

SHELTERING ARMS

Children and Family Services

Embracing Hope and Building Futures for Generations

**Testimony delivered by Shana Hewitt, Director of Early Childhood Education
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Good afternoon. My name is Shana Hewitt and I am the Director of Early Childhood Education at Sheltering Arms. Thank you Chairs Treyger and Rosenthal for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Sheltering Arms is one of the City's largest providers of education, youth development, and community and family well-being programs for the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. We serve nearly 15,000 children and families each year, and employ more than 1,200 staff from across New York City. Our Early Childhood Education program includes nine centers in the South Bronx, Harlem, Queens, and Brooklyn which serve nearly 700 children and their families each year.

When the COVID-19 pandemic caused NYC to close on March 13th, our Early Childhood Education centers quickly pivoted to provide remote learning to all of the children and families in our program. This was brand new for our teachers and our families, and there have been many challenges along the way. While we have adjusted and learned new ways of connecting with families - some of which will allow us to provide more flexible and accessible support moving forward - I am testifying before you today to highlight some of the challenges that remain.

Under-Enrollment

The impact of COVID-19 on the families we serve cannot be overstated. Children have lost parents, families have lost income, food insecurity has increased dramatically, and like parents across the country our families have had to figure out how to balance work with their children's education. In our program, just over one third (35%) have enrolled in our fully remote option, 37% have enrolled in blended learning, and 28% have enrolled in fully in-person learning. To us, this relatively even spread emphasizes the need for families to have options, and we appreciate the support provided by the Department of Education to ensure these options are available to families. While more than two-thirds of our families have opted for some sort of in-person programming, many are still fearful of bringing their children to school on-site. For example, one mother who works full-time in a doctor's office told us she was afraid to bring her son to school, and since her husband had the opportunity to work from home they decided to enroll the son in remote learning. They had trouble in the beginning, but once they got a schedule in place, the father was able to flex his work schedule to accommodate his son's school schedule.

However, for families that do not have as much flexibility or capacity to support remote learning, COVID has impacted their willingness to enroll their children in pre-school at all. Families who have been unable to balance remote learning and work, have opted instead to leave their children with sitters or family members who are unwilling or unable (due to language or technology barriers) to assist children

with remote learning. Across our nine centers, enrollment this year is down 16% compared to last year - from 78% to 62%. For some of our centers this is the first time they have been under-enrolled in several years.

We urge the Department of Education to extend full contract payments to ensure that providers are not financially penalized for under-enrollment throughout this crisis.

Mental Health and Well-Being

We are grateful that New York City has invested some resources and training in recent years to ensure that early childhood education programs provide trauma-informed care to the children and families we serve. Trauma Smart has equipped our staff with critical skills and strategies to address the behavior issues that are often a result of trauma that they face at home, or in their communities. Sheltering Arms has also operated a Thrive NYC Connections to Care program within some of our ECE centers since 2016, allowing us to embed mental health education and screening services into our programs. While these have been helpful in equipping staff with skills and tools to support a trauma-informed environment, more is needed to provide staff and families with tangible mental health services that are integrated into the program.

For example, in April one of our families suffered the loss of the father due to COVID. The father always worked while mom stayed home, so his loss was a devastating emotional and financial loss for the family. Our Early Head Start (EHS) program provided this family with mental health services (made possible with private funding) and intensive family services to assist her with navigating the medical and benefit systems during her husband's illness and death. After his death, the mother moved temporarily with her three sons to a family member's home in Connecticut, where we were able to stay in touch. Her family came together to help her obtain a small studio apartment in the Bronx for her and her three sons ages 14, 10, and 2. The mother now has to work long hours at a nail salon six days a week and is overwhelmed with not being able to help any of her children with remote learning. Instead, the mother relies on the help of their babysitter and grandmother, who are both limited in education and technology skills, to watch the children during the day and help with remote learning as best as possible. We were eventually successful in enrolling the youngest child in our blended learning option, and continue to support the babysitter and grandmother as much as possible during the remote learning days.

While our staff have worked to support families in need throughout the pandemic, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 (physically, emotionally, and financially) on Black and Latinx communities in NYC has fallen on both the families in our program and our staff members. Our communities have experienced incredible trauma and need additional support.

We urge the Department of Education to provide additional resources, including onsite mental health counseling in our ECE centers, to support the growing mental health needs of staff and families, especially for our BIPOC mothers. Research continues to point to the increased need for mental health support in BIPOC communities, and especially for BIPOC women. Our programs are designed to work with parents, and NYC has recognized that the trusting relationship parents have with their childcare provider makes us an effective access point to needed care. NYC must invest additional resources to address the profound trauma our communities have and continue to face.

Childcare for Essential Staff

It is important to reiterate that essential staff across the city -- including our ECE teachers as well as staff in our residential, foster care, and preventive programs -- have struggled with the need for childcare throughout the pandemic. When our ECE centers were mandated to close and were providing remote learning, our teachers, 97% women and 98% people of color, joined parents across the city attempting to juggle working while assisting their own children with remote work. They, like others, were challenged with having to make due with everyone in the household using one or two DOE supplied devices to participate in remote work or school. Technology distribution was not swift enough to meet the demands of the quick shift that the pandemic forced them to make, and many families are still awaiting devices and needed technology. In addition to this, many were simultaneously taking care of sick family members or mourning the loss of those close to them who passed away from COVID-19.

We are grateful that NYC has committed to providing childcare programs specifically for essential workers, including the Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) early in the pandemic, and now the Learning Bridges program. However, these programs have come with their own challenges, including lengthy wait lists. An assistant teacher in one of our programs did not know what she would do with her 10-year-old son who was enrolled in blended learning in his local school. She was scheduled to work in a classroom that met in person 5-days-a-week, but had no one else to take care of her son on the days when he was home receiving remote instruction. When she found out about a local Learning Bridges program where she could enroll her son, she was eager to enroll him. She applied for the program, but had to wait almost six weeks for him to be enrolled and start attending. During these six weeks, she had to use her sick and vacation time in order to stay home with her child while they waited to hear back. Since her son has begun attending the Learning Bridges program, she has been able to work steadily and is grateful that she has a safe place for her child to attend school.

We urge the Department of Education to simplify and streamline the application process for Learning Bridges.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and for fighting for our children, families, and staff. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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