these services for the early childhood community. **This area has been identified as a high priority by 100% of those we surveyed in the community.**

A. COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS SUPPORT

Ongoing wellness and mindfulness support for early childhood providers and families.

EXAMPLES

- *Provide discounts to child care providers to use the full array of wellness services at the West Cook YMCA.*
- *Assign a physician or other medical provider to advise each early childhood program on COVID-19 concerns that arise. This would have a model similar to the Child Care Health Consultants in Head Start, except that our focus would be exclusively on COVID-19 issues at programs.*
- *Build proactive integration of infant & early childhood mental health consultation services into provider programming.*

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B. VIRTUAL WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Self-initiated phone or virtual support for early childhood providers.

EXAMPLES

- *Fund memberships for young children or child care staff for online therapy services. Virtual therapy may be more accessible due to shortages or diminished access to mental health providers.*
- *Provide an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for early childhood providers as a benefit for staff to call when they need short-term assistance navigating personal issues that arise. EAPs allow staff to handle life issues with minimal disruption to their work.*
- *Facilitate group sessions for providers to process their emotions and challenges of working in the shared field of early childhood during a pandemic.*
- *Expand infant & early childhood mental health supports for programs, including purchasing virtual observation equipment to create a lending library to support the early childhood mental health consultation process.*



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CRITERIA

	Priority & Timeline	Cost & Resources	Implementer	ARPA Category
Community Wellness and Health Support	High priority. Implementation could move fairly quickly. Planning needs to occur with the partner agencies to work out how compensation happens, as well as other details.	YMCA (Free use of facilities for 70 Early childhood teachers at a time) = \$42,000/year Health Consultants = \$14,400/year	YMCA, others to be determined, Collaboration	<i>Mental health treatment¹²</i>
Virtual Wellness and Mental Health Support	High priority. Planning and implementation could move fairly quickly.	Online therapy = \$27,000 EAP = \$24,000/year Facilitated group = \$1,800/year	Telehealth, EAP, Collaboration	<i>Mental health treatment¹³</i>
Total Request	\$109,200 yearly			

ARPA PRONG

Behavioral health care.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

This initiative could engage the following community entities and leaders:

- YMCA
- Employee Assistance Provider/Network (EAP/EAN)
- Telehealth provider(s)

¹² Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26822
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

¹³ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26822
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5. SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT

Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



OAK PARK SMALL
BUSINESS COMMUNITY
(Sustainability Support)

APPROACH

In Oak Park, child care providers are small business owners. They operate either a center-based or home-based business where they employ a full staff of providers, utilize vendors for materials and food, and contribute to the local economy. Still, these small businesses struggle because they rely almost exclusively on tuition to fund all of their costs. There are funding opportunities available to child care providers. Finding these grants, applying for them, and keeping up with the reporting requirements is a significant task. Many times, the costs of applying for grants (such as hiring a consultant to seek and write grants) outweighs the benefits for a small business. A standard small grant application can thousands of dollars of consultant time and require significant internal

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capacity for paperwork and reporting. The capacity needs to be built in the community to support local programs from a central location. A dedicated staff person could be hired and become well-versed in the funding opportunities for which the child care industry is eligible. Under the Collaboration for Early Childhood, this person could help relieve the burden on program administrators who are already stretched thin and assist them in finding funding for special projects, site enhancements, and a variety of other fundable pursuits.

Additionally, while we are not able to pay teachers more than what they are paid (even \$1,000 increase for each of the community's 450 providers would amount to a monumental \$450,000 yearly expense), we could allocate resources to help educator and parents stretch their dollars further. The Collaboration for Early Childhood would like to design a community-based discount program which would group early childhood professionals into a unified body and then broker relationships with local businesses on their behalf. The Collaboration would work with local businesses to offer discounts for people purchasing items for use with young children. In addition to extending upon the buying power of the 450 teachers and over 4,000 parents of children under 5 in Oak Park, this keeps dollars in our community and supports local businesses.

A. TECHNICAL/FINANCIAL GRANT ASSISTANCE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROVIDERS

Dedicated staff support to early childhood programs to secure and report on grants and other funding opportunities for program operations and enhancements.

EXAMPLES

- *Provide technical grant writing assistance for programs to secure grant and foundation funding.*
- *Identify and communicate about funding and other supports that are available to programs.*
- *Provide ongoing support on grant reporting and ensure funding requirements are met.*

B. SMALL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP BROKERING/DISCOUNTING

Creation and maintenance of a community-based discounting program for early childhood providers.

EXAMPLES

- *Broker discounting relationships with local businesses on behalf of early childhood providers.*

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CRITERIA

	Priority & Timeline	Cost & Resources	Implementer	ARPA Category
Financial Grant Writer	Medium priority. Planning and implementation could move fairly quickly.	1.0 FTE = \$50,000/year	Collaboration for Early Childhood, OP-RF Community Foundation	<i>Technical assistance, counseling, or other services to assist with business planning needs¹⁴ and/or Small Businesses and Non-profits¹⁵</i>
Discounting Program	Medium priority. Planning and implementation could move fairly quickly.	.5 FTE = \$24,000/year	Collaboration for Early Childhood, Village of Oak Park, Chamber of Commerce	<i>Small Businesses and Non-profits¹⁶</i>
Total Request	\$74,000 yearly			

ARPA PRONG

Technical assistance, counseling, or other services to assist with business planning needs.

POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

This initiative could engage the following community entities and leaders:

- Oak Park - River Forest Community Foundation
- Village of Oak Park
- Oak Park - River Forest Chamber of Commerce

¹⁴ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26795
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

¹⁵ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26794
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

¹⁶ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26794
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

ARPA FUNDING PROPOSAL:

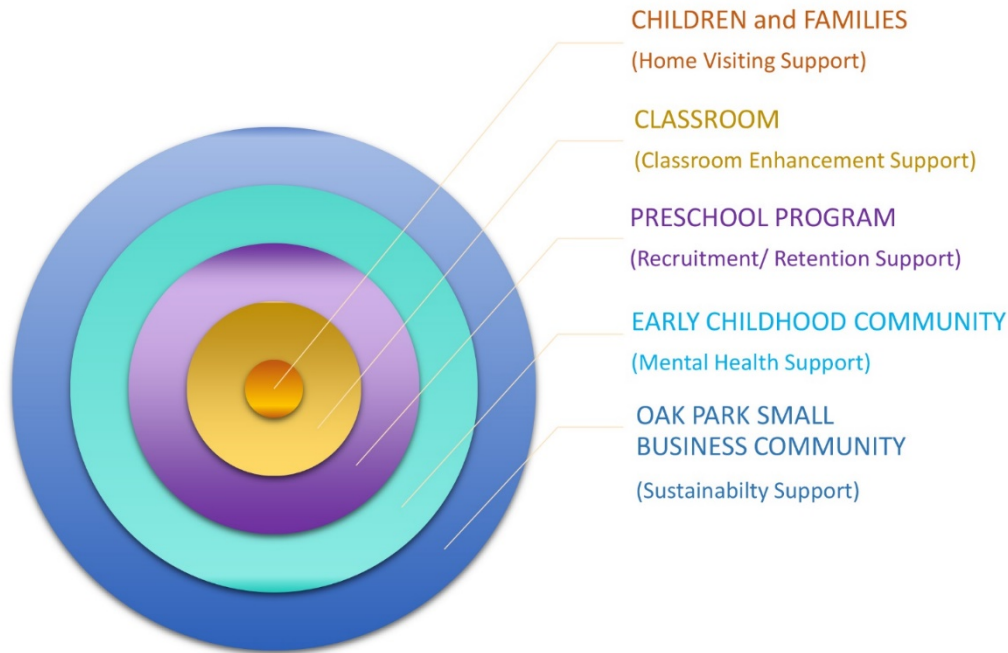
MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE OAK PARK EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY



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Combating the Impact of COVID-19 in Oak Park, Illinois

The Needs of the Early Childhood Community



SUMMARY OF COSTS

Item	Overall Cost			
	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Year Four
Home Visiting Support	\$19,250	\$19,250	\$19,250	\$19,250
Classroom Enhancement Support	\$53,500	\$22,000	\$22,000	\$22,000
Recruitment & Retention Support	\$45,000	\$45,000	\$45,000	\$45,000
Mental Health Support	\$109,200	\$109,200	\$109,200	\$109,200
Sustainability Support	\$74,000	\$74,000	\$74,000	\$74,000
Total	\$300,950	\$269,450	\$269,450	\$269,450

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ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

The early childhood community continues to be at the forefront of the pandemic. As such, there are additional opportunities available for providers and families to receive support outside of the requests above. There are also many existing functions that the Collaboration for Early Childhood is serving that are built into our regular activities. Since the pandemic began, we have pivoted our typical offerings to include a focus on COVID-19.

Here are some other areas where COVID-19 is affecting the early childhood community. **These areas do not have costs tied to this proposal** but the Collaboration for Early Childhood is supportive of their implementation:

VACCINATIONS

The State of Illinois required child care providers to be vaccinated as of December 2, 2021. The Collaboration promotes local vaccine clinics and other opportunities to encourage providers to become fully vaccinated via the Village of Oak Park, the YMCA, etc.

COVID-19 vaccines are not yet available for children younger than age 5. When they do become available, the Collaboration for Early Childhood is available to help coordinate vaccinations via the Village of Oak Park's mobile vaccine van and/or clinics at central locations.

FEDERAL FUNDS FOR CHILD CARE WORKERS

The State of Illinois has been providing COVID-19 relief in the form of financial support to child care centers. The Child Care Restoration and Child Care Workforce Bonus grants are federal funds administered by the state. They are about to begin additional funding through the Strengthen and Grow Child Care program. As of December 2021, they are on round 5 of workforce bonuses that vary in amount. These funds can be used as one-time bonuses or to increase salaries, as decided by the center

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administrators. The various stabilization funds are meant to assist with operating costs, workforce development, increasing quality, and adequately compensating staff to ensure that child care programs stay open. They also cover the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other emergency operating costs. Illinois considers itself a leader in the national administration of federal ARPA and CARES Act funds for early childhood.

These financial supports are very beneficial; however, they do come with reporting requirements and administrators need to keep on top of their announcements. We have outlined ways that local ARPA funds can help by providing a dedicated technical financial assistance staffer in the Small Business section above.

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (CCAP)

In July 2021, the State of Illinois implemented changes to the existing CCAP program, which is subsidized child care for families who qualify based on income¹⁷. The co-pay that families are still required to pay child care providers was reduced, the amount of reimbursement that providers receive was increased, and families who earn more money than before may still be eligible for the program.

FAMILY SUPPORT

An ongoing challenge of the pandemic happens when people lose their income because they have to quarantine from work, or they have to stay home with a young child who has to quarantine from day care. Employers may close due to positive cases and hourly staff are out of work. There are many scenarios where people, especially parents with children in child care, lose income related to COVID-19. During the pandemic, many families have been faced with economic choices that put them on the edge of a crisis. ARPA funds may be used to avert these crises.

¹⁷ <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.23500.html>

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ARPA funds may be used to provide "support for isolation or quarantine"¹⁸ in the form of cash assistance or other supports to people "facing negative economic impacts due to COVID-19"¹⁹. While the Collaboration for Early Childhood is not in a position to administer a cash assistance or similar program, we are supportive of assistance being provided to families who are experiencing these challenges. We are open to partnering with the Village of Oak Park or other agencies to implement such a program. Of note: The City of Evanston is considering a proposal for \$100,000 in emergency support for families and scholarship dollars²⁰. That would cover financial aid during times of hardship (loss of job, inability to pay preschool tuition, etc.) due to COVID-19. (Evanston's population is 74,587 and Oak Park's is 52,233.)



¹⁸ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26790
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds
¹⁹ Federal Register / Vol. 86, No. 93 / Monday, May 17, 2021 / Rules and Regulations, page 26794
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY 31 CFR Part 35 RIN 1505–AC77 Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds
²⁰ https://evanstonforever.org/files/5516/3586/3676/ARPA_Impact_Report_ECF_ARPA_English.pdf



“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

Nelson Mandela



**Collaboration for
Early Childhood**
Strong Start, Bright Future

123 Madison Street, Suite 209
and 171 S. Oak Park Avenue

Oak Park, IL 60302

(708) 613-6122

www.collab4kids.org

Pedraza, Arlene

From: Judith Alexander <jalexander@n-ave.com>
Sent: Wednesday, November 10, 2021 3:23 PM
To: ARPAComments
Subject: FW: revitalizing the North Avenue district with public art
Attachments: Building Bridges flyer.docx; The North Avenue District at-a-glance 10.2021.pdf

WARNING- EXTERNAL EMAIL: If unknown sender, do not click links/attachments. Never give out your user ID or password.

Ooops! I forgot the dash in @oak-park.us.

Sorry about that.

From: Judith Alexander <jalexander@n-ave.com>
Sent: Monday, November 08, 2021 2:21 PM
To: arpacomments@OakPark.us
Subject: revitalizing the North Avenue district with public art

Like many neighborhood business districts, the commercial area that forms Oak Park's northern border has been seriously impacted by the pandemic.

The North Avenue District has been working since 2013 to revitalize North Avenue from Austin to Harlem. (Our factsheet is attached.) We request funding for our North Art Bridge project, which will create transformational positive momentum for our district's recovery. With a critical mass of public art, we expect the positive impact to be similar to what has occurred in Pilsen, Wicker Park, and elsewhere. We're kicking off the project with a window art installation. (See attached flyer and the event's Facebook page for more information:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1071724216701469?ref=newsfeed>.) An ARPA-funded, earmarked allocation of \$100,000 to the Oak Park Area Arts Council will be enough to pay for several murals and many installations, getting us most of the way to the critical mass we're aiming for.

In addition to providing important assistance for the district's recovery, the funding will help implement the Village Board's priority of general economic development for North Avenue.

North Art Bridge also will further the Village Board's equity goals. This initiative seeks to connect Oak Park with the Galewood neighborhood of Austin through public art. (For example, our first window mural was created by 40 St. Giles students. Like our district itself, St. Giles includes both Galewood and Oak Park. Students from both communities worked on the mural, fittingly entitled "Building Bridges".) To realize the goals of North Art Bridge and the Village Board, we request that the Oak Park Area Arts Council be permitted to spend some of its ARPA-funded North Avenue allocation on the Chicago side of our district,

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Judith Alexander

Judith Alexander

Chair, The North Avenue District, Inc.

jalexander@n-ave.com

Mobile (708) 772-3702

Follow us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/107435609823334/>

Follow us on Twitter: @DistrictNorthAv



Oak Park Tourism Recovery Initiative

A Joint Proposal for ARPA Funding

November 5, 2021



Frank Lloyd
Wright Trust
CHICAGO



HEMINGWAY FOUNDATION
OF OAK PARK

UNITY TEMPLE
RESTORATION FOUNDATION



PART OF A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the biggest crisis to hit the tourism and hospitality industry in our lifetime. 2020 will forever be remembered as the year of Tourism's Great Depression. At the height of the pandemic last May, the U.S. Travel Association reported that 51% of the 15.8 million tourism-related jobs had disappeared. That's more than twice the 25% unemployment rate experienced at the height of the Great Depression.

Tourism employment was the most hard-hit sector in Illinois, too, last year. Tourism employment in the state had consistently outpaced overall state employment, increasing 18% between 2010 and 2019 compared to overall state employment growth of 9.2%. However, in 2020, nearly 40% of tourism jobs were lost in Illinois, while total employment in the state only declined by 7.1%. The tourism industry lost 136,000 jobs in 2020 alone, setting it back below its 2010 level.

In Illinois, shutdowns due to the pandemic significantly cut visitations and spending, and cities bore the brunt of the impacts. Business travel disappeared and both the limitations and restrictions to mobility, as well as economic disruptions, hit travel hard. As a result, Illinois' hotel room demand collapsed 48.7% and visitor spending in Illinois declined 49% in 2020.

The pandemic has hit the Village of Oak Park's tourism and hospitality industry hard, too. The Village's hotel/motel tax was down by as much as 45% in 2020. Meanwhile, guided interior tours at the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, which support the Trust's annual operating budget, were down by as much as 70% in July 2020 compared to the same month in 2019. Additionally, since reopening to the public, the Ernest Hemingway Birthplace Museum continues to operate the museum's guided tours at approximately 30% of pre-pandemic levels. Unity Temple, which had been closed, just recently reopened to the public for live programming again this past September.

Travel did happen in 2020—it was just a lot different than previous years. Travel leaned towards auto trips, and the widespread decline of business travel made leisure travel of paramount importance to the tourism and hospitality industry.

While declines in 2020 were significant, the number of trips and associated spending that occurred in Illinois during the year was still noteworthy. According to Tourism Economics, visitor spending in 2020 declined 49%; however, visitors to Illinois still spent \$23.3 billion, which generated \$57 billion in total business sales, including indirect and induced impacts. Additionally, a total of 352,300 jobs were sustained by visitors to Illinois in 2020. This included 207,900 direct and 144,400 indirect and induced jobs. Even with the pandemic, tourism in Illinois generated \$5.2 billion in tax revenues in 2020, with \$2.6 billion accruing to state and local governments.

As the country transitions from the pandemic to the endemic phase of the virus, experts are predicting a surge in tourism next year. If anything, the Tourism Recovery is widely expected to become the Travel Revolution. Now more than ever, people want to recapture what they value most: time with friends and family. Moreover, as a result of the pandemic, travel and the world are not expected to go back to the way it was. People used to live in one place, work in another, and travel to a third place. Now all those places are one place, and that place can be wherever people want. The pandemic has given people more flexibility with their jobs. They can travel any time, go anywhere, and live in many more locations. Travel, living, and working are going to continue to blur together. Over the next year, there is expected

to be major shift from business to leisure travel. Unlike in the past, however, travelers are expected to go everywhere, from big cities to small towns and rural communities.

The coming Golden Age of Travel, as many experts are calling it, presents a unique opportunity for the Village of Oak Park. With the Village's many cultural attractions, public art, small businesses, restaurants & bars, and short-term rentals, Oak Park is the perfect Midwest destination for travelers to discover and visit. Moreover, Oak Park is the perfect day trip, with the City of Chicago and the surrounding Chicagoland area providing a great source of local visitors for the Village to attract.

The Village of Oak Park's ability to continue benefitting economically from the thousands of visitors who spend money in the Village depends on the viability of the Village's tourism bureau and key attractions. As the Village accepts funding requests, Visit Oak Park, The Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, Ernest Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park, Unity Temple Restoration Foundation, and Oak Park Area Arts Council have partnered together to submit a joint ARPA funding request to the Village of Oak Park.

This is a critical time for the Village's tourism bureau and attractions. This funding is vital for each organization's viability as well as our collective ability to support the Village's economic recovery from the pandemic. This request not only addresses the negative impact of the pandemic for our respective organizations, but also supports priorities for the Village's economic recovery, and is in alignment with the recommended use of ARPA funds.

Funding Request

The organizations included in this proposal are grateful for the Village of Oak Park's consideration of our funding requests. The total amount of requested funding is \$765,000. A more detailed description of each request is provided, but a brief summary is below:

- **Visit Oak Park:** A total request of \$192,000 over two years, which would be enough to make up for the gap in the Village's hotel/motel tax needed to secure full state funding. Financial support in the amount of \$96,000 for calendar years 2022 and 2023 would enable Visit Oak Park to execute over \$1 million in advertising to support of the Village's attractions and small businesses.
- **The Frank Lloyd Wright Trust:** A total request of \$190,000 for website upgrades and advertising.
- **Ernest Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park:** A total request of \$150,000 over two years for IT infrastructure, capital expenditures, operations, and marketing.
- **Unity Temple Restoration Foundation:** A total request of \$100,000 over two years for a new ticketing platform, audience development, programming support, and advertising.
- **Oak Park Area Arts Council:** A total request of \$133,000 for the organization's re-granting program, art walk, and to hire a part-time administrative assistant.

Visit Oak Park

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for Visit Oak Park, resulting in the loss of state and local funding that canceled all marketing and advertising expenditures, and severely impacted the bureau's ability to meet its contractual obligations in 2020. While operating on a small cash reserve for most of the year, Visit Oak Park was only able to sustain a bare-bones operation in which its President & CEO was furloughed, and only its website and social media channels were being maintained as the bureau awaited a funding commitment from the Village of Oak Park for calendar year 2021.

Pandemic notwithstanding, Visit Oak Park is thankful for the Village of Oak Park's funding commitment for calendar year 2021 last December that kept the bureau viable and avoided the forfeit of valuable grant funds available from the State of Illinois. Over the past several months, Visit Oak Park has worked diligently to restore operations. The bureau launched a \$200,000 digital advertising campaign earlier this summer to begin supporting Oak Park's economic recovery. The full results will be known later this fall. The bureau also garnered another \$200,000 in earned media coverage for the Village's local attractions and small businesses since May.

Visit Oak Park is requesting \$96,000 in ARPA funds for calendar years 2022 and 2023, totaling \$192,000. This amount represents the difference between the Village's estimated hotel/motel tax and the amount needed to meet the bureau's local funding match requirement from the State of Illinois. Earlier this year, Governor Pritzker committed to using ARPA funds to fully fund the state's tourism bureaus for two years at the pre-pandemic FY20 funding level as the state's hotel/motel tax recovers. As a result, Visit Oak Park is guaranteed to receive \$543,000 in state funding for the next two fiscal years.

With the Village of Oak Park's funding, Visit Oak Park plans to invest over \$1 million into advertising over the next two fiscal years, more money than any other Village-funded partner agency or Oak Park attraction can invest. With tourism marketing bringing back \$9 for every \$1 invested, this investment will go along way in accelerating the Village's economic recovery (Illinois Office of Tourism, 2018).

Visit Oak Park has been transformed over the past three years. In addition to an organizational restructuring in 2018 that drastically cut administrative costs and shifted more money into marketing and advertising than ever before, Visit Oak Park has made the critical investments to help the bureau meet the competitive demands of the tourism marketplace. With the bureau at the forefront of digital advertising, Visit Oak Park is committed to being data-driven and demonstrating the effectiveness of the bureau's advertising campaigns.

With the bureau's new website, creative assets, and digital marketing strategy, Visit Oak Park plans to execute a comprehensive marketing plan to support all of the Village's attractions, including: Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, Unity Temple, Ernest Hemingway Birthplace Museum, Pleasant Home, Oak Park Art League, Cheney Mansion, Oak Park Conservatory, Wonder Works, and Oak Park River Forest Museum. In addition, Visit Oak Park will support the Village's art, music, theaters, and special events. Also included will be the Village's 12 business/historic districts as well as restaurants, bars, breweries, local tours, hotels, Bed & Breakfasts, and Airbnb and short-term rental listings.

In addition to the bureau's advertising campaigns, Visit Oak Park will create a new digital pass for the Village's attractions. Using current technology with Bandwango, the new digital pass will link attractions and offer ticket discounts in order to encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more money. The

digital pass would also link to discounts at selected restaurants and small businesses. Additionally, a new digital pass would be developed in collaboration with the Oak Park Area Arts Council to expand efforts to promote the Village's public art. Together, these digital passes, which provide trackable data for demonstrating ROI, would be a major part of Visit Oak Park's advertising campaign next year.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Trust

The Frank Lloyd Wright Trust respectfully requests \$190,000 from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds allocated to the Village of Oak Park. Funding would help the Trust address negative impact due to the downturn of tourism as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- \$130,000 would go toward updating the Drupal content management system of the Trust's website (which will be obsolete in 2023) as well as revising web pages to work more effectively within the new structure. The Trust's website, with over 500,000 visits per year, is the primary way that visitors to Oak Park learn about our Village and book their tours and other programs.

Our website is the main information vehicle for our stakeholders. Intermittent site closures and the inability to hold in-person tours during the COVID crisis drove visitors to use our website for increased digital programming and information. We expect this trend to continue.

As it stands, it is imperative that our online ticketing system, as well as educational resources, be supported by an up-to-date digital infrastructure more than ever before.

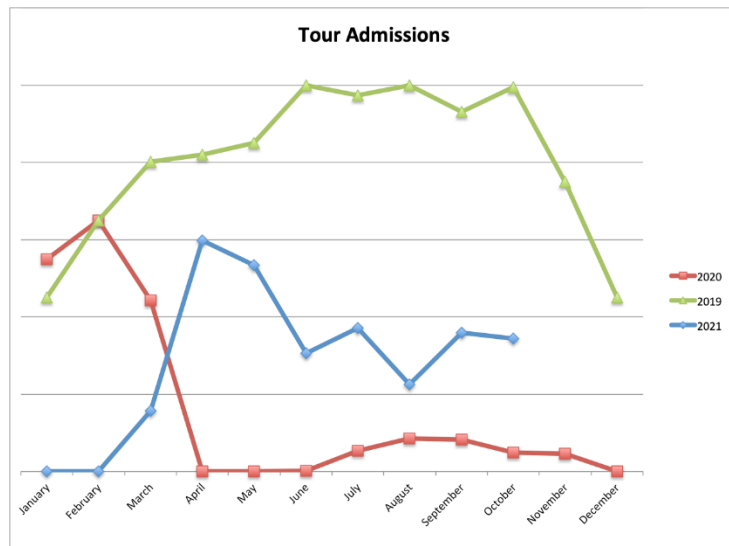
Improving upon our current web pages and web structure will optimize and streamline the tourist experience and our data collection capabilities. The entire Village of Oak Park will continue to benefit from the Trust's online presence as a robust tourist attraction. The importance of high-quality online systems and structure designed for ease of use are our top priority.

- \$60,000 would be applied toward the Trust's 2022-2023 plans for digital advertising and marketing, which will focus on getting visitors back to Oak Park. The charts below illustrates the enormous loss of guests to Oak Park and that it will take years to return visitation to pre-pandemic levels



Ernest Hemingway Foundation of Oak Park

For many attractions like us, tourism season is mid-March through October. The largest influx of tourists and admission revenue comes in during that time frame and helps to sustain us during the low points of the year (winter season). The CVD19 pandemic has really been a two-year struggle for our organization and continues to negatively impact our operations as we have now had two (2) high seasons in a row severely compromised by the pandemic. In 2020, we were closed for almost four months, March-June, and again in December observing the various guidelines, mandates, restrictions, etc. We had an 80% reduction in admissions and a corresponding reduction in revenue losses. In 2021, we were closed January through March 1st in keeping with the same guidelines, mandates and protocols, and upon reopening started to see a slow uptick in admissions. However, that dissipated with the emerging Delta variant, and we had large decline in August (which is typically the height of tourism season). We estimate by year-end 2021, we will be looking at 65% reduction in admissions and 50% in revenue losses. Its important to also note that it takes time to rebuild the momentum from such closures and even when we were able to open, many travel restrictions still remained in place reducing potential travel and visitors. Below is a chart that shows pandemic-related admission trends with the 2019 (green) as a baseline in comparison to the last two years (2020/red) and (2021/blue).



Notes: Pandemic-related closures from March 15 to June 30, 2020 and December 2020 to March 1, 2021

The Hemingway Foundation is grateful for this opportunity to receive ARPA funding through the village of Oak Park. As both a literary arts and educational organization, it is our goal, in addition to serving as a tourist attraction, to also continue our rise as a community cornerstone for the arts and other arts organizations. Working together to bring local, regional and international visitors to the area to spend their dollars on various programming and patronage of neighboring attractions, restaurants and outlets. As we strive to recover from pandemic-related expenses/revenue loss and as part of a community-wide

effort as a tourism partner to rebuild future audiences, the Hemingway Foundation respectfully submits our request for \$150,000 over a two-year period. (\$75,000/year).

IT Infrastructure:	\$20,000
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Investment in new platforms and digital applications for ticketing, translation, marketing, compliance, data analytics and growth. Software and hardware upgrades as deemed necessary for compatibility and expansion. Audience and membership development to increase reach and ensure sustainability.

Capital Expenditures	\$25,000
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Renovate current structure/expand exhibit and meeting space to assist in enhanced foundational programming and non-related foundation events/traveling exhibits in support of artists, teachers, students and attracting additional audiences. Upgrades to ADA compliant equipment.

Operations	\$20,000
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Offset costs to hire a part-time program services manager to assist with responsibilities to meet the additional demands and community outreach. New training platform for docents.

Marketing	\$10,000
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Marketing initiatives through other channels to reach diverse audiences inclusive of social media and co-branded opportunities. Program supplies and new signage.

Total/yr	\$75,000
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Unity Temple Restoration Foundation

Unity Temple was closed to the public since the onset of the pandemic, only recently reopening for live UTRF programs in September, 2021. While it was closed, UTRF pivoted to a virtual format for programming, requiring a Zoom subscription, performance recordings, and livestreaming. Computer equipment was purchased for UTRF's executive director in order to work from home. A part-time program manager was expected to be hired in July, 2020, but was put on hold for one year to manage expenses. As a way to encourage tourism, UTRF purchased attraction signage from IDOT, leading the way for four more Oak Park attractions being featured on the signs.

UTRF programming has returned to Unity Temple for live, in-person performances. In order to ensure social distancing, UTRF purchased new ticketing software which allows for assigned seating. UTRF will continue to offer programming virtually for those who are unable to attend, requiring the recording of

events. The biggest impact to UTRF from the pandemic is not only lost revenue from cancelled programs, but also lost audience and supporters; UTRF needs to rebuild its audience and requires targeting development in the form of marketing, advertising, data analysis, and outreach.

UTRF is grateful for the ARPA funding through the Village of Oak Park. As one of only three UNESCO World Heritage sites in the state of Illinois, Unity Temple has the potential to attract tens of thousands of visitors to Oak Park per year, resulting in increased patronage of neighboring restaurants, stores, and hotels. In order to recoup expenses related to the pandemic and to support efforts to build future audiences, UTRF respectfully requests \$50,000 for two years (totaling \$100,000) as part of the tourism industry request.

Item	Cost	Multiplier	Total	Notes
Ticketing Application	\$500	1	\$500	\$500 startup cost for new ticketing platform which allows for assigned seating
Zoom subscription	\$150	4	\$600	\$150 each year 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Program recordings	\$100	14	\$1,400	\$100 per event x 14 events
Livestreaming & recording	\$800	1	\$800	2020-2021 events
Audience Development	\$12,500	2	\$25,000	10 hour/week independent contractor for audience development
Marketing & Advertising	\$10,000	2	\$20,000	Targeted advertising to build and bring back live and virtual audiences
Computer equipment	\$850	1	\$850	Laptop, monitor, desk, peripherals
IDOT tourism signage	\$1,260	1	\$1,260	2 signs at I-290 Harlem exit, 1 at Lake/Harlem
Directional signage	\$250	2	\$500	Additional signs to be installed at two exits
			\$50,910	Request \$50,000 per year for two years

Oak Park Area Arts Council

The Oak Park Area Arts Council (OPAAC) is presenting 3 requests for the consideration of ARP funds. OPAAC is thrilled that the United States government is making this opportunity possible for the Village of Oak Park.

- **OPAAC ArtsFunds regranting program-\$100,000**

The Oak Park Area Arts Council has been awarding grants to area arts nonprofit organizations since 1979. This year the OPAAC awarded grants to 34 arts organizations and 2 social service agencies who run arts programs for their members. It is easy to see how the Village of Oak Park has become such a vibrant arts community. Oak Park is known for the stunning architecture of

Frank Lloyd Wright who designed many homes, including the Unity Temple Church. Wright is truly one of the most celebrated architects in the history of the United States if not the world. Oak Park is also home to another legend, Ernest Hemingway, the acclaimed writer and poet. There are many “stars” who call Oak Park home and are graduates of Oak Park and River Forest High School. Oak Park has been known as an arts town for years. The fact that there are 32 + arts-based nonprofits in the Village is another reason it is an arts community. When the pandemic hit, these organizations were the first to shut down in March of 2020. They are also the last to reopen not only in Oak Park but across the United States. While some of the organizations have been able to pivot and are able to offer online concerts. Others have not been able to do so for reasons largely due to financial restraints caused by COVID 19. They lack the resources, training and staffing to present online concerts and events.

For purposes of this request, information was pulled from the OPAAC 2021 grant applications. There were 20 organizations who addressed their audience attendance before COVID-19. These groups attract not only residents to their venues but also people who travel to Oak Park from other towns and the city for arts and cultural events. On average, the numbers show a loss in attendance due to COVID-19 of 1, 500, to 5,000 for the smaller organizations all the way up to 80, 000 for the Children’s Museum to 90,000 at Frank Lloyd Wright Trust. That total is staggering-182,000 visitors. Again, that is a total number from only 20 out of the 34 groups. Revenues were a huge loss for the entire arts sector. Ticket prices range on average from a low of \$15 to abt \$25 for admission multiplied by 182,000. That gives you an idea of the amount of lost revenue. These groups need to keep their doors open in order to survive and to do that they need financial assistance. Many artists were also workers in restaurants, retail stores, theatres that also were closed. Help is needed to pay their bills, put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. The OPAAC would like to be able to award larger grants to these deserving art organizations.

Substantial funding is needed in order for these organizations to survive, sustain themselves and have people start to return to concerts and events in Oak Park.

- **Art Walk - \$8,000**

This project will attract visitors and residents to take the Art Walk. Oak Park has become known for its public art. Sculpture, mosaic tile murals, and the Community Mini Mural Project are all popular and have helped to beautify the village. People often ask if there is a public walk tour. Or is there a guide they can use for an art tour? OPAAC would like to make an Art Walk possible with a free app for Smartphones. Otocast was used by OPAAC in 2017 and in 2018 for the Village Sculpture Walks. People enjoyed using the app, it was easy to use and no charge to install it on your phone. The app eliminated the need for paper and updating a pamphlet every year. The app allows the artists to introduce themselves and give a brief description of their art. There is also a map that will show all locations for every piece of public art in the village. Another wonderful feature is that it links the user with other public art walks throughout the city of Chicago and the state. Directions are provided as well to other locations.

I would like to have the ArtWalk also include the Terrain Biennial Exhibition that is growing in popularity. This exhibition that showcases public art on private property was started by the late Sabina Ott, former board member of the OPAAC and former Chair of Columbia College’s Art

Department. Commissioner Mark Kelly of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, and former Oak Park resident for 18 years said that the Terrain Biennial should become Oak Park's signature event. These front yard exhibitions are installed in Oak Park, Chicago, other suburbs, states and also cities in Europe.

It will be a win-win to have Visit Oak Park work with OPAAC to promote the ArtWalk to the communities they serve in the western suburbs.

- **Part-time Administrative Assistant - \$25,000**

The OPAAC Executive Director would like to request funding for a part time assistant. This person will be needed to help with the administration of the grant programs, the Art Walk and all of the other programs and services the OPAAC offers to the community. A succession plan is needed, the OPAAC does not have a succession plan in place at this time.

Total request: \$133,000



December 18, 2021

To: Village of Oak Park Board of Trustees

From: John Lynch, Executive Director, OPEDC

Re: ARPA Funds Recommendation Letter – Black-owned Storefront Business Support

Summary and Rationale

The Oak Park Economic Development Corporation (OPEDC) is committed to supporting a post-COVID recovery for the Oak Park business community in a manner that is both *impactful* and *equitable*. To that end, we are proposing a local business assistance program that is equity-focused to qualify for funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). We believe that this program would provide a significant benefit to prospective Black business owners that want to locate or expand their storefront operations in Oak Park.

We are pleased to submit this proposed program to the Village Board of Trustees for consideration, as we believe it aligns with the Board's goals and with the values of the Oak Park community. The goals of the program are:

- To support local businesses with levels of capital that can result in a deeper impact than the more common \$5,000 - \$10,000 grants that municipalities often provide. The program we have outlined is intentionally structured to fill larger funding gaps and support the kinds of projects that may not traditionally have the start-up capital to get underway.
- To address racial equity on a more intentional level, consistent with OPEDC's and the Village's stated equity goals. Our proposed program specifically supports Black business owners and recognizes the historic lack of access to capital that holds Black entrepreneurs back from realizing their entrepreneurial aspirations.
- To specifically target storefront creation and expansion. Storefront businesses often require additional financial cushion to help them respond to the inherent challenges of operating during the modern climate of internet competition, staffing challenges, and high rent and property tax burdens.

To accomplish these goals, we are requesting \$500,000 in ARPA funds be allocated to this program to assist in the creation or expansion of 5-10 new Black-owned storefront businesses in the Village between now and 2026 (the final year that ARPA funds must be spent). We appreciate your review and consideration of this proposed program.

Oak Park Economic Development Corporation
104 N. Oak Park Ave., Suite 203, Oak Park, IL 60301
708.383.3838

opdc.net



Proposed Program: Village of Oak Park Storefront Step-Up Forgivable Loan Program

Proposed Program Guidelines:

This proposed program would provide forgivable loans to Black business owners seeking to establish a new physical storefront or expand into an adjacent/additional storefront space in Oak Park. The loan funds would be eligible to fund a buildout, improvements to the physical space, and equipment/machinery purchases needed for the business to begin operation. **Proposed loans would be up to \$50,000 for eligible businesses, with an additional \$50,000 available for eligible commercial kitchen buildout projects.** The final approved loan amount for each project would be determined based on the estimated project costs and the demonstrated financial gap/need of the applicant. Loans would be eligible for full or partial forgiveness if the applicant meets the Forgiveness Requirements spelled out below. OPEDC would recommend that the Village reserve the right to modify the eligibility criteria over time.

Proposed Eligibility Criteria:

- Applicant's business greater than 75% Black-owned;
- Applicant's business derives greater than 50% of its revenue from the sale of goods subject to sales and/or liquor tax (or for a start-up business, reasonable expectation thereof);
- Applicant contributes equity funds totaling 5% of project cost;
- Business ownership must demonstrate a financial need for the loan funds to complete the project, subject to a personal financial review of each individual or legal entity that owns 20% or more of the business;
- If total project cost to commence business operations exceeds the equity contribution plus the forgivable loan, applicant must demonstrate sufficient additional funding to fill project requirements and open or expand the business to receive Program funding.

Proposed Forgiveness Requirements:

- The loan will be fully forgiven if the applicant continues to meet the Program Guidelines and the storefront remains in operation for five (5) years;
- If the applicant fails to remain in operation for five (5) years and/or ceases to fulfill the Program Guidelines, the forgiveness amount would be based on a pro-rata calculation of the time in business as a percentage of the 5-year threshold, rounded downward to the nearest year. For example, if a business approved for this proposed program closed after 3.5 years, it would have $[3 \text{ years} / 5 \text{ years}] = 60\%$ of the loan forgiven, and it would be required to repay 40% of the loan back to the Village of Oak Park, with a payment schedule worked out at that time;
- The applicant remains in good standing with all Village licenses, permits, and fees.



Proposed Project Review Considerations and Process:

The quantity of recommended projects for approval will depend on available funds. Projects will be evaluated and approved annually by the OPEDC's Board of Directors. Proposals may be evaluated based on any or all the following criteria:

1. Does the applicant's business fill a gap and/or need for goods/services within the geographic area it is located?
2. Does the applicant present a viable business plan/financial forecast to allow for immediate and sustainable sales tax generation?
3. Will the applicant's business increase the foot traffic to its surrounding area and to surrounding businesses?
4. Is the applicant's project able to proceed without the Step-Up Forgivable Loan Program?
5. How many jobs will the project create?

OPEDC proposes serving as the main point of contact to assist business owners through the application process. OPEDC staff would assess each application and provide additional external resources to each applicant as needed and would bring completed applications to the OPEDC Board of Directors for review and recommendation to the Village.

OPEDC also proposes to seek volunteers for an advisory committee of existing Oak Park Black business owners. This group could be consulted to review applications and assist in final recommendations, in addition to enhancing community involvement to ensure that the program is succeeding in meeting the stated equity goals. This group would also serve as an additional way for Black-owned businesses to connect to one another for networking and resource-sharing, which would expand the benefits of this program among Oak Park's Black business community.