

Family Services Coronavirus Response

UPDATED May 1, 2020

Dear Friends,

We hope this letter finds you healthy in body and spirit! As the world, our country, and our community grapples with the COVID-19 crisis, we want to let you know how Family Services is responding. As you can imagine, the health and safety of Family Services' staff, and all the individuals and families we serve remains our top priority. Because we share in the collective duty to strengthen and care for our community, we want you to be informed about how this pandemic has affected our operations and our programs.

Since March 13, 2020 Family Services' staff have been working remotely and delivering as much programming and support as possible. **Although COVID-19 is primarily a physical health crisis, the toll it's taking on mental health is enormous.** Fear and isolation are the hallmarks of this pandemic. Family Services cannot treat a fever, but we can help people manage anxiety, cope with stress, and maintain self-care. To that end, we are taking the following steps to protect the health and build the resilience of our clients, volunteers, staff and stakeholders:

- Family Services' leadership is working closely with a large group of other nonprofit and municipal leaders **to coordinate a community-wide response** to COVID-19 and ensure that services for nutrition assistance, housing, health, education and emotional wellness are being ramped up and effectively coordinated.
- Family Services has collected and disseminated donations of basic needs items to 100 families with young children. Going forward, Family Services is **collaborating with the Merrimack Valley YMCA to coordinate the distribution of essential items for babies** through their existing food pantry.
- **Crisis helplines** are being provided by trained volunteers and staff to support individuals struggling with the emotional toll of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Online trainings and workshops** are being provided, including:
 - Workshops on **self-care** being offered to front line workers at Greater Lawrence nonprofits.
 - Training on "**mental health 101**" being provided to front line workers in Greater Lawrence to help non-clinical professionals support the mental health of their constituents and colleagues.
 - **Parenting support** workshops being provided (in English and Spanish) to all community members to give parents ideas, advice and guidance on coping with difficult behaviors at home.

- **Relationship education** and support being is provided (in English and Spanish) to help couples navigate the stress of financial, emotional and family stress.

In addition to these newly added services, Family Services' existing programs are adapting and

- Our **Family & Community Resource Center**, located at One Union Street in Lawrence, is reaching out to clients individually, assisting families access financial benefits, and connecting them with resources for nutritional aid and public benefits. FCRC staff are also offering online parenting classes to those able to utilize technology.
- Our **Mental Health Clinic**, located at 430 N. Canal Street in Lawrence, continues to see nearly 200 clients each week. Most of this professional mental health treatment is being provided by telehealth. However, because our clinic is categorized as an essential business, our office remains open (Tuesday – Thursday from 9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.) in order to provide treatment to individuals who cannot access telehealth sessions.
- **Youth mentoring** programs continue to support (and create!) youth mentor matches and in doing so, have come up with a lot of very creative activities for matches to participate in together (including a Tik Tok dance competition, face mask contest, and online board games). Mentoring staff are also helping youth and families find and receive needed resources. While contacting families, it became clear that parents were struggling to help their child(ren) with remote learning. Mentoring staff have responded by creating an online tutoring program, which may be opened up to the community at large.
- **Court Appointed Special Advocates** started the social distancing situation by training 15 new CASA volunteers via an 8 hour remote training session. Since then, the program has been assigned to nine new child abuse and neglect cases. Volunteers continue to make contact with children on their cases and are monitoring the health as safety of children as best they can remotely.
- The **Samaritans of Merrimack Valley** crisis helpline (being answered remotely by a trained cadre of volunteers) is experiencing an increase in calls, mostly resulting from people struggling with fears related to COVID-19. Individuals who participate in the Samaritans' support groups (Safe Place group for loss survivors and attempt survivors groups) are being supported via online support groups. Trainings to organizations who work with high risk individuals are also being moved to a remote platform.
- Because our **youth development services** rely on in person group activities taking place in school and community-based settings, recreating those programs remotely has been a slow and challenging process. However, Family Services youth development staff have maintained contact with youth individually and are currently planning group programming in collaboration with the Lawrence Public School system.
- **Parenting programs** also rely on in person group activities, which have been put on hold. However, parenting program staff continue to reach out to clients and provide parenting support individually and offer online groups, and connecting families with important information and resources and assisting with critical needs.

Family Services entered this crisis in a strong financial position. The organization has not yet had to cut back on staffing or service provision. Many of the organizations funders (private foundations and government grantors) have been very understanding and flexible in the use of funds, enabling us to shift operations and priorities. Several of our fee for service programs (mental health clinic and court mandated parent education) are feeling the financial impact of not being fully open for business. Most notably, Family Services fundraising activities have been dramatically impacted, as our annual gala and two additional fundraising events have been delayed.

In the short term, we feel confident in our ability to maintain all staff and all services. Although the volume and effectiveness of many of our services are greatly diminished, especially those that rely on group activities, in the past week alone, **our staff connected with over 1,000 clients!** As the future of the virus and the economy remains uncertain, we will continue to be creative, flexible and resourceful to do all we can to support individuals and families.

There will be a long-lasting impact on our communities and there will surely be an increase in demands for services and programs. At Family Services, we stand ready to respond as needed. To date, we have been inspired by the humanity and determination we've have seen from all corners of our local and larger communities.

Thank you for supporting Family Services as we work to support others. We wish you good health!

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Elizabeth Sweeney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Elizabeth Sweeney
Chief Executive Officer