



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

## **Summary of interviews of the COVID-19 Family Relief Fund review team**

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 an emergency COVID-19 Relief Fund. 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. The goal was to be as flexible and inclusive as possible in meeting the needs of families during this public health crisis.

As part of our effort to document our learnings from this project, this report summarizes feedback from 13 individuals who served on the application review team. A companion summary provides an overview of the information submitted by the 629 families who applied for funding, including their descriptions of how COVID-19 had impacted their family and how funding would help. Reviewers represented parents, mental health providers, Collaborative coordinators, and other system partners (including school and county corrections staff).

### **Summary of key findings**

- Reviewers generally agreed that the process represented a well-intentioned effort to support families struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that families benefitted from the funding.
- While reviewers saw basic needs (such as rent or food) as impacting children's mental health, there was disagreement about the role of the Collaborative in meeting these needs. Strategies to better coordinate with local service providers and the Family Service Collaboratives are recommended.
- The application and review processes were designed to be family-centered and equitable. Reviewers provided varying feedback about our success in aligning the process with these values, highlighting the importance of ongoing discussions about how best to support families.
- The review process was a significant amount of work, and there was significant dissent within the team that needed to be resolved. The review team worked together to overcome these challenges, and offered recommendations for improving this process if the Collaborative undertakes a similar effort in the future.

Through this initiative, 629 families applied for funding, requesting resources for basic needs (such as housing or food), recreational resources, technological resources, child care/respite support, therapeutic supplies, academic resources, and mental health services. The review team rated the applications, and subsequently approved funding awards for 398 families.

Following this process, the review team was invited to participate in one-on-one interviews, with a goal of capturing their feedback regarding the process and recommendations for future efforts to support families. Quotes from review team members are included to illustrate the different experiences and opinions of those involved in the review process; and reflect the diverse understanding of the process and context for decisions made.

## Benefits of the project for families and the Collaborative

### Many reviewers felt that the funding had been helpful for some families

Some reviewers described feeling proud that the Collaborative took on this project, and felt that families had benefitted from the effort. Some reviewers highlighted the importance of the Collaborative meeting the needs of families who had been impacted by COVID-19. While this type of initiative is not typically undertaken by the Collaborative, these reviewers felt that it was important to provide financial support directly to families, to help offset the negative impacts of the pandemic and to support their children's mental health. Some also felt that the project increased family awareness of the Collaborative and available local supports.

*"I felt positive about the project and our ability to support families. Many applicants talked about how they had been impacted by COVID, and we were able to address that impact."*

*"Overall, it was very positive. It was wonderful to know that families were receiving support. This was a good thing that happened and I'm proud of the collaborative."*

However, reviewers also acknowledged the limited amount of available funding reduced the number of families who could be reached. It was fairly common for reviewers to feel that the needs greatly exceeded the number of applications that could be funded. Families could request up to \$500, but many received smaller awards. Some reviewers questioned the value of smaller awards in light of the significant needs described by families.

*"With the amount of funding that was available, there was a huge need and we couldn't give it to everybody."*

*"I wish that we had enough funding to give everyone \$500. Once we got down to the \$200 or less range, I'm not sure if it made a difference."*

### Some reviewers also highlighted the value to the Collaborative as an important learning opportunity

While most reviewers highlighted the impact of the funding process for families, several also noted the value as a learning opportunity. Some reviewers valued the information gained about family needs, and the increased clarity regarding issues requiring further examination and discussion.

*"I personally learned a lot and it broadened my personal and our Collaborative's awareness of the needs families are facing. It was informative."*

*"We learned a lot about how broad and diverse peoples' interpretations of needs are, and these learnings will help us as we move into the system of care of work."*

## Role of the Collaborative in meeting family needs

### The review team lacked consensus regarding the Collaborative’s role in addressing basic needs

**Reviewers generally agreed that basic needs are critical for mental health.** The funding was originally intended to support the mental health-related needs of families. While some families did request therapeutic or recreational materials for their children, it was common for families to request support for basic needs, such as rent, food, or utilities.

The team was struck by the level of basic needs requested, and struggled to determine how to address these requests. Most reviewers agreed that issues such as housing stability and food security are important underpinnings of mental health.

*“Basic needs are determinants that impact family stress, which is one of the biggest contributors to mental health. I saw those as very interconnected.”*

*“[Basic needs] are largely under the umbrella of mental health even if it doesn’t meet a diagnostic level or reflect what we think about mental health.”*



**Reviewers disagreed about whether the Collaborative should provide funding to**

**meet basic needs.** While reviewers agreed that basic needs were important predictors of mental health, there was not consensus regarding the Collaborative’s role in meeting these needs. Several core concerns emerged.

First, there was some disagreement regarding the role of the Collaborative as outlined in state statute and the appropriate use of Local Collaborative Time Study (LCTS) funding. The review team needed to pause in their process and to seek clarification and input from county and state staff to ensure that it was appropriate to offer funding.

Second, there was significant concern regarding potential duplication with other county services and programs. Reviewers questioned whether the Collaborative should provide funding directly for basic needs, or whether families should be referred to other programs designed to meet these needs.

*“Basic needs and mental health are definitely interconnected. It was really just a question of whether those needs should be met through some other venue.”*

*“There was an overwhelming number of requests for basic needs that are addressed through other providers. It was difficult to say that funding for basic needs should go through us when other providers were available.”*

### There was also disagreement about the Collaborative’s “target population” and how that aligned with funding priorities

**Questions were raised regarding the Collaborative’s target population.** Some reviewers recommended focusing narrowly on children/youth with significant mental health conditions, or supporting only those already served by member agencies. Others felt the Collaborative should think more broadly and inclusively about social and emotional well-being for all County youth. These decisions were seen as shaping the

funding process, as reviewers sought to prioritize needs within the applications.

*“We could have focused on those already in services. Being family-focused doesn’t mean it should support everyone under the sun, rather than supporting their clients.”*

*“I really liked that [the process] gave the opportunity to support people who were not already receiving County support. It was an opportunity for people to become familiar with/comfortable with the Collaborative and to get connected to other resources.”*

### **Reviewers tried not to fund requests that could be met through other programs, but lacked consistent knowledge of resources**

The review team worked together to try to clarify how to respond to basic needs within the parameters of the LCTS funds. The team tried to identify other resources that could help meet basic needs and to provide families with information about these resources.

However, review team members had different knowledge and perceptions regarding available supports. Depending on the reviewer’s background, they disagreed about the availability of other resources and family eligibility to receive these supports.

*“We would decide that some families could meet their needs through other resources, without knowing if they could actually use those resources or if they were even eligible. That didn’t feel family-centered.”*

*“People scored based on their knowledge of County resources (i.e., one reviewer did not cover rent due to the existence of rental assistance programs, while another did grant funds due to their knowledge about difficulty accessing this program).”*

## **Family-centered and equity alignment**

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In an effort to meet emergency needs during a pandemic, the Collaborative moved quickly to offer resources to families. The goal was to be family-centered, by responding directly to the stated needs of families. Review team members highlighted a number of ways in which this project did, or did not, align with the principle of being family-centered.

### **The application and review process built in strategies to be family-centered**

#### **Reviewers agreed that the intent of the funding was to be family-centered and proactive in meeting family needs.**

Reviewers acknowledged the value of letting families describe their needs, and felt that it was important to respond to these needs.

*“We tried to not decide for families what was needed. We tried to keep it open and let them tell us what was needed.”*

*“There was honesty and integrity in opening up money and letting people tell us what they need.”*

**It was helpful to have parents involved in the process.** There was general agreement that it was important to have some parents serve as application reviewers. Several review team members felt that family members should have played an even greater role, though a few people felt overshadowed by family voice.

*“It was helpful to have the Parent Catalyst Leadership Group members/ parents at the table because they pushed back when we aligned with systems or programs. They are the ones who encouraged us to focus on the needs of families.”*

*“It would have helped to have more family voices. Professional voices outnumbered family voices.”*

**It was challenging to adopt a family-centered perspective.** For instance, efforts to build consensus within the review team resulted in delays in providing funding and

changed funding priorities midway through the process. There were also challenges in figuring out how to “weigh” family voice relative to the system and service representatives.

*“The most exciting part of the system of care approach is figuring out how to translate what parents say they need and want to help people delivering or funding services be responsive. How do we make it easy to support families without asking them to continually prove their need?”*

*“How do we create a family-centered collaborative? Do we all understand the viewpoint that we bring to the table and which viewpoint gets elevated? Do families get more weight than providers and schools? Whose voices should be the loudest?”*

## **The process also highlighted several concerns related to equity**

**Several reviewers raised concerns related to representation and equity in the review process.** These reviewers commented on representation in the process and how that representation impacted power dynamics and decision-making. Efforts were made to make the application widely available and accessible across cultural communities (such as by translating the application into multiple languages). However, some reviewers felt that the process itself was embedded in “dominant culture” models related to how we understand mental health (such as being tied to a diagnosis) and awarding funding based on a competitive application process.

*“I think the idea of an application process is based on white culture – could we have found different ways for people to apply?”*

*“My own power and position as a white woman in a powerful position came into play. Our intentions were good but the system may not have mitigated some of these factors...we did not promote equity in the system.”*

**Many reviewers highlighted potential inequities in the review process itself.** The

most common concern centered on the support that some families received in submitting their applications. While reviewers noted the importance of having the opportunity for support, it was fairly common for reviewers to note that families who received support from a case manager or other professional tended to have stronger applications. Reviewers appreciated the clarity of these applications, but also expressed concern that families who lacked support may have had equal or higher levels of need, while receiving lower ratings.

*“The process felt inequitable. If you had better education, or had a provider helping you, you had a better outcome. Some families struggled to complete the application or articulate their needs effectively, but may have had comparable needs to other families that received more funding.”*

*“You could clearly tell who had a supportive worker helping with the forms versus those who did it on their own. The scoring was set up so that those families did not receive full amounts.”*

## **Application and review process**

### **Reviewers identified strengths of the process, along with recommendations for improvement**

**The process was a lot of work and the review team was grateful for the efforts of the coordinators.** The review team was aware of the significant time that the coordinators put into organizing the process and preparing applications for review.

*“[Coordinator] did a really good job trying to respond to all of the things that came up. She worked like a dog to get everything done and was pleasant to work with and had a yeoman’s burden placed on her.”*

*“[Coordinator] worked her butt off. She put in long hours and deserves a lot of credit for the time and passion that she put into the project.”*

**If we were to do this again, we might need some different organizational and screening mechanisms.** While reviewers appreciated the work that went into organizing applications, several also noted that different technology might be needed if we were to offer funding again in the future.

*“The system used was archaic. Typically, you are given an application with just the name blacked out. It was de-identified inconsistently and it made it harder to review.”*

*“We should have an online system that would allow reviewers easier access to materials. We scrambled to update our platforms as much as we could to host private data. I would want us to have a better system for managing private information. Not having this system doubled or tripled the behind-the-scenes time.”*

**Strategies were built in to make the process accessible for families, but we could make it simpler still.** The review team felt that an effort had been made to make the process simple and easy. They also highlighted strategies to make the funding accessible, such as distributing application materials in multiple languages.

*“We addressed some barriers that families may have had with the application itself, such as translation.”*

*“The questionnaire was pretty simple and straightforward for families. They could do it with minimal assistance and I appreciated that.”*

**It was helpful to have multiple reviewers, though more reviewers would have been helpful.** Reviewers highlighted the value of having multiple people read and score each application. This process helped to highlight areas of discrepancy in the ratings and guide discussions to build consensus. The large number of applications created some burden for reviewers, however, and some felt that a larger review team would have been helpful.

*“It worked well to have two reviewers. It made it more cumbersome, but it was definitely helpful to have more than one person.”*

*“We needed more reviewers, but that requires more streamlining of the process. The more people you have, the harder it is to collaborate...but the fewer applications you need to review.”*

**Some reviewers were uncomfortable assigning “value” to family needs.**

Reviewers described stresses involved with assigning ratings. Some felt that there was a mismatch between the intended purpose of the funding, and the needs described by families. As a result, some felt that they were required to prioritize less urgent needs (such as some recreational supports). Others found it emotionally difficult to assign low ratings to families who clearly felt stress and desperation. Some reviewers simply wanted to meet the needs of all families, due to the struggles described in the applications.

*“We were directed to focus on therapeutic needs, but as a reviewer it was clear that people needed cash. Because we received vague guidance, there was conflict within the team and within myself about how to review the grants.”*

*“I struggled with wanting to give everyone the full amount. Who am I to decide how much funding families should receive?”*

**The team worked to build consensus regarding the rating process, though this process was challenging**

The review team worked together to build a common framework for rating applications, though this slowed the review process down. To resolve these challenges, the team needed to pause and work together to clarify the rating process. While this was a necessary step, it also caused delays in the review process.

*“The review group worked very hard to be cohesive and to make unified decisions.”*

*“I appreciated the dialogue with the review team. We didn’t always have consensus, but there was a collaborative spirit and a willingness to discuss. There*

*was room for dissension, and that was certainly part of the process as well."*

**Resolving disagreements and building consensus was stressful for some reviewers.** Because reviewers brought such different backgrounds and perspectives, there were some challenges in resolving disagreements. Many found the process to be difficult and emotional.

*"It was uncomfortable and emotionally charged and there were tears both within and outside the process."*

*"We sometimes got upset and were on very different pages. Those issues could have been resolved had we had clarity going in about how we would be scoring things."*

**While it was important to stop and resolve these issues, this process likely increased confusion and stress for some families.** Some reviewers focused on the delay, and the inconvenience of slowing down the process for struggling families. Addressing issues such as the alignment with LCTS requirements and the unexpected volume of requests related to basic needs helped to build clarity as a team.

However, several members of the review team expressed concern that they were not as clear with parents as they should have been at the beginning of the process about how applications would be rated, what funds could be used for, or the potential for applications to receive only partial funding. Several also felt that the process of building consensus meant that their understanding of the funding priorities shifted over time,

leading to some inconsistencies in their funding decisions.



*"Having to nullify some grants because of reviewers' opinions about how those dollars should be spent or their own prejudicial view was a disservice to families."*

*"Partway through, we switched to rules that had nothing to do with families. The new dynamic did not feel as focused on the families."*

**Reviewers felt that more upfront planning would have been beneficial.** The first recommendation was that the Collaborative develop a shared understanding of family needs before leading another support effort.

*"I wish that we had waited a bit and figured out how to target our money more creatively for greater impact."*

*"We should have been more targeted going into the process. We could have tapped into other areas of need. We could have used more of a team approach to develop the idea. The whole process felt like it was driven too fast without having a plan for where we were going to go."*

## Recommendations

1. **Clarify the Collaborative's role related to statute and appropriate use of LCTS funds in directly supporting families.** While some clarity was obtained through this process, it will be important to ensure that all Collaborative stakeholders have a shared understanding of the context in which the Collaborative operates.
2. **Determine how to best complement and enhance other programs and services, including Family Service Collaboratives.** Discussion should be used to determine whether the Collaborative should provide direct support to families, or support other organizations serving families. It will also be important to determine whether the Collaborative's role is to support a specific subset of County youth, such as those with the most complex or severe mental health issues or those already served by Collaborative agencies, or whether its role is to more generally support positive mental health for all youth.
3. **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.
4. **Continue to assess what it means to align with system of care values, such as family-centered care and equity.** This project highlighted the complexity of delivering services and supports in ways that are family-centered and equitable. It will be important to continue discussing these values and being intentional in applying them to Collaborative representation, decision-making, and delivery of services/supports
5. **Balance flexibility with engagement in future initiatives.** If the Collaborative opts to support families through a similar process in the future, it may be worth investing in different software to help organize the application and review process. Additional strategies may also be needed to ensure that the Collaborative balances the need to be nimble and responsive with the need to build clarity and consensus across stakeholders regarding the work to be undertaken.

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