



## Partnerships Rising Amid COVID-19 in Miami-Dade

*By Gladys Montes, vice president, United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education & executive director, Educare Miami-Dade; Featuring: Elizabeth Pena, director and owner, Tiny Kingdom Learning Center*

Today a care package assembly of critical and often difficult to find supplies like formula, wipes and diapers is underway for the over 500 hundred children and families we serve across Educare Miami-Dade and our Partnerships programs. Looking at the number of staff in attendance, I am struck by the fact that everyone is committed to giving more to the children and families we serve right now. Again and again, staff are giving more of their talents, time and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, which speaks volumes to the heart of the early childhood field.

United Way of Miami-Dade operates Educare Miami-Dade and is an Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (Partnerships) grantee with 21 child care partners located across 7 Miami-Dade County communities. These Partnerships include family child care, small child care businesses, a homeless shelter, nonprofit organizations, and the public schools. While Florida child care providers have the option to remain open\* during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of United Way of Miami-Dade's Partnership programs closed due to safety concerns, without a clear reopening date.

During the pandemic, our child care partners are working overtime to deliver high-quality education and essential services firsthand including access to mental health services, therapy interventions, and family engagement opportunities. Families have also received assistance with basic needs like food and housing, and staff have benefited from stable salaries and continuous professional growth opportunities like online CDA programs. Partnerships funding and associated supports has made all of this possible.

### Partnership Spotlight

Elizabeth Pena, director and owner of Tiny Kingdom Learning Center, a United Way of Miami-Dade child care center partner, is giving more during this unprecedented time to working families who usually depend on her center for full workday, year-round high-quality child care. She now spends her time making care packages and holding care package pick-ups at multiple times throughout the day to meet families' differing schedules, ensuring that her families are supported even when her center's doors are closed.

"I have a moral obligation to serve the children and families who attend the center," says Elizabeth. "My families are agricultural workers who are considered essential employees but are experiencing both financial and personal hardships. By partnering with United Way of Miami-Dade, my center has been able to pool resources to contribute to the greater good of the community in the middle of this crisis."

### Challenges Become Opportunities

The current COVID-19 crisis caused us to switch methods of service delivery through our Partnerships faster than I thought possible. We closed programs on Friday, March 13, and by Monday staff were

connecting remotely with families and troubleshooting challenges. We faced confusion, panic and often insufficient direction from the state and local levels.

If we stay open during this pandemic, how do we provide safe child care? If we close, how can we ensure programs will open again? What will happen to the families who depend on us?

Although the mounting level of uncertainty has taken its toll on our programs and families, it has also fostered greater connectedness and adaptability. We aren't able to hold committee meetings of parents in person? Let's try Zoom, celebrate the 80% parent participation – higher participation than ever before – and let's explore virtual family engagement in the future. Our emergency plans focused on hurricanes rather than a largescale health crisis? Let's develop a more comprehensive emergency plan, reflective of the lessons we're learning during the pandemic.

Elizabeth Pena, like many of our partners, is embracing that challenges can be opportunities. “Modifying center operations from face-to-face into virtual learning via Zoom and telephone contact has been challenging because families have limited access to technology and staff need to adjust quickly,” shared Elizabeth.

Ultimately though, Elizabeth explains, “it has brought us much closer to our children and families. Constant interaction and communication with the parents has led to a deeper understanding of their struggles and their resilience. Although we remain physically distant from our families, our shift to distance learning using Early Head Start resources has allowed us to interact with families more. Families have expressed that they feel supported and know that we truly care about the wellbeing of their children.”

## Looking Forward

“Tiny Kingdom is my heart and soul,” says Elizabeth. “I view the children as my very own, and I've vowed to the families that the center is making all the necessary preparations to reopen to serve them in a sustainable manner while protecting the children and staff from COVID-19.”

With public schools closed and the fragility of child care sector evident, our nation is at a critical tipping point. Without the sustained supports provided by Partnerships, many child care programs will be forced to close their doors. We must take action to ensure that states and Congress invest in Partnerships and/or state or local models that link child care centers and homes to Head Start grantees to provide implementation supports and higher-quality comprehensive services to families remotely and/or on-site.\*\*

A lack of high-quality, accessible child care for working families could paralyze our nation, and so we must find ways to turn the very real challenges of our chronically under-resourced child care system into opportunities to build it back better.

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\* <http://www.hunt-institute.org/covid-19-resources/state-child-care-actions-covid-19/>

\*\* For a comprehensive list of policy recommendations see [Policy Recommendations Informed by COVID-19 Impact on Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships](#)