Crisis Response: Welcoming New Families

On September 1, 2022, the Governor of Texas began sending busloads of asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees to Chicago. As a state-designated Illinois Welcoming Center (IWC), Family Focus and our team members are proud to assist the city and state in meeting the urgent needs of immigrant children and their families.

According to Family Focus Senior VP of Partnerships and Engagement, Mariana Osoria, more than 500 migrants—mostly from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Panama and Cuba—have arrived in Chicago between September 1st and 14th, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and what they could carry. Upon their arrival, Family Focus immediately began working with individuals and families to provide access to comprehensive bicultural and bilingual case management services, public support, clothing, emergency supplies, and other vital needs.

On the weekend of September 5th, Family Focus and other IWC partners worked with the families as they were transitioned into temporary housing and began working on-site, providing translation services, intakes and needs assessments, connecting new arrivals with friends and family in the United States (if any), and help navigating the legal system. Family Focus team members also began providing daily support for nearly 20 children between the ages of 1 and 7, with various activities for child–parent engagement.

As asylum seekers, migrants, refugees and their children continue to arrive in Chicagoland, Family Focus will continue to invest in strengthening families and their children throughout our communities. To donate to newly arrived families in need, visit bit.ly/3xTzejN.

New Website!

Family Focus is proud to have launched our new website — visit us at family-focus.org!

Women of Excellence

We are proud to announce that our President & CEO Dara Munson received the Chicago Defender’s Women of Excellence Award on September 16th at the Hyatt Regency! Every year, the Chicago Defender—the city’s premier Black newspaper—celebrates and recognizes Black leaders with this gala dinner. Awardees inspire others through their vision and leadership, exceptional achievements, and participation in community service. Congratulations, Dara!

This year, each newsletter will focus on one of our core program areas: early childhood education; youth development and family support. This edition focuses on family support. Enjoy!

— Dara Munson, President & CEO
Celebrating Fit Fathers & Families

On June 18th, in partnership with Walmart, Family Focus hosted Fit Fathers and Families Day. Located at the beautiful campus of our Lawndale program site, local fathers and their families were invited to learn about health-related community resources, get screenings by traveling doctors and nurses, and participate in fun, healthy activities with their families and friends.

For decades, Lawndale has suffered from chronic underinvestment and poverty: 46% of residents earn less than $25,000 a year; and 24% of families are single parents with children (according to the August 2021 North Lawndale Community Data snapshot). Thanks to our generous event sponsor Walmart, we were able to provide vital health resources to over 200 attendees in an under-resourced community traditionally lacking access to affordable healthcare.

The event was a superb success! Fathers and families were able to participate in free health screenings performed by Walmart Mobile Wellness, including BMI, blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol tests. At the same time, our generous event partners provided access and information about community resources, Zumba, men's haircuts, and health and wellness exhibits. Family Focus provided free food and beverages, kids games, bouncy houses, face paintings, and giveaways for the whole family.

As Darren Martin, a parent at our Lawndale program site said, “I really appreciated that the event also focused on the kids. My son had a ball and really enjoyed the bouncy houses and the ice cream. This event provided an opportunity for my son to interact with other children his age.”

Thanks to our community partners for coming out and showing their support! These include (in alphabetical order) 11th District CAPS, ACERO Charter Schools, Adidas, Chicago Police Department, Children’s Home & Aid, DCFS, Encompassing Center, Facing Forward-CEL, Family Legacy Foundation, Gads Hill Center, Greater Chicago Food Depository, I AM Able/Tr4im, Illinois Action for Children, Institute for Latino Progression, It Works, LUCHA, NLEN, Open Book, Poder, Project Success at Chicago State, Rush Hospital, St. Anthony Hospital, and Walmart.

Here’s What Family Support Means To Family Focus Parents

“I learned how to acknowledge my children’s emotions and deal with them in a positive way. I have learned how to use my coping skills when I am experiencing stress.”

“I learned that I can have my own parenting style and not have to follow my parents’ rigid parenting style and still get the same effect, without the harsh and negative ways my parents parented me and my siblings.”

“I learned how to grow as a person and as a mother and I’m absolutely extremely happy for this. I also learned about how to listen and understand babies much more because in all honesty they are also stressed like me.”

“I learned that it's ok to asked for help. I was also very scared but was put to ease, after the first day of class.”

“I like that the staff was not judgmental of my parenting. I learned that there is no perfect parent.”

Congratulations Graduates!

Family Focus celebrates those children and parents stepping up from home visiting and pre-school programs at each center. These celebrations are a chance for families to recognize and celebrate their achievements and success, and help connect parents with other community resources. Congratulations to this year’s graduates - they have a bright future ahead of them! (Pictured: Englewood Graduates)
Celebrating Generations Of Service

On August 27th the City of Evanston honored Family Focus Youth Leader, JoAnn Avery, by naming part of Simpson Street “JoAnn Avery Way”, in celebration of her 40 years of service to Evanston’s children and youth.

A long list of dignitaries saluted Miss JoAnn with words of congratulations and admiration – former Council Member and Family Focus Founder Delores Holmes, former Council Member Robin Rue Simmons, current Council Member Bobby Burns, Family Focus President and CEO Dara Munson - as well as a dozen other community leaders lined up to take the microphone. Old and young people currently in Miss JoAnn’s seniors and after school enrichment programs, as well as adults whose lives she touched decades ago joined the celebration. Miss JoAnn said “My first group that I had, some of them just turned 42 and 43. They were there.” She has truly had an outstanding impact on the City of Evanston.

JoAnn Avery (L) and Evanston City Council Member Bobby Burns.

Her positive attitude and warm, caring support have meant everything to those who she served. “People always say to me, ‘You work with at-risk kids,’ and I say: ‘No, I work with ‘at-promise’ kids. All these kids have promise. I work with at-promise kids.’”

Miss JoAnn’s colleague who teaches writing with her, Beth Jacobs, opened the festivities with an original poem for the occasion (at right), summing up all that Miss JoAnn has meant to so many over the years.

On behalf of all of the lives that Miss JoAnn has touched: THANK YOU!

ODE TO THE ROAD

named for the woman
who carries the load
whose love shows us all
what it means to be cared for
to be taken truly
and only for what we are
as our own shining star
in the galaxy of people
who all sparkle and twinkle
We’ve seen what it means
to be encouraged as a queen
in the realm of our own being
We’ve seen what it means
to feel the steady beat
of the woman who doesn’t miss a day
on this well-deserved street
who doesn’t miss a tear
that needs to be understood
or a text or request
day or night
that needs to be set right
We’ve felt the beat so steady
that heart so ready
to bring generations forward
and move child after child toward
their best self and life

Teaching what matters and is right
Ms. JoAnn says
the energy comes from the kids
but it’s chicken or egg
for one who gives
so freely and truly
the love just compounds
as it goes around
growing every day
here on Ms. JoAnn Avery Way.

Above: Dara Munson (R), Delores Holmes, and Bobby Burns gave words of thanks and congratulations. Right: JoAnn Avery is touched by praise.
City of Evanston Awards Grant to Restore Home of Family Focus

From the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA), a grant for community development was awarded in July by the City of Evanston in the amount of $3 million to renovate and restore the iconic and beloved Family Focus Center at 2010 Dewey Avenue. The total project will be $12 million over the next three years.

The Family Focus Weissbourd building is home to Evanston’s last predominantly Black school before desegregation, the historic Foster School. Today it houses some of Evanston’s most essential nonprofit organizations that provide critical social and education services. Eighteen distinct agencies are tenants of Family Focus’ Evanston Center, which serves as a community hub of the Fifth Ward, as did Foster School between 1903 and 1979 before it closed as a public school.

In 1900 there were less than 750 Black citizens in Evanston so Foster School was originally all white students, built in 1905. However, from the great migration, the Black population grew by more than 5,000 people between 1900 and 1940. Black citizens were systemically segregated to the area around Foster School, and by 1940, the area was 95% black and Foster School was almost all Black taught by an all-white faculty.

Black Evanstonians suffered the all too familiar segregation practices as in other cities, limiting housing and loans, civic participation and jobs, and restaurants, theaters, even hospitals turned away Black people. So the segregated district built its own churches and businesses and was a thriving, self-sustaining community, even establishing its own Boy Scout troop and YMCA.

Foster School was the pulse of this close knit, vibrant community that made high-quality education a core value. The Civil Rights Movement, desegregation and closing of Foster School coincided to disperse Black families of the 5th ward and began gentrification. Even today, Black families who attended Foster School or taught there have special memories and a deep love for the school, in addition to troubling memories of their children bussed to other schools and having to assimilate to the dominant culture.

With equity at the core of Family Focus present day work, we will humbly honor those memories and the rich history of Foster School by transforming the building into a modern 21st Century community hub, with state-of-the-art design and technology, welcoming to all who need it.

Family Focus President and CEO Dara Munson says, “We are working closely with the City of Evanston, District 65 and a host of partners to reimagine, renovate and expand the Family Focus Evanston center to meet the evolving needs of 5th Ward residents and the broader Evanston community. We remain committed to assessing and serving the social, emotional, educational and family support needs of the community. This work cannot be done alone and Family Focus will continue to partner on the massive and meaningful endeavor of providing whole family services in service to our mission. The Evanston Center is an amazing asset that allows us to deliver on that mission within the Foster Campus.”

Special Thanks

Family Focus is so pleased to announce an endowment gift of $300,000 from the David C. & Sarajean Ruttenberg Arts Foundation to establish the David C. & Sarajean Ruttenberg Impact Fund for Fathers. Thank you to the Ruttenberg Family for this foundational support to serve fathers and to encourage peer-to-peer mentoring in our fatherhood initiatives and activities.

In addition, we give a special thank you to Living On The Go Foundation, a group of investors doing good for children and families with their unrestricted gift of $100,000 to Family Focus. Thank you! Thank you to all of our donors!