



Supporting children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic:

## **Analysis of applications for the COVID-19 Family Relief Fund**

Prepared for the Hennepin County Children's Mental Health Collaborative – May 2021

It is well-established that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the daily life, health, and well-being of children, youth, families, and organizations in Hennepin County. To support families during these unprecedented times, the Hennepin County Children's Mental Health Collaborative created a COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund for families. In the summer of 2020, families caring for children/youth living with a mental health diagnosis or condition were invited to apply for one-time funding up to \$500 to offset the financial impact of COVID-19.

This document summarizes the information provided by 629 families who applied for funding, including their descriptions of how COVID-19 impacted their family and how funding would help address their challenges. A companion document summarizes feedback from 13 members of the application review team, highlighting the strengths and challenges of the funding process itself.

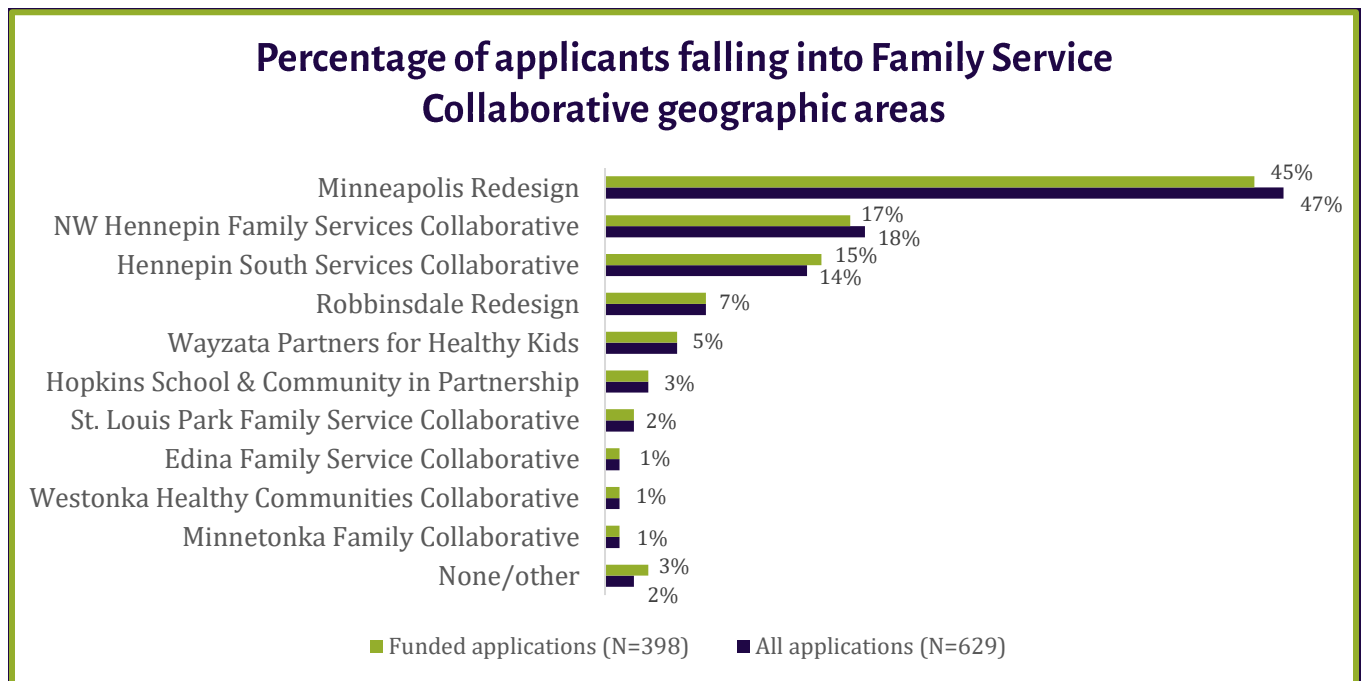
### **Summary of key findings**

- The funding opportunity was created to support families in meeting the mental health needs of their children. However, families were most likely to request support for basic needs, such as rent or food.
- Parents described a number of ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their children's well-being, including challenges due to social isolation, the transition to distance learning, and the cancellation of recreational and social activities.
- Concurrently, many families experienced reduced support. Mental health services were often disrupted due to telehealth challenges and a discontinuation of in-home services. Some parents also described their own increased isolation and reduced access to informal support.
- Families requested an array of supports to meet these challenges, including funding for basic needs, recreational resources, and technological resources. In alignment with the project priorities, families were more likely to receive funding for mental health supports than for basic needs.
- Further efforts may be needed to adequately meet the complex and significant pandemic-related needs of families with children who have mental health concerns.

## Geographic distribution of applications

A total of 629 families applied for funding through this initiative. Prior to analyzing the content of these applications, the location of the families was documented. The goal was to determine how applications were distributed across the County, and how applications aligned with the geographic boundaries of the County’s Family Service Collaboratives.

Just under half of the applications received (47%) and subsequently funded (45%) fell into the region covered by the Minneapolis Redesign Family Service Collaborative. Applicants were also somewhat likely to be residents of the geographic communities served by the Northwest Hennepin Family Services Collaborative and the Hennepin South Services Collaborative.



### Author’s note

The funding opportunity was created to support families in meeting the mental health needs of their children in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Applications ended up being due in the aftermath of the May 2020 murder of George Floyd. While this summary focuses on the original intent of the funding, it was very clear that many families were deeply impacted by the murder, and the subsequent civil unrest that took place in Minneapolis and other locations around Hennepin County. Some families specifically referenced this context in their applications, highlighting ways that their child’s mental health had been impacted by anxiety, fear, or trauma. Other families described ways that the civil unrest compounded their difficulty meeting basic needs, such as job losses (due to store closings or destruction) or reduced access to needed food or supplies (due to safety concerns or lost community resources).

## Impact of COVID-19 on families

Financial challenges were common, especially job losses due to COVID-19

**62%** of families described economic hardship

While some applicants did not specify the causes of financial stress, **38 percent of applicants said that they had lost income due to COVID-19.** Some families had a parent who lost their job, while others were temporarily furloughed or had their hours reduced.

*"I was furloughed from my employment for 2.5 months. This caused me to not be able to pay some of my bills."*

*"My partner's business has been closed since March, which is our main source of income. With finances greatly decreased and the future uncertain, our stress level has been very high."*

**Other parents (13%) needed to leave positions or reduce their hours due to parenting demands or health concerns.**

Most of these parents left positions to provide childcare or educational support for their children, who were unexpectedly home due to school and program closures. Others left positions due to health conditions that would make them, or their families, more susceptible to the risks of COVID-19.

*"[Parent] had to leave her job due to a previous health condition that could have been made worse by all those infected with COVID-19 at her work."*

*"COVID-19 created stress on me as a mother and provider and also for my children and their education. Due to the stay-at-home order, I had to stay home from work, eventually exhausting all of my income."*



Even when there was not income loss, some families (8%) struggled to cover costs that had increased unexpectedly due to the pandemic.

*"My oldest son used to have breakfast and lunch at school. Since school has been closed, we have had more out-of-pocket expenses for food."*

*"I am struggling to afford groceries since my kids are home all day now and I am responsible for feeding them more meals than usual."*

**Some youth were negatively impacted by the consequences of stay-at-home orders, such as social isolation and family conflict**

**38%** of families described difficulty coping with stay-at-home orders

Families talked about a variety of ways that their family was impacted by stay at home orders. First, **some parents (13%) highlighted the social isolation that their**

**children faced.** Parents talked about the challenges of connecting with friends, while often expressed concern about the lack of socialization on their family's well-being.

*"My child is getting behind socially since I keep him home due to COVID; he is not able to make friends."*

*"Not being able to access her friends has aggravated our daughter's anxiety"*

*"[Child] misses her friends but cannot use technology long enough to Zoom (due to attention difficulties)."*

Second, **some parents (10%) talked about the cancellation of activities that provided recreational and social outlets for their children.** Children lost access to extra-curricular activities, sports teams, camps, and child care programs. Some parents talked about ways in which these programs were especially important for their children with mental health concerns, providing opportunities for exercise and socialization.

*[Child] hasn't been able to participate in any structured summer activities, which are an important outlet for his anger."*

*"My child has not been able to participate in activities recommended for his mental health, like basketball."*

*"[My son] usually goes to camp and has access to a lot of social and emotional outlets that are not available currently. He has limited opportunities right now, which is becoming challenging on our family."*

Third, some families (12%) struggled as a result of spending so much time together, resulting in increased stress and conflict.

*"We have been struggling to get along since we are stuck in the house 24/7."*

*"My four kids stay in the house and all they do is argue, fight, and gain weight."*

*"The strain on our relationship has been difficult as it is just the two of us in the house. [My daughter's] social skills have deteriorated, and my mental health is suffering."*

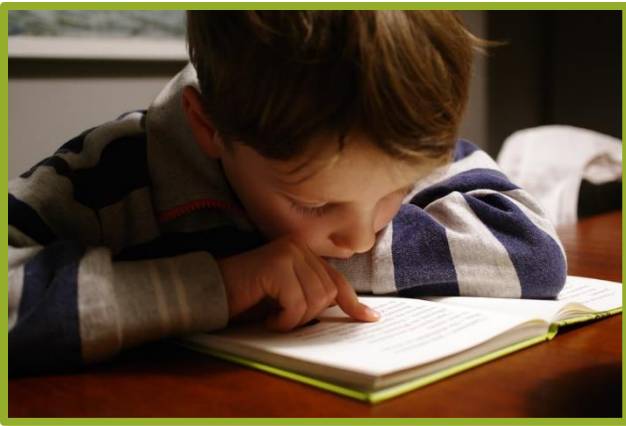


**Many families struggled with distance education, due to learning challenges, technology barriers, and reduced supports**

**24%** of families described challenges related to distance learning

**Learning difficulties were described by almost one-quarter of the families.** It should be noted that applications were completed in the summer of 2020. For many schools, the spring transition to distance learning happened quickly, with little opportunity to prepare academic and other supports for students. While the learning situation may have improved for some in the fall, many students had difficulty with the transition to online learning.

Often, parents described their child as struggling with online learning, without describing the nature of the difficulties.



However, for those parents who provided more detail, a few key themes emerged.

First, **some students had difficulty completing online learning due to learning challenges.** Some students found it difficult to maintain focus remotely, or found online learning stressful.

*"[Child] has a hard time focusing, following directions, and using respectful language with adults – all of which made distance learning difficult on the family."*

*"Child has a lot of energy and has a difficult time being on the computer for extended periods of time for learning."*

*"School was a real struggle in the spring, and we are nervous going into the fall knowing that distance learning does not work well for our kids. The anxiety is ramping up for everyone."*

Second, **some children did not have the materials that they needed to successfully complete school.** Some families described barriers due to a lack of computers or adequate Internet connections. Others said that their child did not have an appropriate place to complete online education.

*"[Children] had significant difficulty engaging in distance learning with the tools provided by the school, which increased their stress and mental health symptoms."*

*"Distance learning has been difficult for the family as they do not have access to electronic devices."*

*"Our home is not ideal for learning in that we do not have a desk, chair, air conditioning, and space for our children to learn comfortably."*

Third, **some youth struggled due to the loss of educational supports.** Some parents described losing educational and other services that the child had been receiving. Some also described the stress of trying to step in to provide these supports to their children on their own.

*"[Child] lost access to a lot of things that help her cope. She doesn't have the same special education equipment or physical tools that she had in school. She lost access to sensory tools, physical activity, school library, food program at school, etc."*

*"We provide full time monitoring, motivation, discipline, and organization. Our children lack the ability to focus on video lessons without full-time guidance. In school, they had paraprofessional help. That duty now falls on us."*

*"My kids moved to distance learning without the same supports they typically receive in school. I've been struggling to manage a full-time career and spend evenings trying to get kids to do schoolwork."*

**Some youth faced disruptions in their mental health care, due to difficulty engaging with telehealth, technology barriers, and lack of in-home services**

**18%** of families had reduced access to mental health supports

When the pandemic struck in the spring, many families experienced challenges accessing mental health supports for their children. **In some cases, services were simply no longer available, such as in-home services.**

*"Due to health concerns, we have had to self-isolate and have not been able to meet with providers in-person."*

*"All of our normal supports (i.e., school, therapy, and home visits with social worker) have been cancelled due*

to COVID. It's left us feeling very isolated and overwhelmed."

"[Child's] day treatment milieu program has been cancelled for the last few months. Rather than receiving four days a week of in-person day treatment, he has only been receiving one hour a week of therapy via zoom."

In many cases, providers moved to telehealth, providing appointments and support online. However, **the shift to telehealth did not work well for all youth.** Some children and youth were not comfortable engaging in online appointments, while others lacked the technology to support online appointments.

"Parent has had to navigate technology barriers due to distance learning and telehealth. Cultural barriers have caused technology use difficulties, making telehealth and supports inconsistent."

"Both [child] and his mother are struggling to attend virtual therapy and other mental health services due to having only one electronic device that connects to the internet (mom's phone). Both are struggling to manage their mental health symptoms due to frequently having to miss appointments."

"[Child] is unable to do therapy online due to her limited ability to stay on task, even with mom's assistance."

**Some parents struggled with their own lack of support, due to isolation from informal supports and limited respite opportunities**

**10%** of families had reduced access to parenting supports

**Some parents talked about the loss of resources that provided care and support for the family.** In some cases, parents talked about the strain of losing formal childcare. Others talked about the reduction of informal family support, often due to the need to isolate from older family members.

"We have lost the family support that we had, as my son's grandparents are isolating and they would provide respite before."

"Due to COVID 19, my mom is at risk due to low immunity and I can't use my parents for help as much as I used to."

"Daycare's are closed so [child] is no longer able to attend. Mom has to try and manage working from home with her child there."

Other parents **highlighted the need to have parenting respite.** These parents described feelings of high stress due to balancing work and parenting responsibilities without opportunities for breaks.

"I am feeling overwhelmed with trying to meet the needs of my family."

"I am a single mom with no support from family. I have had no time away, no breaks. I have to take leave from work in order to care for my son, as carrying both full-time work and his care were pushing me to the breaking point."

"We are in need of respite due to having our kids home all the time. They have a lot of energy, especially my kid who is diagnosed with ADHD."



## Requested resources to mitigate challenges

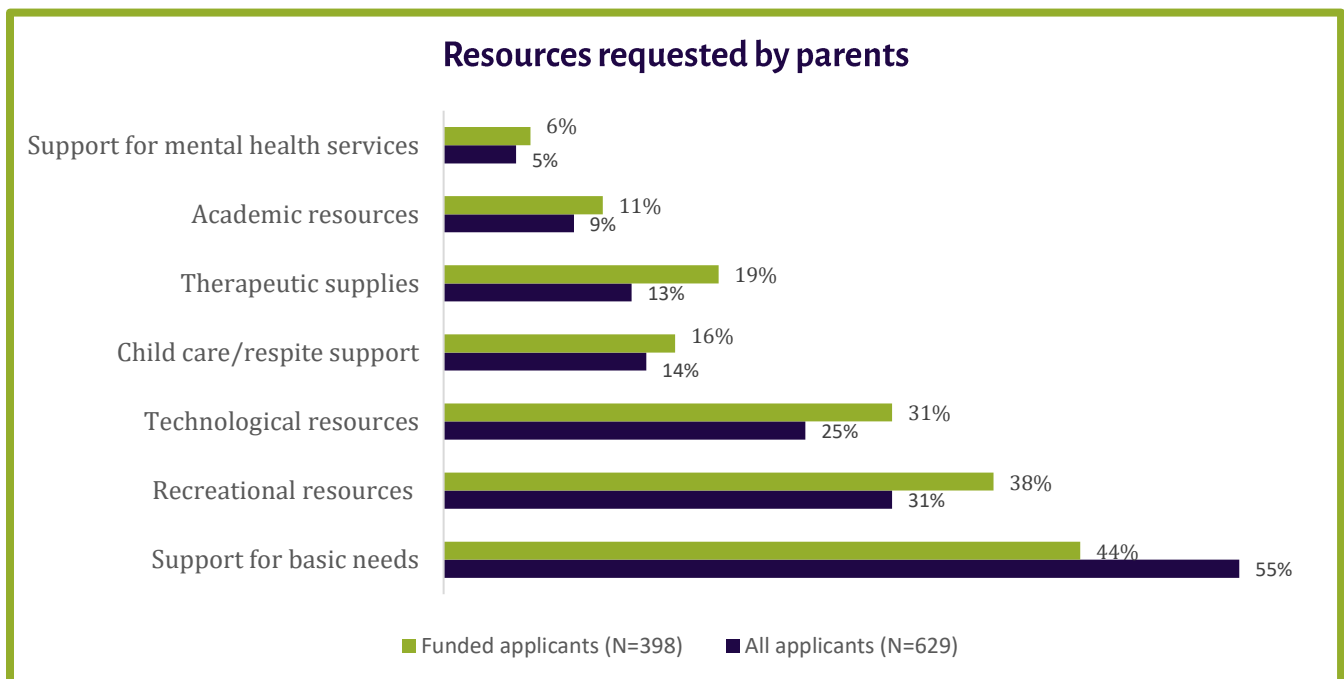
### Families requested an array of supports to meet these challenges, including funding for basic needs, recreational resources, and technological resources

In their applications, families requested a variety of supports to help address the COVID-19 challenges they were facing. More than half of the applicants (55%) requested financial assistance to help them meet their basic needs (such as support for utility bills, rent, clothing, or food).

Other families requested funding to provide materials or supplies for their children. Families were particularly likely to request recreational resources (such as program fees, exercise equipment, art supplies, or games) or technological resources (such as computers, tablets, or phones). Other families requested funding for child care or respite support, therapeutic supplies (such as weighted blankets or calming items), academic resources (such as tutoring, office furniture, or educational resources), or support for mental health services (such as co-pays, medical bills, or medications).

### Due to the priorities established in the application review, families were more likely to receive funding for mental health supports rather than for basic needs

The instructions provided to the application review committee specified that priority should be given to “child’s mental health needs (e.g., mental health provider session/therapy, medication, medical fee, technology item for child, respite activity or program, therapy tools for home, etc.)” over support for family household needs. As a result, funded applications were somewhat less likely to include funding for basic needs. However, 44 percent of all funded applications did include some financial support for basic needs.



## Recommendations

1. **Consider strategies to help families meet basic needs.** It was clear from this project that a significant number of families of children with mental health concerns are struggling to meet basic needs, such as housing. Additional strategies to help families learn about and access available services to meet these needs may be helpful.
2. **Promote efforts to support families experiencing isolation and reduced access to care.** It is unclear how long families will face the consequences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the results of this analysis do highlight the challenges that families have faced in meeting the mental health, educational, and social needs of their children. In addition to technology-based supports, it may be helpful to explore other pandemic-appropriate strategies for engaging with children and families, reducing family stress, and increasing access to respite support.



### **Author**

Cheryl-Holm-Hansen, PhD, Community Research Solutions  
[chery@community-research.solutions](mailto:chery@community-research.solutions)  
<https://www.community-research.solutions/>



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