



Through the Lens of Partnerships: What COVID-19 is Teaching Us About Racial Disparities and Resilience in New Orleans

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Featuring: Crystal Fernandez, education coach, Keith Liederman, CEO, and Yolanda Motley, program officer for Early Learning Services at Kingsley House/Educare New Orleans

During this public health emergency, Kingsley House in New Orleans has firmly communicated its proactive support for its child care partners by showing up for them in response to the growing needs of the community. In Louisiana, public schools have been closed since mid-March to reduce the spread of COVID-19. While child care programs were allowed to stay open, most closed when Governor Bel-Edwards ordered the shutdown of schools on March 13.

“We are here to support our partners however and wherever we can,” said Yolanda Motley, program officer for Early Learning Services at Kingsley House. Kingsley House, the management partner for Educare New Orleans, is an Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (Partnerships) [grantee](#) working with nine private child care centers. The centers, all African American female-owned businesses, serve 150 EHS infants and toddlers in Orleans and Jefferson parishes, along with an additional nearly 1,000 young children across the partner sites. Currently, all are closed for health and safety reasons, but staff continue to serve children and families through active outreach.

Partnerships infuse funds into child care systems and provide a level of funding sufficient to allow providers to stay financially afloat and deliver services that support under-resourced communities. Through Partnerships, child care providers, on average, receive twice the funding they would have otherwise have received from state child care subsidies exclusively. The funds allow for child care partners to provide high-quality child development and family engagement through newly credentialed and better compensated teachers, parent engagement services that are more frequent and comprehensive, enhanced outdoor playgrounds and facilities, and greater continuity of care. Such resources are even more critical given the recent collapse of the child care sector during COVID-19. A [survey](#) from the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children found that a majority of child care providers have experienced serious financial losses during COVID-19, and approximately 35% are expected to close permanently as COVID-19 restrictions lift.

Lessons from Hurricane Katrina

Although the current pandemic has global reach compared to local or regional natural disasters, the patterns of inequity and economic distress are familiar, as are the markers of recovery and stories of community resiliency. This rings especially true for Kingsley House and the city of New Orleans, which rebuilt from the ground up following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Dr. Keith Liederman, Kingsley House CEO, recounted that Hurricane Katrina gutted close to 80% of social services in New Orleans for almost a year. Kingsley House was located in a neighborhood that did not flood, so about five months after Katrina, Kingsley House became the first Head Start and child care program to reopen in New Orleans. At first reopening was limited – they served only 80 families in the least damaged, but oldest, part of their historic facility – the gymnasium. In a [post](#) ten years after Katrina, Liederman reflected, “Our campus sustained more than \$4 million dollars in damages and we could only

occupy less than half of our facilities, but we went to work anyway. Families needed us and that compelled us to move forward.”

After Katrina, a group of civic, business, philanthropic, education, and nonprofit leaders came together to implement a unified plan to bring back essential social services for families by pooling public and private resources to support shared non-profit service alliances. Pre-Katrina, 67% of the population in New Orleans was African American, so the ability of African American providers to access resources and data to adequately address the need for rebuilding in neighborhoods required strong advocacy efforts.

Liederman and Motley think that lessons learned from Katrina might be applied to economic rebuilding as the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, noting similar inequities in the populations most impacted and safeguards necessary to ensure equitable access to resources to sustain early care and education.

COVID-19 Illuminates Racial Inequities

In late March the bipartisan Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act included the Payment Protection Program (PPP), which promised loans for small businesses like child care centers. The PPP loan content and application process, however, as advocates [noted](#), precluded most small child care businesses, especially smaller minority-owned business, from successfully accessing funds. Inequities surfaced in the design and implementation of the PPP: finite resources were awarded on a first come, first served basis; loans only covered payroll expenses and would not be forgiven unless a business hires back staff to pre-pandemic levels; and limited guidance to and capacity of financial institutions issuing the loans caused them to favor applications with whom they had prior relationships. The unfair access and distribution of the funds build upon a system that has been historically inequitable.

Small businesses owned by persons of color often face discrimination and [barriers](#) to tapping into financial capital, which are rooted in policies and practices that have prevented, denied or discouraged lending to communities of color. As the PPP rolled out, reports [estimated](#) that about 90% of businesses owned by people of color or women have been or will be left out of the loans. Motley reflected a similar development with Kingsley’s child care center partners as they watched their white business counterparts receive loan awards. Despite substantial support from Kingsley’s Chief Financial Officer and other community volunteers, none of Kingsley’s partners secured the PPP funding in the first round.

Racial disparities are also present in the pandemic’s effect on human lives. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted [African Americans](#) and marginalized groups such as [Native American](#) and [Latino](#) communities. The disproportionate toll may be partially explained by [increased risk](#) of [exposure](#) for communities of color, many of whom are overrepresented in essential occupations. However, the origins of these inequities and negative outcomes lay in the legacy of racism in the U.S. and its influence on systems, structural policies, and everyday practices that have significant impacts on health and drive disproportionately adverse impacts at almost every societal level for African Americans and other communities of color.

In Louisiana, data reveal that African Americans [accounted](#) for 70% of fatalities, but only comprise 33% of the total state population. Data further [show](#) that the communities where Kingsley House’s partnership sites reside – Jefferson and Orleans parishes – have led the state in coronavirus cases and mortalities.

“Some of the staff and families in our Partnerships sites have experienced COVID-19 directly; either they have had it or know of someone close to them who does.” said Motley. With this in mind, Kingsley House has provided coaches to their partner programs to help to stay in touch with families and address the needs of providers particularly at a time when children’s, early childhood educators’, and families’ mental health and resilience is [vital](#).

Finding Hope and A Path Forward

As Kingsley House and its child care partners plan for re-opening, they anticipate big challenges, noted Crystal Fernandez, education coach at Kingsley House. New costs that will arise as they reopen include paying for additional credentialed teachers to accommodate higher teacher to child ratios, securing additional space to accommodate smaller class sizes, adhering to stringent new sanitization and safety guidelines, and purchasing protective gear and cleaning supplies. “It will be a new day, and a new way,” Motley said.

The pandemic has simultaneously underscored child care’s vital role in supporting working families and stabilizing the economy and how financing for the child care system in its current form is broken and the quality of services is inconsistent. Adopting bold, creative policy [recommendations](#), which reimagine policies and financing models to address long-standing inequities experienced by communities of color and sustain early childhood systems that work over the long term, are paramount.

“Everyone is still going through this – so hope is harder to find,” said Liederman. We are all living through COVID-19, and the full extent of its impact is yet to be seen. “We must have funding mechanisms, capacity-building supports, and accountability measures that make sure the public funding needed gets to the providers serving the children and families most in need.”