



December 1, 2021

Lisa Shelley
Village Manager
Village of Oak Park
123 Madison Street
Oak Park, IL 60304

Ms. Shelley,

On behalf of Hephzibah Children's Association, I am pleased to submit the following request for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to the Village of Oak Park. As outlined in detail in the attached narrative, we are respectfully requesting \$525,000 from the Village of Oak Park ARPA funds. This funding will ensure our ability to support necessary programming for Oak Park children including our critical comprehensive therapeutic services for severely traumatized young children who reside at Hephzibah Home, as well as our sliding-scale after school and summer day care program which serves hundreds of Oak Park elementary school children and their families.

We are grateful for your thoughtful consideration of this request and welcome the opportunity to answer any further questions you may have regarding this request or our organizational needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Merry Beth Sheets".

Merry Beth Sheets
Executive Director
Direct Line: 708-649-7103
E-mail: mbsheets@hephzibahhome.org

About Hephzibah Children's Association

Hephzibah Children's Association has a rich and esteemed history of caring for vulnerable children and helping families in need. Hephzibah is Oak Park's oldest social service agency, founded in 1897 when village resident Mary Wessels opened her home to two young boys. When a local orphanage was destroyed by fire, Mary took in dozens of orphans and made it her calling to care for society's most vulnerable children. She named the children's home after her mother as an expression of her mission to create a nurturing haven for children in need. What began with the group home has grown and expanded over the years to meet the changing needs of the community and clients. With a focus on keeping children safe by strengthening, healing, and keeping families together, we provide both prevention and intervention child welfare services. In addition to Hephzibah Home, which each year provides extensive care and therapeutic services for up to 60 severely abused and neglected children ages 3-11, Hephzibah also provides:

- family-based services for more than 200 foster care children and families who require extensive behavioral and psychological support;
- intensive case management and support services for nearly 300 low-income families in crisis due to poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and other factors;
- after school and summer day care services for more than 600 Oak Park children;
- a Positive Parenting abuse and neglect prevention program;
- and an adoption program for children who cannot return to their biological families.

Hephzibah's mission is to help children thrive and families flourish through innovative, community-based programs. The organization maintains the highest level of professional accreditation by the National Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services and Hephzibah is recognized statewide for our comprehensive, transformative programming that far exceeds state requirements; a highly trained and experienced staff; and strong and engaged community support. Embedded in our mission and operations is a commitment to provide for needs of every child who comes to us; thus, our services far exceed state requirements.

Hephzibah Group Home

Hephzibah Home serves the most vulnerable young children in Illinois and is the only group home program in the state designated to care for the most extreme cases of abuse and neglect of young children, ages 3-11. The home's 16-bed Diagnostic Treatment Center (DTC) is the only designated diagnostic treatment center for young children in the state. When children arrive at Hephzibah, they receive intensive stabilization and therapeutic care in the DTC typically for six to nine months. In addition, they receive a comprehensive assessment to analyze the individual impact trauma has had in a variety of areas of each child's life, including social/emotional wellbeing, physical health, mental health, educational progress, etc. Children who are not ready to move to family-based care, transition to our residential therapeutic program located on the upper level of the home. Children in this longer-term program live in Hephzibah Home for up to several years while they continue to receive the therapeutic support and services they need to heal. These services include a structured, safe, trauma-informed environment; individual therapy from a variety of modalities, including cognitive-behavioral, play therapy and pet therapy; group therapy focused on social skill development and self-management; and psychiatric services. In addition, each child receives year-round educational enrichment, advocacy, and support; and comprehensive wraparound supports providing opportunities to engage in the community and participate in normal childhood activities like swimming, camping, and field trips. All children are

youth in care meaning that they are in the custody of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, all are low or extremely low income, and all are Medicaid recipients.

Hephzibah After School and Summer Day Care Program

For more than 40 years, Hephzibah has provided essential after-school and full-day summer day care services for more than 700 Oak Park elementary school-aged children from over 500 families. We offer a nurturing, enriching, and dynamic day care experience for children in grades K-5 after school, on school holidays, and during the summer months. Our day care activities are designed to help children achieve their full social, emotional, and intellectual potential by fostering the development of a wide variety of skills, as well as social competence and a positive self-image. As part of delivering comprehensive program services, Hephzibah provides social work services to address the needs of children and families in the program. The children and families are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, fulfilling a critical need in the Oak Park community for affordable, school-age day care.

A vital component of Hephzibah's after school and summer day care program is the Family Support Program providing a range of short and long-term services designed to stabilize and strengthen families that may be experiencing a crisis or stress in the family unit. In addition to addressing the individual needs of the children in the program, the program's social worker provides support to at-risk families. The social worker works with the children addressing issues of physical and verbal aggression; developing self-control and managing impulses in large group settings; trusting adults; and developing healthy relationships with peers. She also helps identify and support academic needs that can be addressed in the day care setting through tutoring and homework help and she provides training to the day care staff on the social and emotional needs of the children served.

Fees are assessed on a sliding scale and offset by financial aid when necessary to ensure that every family in our community has access to high-quality day care. Hephzibah's Day Care Program is a critical resource for working families, and especially during the pandemic, for single-parent households, and for essential workers. The program prioritizes admission for low-income families and more than a third of those served are low to moderate income households.

Statement of Need

As an essential service provider, Hephzibah has been on the front lines of providing support to children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic in all our programs, and the pandemic has had a significant financial impact on operations. We have experienced tremendous increase in cost of doing business simply to keep our children and families safe as we comply with all local, state, and federal regulations as set by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Illinois Department of Health, the Cook County Department of Health, and the Oak Park Department of Health. In addition, Hephzibah's Day Care Program complies with all District 97 requirements.

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Hephzibah has spent more than \$590,000 on COVID-specific expenses to meet these guidelines including, but not limited to:

- PPE for staff and families
- daily disinfecting and cleaning
- incentive pay for our essential workers

- upgraded technology for mobile workforce adaptations including cell phones, laptops, network broadband extensions and WIFI connections
- emergency financial support for at-risk families
- additional equipment and staff to meet COVID safety requirements
- costs associated with supporting e-learning needs for children and families

Many of the added COVID-related expenditures specifically at our 24 hour/7 day per week group home are mandated for the agency to meet all local, state, and federal health and safety requirements. These expenses will continue for the foreseeable future until the State of Illinois moves to pre-pandemic operations. The ongoing costs for Hephzibah Home alone exceed \$6,000 per month.

Compounding the increase in expenses, Hephzibah has experienced – and continues to experience – a significant loss of revenue especially in both the group home and day care programs.

Since March 2020, throughout FY 21 and the first half of FY 22, the length of stay for the children in the Hephzibah Home has been longer than normal directly due to multiple COVID complications. Children were simply not moving to and from placements as many foster parents and other programs were reluctant to accept new children into their homes. Longer lengths of stay prolong the healing process and the children’s difficult journey to recovery, and many pandemic-related protocols and disruptions further impact their therapeutic progress. Hephzibah maintains low staff-to-child ratios and this year, we were not able to introduce additional high needs children into the program for two months due to the lack of qualified staff resulting from the workforce crisis. Subsequently, to ensure the health, safety, and protection of the children and staff, Hephzibah’s staff of essential workers have taken additional shifts, including working overtime. While the operating expenses for maintaining our high-level of care are increasing, the lower census means lower reimbursement from the State of Illinois. In addition, the daily mandated enhanced cleaning and sanitation requirements for this 24-hour, seven-days-per-week program and related expenses are fixed costs that the agency must absorb. **On average, we typically serve 60 children per year in the Hephzibah Home, however, in FY20, we only served 35 children and 43 in FY21.**

Hephzibah’s After School and Summer Day Care Program has weathered incredible challenges resulting from the pandemic. The program closed entirely while schools were closed for in-school learning. The subsequent transitions between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning resulted in fewer children and families enrolling in the program and required Hephzibah to institute many expensive program modifications to protect children and staff, allow for social distancing, and ensure appropriate staff to child ratios. **In 2019, before the pandemic, the program served 773 children. In 2021, we served 484 and this year we have served roughly 325 children – a 58% reduction in children served.**

Current COVID safety protocols and space availability limit the number of children enrolled in each school program, and additional staff are required for each group of children. Two additional supervisory staff were hired to meet requirements, and, because staff who are exposed to COVID-19 are required to quarantine, more substitute staff members are needed. During the 2020-2021 school year when District 97 had both remote and in-person learning during the school day, Hephzibah provided a remote learning option for working parents which required increasing the number of full-time staff to accommodate both remote learning and after school childcare. Additionally, during this time, the social/emotional/behavioral needs of children enrolled in the program were much higher than normal and required the regular attention and intervention of the program’s social worker and supervisors.

The many changes resulted in high staff turnover, and the workforce shortage resulted in not having sufficient qualified staffed to open three of Hephzibah's eight, day care sites at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. These sites remain closed, impacting hundreds of working families in Oak Park who are struggling to secure safe, high-quality childcare for their children. The program currently operates at 63% capacity, so revenue is currently 63% of budget. However, fixed costs remain and cannot be reduced, leading to a budget deficit. Ongoing COVID disruptions affect program capacity which further impacts the revenue stream, further adding to the budget deficit.

Hephzibah relies on the strong Oak Park community for support to ensure our ability to deliver a critical level of care and service and we need that support now more than ever. During this very challenging time, Hephzibah respectfully requests \$525,000 in funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to offset \$1,240,000 in current fiscal year budget deficits resulting from increased expenditures and reduction of revenue incurred since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hephzibah continues to incur approximately \$15,000 in additional monthly expenses related to the pandemic, as well as \$120,000 in lost revenue.

Hephzibah will use ARPA funds to stabilize two of our core programs: Day Care and Hephzibah Home, which are both continuing to experience significant budget deficits resulting from increased and ongoing COVID-specific expenses, and the loss of revenue due to COVID-specific and COVID-related issues including the nationwide workforce shortage. These funds will also assist us to stabilize our workforce through a variety of mitigation efforts including:

- an incentivized employee referral program
- offering a sign-on bonus for key positions
- increase in starting pay and subsequent cascade for current staff

Impact Statement

Ensuring the stability of Hephzibah Home is essential for the most severely traumatized children in the State of Illinois because they require a safe, supportive, and therapeutic place to live in order to stabilize and heal. A loss or reduction in services for these children, would result in them not receiving the care they so desperately need, remaining in unstable, often times unsupportive living arrangements that cannot meet their needs, and lingering in psychiatric hospitals for much longer than is medically necessary (there are currently 57 Illinois youth in care in psychiatric hospitals beyond medical necessity). Hephzibah provides exceptional care, yet we recognize that it is in the best interest of every child to be raised in a home with a family, not in a group home setting. Enabling children to progress on their healing journey and move into a family setting as quickly as possible is essential for their progress. For every child that remains in the home longer than necessary to meet their therapeutic goals, another child goes unserved.

In the absence of ARPA funding, Hephzibah faces an ongoing and significant reduction in services, particularly affecting Oak Park working families served by our after-school program and the community's most vulnerable children residing in or awaiting placement at Hephzibah Home. Service reductions include the continued shuttering of three after-school program sites and even the potential closure of additional sites of Hephzibah's after-school and summer day program which typically serves more than 700 children attending Oak Park District 97 schools. A significant portion of these families are single-parent households, and more than one-third are low-to-moderate income who pay on a sliding scale fee basis. Many are essential workers who do not have the option of working from home and need reliable, high-quality childcare to maintain employment. The further loss or reduction of stable, affordable childcare in Oak Park will have a profound impact on Oak Park families and may result in loss of employment and increased stressors in the household, placing vulnerable, school-aged children at greater risk.