

# Easterseals and Head Start: Expanding Early Education and Family Resources in Our Communities

Apr 10, 2025



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## Spotlighting Our Partnership Program Through the Work of Happy Days Cicero Site Director Perla Botello

Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford collaborates with nearly 40 independently-operated early childhood programs in Chicago and suburban Cook County through Head Start and Early Head Start. Together, they provide transformative early learning services to low-income families. For children aged 5 and younger, enrichment is year-round and takes place in inviting classrooms led by caring professionals, with favorable teacher-child ratios and an evolving curriculum. These programs are a vital resource for families and are deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

At each early childhood center, directors work closely with Easterseals, partnering with families and staff educators to provide blended play and learning experiences. At one such center, Happy Days in Cicero, that director is Perla Botello.

For her dedication and strong community presence, Botello received the 2023 Extraordinary Latinas Award from United Latinas. She is also a 2024 and 2025 Women of Inspiration Awards Nominee by Universal Womens Network, an honor that recognizes female entrepreneurs, business leaders, and those striving for change.

Botello is continually inspired by her surroundings and finds working within her hometown deeply fulfilling. "I'm a great talker," she said. "I love to talk to families and to the people in our community."

She credits her communication skills as key to keeping a pulse on what's happening in Cicero. Recognizable in her hometown, she says people feel comfortable opening up to her, allowing her to gain a deeper understanding of local needs. She oversees parent gatherings and assists with community food programs, working hard to be a source of support and, ultimately, a catalyst for change.

This familiarity allows her to build relationships with the parents and families who belong to her school, particularly when advocating for healthy habits. Most recently, Botello helped connect families with free dental and medical checkups for children, provided by Easterseals, which are services that can be difficult to afford.

Healthy families lead to happy communities, Botello said, expressing gratitude for the supports and services Easterseals provides. By reaching out to Easterseals team members for visual aids, technical assistance, and materials, she is able to strengthen her teachers' practices and help improve outcomes for her young students.

**“I believe when we work together, we are stronger,”  
Botello said. “We create a bigger impact in the  
community, and that’s what families need.”**

Working together with early childhood programs and site directors is the Easterseals Regional Leadership team. The team is a constant source of support for their partner sites, ensuring that leaders like Botello—and families in Easterseals’ Early Learning Services programs—have access to essential health care, emotional regulation tools, and a number of other services, particularly for parents of children with disabilities who reside in these areas.

“Miss Perla does great things for her families,” said Maria Casiano, the regional director for Happy Days in Cicero. “She is great at connecting families with resources.”

Through this supportive partnership, Casiano and Botello bring even more holistic health services to Cicero.

Casiano explained how every Head Start program is unique and also how Easterseals provides for families down to basic needs. “We’re a program that’s going to bring you the wipes and diapers because we know we’re working with low-income families” and it is already a struggle to afford necessities. We help bridge that gap, she said.

Supporting a child’s emotional well-being and classroom behavior is another focus of the Head Start partnership program. To address these needs, Botello collaborates with Easterseals specialists on safety plans and classroom recommendations. She ensures that best practices are both intentional and implemented in the classroom, particularly for children exhibiting challenging behaviors.

Within Cicero, Botello is continually seeking touchpoints to build and strengthen relationships. She is particularly inspired by the women around her in her multigenerational community and encourages them to continue learning and moving forward. Currently, Botello is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in early childhood and infant psychology at National Louis University with plans to graduate in June 2026.

“She wants to grow,” Casiano said. “She wants to be better for her teachers. She wants to be the best for them. They know they can come to her and she can be more intentional with them and more supportive.”

Botello agrees. “The most important thing about my work is how I’m able to inspire not just my families, but also my staff,” she said. “I work with young women of Hispanic, Latina, and Mexican

heritage. Growing up with few resources, I didn't know where to start or where I was going. I always wanted to achieve more. So I tell my ladies—keep going to school, keep learning, and keep growing.”

It is these experiences that fuel her passion for helping others.

“For me, building a strong bond with families where they feel comfortable coming to me for resources is incredibly rewarding,” she said. “The most important thing in childhood is creating positive memories and ensuring my students are happy.”

Want to learn more about our Early Learning Services? [Find out](#) if your family qualifies for Head Start or Early Head Start.

You can also visit <https://headstartchicago.org/>.