# COVID-19 Response and Recovery in Promise Neighborhoods 2020-2022

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A [Promise Neighborhood](#) is a place-based, collective impact approach to improving results for children and families. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Promise Neighborhoods were uniquely positioned to provide on-the-ground community response. They were partners to government, philanthropies, businesses, and community institutions in reaching students, parents, and neighbors with essential emergency services and vital information. ***This paper explores Promise Neighborhoods' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and demonstrates that investing in Promise Neighborhoods produces more than academic results; it ensures critical community infrastructure is available during times of crisis.***

## I.   Introduction

Many communities across the United States experience economic distress, which negatively affects many aspects of life, including early learning opportunities, PK–12 school systems, employment opportunities, health, and well-being. The transformative vision of the Promise Neighborhoods initiative is that all children and youth growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support. Promise Neighborhoods weave together people, services, and organizations to create a seamless cradle-to-career pipeline, along which community members have access to high-quality early care and education options, excellent K–12 schools, and pathways to achieve postsecondary success.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) seeded the Promise Neighborhoods program with 1-year planning grants awarded to 21 grantees (i.e., nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, Indian Tribes). Starting in 2011, ED awarded additional 21 planning grants and the first round of 5-year implementation grants. By 2022, communities established 36 Promise Neighborhoods with these implementation grants, and additional communities continued to grow after receiving ED planning grants. ED-funded Promise Neighborhoods, now in 30 states and Tribal lands across the United States, sustain their efforts with strong partnerships, resident leadership, and funding from public/private sources. (See [https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/promise-neighborhoods-pn/awards/](https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/promise-neighborhoods-pn/awards/) for additional details about Promise Neighborhoods awards.)

Grantees collect and report population-level data for Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators related to education and family and community support results that Promise Neighborhoods are designed to improve. In addition to GPRA indicators reported annually (e.g., percentage of kindergarteners with age-appropriate functioning, percentage of children with parents or family members who read to them), grantees also collect and report other data important to their communities.

Communities nationwide shared a few highlights from their transformative results, as measured by improvements in these indicators. For example, Promise Neighborhoods in California have contributed to 14–21 percentage point gains, resulting in 89–100 percent graduation rates in their communities. Camden Promise Neighborhood in New Jersey tripled the proportion of third- and fourth-grade students in target schools performing at or above grade level in mathematics. Knox Promise Neighborhood in Kentucky achieved a 10 percent increase in age-appropriate functioning/kindergarten readiness.

The remainder of this report describes the data sources used to report the characteristics of Promise Neighborhoods that facilitated emergency response and summary of disaster response outcomes. Stories from two Promise Neighborhoods, Mission Promise Neighborhood and Deer Creek Promise Community, add context to the summary statistics. The report concludes with lessons learned from Promise Neighborhoods about disaster response and infrastructure for recovery.

## II.  Data Sources

Several sources of data informed this report, including mandated GPRA reporting, summary reports, and direct outreach to grantees related to 15 unique Promise Neighborhoods that formed between 2012 and 2018. The Promise Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) team, led by Insight Policy Research, assessed the data quality for each GPRA indicator reported in the Annual Progress Reporting (APR) and determined whether the data were reliable for tracking progress to create ad hoc APR summary reports shared with grantees and ED. This initial review informed the categories of COVID-19 related support but did not yield quantifiable data because these summary reports did not include specific GPRAs or quantitative data related to COVID-19 recovery efforts. The Promise TTA team reviewed the source materials from grantee APR submissions from 2020, 2021, and 2022, specifically the "additional questions" section, in which grantees responded to open-ended questions about the COVID-19 impact. The Promise TTA team emailed 12 Promise Neighborhoods project directors responsible for these 15 sites to review the data extracted from GPRA data entry and summary reports for accuracy and invited them to report any additional COVID-related activities between March 2020 and December 2022. Nine project directors verified their data and provided additional information, representing 12 of the 15 sites. The remaining three sites did not have relevant data in their reports and were unable to provide additional information within the timeframe requested. Figure 1 shows aggregate data, and additional details follow in stories from two Promise Neighborhoods.

# III. Promise Neighborhoods Characteristics That Facilitated Emergency Response

Several core characteristics made Promise Neighborhoods uniquely equipped to respond to community emergencies. Characteristics such as establishing a backbone role and public-private funding collaboration are required by ED, whereas features such as high-trust networks are affiliated with the most successful grantees. During the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery, the following characteristics proved critical to the rapid response by Promise Neighborhoods:

- **Backbone role for cross-sector communitywide partnerships:** "Backbone" organizations lead Promise Neighborhoods with a network of cross-sector community partnerships, including schools, early learning centers, higher education institutions, government agencies, community-based organizations, health clinics and hospitals, small businesses, and community residents. This centralized role and ability to quickly coordinate partners, communicate, gather data, and connect with community members most in need proved critical to the response.

- **Public-private collaboration:** Promise Neighborhoods are at the intersection of public-private partnerships, facilitating access to information and resources from a variety of sources. For example, Promise Neighborhoods were able to quickly collect and distribute donated money, personal protective equipment, food and household supplies, and government program resources, such as income support for families affected by COVID-19.

- **High-trust networks:** The decades of trust intentionally built by Promise Neighborhoods grantees also facilitated the response efforts. In a climate of inaccurate and sometimes predatory information, Promise Neighborhoods' reputation as a trusted messenger within the community enabled them to reach some of the most vulnerable populations with accurate information and COVID-19 prevention supports.

- **Place-based approach:** Because placed-based Promise Neighborhoods are often deeply connected with schools, early childhood education and care providers, community centers, and institutions of higher education, they were able to meet families in spaces they frequented, more effectively implementing response efforts. This neighborhood- and community-based approach provided numerous access points from which to provide services, distribute vital information and resources, and gather information on community needs.

- **Data infrastructure:** Promise Neighborhoods are intentionally designed with a robust and holistic data and evaluation infrastructure to collect information on community needs, program activities, and impact. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Promise Neighborhoods leveraged the existing infrastructure to administer quick turnaround surveys and conduct focus groups with community members to rapidly inform response efforts. On the service delivery side, Promise Neighborhoods' data infrastructure enabled them to monitor and track the support provided to families, schools, and communities.

# IV. Summary of Disaster Response Outcomes Among Promise Neighborhoods

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many families in Promise Neighborhood communities experienced job loss, immediate pivots to remote learning despite often inadequate technology in the home, and increased vulnerability to illness because of the large number of community members who were essential workers and/or lived in overcrowded households. Promise Neighborhoods responded by providing a variety of types of relief, ranging from food distribution to laptops and internet for remote learning. These efforts were deployed quickly and relied on the Promise Neighborhoods' existing infrastructure, trust, and relationships to be effective. Figure 1 reflects data from **12 Promise Neighborhoods established between 2012 and 2018, reporting for the 22-month timeline of March 2020 to December 2022.**

**Figure 1. Promise Neighborhoods COVID-19 relief and impact**

| Type of relief | Description | Impact summary | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Emergency relief funds distribution | Family income relief funds, rental relief, small business relief (including family childcare providers) | | **$67,793,452** |
| Emergency food assistance | Hot meals | | **1,762,007** meals |
| | Grocery bags and household supplies | | **299,665** bags/units |
| Education support | Access to student support services such as tutoring, homework help, virtual office hours, and virtual summer camps | | **94,198** students |
| | Technology support, starting with access to laptops | | **7,872** laptops |
| Health support | Information on COVID-19 prevention, vaccination, proper use of PPE, and community resources through multiple outreach methods such as social media, in person, online, and phone | | **147,127,404 estimated reach** |
| | COVID-19 support, including test distribution and vaccination appointment support | | **142,280 tests or vaccinations** |
| | Health kits with items such as PPE and cleaning supplies | | **71,946** kits |

Note: PPE = personal protective equipment

In addition to the direct relief efforts highlighted in figure 1, Promise Neighborhoods were strategically poised in their communities through their collective impact infrastructure to advocate for and secure additional resources and respond to other community crises exacerbated by COVID-19.

For example, in response to the U.S.-Mexico border crisis, Chula Vista and San Diego Promise Neighborhoods (SBCS, formerly South Bay Community Services) partnered with local organizations and the federal government to lead Operation Artemis in March 2021. Operation Artemis provided 3,213 unaccompanied migrant children with shelter, meals, education, and recreation, before ultimately reuniting 2,408 children with family members or sponsors. SBCS's community engagement strategies, which include the Promotora Model and Resident Leadership Academy, focused on sharing with residents critical information related to COVID-19 from reliable sources. Partnerships with the County of San Diego public health leaders and local school districts made these communications possible. The Promise Neighborhood infrastructure enabled SBCS to easily integrate its partners into COVID-19-related efforts such as education, outreach, contact tracing, and vaccine access.

The devastating floods that affected Perry County, Kentucky, in July 2022 left many community members in need of the basics. Perry Promise Neighborhood was well positioned to support food recovery efforts fueled by the outpouring of support from local people, the region, the state, and the nation. The Red Cross and similar organizations set up feeding stations as close to survivors as possible. Volunteers delivered food, drinking water, and necessities door to door on foot, in off-road vehicles, on horseback, in boats, and in helicopters. As relief efforts shifted from a massive universal response to more targeted recovery efforts, Perry Promise Neighborhood was able to seamlessly support families.

Latinos in San Francisco served by Mission Promise Neighborhood and its backbone organization, MEDA, were the hardest hit by COVID-19 because of preexisting health disparities and socioeconomic inequities. In early 2020, Latinos represented 44 percent of individuals tested but 95 percent of positive COVID-19 cases. With the Mission Promise Neighborhood partner network, MEDA was able to help secure $28 million in COVID relief from the City of San Francisco for the Latino community. With federal Health Resources and Services Administration funding, MEDA implemented a widespread vaccine outreach campaign, resulting in a 95 percent vaccination rate among San Francisco Latinos.

# V. Stories From Promise Neighborhood Communities

The previous examples highlight the intersection between COVID-19 and other crises. The following stories provide additional context for the relief efforts related to COVID-19 in two Promise Neighborhoods in California and Mississippi.

## Mission Promise Neighborhood
## A Community of Support

Arold Josué Hernández contacted Mission Promise Neighborhood (MPN) 3 years after he and his son, Samuel, arrived in San Francisco from Honduras. They fled violence in their homeland of Honduras, which included the tragic murder of Hernández's wife, to seek resources to better meet the needs of Samuel, who is visually impaired. The family met Ana Avilez, MPN Family Success Coach, through one of Samuel's San Francisco Unified School District therapists. Avilez prioritized the services that would best help the family settle into their life in San Francisco and provide the best care for Samuel.

Since their arrival from Honduras, the family has lived in shelters, so Avilez prioritized finding stable housing. MPN and local housing partners provided housing subsidies and application assistance—a critical support because Hernández fell behind on rent as a result of pandemic job loss. The Hernández family moved into their apartment after winning the City of San Francisco's affordable housing lottery.

"Through Ana, I applied for BMR [Below Market Rate] housing, I was able to apply for school, plus I was able to find resources for food and get financial aid when the pandemic began," Hernández stated. "The truth is that Ana has been my right-hand person."

Hernández has continued to work with MPN community partners, such as Support for Families of Children with Disabilities, that provided information on his rights and the services Samuel would receive because of his Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Early learning partner Felton Institute has also been a care provider for Samuel. "When Arold receives a no, he won't stop there," Avilez explained of the father's determination. "He now knows how he can apply for resources. Now they have a permanent home, and the child has all the therapies and a school that can fulfill his needs."

Hernández has also returned to the workforce; MPN partner La Raza Centro Legal connected him to a pro bono immigration lawyer who helped him obtain a work permit. With this father's determination and the support of MPN partners, the future is now bright for both father and son.

# Deer Creek Promise Community's Successful Summer Camps Amid the Challenges of COVID-19

In a world of new challenges born of the COVID-19 health crisis, the Delta Health Alliance (DHA) found ways to serve the young people of the Deer Creek Promise Community in Mississippi during the summer of 2021.

The three DHA summer camps not only offered a chance for kids to continue their education but also provided the organization with an important roadmap for the fall. These camps—the Head Start Promise School, the Literacy Fellows summer session, and the Coding Camp for budding computer information aficionados—served preschool through high school students amid the global disruption of a pandemic.

"We were able to construct and follow a well-crafted plan that gave our young people an opportunity to learn in a safe, health-minded environment," said Karen Matthews, president and CEO of DHA, which supports three Promise Neighborhoods in the Mississippi Delta. "This was a group effort composed of our dedicated staff, trusting parents, and eager students, who all understood and met the challenges we faced."

Deer Creek Promise Community staff and partners implemented temperature checks, sanitizing stations, face masks, social distancing, and other Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations to ensure the safety of students and instructors at the Head Start Promise School camp, which provided students with an opportunity to prepare for kindergarten and the 2021–22 school year.

"I was impressed with the ways that the staff worked to make sure the kids were safe," said Linda McClinton, parent of a 5-year-old Promise School student. "To prepare him for kindergarten while being so mindful of his health and safety made me feel really good as a parent."

The same held true for the Literacy Fellows camp, the summer offshoot of the Literacy Fellows program that provides high-quality, research-based reading instruction and intervention to struggling students; and the Coding Camp, which taught students the basics of coding and the concepts behind it, such as algorithms and flowcharts required to code computers.

"I think this camp will really help me in the future if I decide to have a career in computer science," said masked Nia Kenrick, a rising junior at Leland High School. "I didn't even know what an algorithm was before this camp. It made computer science a new interest for me. Everything is a learning opportunity."

DHA learned from summer camps to generate creative solutions in the face of COVID-19 for back-to-school mentoring and tutoring programs to meet the needs of the communities it serves. "With the knowledge we gained this summer, we are committed to continuing our efforts to provide the programs and services that are so important to our communities," said Matthews.

# VI. Lessons Learned From Promise Neighborhoods About Disaster Response

Promise Neighborhoods' pandemic responses contain important lessons to inform future disaster response and underscore the urgency of ensuring these types of investments in cradle-to-career community infrastructure continue.

- ***Existing infrastructure enables rapid response and must be sustained.*** When the COVID-19 crisis hit, Promise Neighborhoods' response was fast and effective. Promise Neighborhoods became a go-to for local governments to quickly respond to community needs and trust that available resources would benefit the hardest hit community members. In some cases, existing infrastructure has taken decades to build and hone. To be prepared for future emergencies, the government should invest in sustaining this type of community infrastructure long term.

- ***Flexibility ensures resources are tailored to community needs.*** During the pandemic, ED was responsive and flexible with its grantees, enabling them to adjust existing plans and use the resources to best meet their specific community needs. This type of flexibility with the use of existing resources helped Promise Neighborhoods be most effective with their community-tailored response efforts and should be allowed in the event of future emergencies.

- ***Trust in networks enables Promise Neighborhoods to be nimble and pivot quickly to meet community needs.*** Through their networks of cross-sector partners, partnership with Promotoras[1] or community health workers, and deep community relationships, Promise Neighborhoods were able to act quickly and nimbly and respond to community needs as they arose. These trusted networks and the role of a backbone agency within them should be valued and invested in as a long-term source of community resiliency.

# VII. Promise Neighborhoods Now and Infrastructure for Recovery

As the country recovers from the health, economic, educational, and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Promise Neighborhoods continue to leverage their existing infrastructure to take on critical roles in recovery efforts. Promise Neighborhoods connect students and families to mental and physical health services. Promise Neighborhoods partner networks work closely with schools to address worrying attendance trends and widespread learning loss that has deepened educational achievement gaps. They provide families with wraparound support services to help people in their communities secure jobs, advance careers, access public benefits, locate food support, improve financial skills, stabilize housing, and more. Continued and expanded investment in Promise Neighborhoods can help ensure communities have the partnerships, infrastructure, and resources needed for all children and families to thrive.

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[1] https://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/promotores/index.html

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