COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
EQUIP FAMILIES FOR SUCCESS

THE GENEROSITY OF PEOPLE LIKE YOU
ENSURES THAT EVERY PARENT AND CHILD
CAN ACCESS LIFE-CHANGING SUPPORTS
IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

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FOR STRONGER NEIGHBORHOODS AND
A STRONGER CHICAGO REGION!

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Over the holiday season, Maria Robles, a West Chicago mom, and her son were suddenly forced out of their home. At a time when they should be celebrating, they found themselves in crisis.

For help, she turned to Crystal Dela Huerta, a family liaison working in her son’s school.

Family liaisons from We Go Together for Kids (WeGo), a United Way community partner, provide services and advocacy to students and parents in schools across West Chicago Elementary School District 33. Much like social workers, they help to ensure students have safe housing, food in the cupboards and healthy and thriving households.

As the lead agency of the West Chicago Neighborhood Network, WeGo works to create “community schools” that prioritize more than students’ academic success, addressing a wide range of needs. Through our partnership, United Way provides financial support, training opportunities, and more to WeGo to help sustain and grow programs and improve the quality of services.

“We’re helping families reach self-sufficiency, and we’re really being a guide for them, connecting them to resources in the community,” Crystal said. “The best and most rewarding part of my job is building those relationships with families.”

For Maria and her son, this support is critical. As she finalizes a divorce from her husband, WeGo and Crystal have connected them to counseling, food, clothing and transportation to and from meetings with lawyers. Then, when they were forced to vacate their home in December, they helped Maria secure rental assistance, which allowed her and her son to move into a new apartment just before Christmas.

“She’s extremely grateful and happy with the services that she’s received,” Crystal said, translating Maria’s praise. “When she was in the process of divorce, it was really difficult for her. She felt as though the world was crumbling and falling all around her and she wasn’t going to get through it.”

“But, she said, ‘I never would have imagined that through this phone call I made to ask for help that I would receive all I needed,’” Crystal added on Maria’s behalf. “Now, I feel like, little by little, I’m moving forward.”

Maria Robles
Deborah Shirley, a caretaker living in Robbins, took a break from her daily duties to pick up groceries for her family. Unfortunately for her and her neighbors, there are no quality grocery stores within the city limits.

In addition to living in an area known as a “food desert,” Deborah was working on a tight budget. Instead of traveling miles to the closest affordable store, she stopped at Blue Cap Pantry, a food bank serving Blue Island, Robbins and the surrounding communities.

“You know, it’s kinda rough out here. You gotta go to other towns to get something fresh,” Deborah said. “I really do appreciate it. Times are really hard, and it’s just a blessing to be able to come here.”

The creation of the Blue Cap Pantry illustrates the power of partnerships built through United Way of Metro Chicago’s Neighborhood Network Initiative.

Members of the Blue Island-Robbins Neighborhood Network agreed that issues faced by children and families in the area, like poor health and high poverty, are rooted in a lack of access to healthy foods. Together, the Network built the Blue Cap Pantry to change that.

Unlike some pantries that offer only dry goods, Blue Cap boasts an abundance of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and eggs. Instead of receiving prepackaged bags, shoppers select their own groceries just as they would at the store.

Not only do the pantry’s patrons benefit from access to free food, the pantry’s volunteers, most of whom are Blue Cap clients, also shop there and learn important life skills through their service.

Each Tuesday, they open the doors and greet patrons, stock shelves, and load groceries into shoppers’ cars. This experience prepares them for jobs in the community and teaches them management skills to use in their day to day life, like planning a budget for a shopping trip.

Keith Konsoer, a long-time resident of Blue Island, has worked at the pantry every week since it opened. “I love everything here. They’re all my friends,” he said of the other volunteers.
Prior to last school year, Luisa Valadez, a seven-year resident of Brighton Park, spent her days as a housewife, caring for her three children and home. Some days when her older children returned from school and asked her how her day was, she became frustrated that she had little to share.

“Sometimes, I felt like I can do nothing. [What am I here for? What can I do?” said Luisa, reflecting on the past. “And in the night, when the day is done, I didn’t do anything.”

After talking to a friend, Luisa was invited to join a parent-mentorship program. Though at first hesitant, Luisa opted to give it a try.

Through our Neighborhood Network Initiative, we support the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council as they train parents to work alongside teachers in local classrooms. In this way, they play a more active role in their children’s education.

“Parent leadership programs are a great way for parents to get to know each other and to get more involved in their community,” said Jessica Lucas, a senior program manager with United Way of Metro Chicago. “It gives parents a voice and the confidence to speak up for their children and advocate for them within the school system and their communities.”

The benefits of the program are felt throughout the community. “Parents and teachers working together is probably the best formula for student success,” said Richard Morris, principal of Burroughs Elementary School.

A year since her training, Luisa has seen significant personal growth. The parent leadership program not only increased her self-confidence, it’s motivated her to return to school to earn her GED.

“Mothers like me, we always think that we were made to be home, to clean the house, to make dinner, and do laundry. We don’t know all the things we can do,” Luisa said. “When this program came to my life, everything changed.”
As a young boy growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Rasheed Sami faced struggles that no child should. Some days, there wasn’t food on his table. For weeks, he and his friends stayed inside after they witnessed police shoot a neighbor. Other times, he watched his father battle an addiction that rattled his household.

Today, Rasheed, who’s almost 30, uses those struggles to empower others who face similar circumstances. Most recently in his journey to healing, Rasheed attended an educational symposium designed to teach South Chicago residents about trauma, how it can manifest in your life and tips to better respond to its effects.

The symposium, hosted by the South Chicago Neighborhood Network, is just one effort the collaboration is taking to foster a trauma-informed community.

“Our Neighborhood Network wants to make sure people can identify trauma and find ways to heal from it,” said Tevonne Ellis, the South Chicago Neighborhood Network coordinator.

During the day’s workshops, some attendees learned first aid to respond to physical trauma and lessons about identifying and responding to domestic violence, while others explored how one’s spirituality can be impacted by trauma. The group also brainstormed tangible ways to improve the culture of empathy and support in South Chicago.

Through the event, Rasheed learned to see trauma differently. “Trauma never leaves you,” he said. “You just learn to be more aware of it and what triggers it. You learn to cope with it better.”

Now, Rasheed shares these lessons with the next generation. A youth counselor with Becoming a Man and motivational speaker, he delivers a message of resilience to his community.

“My job is to empower through my story,” Rasheed said. Not to say, ‘I know what you’re going through,’ but to express that others have experienced hardships and they can triumph over them.”

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