

# protecting child care during COVID-19

## MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

A collective impact initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Milwaukee Succeeds brings together some 300 partners in a cradle-to-career partnership focused on two priorities: quality early care and education for Black and Brown children and high school success for Black men. Milwaukee Succeeds works with school systems that are among the nation's most segregated and a population experiencing unusually high levels of poverty. As with other StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network members, Milwaukee Succeeds continually tests and improves its methods, using data to drive its work.

This case study shows how Milwaukee's existing civic infrastructure allowed it to quickly pivot to address immediate problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



## CHILD CARE

Out of a once-in-a lifetime crisis — one that exacerbated Milwaukee's considerable racial disparities — came opportunity, the imperative for action and the willingness to cooperate.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the city last March, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and city officials called upon StriveTogether network member Milwaukee Succeeds to lead them in a collaborative effort to address the crisis.

At the time, Milwaukee Succeeds was deep into its work on a three-year strategic plan that, however important for the long term, suddenly seemed “tone deaf” to launch, says Dave Celata, deputy director of Milwaukee Succeeds. The organization quickly pivoted to focus on immediate needs, taking the role along with others at the Greater



Spearheaded by local manufacturer Rebel Converting and marketing group Ignite Change, the #MaskUpMKE campaign educated and encouraged Milwaukeeans to stay safe by wearing face coverings. The MKE Civic Response Team helped maximize the impact by leveraging volunteer resources and helping distribute masks where they were needed most.

Milwaukee Foundation as the backbone organization of a collective initiative. The organization had the relationships to convene partners quickly. “We knew the lay of the land,” Celata said. “We had the data capacity and the capacity for collective impact work, and we knew how to build a community agenda.”

The MKE (Milwaukee) Civic Response Team, as it was now called, created six separate teams

— comprised of representatives of government, nonprofits, universities and the community — to address immediate needs: physical health, mental health, early childhood education, K-12 education, shelter and food. A seventh team, economic recovery, was added later. To co-lead the teams, content experts, some of whom were service providers, were paired with officials of local philanthropies. The former had the expertise, and



GMF's Total Commitment to COVID-19 Relief: **\$11.3 million**

Total raised for MKE Responds: **\$5.7 million**

Total grants made from MKE Responds: **\$4.4 million** (to 194 grantees)

MKE Responds grants to Education: **\$2.5 million**  
to other Children/Family/Youth: **\$438,000**





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the latter had the influence to generate financial and other support. Importantly, these teams were not advisory committees; they were action committees: They set the agenda and made the decisions about work to be done.

The first order of business was to establish an emergency fund. The second was for the Greater Milwaukee Foundation to combine its fundraising efforts with the United Way and other foundations so they were coordinating and complementing each other's efforts instead of competing. The goal was to get as much money raised and distributed as quickly as possible. By June 2020, the campaign had raised \$6 million; by January 2021, they had raised \$11.3 million.

Meeting by video and communicating by a Slack channel that facilitated real-time decisions, the teams quickly identified several distinct problems and targets for systems change: important communications about COVID-19 were not getting through to Black and Latinx communities; food, supplies and personal protective equipment were not making it to people who needed them; child care centers were going out of business; students lacked the technology they needed to learn; homeless shelters were at capacity; and COVID-19 was worsening existing racial disparities.

The civic response teams accomplished much in the first three months, all informed by an expressed commitment to advancing equity. Local manufacturers stepped up to produce hundreds of gallons of hand sanitizer and material for millions

of face masks, which volunteers assembled, packaged and distributed. To address growing anxiety among populations of color, the mental health team helped people get Medicaid waivers for telehealth services, and they dispatched community organizers to connect people with mental health resources. The K-12 team worked to improve digital access for students. The housing team got homeless shelters disinfected and transformed a shuttered convent into a new shelter equipped to care for residents who were sick.

Of all these efforts, the partners' work in child care emerged as a particularly bright spot.

For eight years, Milwaukee Succeeds has been working with other members of the Wisconsin Partnership to enhance academic and social development in the early years. When COVID-19 made that work even more urgent, the backbone organization was ready to take it on with a network that was already established.

Nearly overnight because of the pandemic, Milwaukee lost one-third of its child care providers and was on track to lose many more. Thus, the partners' first mission was to ensure their survival. They worked to stem the damage, especially for providers who served children experiencing poverty and children of color. They also pledged to get the centers personal protective equipment and to address the mental health needs of children.

"The biggest challenge was just the question of survival and making sure there was a baseline of

resources available to those centers, especially those that live hand to mouth,” said Ian Bautista of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. “It’s not a lucrative business, so they had very little time to figure out a contingency plan when they are only open at 25% capacity.”

Some centers, who were used to serving infants and toddlers, got help adapting their programs and facilities for K-12 students who were now receiving virtual instruction but whose essential worker parents could not be home. The early childhood centers now became safe environments where these student could access the internet and get some homework help. “None of [the providers] thought they would be doing this before the pandemic,” Bautista said. “But I think it’s another testament to the willingness [of providers] to figure out ways to make themselves useful and financially viable in the short run.”

One issue that arose was whether the partnership should focus on supporting higher quality child care providers or concentrate on the quantity of slots in hard-hit communities. While Milwaukee Succeeds and its partners were, and are, focused on quality in the long term, they now had to build sheer capacity in the short term. They used emergency response funds and a federal grant to make small grants to 140 child care providers, some in private homes, some in daycare centers to stabilize the sector. They distributed face masks and other protective equipment, gallons of hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies, hundreds of

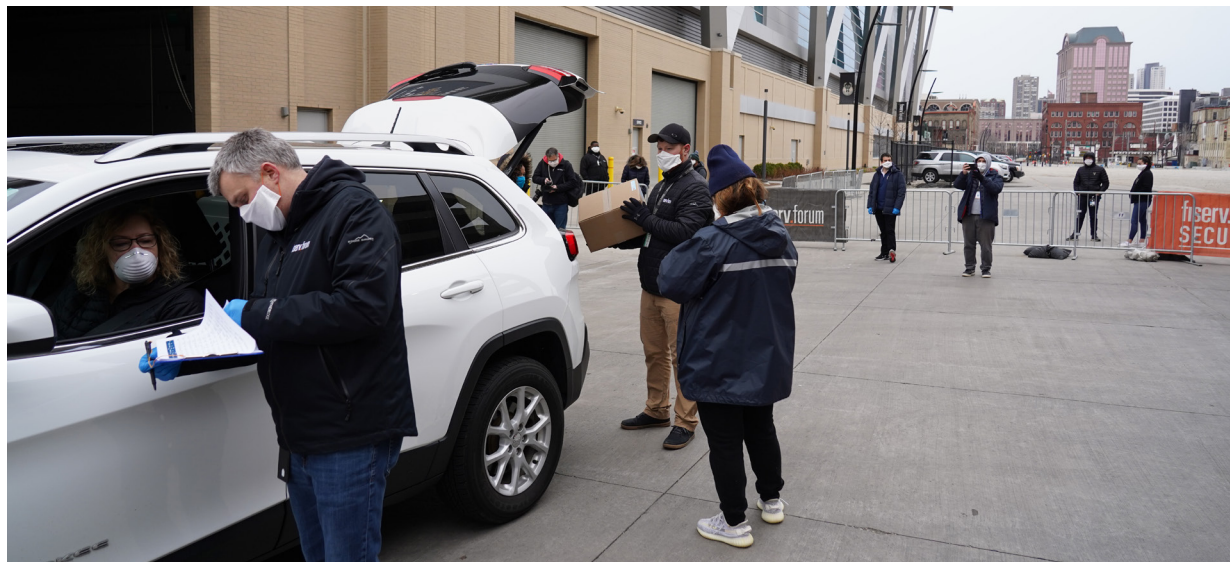
instant-read thermometers, and thousands and thousands of diapers.

Because the Milwaukee Succeeds early childhood team includes members of the city health department and the state department for children and families, the members could coordinate on guidelines for safely reopening the child care centers. And the team joined forces with a foster care and mental health organization to conduct workshops on how to support the mental well-being of strained child care staff and the children and their families.

Meanwhile, the hunger team, meeting a particularly urgent need, managed to work out a

distribution model and a supply chain in just two weeks. Through a variety of channels, the response team was able to get thousands of meals distributed each week. Post-pandemic, the partnership will dedicate its efforts to helping providers recover and continue to improve all these essential services.

Having a civic infrastructure was vital to doing all of this work. Bautista said, “Without having the infrastructure of collective impact and the facilitators and moderators with various skills to be able to match the philanthropic leaders that were signing up to lead these teams, we really wouldn’t have been able to make this work.



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– Ian Bautista, Greater Milwaukee Foundation

“With Milwaukee Succeeds providing their staff capacity to stand up with these leaders and helping facilitate and set the agenda and knowing the nuts and bolts to bring all these people together — to have that intact capacity right off the bat and dedicate their staff to the real and compelling need at hand made our goal much more attainable.”

There were challenges, of course. Celata notes that while most partners were open to shared decision making, the attitude was not universal. For example, the mental health team wanted community organizers to be part of the civic infrastructure because Milwaukee’s Black residents sometimes mistrusted the medical community. Some members of the team, and Milwaukee Succeeds, wanted to deploy the organizers as intermediaries and compensate them for their time. “That took convincing some people,” Celata said. “The review process was difficult. It worked out, but it took a while.”

At the same time, while the partners enjoyed good relationships with government officials as they made recommendations for disbursement of federal CARES Act dollars, some didn’t always hear back on those recommendations. “Communication has been challenging,” Celata said. And bureaucracy has gotten in the way.

When the county wanted philanthropies to fund some mental health services, for instance, it could not make the arrangement happen because of auditing rules that required the county to assume responsibility for financing. “There were opportunities missed because of misalignment across institutions,” Celata said.

Addressing the hunger emergency exposed another challenge — and suggested a possible solution. The response team realized that, unlike in other areas of need, the community had no single person, organization or network to take the lead on food insecurity. The established infrastructure allowed the team to coordinate a seamless crisis response, but the team also knew their lasting value was far more systemic. That is why, to ensure true systems change, the hunger team has recommended the city appoint a full-time food systems director.

Finally, the partners were often stymied by Milwaukee’s divided K-12 school system, which is about half traditional public and about half private and charter schools. “It’s a very contentious landscape,” Celata said, “and they struggle to collaborate.” As a result, he says, the response team’s results with schools were “mixed at best.” Despite partnering and having weekly meetings

with the United Way and the city, the team has been unable to get laptops and devices to all the children and families who need them. “Building collective response on K-12 has been slow,” Celata said.

Overall, though, Milwaukee Succeeds has led a successful, nimble response to a major crisis, with partners cooperating and aligning on common goals and grants in new ways. Bautista said, “The opportunity to work with these partners has created a collegiality and trust that, while there in some cases before, has definitely been strengthened and tested over the course of the past year.”

Milwaukee Succeeds is now turning its attention to pandemic recovery and its long-term strategic plan. As it does so, it will benefit from the partnerships built and bolstered, along with the progress made, through the child care response team. “We see the response team’s work as a major part of our long-term goals,” Celata said. “The economy can’t grow without child care. And now we have businesses and university partners talking about child care in ways they hadn’t before.” Even after the emergency is past, Celata says, “we want to preserve what works well.”

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