



# Loyola University Chicago BRAVE Project

## Advisory Board Newsletter FALL AND WINTER 2020

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## **Continued Response to COVID-19**

During COVID-19, BRAVE has offered in-person programming for groups of up to 10 students as well as online programming mirroring the in-person activities. Programming has been flexible with the students' schedule and has included regular check-ins with students using text, Zoom, and Facetime; group work; life skills practice; socioemotional discussions; current events analysis; and various virtual games. In some partner agencies, afterschool programming included offering a clean, quiet space for students to attend online classes as well as third party online/virtual tutoring services. Incentives were offered to increase youth's participation in their programs. Additionally, home visits occurred for delivering necessities packages, food baskets, and wellness checks. BRAVE agencies linked youth and families to diverse community resources (e.g., food pantry, virtual volunteers, internet devices, and unemployment benefits); delivered outreach packages with school supplies and resources related to COVID-19, and offered socioemotional activities that could be completed independently at home. Check-ins with students addressed their need to socialize, play, and interact with one another. Furthermore, parent social events were held virtually.

## **Year 4, First and Second Quarter (July 2020 – December 2020) Agency Highlights**

### **Vietnamese Association of Illinois (VAI)**

VAI has provided online programming via Zoom. The agency has hosted virtual workshops and parent socials, remote check-ins using Google surveys, and implemented a remote community engagement project. Additionally, VAI has mailed care packages containing resources and information relating to COVID-19 such as information from the CDC on how to take proper safety precautions, information on local food pantries, and information on how to apply for unemployment benefits.

Additionally, VAI has established partnerships to help support their programming. One is with The International Student Services organization to host workshops for youth discussing college planning. Another is with a local organization, KANWIN, to plan future workshops discussing gender based violence, the importance of boundaries, and healthy relationships.

### **Centro Romero**

Centro Romero has offered in person activities when safe, while also simultaneously offering virtual activities. In person activities follow CDC guidelines for safe gatherings including masks, temperature checks, hand sanitizers, and cleaning of office space. Programming has included beginning the CASA curriculum from UnidosUS, focused on a culturally relevant service-learning project; a photography project where students presented their photos in an outdoor gallery; and creating a haunted house for younger Centro Romero students. Socioemotional activities focused on heritage, gratitude, leadership, values, self-compassion, self-worth, imposter syndrome, and 2020 reflections. Centro Romero also incorporated more fun and games into programming to keep students engaged and relaxed. BRAVE

students received free meals for their families from Tapas Valenica on Thanksgiving day. Students also gave back to the Centro Romero community by filling and distributing goodie bags for Christmas. At the semester's end, Centro Romero held a blended holiday party, virtual and in person, with less than 10 people in the classroom, and gave each BRAVE student a present and gift card.

### **By the Hand Club for Kids-Englewood**

At by the Hand Club for Kids, in-person and virtual programming has been offered. Bus service was available for students via their schools and dropped students off at their residences after programming. Only students who agreed to follow CDC guidelines and policies have been allowed to attend in-person programming, and to motivate them, the agency provided accessories for their face masks that offered more comfort and allowed speech to be clearer.

The organization collaborated with Ford Motor company to distribute 5,000 masks to the community. This allowed By the Hand Englewood to provide each student with a donation of 20 masks. The agency also collaborated with the Center of Englewood which resulted in each student receiving a personal hygiene kit including socks, soap, toothpaste, tooth brush, and shampoo. Following the CDC guidelines, small groups of 5-6 students attended weekly enrichment activities such as horse riding with HRET (Horse Riding Equine Therapy) and a Mock Trial. Additionally, wellness checks were conducted on an as-needed basis when students' attendance dropped to zero, students and families received hot meals on Fridays, and youth were offered free annual visual and dental check-ups.

### **Lincoln Park High School**

BRAVE programming has remained remote at Lincoln Park High School. BRAVE continued to conduct daily and weekly check-ins via text and through the use of remote platforms. Students conducted talking circles. The youth discussed the recent spike in the crime and the impact on their view of their community. Social awareness was also a focus where students were able to reflect on the issues related to the ongoing pandemic and the recent social activism. Students expressed an increased need for stress and time management strategies. To help offset these issues, BRAVE staff offered students online planners to help effectively manage their classes, extra-curricular activities, and work. Also, in order to help manage stress, students engaged in relaxation activities like mindfulness, vision boards and self-care activities.

### **Successes and Lessons Learned from COVID-19**

When in-person programming was replaced by virtual/online programming in response to COVID-19, BRAVE site coordinators and MSW interns developed various strategies to engage youth and their families in order to accommodate their living conditions, as well as academic and financial needs. It became apparent that during remote programming, many BRAVE youth had limited privacy and confidentiality because they were joining from home instead of at their respective sites. In some cases, to ensure youths' confidentiality, BRAVE staff created a Google survey youth could fill out electronically. As a result, youth's participation in online programming has increased. Furthermore, both in-person and online programming has occurred in smaller group sizes due to the necessity of social distancing as well as a result of decreased youth participation. However, reduced group sizes has led to more intimacy between youth and staff, an increased sense of community, and opportunity for youth to gain autonomy and leadership. During programming, BRAVE staff have observed youth

discussing topics such as innate self-worth, gender identity, and affirmations all which reflect a renewed level of comfort and trust between one another. Also, youth have verbalized a better understanding of healthy coping skills. In some cases, youth have also shown willingness to reach out to staff members when in distress to discuss any conflicts or emotions they may be experiencing. Some BRAVE youth have had opportunities to lead while guiding younger students in weekly discussions of current events, participating in a communal painting, and having respectful debates. Through these experiences, BRAVE youth have become dependable role models for younger students. BRAVE staff is continuously offering programming and activities that address youths' emerging needs.

## **Accomplishments**

Despite barriers mentioned above, all BRAVE partner agencies have actively engaged with intervention youth, families and the communities in which they live to accommodate emerging needs during COVID-19 including:

- Hosted virtual workshops about career and college planning
- Offered virtual holiday card writing campaign for community seniors
- Organized a service learning project with the Latino community
- Provided Thanksgiving food baskets
- Offered weekly enrichments of Equestrian Therapy and Mock Trial for 6-8 weeks at a time
- Offered dental and vision services
- Delivered regular care packages (food, hygiene products, school supplies)
- Where available, served a clean, quiet space for students to attend online classes
- Connected students to third party online/virtual tutoring services and volunteers

## **Challenges**

BRAVE programming has faced various challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limited in-person contact, BRAVE has relied primarily on online programming for its services. Agencies have had difficulty reengaging some youth who were inactive at the start of the pandemic and into the summer. Additionally, there have been concerns around youth not having computers / internet services resulting in students not participating. Students have continuously felt exhausted from online learning and struggle to maintain their focus and motivation. Furthermore, there is limited space at the agencies and providing social distancing is difficult to instill. BRAVE staff attempt to go outside as much as possible, though this choice has become more difficult as winter weather interferes.

## **Sustainability**

Since the inception of the BRAVE project, each partner has collaborated with diverse community stakeholders such as schools, religious organizations, business owners, other community agencies, and law enforcement. Partner agencies have been exploring some possible funding to sustain the BRAVE project after the federal funding ends. To date, Centro Romero received extra funds from UnidosUS to

implement a community outreach program; BTH-Englewood received a Healthy Living Chicago Grant and is partnering with the YMCA to provide enrichment and STEM activities; The BRAVE team at Lincoln Park High School has collaborated with Alderman Smith from Chicago's 43rd Ward in order to explore possible funding from business owners, Chamber of Commerce, and the LPHS Parents Association; VAI is pursuing a grant application for an anti-racism program through IDHS and would provide cultural competency and racism education with funding. The site is also looking into partnering with a local gaming café for fundraising.

All partner agencies have demonstrated ongoing commitment to preventing youth violence by continuously implementing BRAVE programming to their existing youth services. Agencies can easily integrate BRAVE programming once the project ends as they have pre-existing after-school services and other social services in which BRAVE youth and families can be seamlessly absorbed.

## **Participating Agencies**

### *By the Hand Club For Kids - Englewood*

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### *Centro Romero*

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### *Lincoln Park High School*

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### *Vietnamese Association of Illinois*

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**\*Cover Photos**

**Top Left:** Screen shot of Centro Romero BRAVE youth participating in virtual programming

**Bottom Left:** Centro Romero BRAVE youth who received a free tablet from Yello, a company that made a donation to the agency

**Top Right:** By the Hand Club for Kids-Englewood BRAVE youth participating in Horse Riding Equine Therapy

**Bottom Right:** Centro Romero BRAVE youth ice skating at Warren Park for the final gathering of the year

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