



## **SELN Peer Advocate Pilot Project September 2016 – December 2016 Final Report**

As a project of the Southside Early Learning Network (SELN) and Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), funded via a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, the aim of the Parent Peer Advocate Pilot was to connect parents to resources for early intervention and special education services, such as developmental screenings and early learning programs, while assisting parents as they navigate these systems. The program targeted families in the Englewood, West Englewood, and Greater Grand Crossing communities, corresponding to the areas targeted by the Innovation Zone. The 5 peer advocates hired were a part of the 7 who completed an 8-week training on the IEP process, which was provided by the Family Resource Center on Disabilities.

This project was developed as a result of organizing efforts of Southside Parents United Roundtable (SPUR) members who conducted surveys with parents at their children’s schools, during September 2015, and discovered that many parents felt uninformed about the IEP process in schools, and were unaware about the Early Intervention (EI) resources that exist to serve their families. Motivated by this, SPUR has been dedicated for the past 3-4 years to increasing awareness about the importance of early intervention programs; this project emerged as a result of that dedication coupled with the recognition that parents need support in navigating the IEP system. A particular focus was the unique support that a peer to peer approach could provide to families, including explaining a parent’s rights and navigating the system to overcome any access barriers.



## Outcome Goals & Achievements

### *Training and Approach*

From the beginning of the project, Peer Advocates have received ongoing training about the EI and IEP system from many different sources - school-based service providers, organizations that provide developmental screenings, and parent-focused training groups across the 3 communities (see list of collaborators below). Along with knowledge gained from these meetings and their own personal experience, Advocates were able to provide materials about CPS Child Find screenings, Child and Family Connections services, and information about IEP rights and Responsibilities to families during outreach. At the end of the pilot project, the five peer advocates had knocked on 348 doors, and spoken with 813 families through the various outreach strategies, including canvassing neighborhood locations and attending parent meetings. More specifically, advocates visited locations where parents frequent, including laundromats, Chicago Park District sponsored events, DHS offices and health-related resource fairs. The number of schools where the Peer Advocates have built relationships are numerous (refer to collaborators below). Those relationships were strengthened by and have resulted in attendance at over a dozen PAC meetings, presentations to parent groups, and informative one-on-ones with parents. Through one-on-ones, Advocates have been able to understand barriers facing families, have helped parents understand their rights and responsibilities in the EI or IEP process, and have provided moral support, especially for parents new to the process. The following two tables depict the outcomes of outreach conducted and an explanation of what is included follows:

### **Detail of Type of Outreach and Number of Families Reached**

Type of Outreach	People talked to	Children Under 5
Door Knocking (348 doors)	205	151
Other Outreach (Canvassing & 17 Events/Presentations)	608	1224
Total	813	1375

### **Detail of Type of Support Provided to Families Reached**

Type of Support Provided	Ages		
	0-2	3-4	Over 5
Information Given	474	499	62
No Support Needed	209	131	0
Follow Up	9	9	3

A total of 1375 children across 813 families were found by the Peer Advocates during the course of outreach. A total of 973 children under the age of 5 indicated some level of interest in receiving the information about early intervention, specifically the Peer Advocate flyer and information about child development. Through this initial interaction, Advocates were able to conduct greater and more in-depth follow up with a total of 21 children. Follow up support included follow up phone or in-person contacts to further understand the needs of the family and work on connecting the family to necessary resources or to provide support. The needs and results of the support with these families were varied. There were 2 confirmed success stories with parents satisfactorily connecting to resources, 3 parents engaged on an ongoing basis but who did not make it to the resource fair to connect to resources, and 5 parents decided not to pursue resources because of a variety of reasons (i.e. moving, new job, discouraged). One family was discouraged after attempting to be screened at the library and after travelling there, found that screeners were not there as originally scheduled due to a change in Child Find scheduling.

In addition to working in schools, the advocates discovered that a key component of promoting early intervention services could happen at the Doctor's office—when parents are bringing in their children for their check-ups. The advocates heard on many different occasions that pediatricians often hesitated in diagnosing a child with any challenge for fear of labeling that child too early in their development. Even when a screening is completed during a medical visit, Dr. Julie Blankemeier from the University of Chicago Family Medicine Center told advocates that families often leave the Doctor's office with a hazy understanding of what actually happened in the appointment—and thus this could be a great opportunity for a peer advocate to step in to work with the parent to ensure that they understand the next steps for the child, but also that the doctor is as helpful and transparent as possible about the medical process.

### *System Change and Expanding Reach of Resources*

Though the Advocates, the materials and information about EI resources have been made available to a wider audience - parents and directors of organizations have taken information to distribute to others. The Network 11 Chief of Schools asked to be kept abreast of Advocate-sponsored events and remarked about the value of the work of the Peer Advocates. The Peer Advocates' work also aligned with the goals of the Englewood Community Action Council which recently decided to adopt special education, specifically Early Intervention, as an issue of concern for their educational strategic plan for the upcoming year. They intend to work to implement informative workshops about Early Intervention and the IEP for parents throughout Englewood.

Through collaborations and conversations with parents, the Peer Advocates became aware of the absence of screening events within Greater Englewood. They connected with staff from CPS Child Find, Child and Family Connections, Family Resource Center on Disabilities and Metropolitan Family Services to identify resources that are available to families. In order to supplement the resources available nearby with a screening within the Englewood community, they worked with Child Find Coordinator, Davette Johnson. Though, despite their best efforts, due to limited available staff and a fixed schedule, it was not feasible to secure Child Find for an additional screening specifically in the target area of the project.

An attempt to connect with screeners from CFC offices-La Rabida and Easter Seals- had resulted in relationships but not any tangible outcomes in using them as a resource. Parents in the community hold negative perceptions of these organizations, voicing concerns about access. For La Rabida, its long distance from Englewood, the reputation of having long wait times, and a perception that staff are not going to come to Englewood because of safety are very real factors that foster disconnection - causing parents to disregard La Rabida as an option. Recognizing the scheduling difficulties with ChildFind and the current reputation of La Rabida, the strategy was revised to address the barrier keeping families from attending a screening in other communities - transportation. This outcome is discussed more thoroughly in a section below discussing events sponsored and organized by the Peer Advocates

### **Advocacy for Families**

The advocates have been working closely with 19 families from the Englewood, West Englewood and Greater Grand Crossing communities, in helping them navigate the IEP process, understanding home visiting services, advocating for more services for their children from local CFCs, as well as enrolling their children in early learning programs. Peer Advocates were able to provide support as well as a sympathetic listening ear. Each of the 5 peer advocates have their own intensely personal connection to special needs, and so they were able to take that passion and funnel it into planting seeds of hope, empowerment and raising consciousness of the families that they worked with.



The advocates reported encountering parents who felt isolated and very lonely in the Early Intervention process. Some of the common causes were denial of the child having a developmental challenge, service providers who were neither friendly nor able to thoroughly support families through the process, and confusion often exacerbated by a complicated early learning system. Many parents felt supported by the advocates not only because of the knowledge about EI & IEP that they brought to the relationship, but because they were able to hear about relatable personal experience.

One Englewood parent has been fighting tirelessly for her disabled 2-year-old grandson since she became his legal guardian. Through outreach and for 2 months, our Advocates have been moral supports and at times, active agents in her decision-making and goal-setting process. Her grandson had been receiving services from Child and Family Connections #10, and the plan had been for him to transition at age three into a daycare. For the grandmother, the transition came with uncertainty, which was addressed in late-evening conversations, where our Advocate supported her by first listening to her frustrations and how she felt the system was not working for her. By the time of the resource fair, hosted by the Peer Advocates, on December 16<sup>th</sup>, she was ready to learn about local early learning resources but still needed the Advocate to provide guidance in asking the right questions and seek the resources needed. At the end of the fair, the 2-year-old had been connected to an early learning program that we anticipate he will attend in the Fall.

### Peer-Advocate Sponsored/Supported Events

Over the course of the project, the Peer Advocates hosted 1 event, and participated in a CPS-sponsored screening event and an educational event at a local school. After initial outreach families in the greater Englewood area, the advocates found families were having difficulties gaining access



to developmental screenings for their children under the age of 5. While screenings are regularly scheduled at varying organizations throughout the city, the ease of access to families is a different story. CPS Child Find screenings are meant to catch children who are not enrolled in a CPS early learning program, yet the fixed schedule that was developed through CPS Office of Diverse Learners does not include a location in the Greater Englewood Area. To address this service gap, the Peer Advocates decided to plan a screening event in the Englewood area, in order to make these services more accessible to families. The advocates developed a relationship with different community partners who were trained to conduct developmental screenings, yet ultimately, none of these community partners were able to follow through in partnership for a screening event. A few of these community partners include CPS Child Find, Child Serv, Child and Family Connections La Rabida, and the Kennedy King Early Childhood Development Center.

The Peer Advocates then shifted their strategy and partnered with CPS Child Find, to promote pre-scheduled screenings held at local libraries in the Chicago Lawn and Avalon communities. Recognizing that transportation is an immediate barrier to access, the Peer Advocates coordinated with Englewood Children’s Home + Aid to provide transportation for families from Englewood to and from the monthly screening at the Avalon Public Library. Six families expressed interest, three intended to find a way on their own and on November 29<sup>th</sup>, the advocates were able to accompany two families to the Avalon library. The sixth family was unable to attend due to parent illness. Nonetheless, both families that attended gained a great deal of knowledge about both the Early Intervention and IEP processes after meeting with Child Find representatives. One father arrived without knowledge of his son’s current IEP but left feeling confident and knowledgeable about the outcomes of his son’s IEP, saying that “I can teach my son’s mother about his IEP so that she can help him at home too”.

The Peer Advocates were involved with two informational events for Englewood families: supporting an IEP training organized by one of the Peer Advocates at Nicholson STEM and coordinating an Early Intervention and IEP resource fair at Teamwork Englewood. Peer Advocate, Denise Dyer, is an active member of the LSC at Nicholson STEM Academy, and collaborated with the Family Resource Center on Disabilities' Parent Advocate, Zoubidah Pasha, who provided the initial training for the Advocates, to facilitate the training for Nicholson STEM Parents. The takeaway for many parents after the training was that they too are partners in the IEP process, and should be treated as such, an informative and empowering outcome.

At the conclusion of the project, the Peer Advocates hosted a resource fair for local parents about Early Intervention and the IEP. They reached out to a dozen partner organizations from the SELN network, as well as SPUR connections, to host tables at the resource fair. The advocates felt that a resource fair presented an exciting opportunity to inform parents of the wealth of resources available in their own community. The resource fair took place on Friday, December 16<sup>th</sup> at Teamwork Englewood. A total of 5 local organizations attended, including Mile Square Clinic, CPS Office of Diverse Learners, Chicago Childcare Society, St. Bernard Ambulatory Clinic/University of Chicago Family Medicine, and finally Family Focus Englewood. A total of 7 families attended the event and engaged with individual organizations as well as with each other. The representatives were visibly eager to share resources with families, as well as with each other to strengthen local partnerships. They engaged parents in informative conversations and were attentive to their needs. As a result of the resource fair, the advocates continued to gain CPS support, including the support of Office of Diverse Learner Early Learning Program Coordinator Hope Sharp. In a conversation with Peer Advocates about the Peer-to-peer approach in working with families about special needs, Sharp said that "I think it's situations like this, parents like you guys, can help other parents sometimes where CPS cannot. You can sit down with them". As the support grows for the peer-to-peer advocacy, the advocates hope that this approach will be met with a positive reception and expanded support throughout the state.

### **Recommendations from the Project**

As referenced above, the peer advocates encountered some challenges during this pilot project. However, the peer advocates remained dedicated through the tasks of identifying goals, and rethinking strategies. Each advocate brought their own unique style and approach to outreach and formed a powerful group that gained the trust and confidence of many schools and organizations on the Southside. On the last day of the project, Peer Advocate Gloria Worrill reminded the group, "Who is to say what seed has been planted and where it will germinate". Upon reflection about the project, the advocates offered the following recommendations for future Peer Advocate projects that will hopefully be implemented statewide.

- Building relationships with families is a core element of success in this project. Peer advocates need the time to be able to build meaningful relationships with families where parents feel as though they can trust the advocates and utilize the resources that Advocates have to offer. Peer Advocates found that in their relationships with families, parents were not immediately forthcoming with details about their

children with special needs, thus, in future projects, Advocates should be given adequate time to get out and meet families, establish trust, build rapport and then dig deeper into the children's needs.

- In addition to adequate time to build relationships with families, future advocates who would like to measure the success of families following through with resources will need at least 6-8 months to understand what services families have pursued and received. Not only are families not always forthcoming with information about Early Intervention and/or IEP resources that they are receiving, but the process of applying and beginning services takes time that should be accounted for in future projects.
- School parent volunteers should be trained and established in the community to serve as an advocate/expert on the IEP/EI process, and conduct outreach based on the block-to-block model, where they can focus on reaching parents in a particular area and providing insight, relatability, and resources.
  - The peer advocate model could be used to establish a group of advocates like themselves and implementing Special Needs 101 training in schools and early learning programs.
  - Each CPS school would be supported by Network chiefs and the Office of Diverse Learners
  - Parent volunteers would develop a tailored outreach strategy addresses specific barriers and leverages the resources available in each community.
- Peer Advocates should be a key component at Doctor's offices during check-ups, at the parent's request
  - The role would be to help ensure transparency so that the parent understand the next steps for the child
  - They would mediate the perception that doctors and clinicians are not willing to diagnose or label the child, and that this isn't translated into denial about the child's challenges.
- The Legal Assistance Foundation should host a "Know your Rights" workshop for parents with school-aged children, specifically about the IEP process.
- Service providers should implement more effective outreach strategies for families
  - Providers should focus on creating a more welcoming environment for parents.
  - Service providers should assess and strengthen their network so that families feel more supported.
- Daycare center staff should receive training about Early Intervention services for families so they can encourage families to seek resources when their child is having challenges.



# Appendix B

Page #: \_\_\_\_\_  
 For Peer Team Leader

**PEER ADVOCATE TALLY SHEET**

Event/ Matched Effort: \_\_\_\_\_

Peer Advocate Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Community: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#	Spoke on Street /	Address Or *Write "Event" / "Street" / Business Name	Door-Knocked	Not Knocked (LG, NT, Dog)	# of People Talked To	INTERACTION STATUS						
						Ages 0-2			Ages 3-4			5 and up
						No Support "Wanted" (#)	Information/ Resources Given (#)	Follow-up Scheduled (Y/N)	No Support "Wanted" (#)	Information/ Resources Given (#)	Follow-up Scheduled (Y/N)	
1	<input type="checkbox"/>											
2	<input type="checkbox"/>											
3	<input type="checkbox"/>											
4	<input type="checkbox"/>											
5	<input type="checkbox"/>											
6	<input type="checkbox"/>											
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8	<input type="checkbox"/>											
9	<input type="checkbox"/>											
10	<input type="checkbox"/>											
<b>TALLY</b>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
						TOTAL CHILDREN: _____		TOTAL REFERRALS: _____				

Key: Locked Gate - "LG", No Kids - "NK", Pregnant - "PG", No Trespassing - "NT"

Codigo: Puerta Cerrada - "LG", No Niños - "NK", Embarazada - "PG", No Pasar - "NT"

## Appendix C

Organization	Resource Fair Invite	Resource Fair Vendor	Nicholson IEP Training Partners	Parent Meetings & Trainings	Presenting / Outreach	Meeting Spaces
Allison's Infant and Toddler Daycare	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Bass Elementary School	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Beloved Community Family Wellness Center	Yes				Yes	
Burke Elementary School	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes
Chicago Child Care Society	Yes	Yes				
Child of God Daycare	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Children Learn and Play Daycare	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Children's Home +Aid	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes
Family Focus Englewood	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	
Family Resource Center on Disabilities	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	
First Step Learning Daycare	Yes			Yes	Yes	

Henderson Elementary School	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Holmes Elementary School	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Jelly Bean Learning Center	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Metropolitan Family Services	Yes	Yes	Yes			
Miles Davis Magnet Academy	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Mile Square Clinic	Yes	Yes	Yes			
Nicholson STEM Academy	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parker Academy	Yes			Yes	Yes	
Reavis Elementary School	Yes			Yes	Yes	
St. Bernard Ambulatory Clinic	Yes	Yes				

In addition to the above locations, the Peer Advocates did outreach at the following locations: Hamilton Park, Jeanne Kennedy YMCA, Englewood WIC office, Beasley Academic Center, Carnegie Elementary School, West Englewood public Library, Benjamin E. Mays Elementary Academy, Kelly Library, Park Manor Elementary School, Dr. Martin Luther King Service Center, Dewey Elementary School, Earle STEM Academy, Ogden Park, Kennedy-King Center for Child Development, Friends Family Health Center, Partners in Health Family Clinic, Archer Clinic, Obesity Clinic, South Town Medical Clinic, People’s Medical Center, Victory Worship Center Church of God, Whole Foods Englewood, Kusanya Cafe, and the Metropolitan Chicago Breast Cancer Task Force.