How Chicago Youth-serving Organizations are Responding to COVID-19

On March 30, 2020, the My CHI. My Future. mayoral initiative conducted a survey to learn how youth-serving providers are responding to shelter-in-place orders due to COVID-19, which are impacting their organizations and the families they serve.

SUMMARY

95% of providers remain in touch with the youth and families they serve.

Organizations are finding creative ways to communicate with youth and continue to coordinate meaningful experiences related to youth interests.

Multiple methods of youth engagement are essential, including both real-time and asynchronous opportunities and low/non-tech options for participation.

Providers from organizations that work closely in specific Chicago communities are more likely to be in touch with individual youth and families than those who serve youth citywide.

As providers address the current needs of their communities, they face challenges such as lack of financial and material resources and a need for professional learning opportunities to support their transition to remote engagement.

While there is excitement and momentum about engaging youth online, providers are concerned about equity issues regarding Internet access, technology access, and familiarity and skills using digital tools.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

95% of providers are **in touch with the youth & families** they serve.

84% use mass messaging strategies (e.g. informational emails sent to contact lists, social media posts)

75% are engaging in individual communication (e.g. telephone calls, individual emails).

See Figure 1 for more detail.

81% of providers that serve specific communities are more likely to utilize individual, personalized communication methods vs 66% of organizations that serve youth citywide.
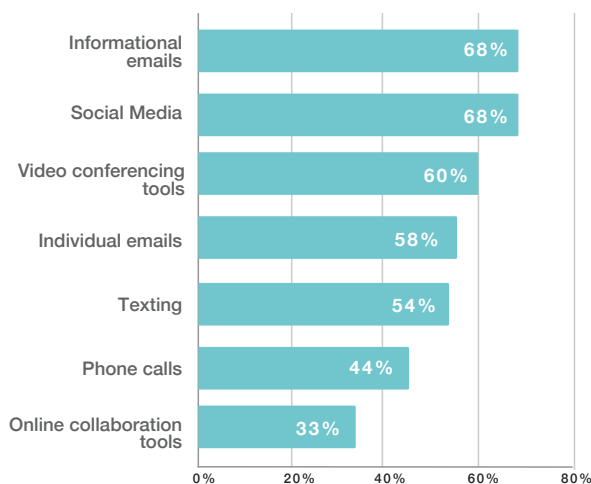

Figure 1: Preferred communication methods used by respondents for staying in touch with youth and their families

Method	Percent
Informational emails	68%
Social Media	68%
Video conferencing tools	60%
Individual emails	58%
Texting	54%
Phone calls	44%
Online collaboration tools	33%

WHO TOOK THE SURVEY?

336 providers representing 253 organizations that serve Chicago youth took the survey.

92% of the providers represented in this survey work for organizations that serve youth during out-of-school time. Two-thirds of respondents also serve youth during school hours. The youth they serve range from preschool to post-high school ages.

Table 1: Age categories served by survey respondents.

Preschool age	28%
Early elementary	49%
Upper elementary	59%
Middle school	73%
High school	83%
Post high school	58%

41% work in organizations that serve youth citywide while **59%** identified working closely with one or more specific communities.

From those who identified particular communities of focus, all but one of the **77 Chicago communities** were represented, with the greatest representation on the **west** and **south sides.**
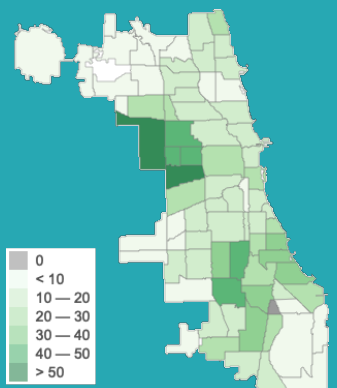

Figure 2: Number of respondents who work closely in a particular community.

40% of respondents work in organizations physically located in a community they serve closely.

96% of providers **continue to coordinate meaningful experiences for youth while face-to-face locations are closed** (i.e. connecting them to people, resources, and opportunities related to their interests and passions).

Of those connecting youth to meaningful experiences (currently or in progress):

70% invite youth to participate in real-time activities

though video conferencing tools like Zoom to host live classes or workshops, drop-in office hours, and virtual social events.

69% offer experiences that youth can do on their own time

like DIY guides through pre-recorded videos or step-by-step instructions, providing virtual tours of city spaces that are now inaccessible, and hosting weekly challenges for youth to create and share with peers).
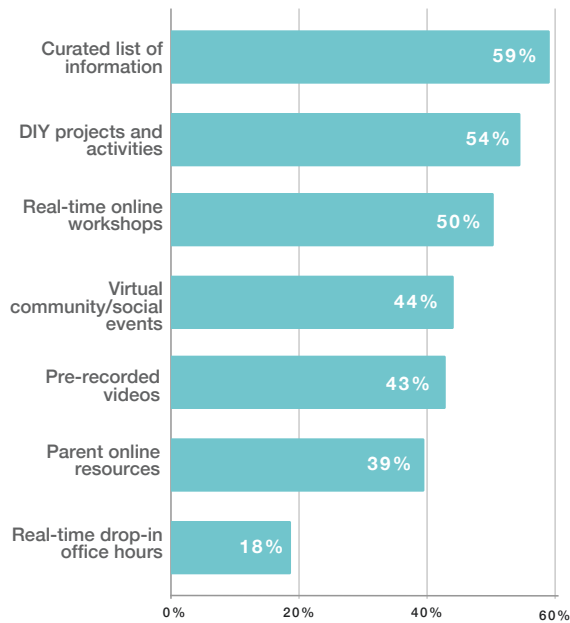
See Figure 3 for more detail.

Category	Percentage
Curated list of information	59%
DIY projects and activities	54%
Real-time online workshops	50%
Virtual community/social events	44%
Pre-recorded videos	43%
Parent online resources	39%
Real-time drop-in office hours	18%

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents using remote strategies for youth engagement.

Both real-time and asynchronous opportunities for youth participation are utilized and emphasized as important by providers.

" *Given the limitations we know of, I think hosting these in an asynchronous way would be best. For example, posting the activity in the morning and then youth can submit their response at any point (e.g, a video of their talent). Or for a "tour" you could post one stop per hour in a thread, and then it's there whenever the youth have a chance to look through it."*

*—Liz Lehman,
UChicago STEM Education*

71% (237 providers) intend to create and share a remote activity or virtual event on the My CHI. My Future. website and 27% (91 providers) used the survey to submit what they already had available. The most commonly shared content categories were: **Learning as a Lifestyle** (29%), representing work experiences, academic support, and social-emotional guidance, and **Helping Your Community** (23%), representing opportunities for youth to engage with and support their local neighborhoods.

Figure 4: Examples of provider submissions to the My CHI. My Future. website (left to right): Project Syncere Monday Design Challenges, Field Museum Mission to the Mesozoic game, Project Exploration STEM @ Home.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

Providers were asked about what youth and families need right now. Open-ended responses fell into several categories.

Whole-Family Needs

Essentials
(secure housing, financial assistance, food, childcare)

Counseling and mental health services

Technology
(computers, mobile devices, Broadband Internet, tech support)

Activity resources
(activity ideas, books, art supplies, games)

Reliable and accessible information
(about school, COVID-19, ordinances, Census 2020)

Youth-specific needs

Social connections
(community of peers, mentorship)

Safe spaces
(ensuring socio-emotional health and physical safety)

Academic and workplace supports
(e-learning opportunities, help with school & work requirements, time management/schedules)

Enrichment activities
(art, spending time outside, music, ideas for how to spend time)

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

In thinking about how to fill these needs, providers came up with creative solutions using different methods of engagement.

Providers indicated that the youth they serve would be interested in both live events and asynchronous opportunities (see Figure 4). Almost half thought youth would be very interested in online peer-led activities.

While low/non-tech solutions were less commonly nominated as something of high interest in their community, 60% of providers selected at least one of these options (access to mentors through online or phone, physical activity kits, or printed how-to guides).

High Interest Moderate Interest

- Access to peer-led activities via live stream — 48%
- How-to videos for self-directed exploration — 44%
- Structured online workshops or classes — 43%
- Peer and topic-based town hall meetings or group chat — 41%
- Access to mentor-led activities via live stream — 40%
- Access to adult mentors through online or phone office hours — 37%
- Physical activity kits for projects (to be picked up) — 36%
- How-to guides (printed) for self-directed exploration — 25%
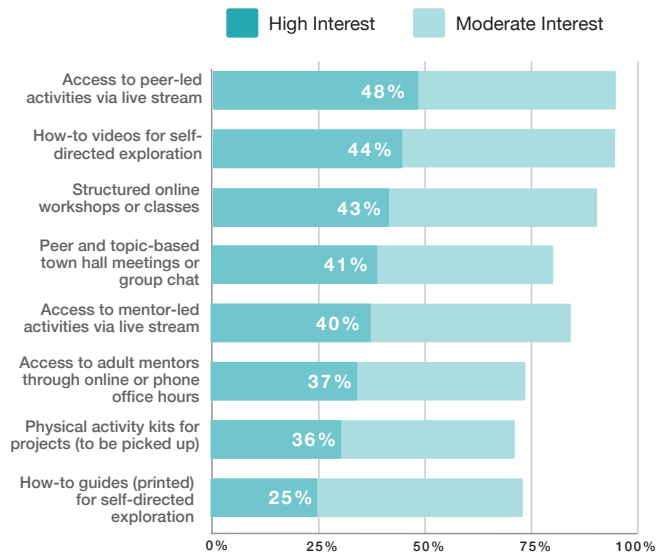
Figure 5: Percentage of respondents identifying potential remote strategies as of interest to their youth community.

Through open-ended responses and by sharing their existing resources and opportunities, providers highlighted:

Online youth challenges and showcases
(e.g. video challenges, spaces to share projects, virtual scavenger hunts)
Suggested tools: TikTok, Instagram

"Showcase of live performances, multimedia, and art."
—Jeanne Warsaw-Gazga, MeMA-Music

Virtual connections to people & places
(e.g. virtual tours, online speaker series, master classes, and professional performances)
Suggested tools: Google Earth, Google VR, Zoom, YouTube

"Making use of virtual tours and delivering resources to the neighborhoods would be great. Pairing the video of the penguins at the Shedd with a bus full of animals out to greet kids would be really cool."
—Patrick Bittorf, Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School

Online showcases
(e.g. virtual performances, online talent shows)
Suggested tools: YouTube, Vimeo, TikTok

"We are considering how to create more virtual learning curriculum and […] online platforms for dance competitions…"
—Marcus Warren, Westside Health Authority

Youth-led programming
(e.g. youth design solutions, monthly teen hangouts)
Suggested tools: Instagram, Zoom

"Dance parties, youth-driven programming, having youth voice be involved in how decisions are made."
—Irina Zadov, Chicago Park District

Opportunities for work & community service
(e.g. paid internships & hourly work, community service credits through online efforts)

Providers have creative ideas for remote engagement with youth. The examples below align with the themes highlighted in blue to the left.

> *I would like to do something like a video collage challenge: what gives you joy? Or what is the first thing you want to do when this is over? Or have them show something they have made around the house."*
>
> *—Van Bensett, Life Directions*

> *Virtual tours using Google Maps/Earth which can be used to display change in neighborhoods over time."*
>
> *—Moses Williams, Public Allies Chicago*

> *Working with youth to create a virtual Spring Circus show since the real one needed to be canceled."*
>
> *—Renee Bell Werge, CircEsteem*

> *I also think opportunities to do community service and/ or civic engagement from home and be a part of something (and earn money and/or scholarship funds) would be very helpful."*
>
> *—Bridgette Davis, University of Chicago, SSA & Noble Schools*

Small group interactions around interest & support topics
(e.g. online counseling, spaces for smaller group discussions)
Suggested tools: Zoom, Google Meet

Non-technical solutions
(e.g. project kits, care packages with puzzles & books, mail & telephone communication)
Suggested tools: Printed materials, telephone, postal mail

ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS AND CONCERNS

Providers shared challenges facing their organizations as they work to serve their youth and communities right now. Open-ended responses about what they need fell into the following categories:

COVID-19 supports
(Communication from district/city about policies regarding serving youth now and in the summer; Personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff)

Organizational necessities
(Financial assistance; Ways to keep staff employed)

Capacity to offer remote opportunities for youth and families
(Strategies, and best practices of virtual programming, professional development to conduct virtual programming, technology and devices)

Marketing and outreach support to promote current learning opportunities

Materials to offer youth and families
(Technology equipment and devices; Basic necessities such as food and cleaning supplies)

Connections with other organization that could support collaborative engagement
(Networking amongst organizations to identify opportunities for partnerships and resource sharing)

Throughout the survey, **issues of equity and access** are at the forefront of both challenges and solutions posed by providers.

> **"Everything has to be offered online. However, this creates a barrier for many of the families who need these opportunities the most."**
> —*Mark Myers, Chicago Children's Choir*

> **"Many of our teens are excluded because they can't get access even through their phones. If that's the case, then they can't access any virtual opportunities."**
> —*Helen Slade, Territory NFP*

> **"I am interested in working with the MCMF community on digital divide issues first. The kids that were hard to connect with before are even harder to connect with now."**
> —*Allison James, Chicago Innovation (Chicago Student Invention Convention)*

While organizations prepare for the future, keeping employees paid and virtual doors open remains a priority that can be supported through **professional learning opportunities and the sharing of experiences and strategies.**

> **"Let's share resources, and let's keep engaging in the ways we're doing and in the new ways we can dream up doing it in the coming months."**
> —*Michelle Rabkin, Chicago Academy of Sciences/Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum*

digital youth network

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Research & Design Lab

> **"**
> *Youth clearly are missing the social aspect of their lives- far and away I keep hearing about missing their friends- so how do we create safe places via Zoom for this with that platform's ability to have small group conversations and the host can toggle around?"*
>
> —*Robin Koelsch,*
> *Communities In Schools of Chicago*

> **"**
> *We are ... preparing science kits they could pickup with no direct contact at our farms. Our first experiment will be growing microgreens at home and then preparing a recipe with them."*
>
> —*Lauralyn Clawson,*
> *Urban Growers Collective*