

Supporting Children During the COVID19 Crisis
Mayor's Office of Education
Special Report
Childhood and Youth Committee
4/8/20
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HTV

Good Afternoon, and Welcome to this City of Houston Special, "Supporting Our Children During the COVID19 Crisis." My name is Juliet Stipeche, Mayor's Director of Education for the City of Houston. I want to thank Council Member Karla Cisneros and the members of the City's Childhood and Youth Committee and Mayor Sylvester Turner for allowing me the opportunity to spend some time with you today to discuss what the City and Mayor's Office has been doing to support our children, families, and communities.

We offer our sincerest condolences to those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy. We pray for those sickened or adversely impacted by this terrible disease. We are living in a very challenging time in human history. Danger and uncertainty abound, but they are surpassed by Houston's creativity, selflessness, and compassion. Disruption causes enormous challenges to our daily lives, but we are here today to discuss how we are building new bridges and creating new collaborations.

On behalf of Mayor Turner, we want to thank everyone who is keeping the city running. Thank you to our essential workers. We thank you first responders, healthcare and public health employees, and allied health professions. We thank our municipal employees, grocery store employees, delivery workers, construction workers, childcare workers, and civil servants. We appreciate you and love you.

Mayor's Office of Education works to create collaboration, coordination, and communication amongst the educational entities that serve Houston. Mayor Turner created the City's COVID19 Taskforce comprised of his offices to work on tackling this plight's unique challenges. We have worked closely with city directors, including Marissa Aho, Mayor's Chief Resiliency Officer, to design what we will be discussing today. We have also collaborated with other partners including the Harris County Judge's Office, the Region IV Education Service Center, Dr. Pam Wells and Superintendent HD Chambers, the host of outstanding local superintendents and their respective Boards, and the Texas Education Agency.

At the start of this pandemic, the Mayor's Office of Education decided to focus on five key areas: 1) food insecurity, 2) childcare access, 3) digital access, 4) health/mental health, and 5) wrap around services and non-learning resources. Given our time constraints our report will focus on the first 4 priorities. Let's begin.

FOOD:

The City's vulnerable communities COVID-19 Taskforce subcommittee has focused on food insecurity. Please note that schools and childcare centers typically provide up to 2/3 of a child's daily nutritional needs. Food insecurity hurts children's immune response potentially making them more at risk to contracting diseases. It is also linked to long-term academic, developmental, physical, and emotional harms.

Schools are presently closed until May 4 and potentially may remain closed for the rest of the year. The USDA has not mandated schools to provide meals during the closures, so school districts are deciding to serve meals on a district-by-district basis. In Houston, we have seen schools, government entities, and nonprofits answer the call. They offer summer meals and seamless meal options right now to support low-income families during extended school closures.

While summer meals don't follow the same strict nutritional standard as school meals programs, they do allow for more innovative strategies in terms of meal delivery, such as "grab-and-go" meal sites. We are examining models that are best for social distancing recommendations, especially when scaled up to serve more people. We are "building the plane while they fly it" in this COVID19 environment. But we must address the issues that COVID19 is exacerbating in the health and educational disparities that exist now and for years to come.

Please note that recent federal legislation is allowing more temporary, emergency benefits under SNAP to families already enrolled, but children don't qualify if they are served by the Child and Adult Care Food Program or if they are undocumented. Changes to the "public charge" rule went into effect in February 2020, so a path to U.S. citizenship could be denied if a person uses public benefits such as SNAP. In effect, documented immigrants will likely be discouraged from using SNAP for emergency food leaving them increasingly vulnerable, which brings the importance of utilizing nonprofit supports, summer meals programs, and seamless summer meals.

We need your help.

The Texas Hunger Initiative (THI) has mapped food services in the area. Please visit: <https://www.baylor.edu/hungerandpoverty/> and the Texas Education Agency has a state-wide database at www.txschools.gov, please click the link "meal pick-up locations." Sharing these resources with the community. If you know of a family that does not have internet access, please help them in sharing information that is available on these websites.

School districts are offering unique food distribution strategies, and the City of Houston has opened 50 parks and community centers to distribute lunch and a snack Monday through Friday (<https://www.houstontx.gov/parks/>). Please communicate this resource to your friends, families, and communities. Nonprofits addressing food insecurity such as the Houston Food Bank (<https://www.houstonfoodbank.org/>), Second Servings (<https://secondservingshouston.org/>), and Interfaith Ministries (<https://www.imgh.org/>) need your support. Clearly, my list is not exhaustive. Please consider donating your time and treasure to a local nonprofits addressing food needs.

Also, do you need help? Dial 211. It is a free helpline operated by the United Way of Greater Houston 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in many languages.

QUESTIONS?

CHILDCARE:

Mayor Turner, Judge Hidalgo, and the City of Houston recognize the challenges that you and your family face in these difficult times. Essential workers have kept our city and county operating since the beginning of the health care crisis.

On any given day, finding quality childcare is critically important for parents who work outside the home, and today, this issue is further complicated by the fact schools and many businesses are closed at this time. However, did you know that childcare centers are essential providers that remain open?

In response to this unique challenge, we partnered with the Houston Endowment and the Harris County Judge's office to develop a childcare solution for essential workers during this emergency. Rallying a diverse group of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders, we developed a strategic childcare plan and created a streamlined process for essential workers to find childcare and apply for financial support.

Launched on Monday, April 6, 2020, we, essential workers, to please visit and register at www.findchildcarenow.org.

This is available to all City of Houston, all Harris County employees, and all essential workers with children ages 0-12. Please note: Texas Workforce Commission Essential Workers include pharmacy and healthcare, first responders, critical local and state government staff, mail/delivery services, nursing homes, child care, home healthcare, and other direct care providers, grocery stores, gas stations, banks, restaurants (drive-through and delivery), military personnel, any other worker deemed essential by TWC or local workforce development boards.

If you are eligible, Participate! This is available on a first come, first served basis. Once a family selects a center and their enrollment is confirmed, care can begin immediately.

Collaborative for Children will contact applicants within two-business days to help them find a quality, licensed childcare center that best serves their needs. And, if a family wishes to apply for financial support, they will be contacted by a representative from Workforce Solutions within four-business days to review options.

Workforce Solutions has allocated \$10 million in for child-care for the 13-county region of Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller, and Wharton counties, which can provide childcare support for at least 3,500 children of essential workers.

We want to personally thank Tonyel Edwards, program officer, from the Houston Endowment, Chief Resilience Officer, Marissa Aho, the Harris County Judge's Office, Workforce Solutions, Bain & Company, Collaborative for Children, United Way of Houston, the YMCA of Greater Houston, First3Years, Harvey Home Connect, Texas Policy Lab at Rice University, The Bridgespan Group, The Baker Institute at Rice University, and Children at Risk.

Again, if you are an essential worker and need of this service, please visit and register as soon as possible at www.findchildcarenow.org.

QUESTIONS?

DIGITAL LEARNING:

This pandemic has transformed the way we work, learn, interact. Our homes have become extensions of the workplace, the school house, and the coffee shop all at the very same time. We are trying to find new ways of working and learning at home, while living with our family and pets. With tech and trust,

we are no longer bound to a traditional office, let alone an archaic landline. We now welcome and invite others to interact in our sacred spaces. We capture glimpses of people's homes, family photos, art, pets, crying babies. I never used Microsoft Meetings, Zoom, Google Hangouts Chat, Skype, or even FaceTime until COVID19. My learning curve was steep but largely efficient. Our professional and personal lives are now inseparably married to tech. I am blessed with the essentials: hardware and internet access. But, what happens if you don't have a relationship with tech in these troubling times?

In the education space, post-secondary institutions have transitioned the most rapidly to offer online classes to its student population. By way of example, before COVID19, Rice University offered three for-credit courses online, when classes restarted on March 23, 1,906 online courses were offered. Online education has been around for a while, but it has not been universally embraced in the education world until now. With emergency distance education, we are witnessing a revolution in the teaching and learning process. We need to develop an equitable system of digital learning that also incorporates the essential social emotional supports and development that are critical for our society.

We have been privy to conversations at the local, state, and national level regarding remote learning, the digital divide, and creating a new system of teaching. It moves rapidly; it's a work in progress; it requires patience, risk-taking, forgiveness, and creativity. The K-12 system is trying its very best to meet unique challenges offering digital learning, coupled with the delivery of old-fashioned paper instructional packets. All educators are valiantly jumping into this novel environment focused on the needs of their students to allow instructional support to continue. They are learning about digital resources and connecting to the unique needs of the children and families in the communities that they serve.

There are three primary challenges in bridging the digital divide:

- 1) Do students and educators have the hardware that they need? Computers, power cords, routers, cable?
- 2) Do they have internet access?
- 3) If 1 and 2 are satisfied, then what instructional support is offered digitally?

Local superintendents have been rallying HARD to solve these questions. The City of Houston has been supporting their efforts in looking at internet access equity issues throughout the City. Director Shannon Buggs has been examining this issue as a part of Mayor's Complete Communities and continues to lead this effort today with the Office of Emergency Management and Office of Innovation. We have been working with Planning and Development and Children at Risk to examine digital access issues. Mayor's Office of Education developed and updates a digital resource page for our community.

It's time for us to be creative and collaborative in this issue. A best practice example is Comp-U-Dopt. It has been giving away refurbished laptops for children in need. If you need a computer, please visit: www.compudopt.org/covid for updates regarding this program. Comp-U-Dopt has given away thousands of computers, but it needs more support.

We are asking private citizens, government entities, or private companies that have computers that are no longer being used to please email donate@compudopt.org to set an appointment for your gift. Your old computers are the lifeline for children and families in this time of need.

Comcast's Internet Essentials is now offering a two-month free promotion. While it is only available to those who qualify, it is open to most low-income persons as long as they live in the Comcast footprint. Please visit <https://www.internetessentials.com/> for more information.

AT&T announced that is suspending broadband usage caps for our home internet customers. That means no overage fees while people are home using more data. They are keeping public Wi-Fi hotspots open for anyone who needs them. They are offering internet access for qualifying limited-income at <https://www.att.com/shop/internet/access/#/>. New customers who order Access by April 30, 2020 receive two-months of free service. \$5 per month or \$10 per month thereafter, depending on your speed. It expanded eligibility based on income to households participating in National School Lunch Program/Head Start. It is waiving all home internet data overage fees.

We are now asking all internet, cable service providers within the City of Houston to please contact us with any and all benefits, specials, promotions being offered by your company as a part of the COVID19 crisis. We will update our digital resources link and share it with others.

Which brings me to the Mayor's Office of Education webpage: <https://www.houstontx.gov/education/>. We have a page listing e-learning resources and supports during this time of need. These resources come to us from our local, state and national partners. Please share with us quality low-cost and no-cost resources that you offer, and we will consider adding it to our local resource page! Remember that though we are apart, we remain together.

QUESTIONS:

HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH:

HEALTH

We want to thank you for honoring, respecting, and carefully following recommend health advice concerning COVID19. (From the CDC) As a reminder: The virus is spread mainly from person-to-person. Recent studies indicate that people who are infected but do not have symptoms likely also play a role in the spread of COVID-19. There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus.

We want to reiterate the CDC's prevention guidelines: Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Avoid close contact. Stay at LEAST 6 feet away from others. Avoid close contact with those who are sick or vulnerable to the illness. Stay at home as much as possible. Everyone should wear a cloth face cover when they must go out in public, for example to the grocery store or to pick up other necessities.

Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

The cloth face cover is meant to protect other people in case you are infected. Do NOT use a facemask meant for a healthcare worker. Continue to keep about 6 feet between yourself and others. The cloth face cover is not a substitute for social distancing.

Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks. If surfaces are dirty, clean them: Use detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection. To disinfect: Most common EPA-registered household disinfectants will work. Options include: Diluting your household bleach. To make a bleach solution, mix: 5 tablespoons (1/3rd cup) bleach per gallon of water OR 4 teaspoons bleach per quart of water.

Follow manufacturer's instructions for application and proper ventilation. Check to ensure the product is not past its expiration date. Never EVER mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser. It will produce a POISONOUS GAS. Ensure your alcohol solution to disinfect has at least 70% alcohol. You may use other common EPA-registered household disinfectants. For more information: please visit: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/index.html>.

SOCIAL DISTANCING AND STAYING HOME:

YOU are making a difference by staying home. According to a recent report from Rice University's Kinder Institute: 4,533 lives have been saved in Harris County by staying at home! Estimates show that social distancing measures during the 14-day period between March 24 and April 6 have saved the lives of 4,533 Houstonians and kept 48,812 people from being hospitalized locally. Also, not everyone can stay at home. So please keep our essential workers safe by staying at home and going out ONLY when necessary, AND faithfully practicing COVID prevention measures. Remember, while we are apart today, we are making sure we will be together tomorrow. Your hard work is working. Practice to make progress against COVID19 a reality!

INTERVENTION:

If you are exhibiting COVID19 symptoms: a dry cough, fever, tiredness, difficulty breathing, please call your healthcare provider or call the City's Houston Health Department's COVID-19 call center at 832-393-4220 between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. Once you're screened over the phone, you will receive a unique identification code and instructions on where to go for testing. You must have a unique identification code obtained through the screening process, or else you will not get tested.

Harris County has an online tool to access testing: <https://checkforcorona.com/harris-county#/welcome>. Once you're screened online, you will receive a unique identification number and a phone number to call to get the site location. You must have a unique identification code. Harris County residents without access to health care or the internet can call the county's triage line at 713-634-1110 any day from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. with questions.

Please check for other providers as well. United Memorial Medical Center has free COVID-19 testing at multiple sites, Monday through Friday. Pre-screening isn't necessary, but you can register online for a pre-screening test. Testing is available for anybody with symptoms. Visit: <https://www.ummcscreening.com/>.

Legacy Community Health has COVID-19 testing for those that screen positive. Call 832-548-5000 with questions. All testing is done on a sliding scale. <https://www.legacycommunityhealth.org/>.

MENTAL HEALTH

It is natural to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry at this time. Everyone reacts differently, and your own feelings will change over time. If you or someone you know shows signs of stress for several days or weeks, get help by accessing Harris County's COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line. **The dedicated toll-free number is 833-251-7544 and is available 24/7.** The purpose of the line is to provide trauma informed support and psychological first aid to those experiencing stress and anxiety related to the COVID-19.

We have been blessed to work with Baylor College of Medicine, Texas Children's Hospital, UNICEF USA, the Harris Center, Mental Health America, the Collaborative for School Behavioral Health, Texas Children's Hospital's Trauma and Grief Center, the Meadows Health Institute, and the Menninger Clinic to develop psycho-social supports for children impacted by stress and trauma.

Please know that children are extremely attuned to your reactions and their own anxiety is often a reflection of what they see in others. Children of different ages respond differently, but they may demonstrate developmental regressions, tearfulness, aggression, irritability, difficulty sleeping or changes in eating habits. Please remember the 6 "S's":

- 1) Safety and security;
- 2) Simple language;
- 3) Supervision;
- 4) Structure;
- 5) Social support; and
- 6) Self-care.

Give your children time and support to adapt to this new normal. Support them through "teachable moments" including how to cope with stress and how to focus on what matters such as their health and wellbeing, relationships, and how to do their part in Keeping Houston Strong.

QUESTIONS:

CLOSING REMARKS:

Thank you for joining us today. United against this disease, we will overcome it. While we are apart today, we will be together tomorrow. Remember Houston: you are a part of the solution; be well; stay safe. Together, we are Houston Strong.