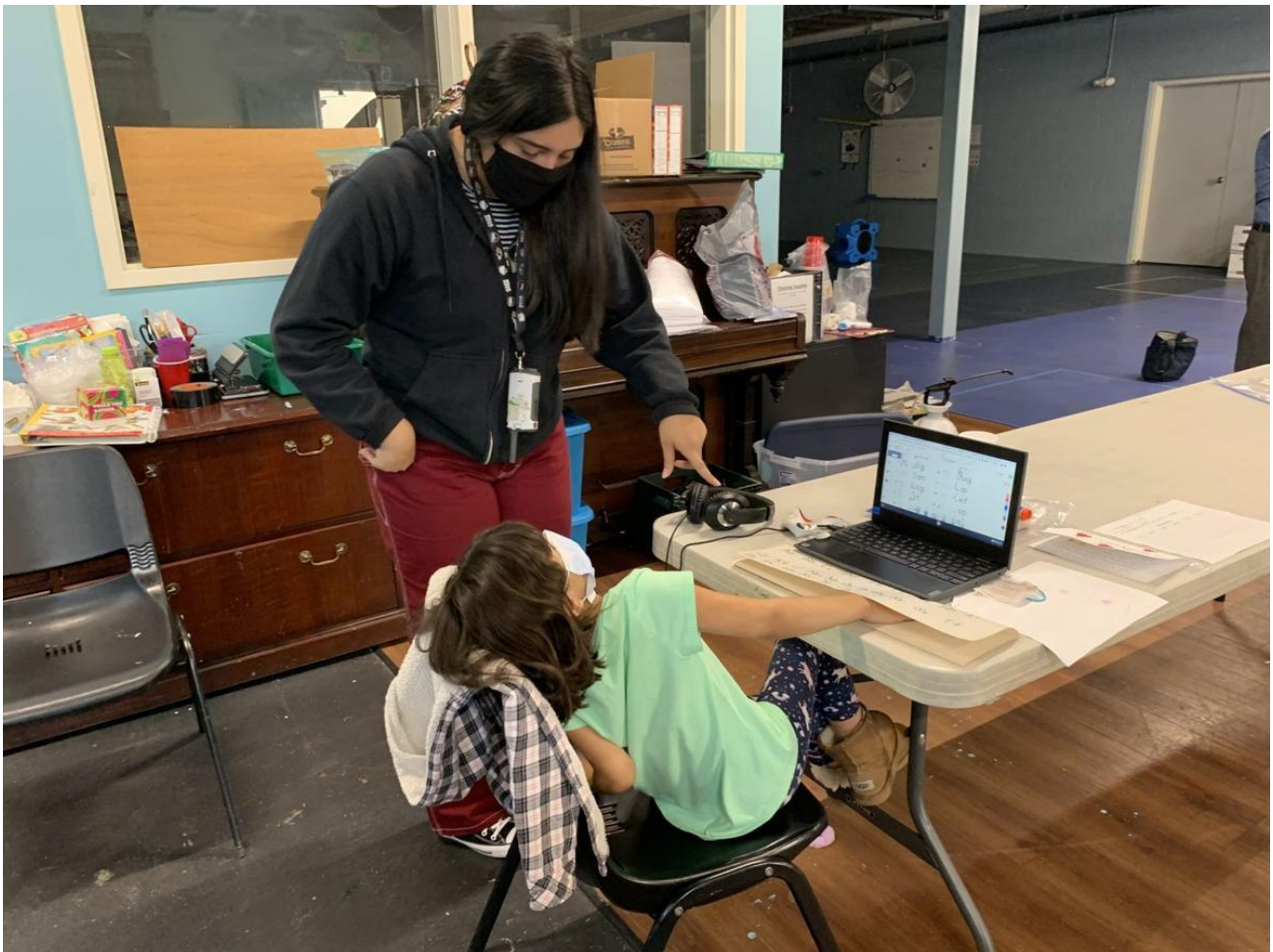


# Napa Valley *Register*

## Napa County children expected to benefit from stimulus funds

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A student and a staffer talk at the day care offered by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Napa Valley and the Napa County Office of Education during COVID-19. New federal funds are expected to trickle down to the local level.

## Jennifer Huffman

What will the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 stimulus money mean for Napa kids, especially those in poverty?

That's the question that local agencies and nonprofits are all asking, now that billions in tax breaks, direct payments and other measures begin to flow into the American economy, and trickle down to the local level.

Experts who work in the industry said they are optimistic that the funds will make a difference for their clients.

"We know that for some, it will be money directly in their pockets," in the form of tax savings, said Debbie Peralez, executive director of Child Start Inc. in Napa. Child Start programs benefit low-income families.

Child Start families live at the federal poverty line or below, and they will get benefits, such as a child tax credit and other tax breaks, Peralez said.

"There's a general sense of relief that there seems to be a plan," to recover from the pandemic, she said. "There's an awareness we need to get kids back to school and increase childcare options and (now) there's going to be money to do (that)."

Notably, "We're also hoping we can increase our enrollment," in Head Start programs that provide quality child care and education, which means more families can have children in care so one or more parents can get back to work, she said.

She hasn't come up with a "wish list" quite yet, said Peralez. "We usually like to wait and see what the parameters are going to be. But anything that will help us get back to normal operations," is key, she said.

During the pandemic, most classroom sizes had to be cut in half. "We're not serving our full enrollment. We would like to get back to full enrollment."

Kerry Ahearn, CEO of Aldea Children & Family Services in Napa, said she definitely feels encouraged by the expected aid. Aldea provides mental health treatment and other support services to the community.

"It's really putting a priority on the mental health and wellness of people in our community but the devil is in the details," said Ahearn. "That always concerns me. The state and county has to decide how to divvy up the funds. I am hopeful. I know they want to get this money out fast."

The isolation of COVID-19 has been a great strain on many in the community, especially children, said Ahearn.

Substance abuse, anxiety and depression have increased, said Ahearn. “We are seeing an increase in referrals to mental health services for kids and families. Everybody had to pivot to make huge changes in their lives, in work and school,” she said. That stress impacts everybody.

Additional funds means that Aldea can increase its engagement with the community, meeting people where they are at and bringing resources to their doorsteps.

“We need to hire more staff to make sure we are serving all of these kids and families.”

Thankfully, the nonprofit did get a PPP loan. Without such aid, “it would have been devastating,” said Ahearn. “We would have lost a lot of staff and not have been able to bounce back as quickly.”

“Because of the fires, and no school, and the pandemic, we lost that connection. We need to re-engage the community and go out to where they are and get them resources.”

All of this has an impact on poverty, said Ahearn.

“If the family is poor and worried about feeding kids and keeping their home and making the next rent payment, paying attention to their mental health issues is not the priority. It’s basic needs first.”

Greg Bouillercce, executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Napa Valley, said that these funds “could mean hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of Napa Valley children.”

The Napa club was the first youth-serving organization in Napa County to open in the midst of the pandemic, in June of 2020, and has been providing full-service distance learning support for virtual learners since September of that year, he said.

“Full service means our staff are working with cohorts of 10 to ensure kids sign on to Zoom lessons, get help with homework, get access to healthy and nutritious meal service and most importantly still have a place to safely socialize with their friends,” he said.

Up to this point, he said, “A lot of our effort has been focused on how we mitigate the impact of COVID-19 for kids. We’re excited because the conversation gets to shift from mitigation to recovery. How do we address the academic atrophy that’s taken place by getting kids into programs to help address some of the losses we’ve sustained over the last year?”

More funding, such as from this aid, means that Bouillercce can increase club hours and add staff. That means more kids can come to the club locations, which can have a trickle-down effect on poverty.

Families pay a greatly reduced amount to be members, he said. If enrollment can increase, “you are giving families the opportunity to make sure their kids have a safe place to go so

their parent can go to work and those businesses have employees,” and customers to shop.

Of course, this funding is all new. “We haven’t heard from any of our partners yet to what degree that pass-through funding will be. We are looking to participate in that discussion so we can be a part of the planning process,” Bouillercer said.

Elba Gonzalez-Mares, executive director at Napa’s Community Health Initiative, said the projected funding “is tremendous.” Community Health Initiative, or CHI, helps ensure that children have access to comprehensive, quality healthcare.

“To me, it’s sending the right message that there are more funds available for this work,” of providing quality health insurance for children and families.

“Individuals will be able to see more options in terms of affordability for health care. That trickles down to families’ finances.”

Gonzalez-Mares explained that when a family is not burdened by the cost of medical bills and medical care “that means they are able to focus their energy and resources to meet their other needs such as childcare, housing and education,” and that leads to better outcomes.

When those basic needs are met, “the individual is more likely to be able to thrive and succeed in life. That opens up more opportunity especially for our vulnerable populations to focus on opportunities versus just everyday surviving and struggles.”

Joelle Gallagher is the executive director of First 5 in Napa County. This government agency supports children ages 0 to 5, and families, by funding different initiatives.

“It’s great to put money into the pockets of families—we need to be doing that right now,” during these tough times, said Gallagher.

However, she doesn’t yet know enough about the rescue plan to understand if the funds are one-time grants or not.

For example, “If there were tax credits that were permanent, that’d be helpful.”

As Gallagher pointed out, “I don’t think anyone is going to be permanently brought out of poverty because of a one-time tax credit. That doesn’t mean it’s not helpful, but there’s a bigger picture here,” to consider.

“The kinds of things that affect childhood poverty are their parents making a living wage and being able to afford the homes we live in,” Gallagher said.

Her suggestion? “Let’s come up with some creative ideas so some of it makes a permanent change in the status of poor families and helps them move out of poverty.”