



**Written Testimony**  
**Metropolitan Family Services**  
**Senate Redistricting Committee—Chicago South Hearing**  
**March 25, 2021**

On behalf of Metropolitan Family Services, our Board of Directors and clients, we thank committee Chairperson Senator Aquino, Sub-Chair Senator Peters, and Sub-Vice-Chairs Senator Villanueva and Senator Collins, and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

For over 160 years, Metropolitan Family Services has been a human services leader, empowering families and communities to learn, earn, heal and thrive. Part mentor, part motivator, part advocate, Metropolitan has been an engine of change that empowers families to reach their greatest potential and positively impact their communities. In 2020, we provided wrap around services across the lifespan in education, emotional wellness, economic stability, and empowerment to 95,917 families. We work to transform lives across seven community centers with 24 satellite and offsite locations throughout Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. Throughout Chicago South, our Calumet and Southeast Chicago Centers serves a combined 16, 978 families. We come before you today to convey the strength and beauty of the communities we support in Calumet and Southeast Chicago as well as the disparities they must overcome every day in order to thrive.

**Southeast Center**

**“My heart has always been in South Chicago. [Disinvestment] is going to leave a lot of open land in the Community. My biggest passion is around providing afterschool and Community Schools services. There aren’t a lot of meaningful programs for kids, and parents won’t be able to continue working if their kids aren’t in a safe space after school.”** –Vanessa Schwartz, Executive Director, Southeast Center

Metropolitan Family Services Southeast Chicago’s Center is a beacon of hope for the future serving South Chicago, Calumet Heights, the East Side, Hegewisch and Deering. Founded in 1985 on the heels of local steel mill closings, we have been in the community filling voids and investing in families in the midst of persistent disinvestment. In FY20 alone, we served 5,571 families providing programming in child, youth and parent development, and vital behavioral mental health supports.

Youth and young adults in Southeast Chicago coping with challenging life experiences which affect their ability to maintain psychological wellness find support in our youth with crisis stabilization and intervention services, psychiatric evaluation and medication monitoring, assistance with addressing exposure to violence and bridging to a chosen through educational, training and employment success.

Many of the fathers in our community have been isolated by systemic barriers to employment and face discriminatory policies. We offer programming which links mentors with fathers who want to engage as caregivers and role models for their families. While COVID-19 and civil unrest have highlighted deep disparities, our history in the community provides understanding that decades of disinvestment is a major contributor to the violence our violence prevention programs work to prevent.



Our Communities Partnering 4 Peace and Metropolitan Peace Initiative focus on addressing these broader systemic issues – which present as barriers to healing and success for our communities – by expanding street outreach services with linkages to programming in Behavioral Health, Workforce Development, and Legal Aid, and financial relief for small businesses.

**“CP4P and Metropolitan Peace Initiatives has a renewed focus on addressing broader systemic issues— which present as barriers to healing and success for our communities—by expanding Behavioral Health, Workforce Development, and Legal Aid, in addition to financial relief for small businesses affected by looting. We are responding to the needs our partners have told us about, and we are operationalizing those needs.”** –Vaughn Bryant, Executive Director, Communities Partnering 4 Peace

For families seeking to end the abuse and break the silence of domestic violence, we offer domestic violence advocacy services which help people who are or who have experienced domestic violence find strength, resources and opportunities to maximize safety for themselves and their family. All services are client-centered, culturally sensitive, bilingual (English and Spanish), and respect survivor self-determination rights. Services are trauma-informed and evidence-based, combining clinical knowledge, research, clients’ expertise and values to provide quality care. Metropolitan also offers a variety of programs to assist survivors of domestic violence with legal and child visit arrangements with linkages to our Legal Aid Society and Court Advocacy Programs.

Environmental justice is of particular concern to the communities in Southeast Chicago. Beginning with the steel mills, these communities have housed a disproportionate share of industry and facilities that too often have polluted the air, land and water. Not only does this impact the physical health of families, it also impacts education inequities as many of these facilities are located near schools.

### **Calumet Center**

**“Metropolitan's Calumet Center is located in the heart of the far south side of Chicago. We focus on providing critical services to empower families in the community. Due to community needs exacerbated further by the pandemic and systemic disinvestment, we have had to step up as an organization to create access. It is vital that the voices of our families are heard and counted.”** – Audrena Spence, Executive Director, Calumet Center

Called the “Miracle on 103rd Street”, Metropolitan Family Services’ Calumet Center has been serving families on Chicago’s far south side since 1955, with programs ranging from youth leadership and economic development to senior care and violence intervention. We reach out to families in the communities of Avalon Park, Beverly, Calumet Heights, Chatham, East Side, Englewood, Morgan Park, Mount Greenwood, Pullman, Riverdale, Roseland, South Chicago, South Deering, South Shore, Washington Heights, Washington Park, West Englewood, West Pullman and Woodlawn serving 11,407 families in FY20. We also provide services at our Financial Opportunity Center at Kennedy King College and Altgeld Gardens—Murray Homes Site.



Families residing in these areas of Chicago are rich in community, but also come up against years of systemic discrimination and disinvestment. These are communities that know more than their fair share of violence and have few institutional supports that meet their potential. We regularly push against these barriers seeking to bolster families with critical supports and opportunities with wrap around services across the lifespan.

Families can access services in child, youth, and parent development, adoption support and preservation, domestic violence counseling, behavioral health, older adult services and violence prevention and intervention. Seeking to assist families achieve economic stability we provide Family Works programming offering comprehensive case management, employment and education services and opportunities for youth. Further career and personal financial counseling is available at our Financial Opportunity Center. Finally, all families have access to empowerment with our Legal Aid Society.

Employment opportunities are few and far between in our communities at this time. We seek to fill this gap reaching youth through our YouthBuild program. Youth Build is an innovative construction education-training program that teaches the basic concepts of construction for individuals ages 18-24. It is an option for individuals who have not completed their high school education helping them earn their GED and a certification from National Center for Construction Education and Research strengthening youth with education and entry level occupational skills that prepare them to jobs with sustainable wages and creating wealth building potential in our communities.

The COVID pandemic laid bare the food insecurity and isolation from transportation that our communities face. Our Calumet Center staff highlighted these concerns faced by their clients and mobilized to fill the gap. Calumet Center staff distributed food for 2,042 households on three subsequent Fridays in June partnering with the Greater Chicago Food Depository and local elected officials.

Seniors in our community can often feel isolated and this is especially the case during the COVID pandemic. Knowing this was a key issue, our Altgeld Gardens staff innovated, and hosted BINGO nights over Zoom and delivered cleaning supplies as prizes.

In conclusion, Metropolitan Family Services is proud to ground our organization in the communities of Chicago South and are glad to unite our histories over many decades. Many of us call these communities not just our place of employment, but home. We remain committed to our communities and to mobilizing the systemic supports that will allow all to thrive. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to share our knowledge of the Chicago South region.

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