

**Forest Preserves of Cook County**  
**Public Hearing on 2017 Budget**  
**November 15, 2016 – Cook County Building**

Hello, my name is Claudia Rivera and I am the Associate Director at the Mary Crane Center. The Center provides necessary supports for 350 children and their families living in Chicago ages birth to five, including social-emotional skill-building, wrap-around services for families, and enhanced literacy and language development.

In this time of Thanksgiving, it is important to celebrate the strong, supportive community partnership that we have with the Chicago Zoological Society. Two years ago, Mary Crane embarked on an innovative approach called NatureStart. NatureStart is the Chicago Zoological Society's early childhood learning initiative, which uses children's innate curiosity about the natural world as a way to foster learning. We did this because Mary Crane and the Chicago Zoological Society understand that early play experiences for our youngest learners cultivates a caring attitude toward the natural world and with issues of conservation well into adulthood.

When Mary Crane and the Chicago Zoological Society began the process of NatureStart training with Marilyn Brinks, it was clear that not only would we learn how to facilitate nature play for children and families, but that we would cultivate meaningful relationships between Mary Crane staff, the Chicago Zoological Society and Forest Preserve personnel. One of the relationships that blossomed was with Chicago Zoological staff Marilyn Brinks and Forest Preserve representative, Mr. Adam, who worked with teachers at our Roger's Park Morse location and helped to initiate the *Footsteps of Delight* Program.

The Nature Start program provided highly specialized national nature play training for our early childhood staff. In participating in the program I have witnessed and have been part of how it has helped informal educators in museums, zoos, aquariums, gardens and nature centers across the country provide quality early childhood nature play programs for children and their families. The training provided comprehensive, hands-on professional development, nature play curricula, online distance learning, and peer support. Our staff consistently report increases in their knowledge, skills, confidence, perspectives, and practice with implementing nature play. Mary Crane along with the Chicago Zoological Society and Forest Preserve has gained a network of professionals engaged in advocating for and implementing early childhood nature programming.

Through NatureStart, the Chicago Zoological Society has trained over 20 of our Mary Crane staff.

What we have proudly accomplished in NatureStart was to actively participate, as learners and contributors, in a professional learning community focusing on developing and strengthening nature play opportunities for children and families. What we gained was a beautiful relationship with our community Partners the Chicago Zoological Society and Forest Preserves. As the Associate Director I extend and express gratitude and thanks from the families, teachers, administrators and especially the children of Mary Crane.