

Testimonial for Frontline Worker Bonus Pay: Mental health services for middle school aged youth!

When COVID struck our state and the governor made the decision for his executive order to go into effect and close almost every in-person service and interaction, our work days were changed completely.

At first, we did not know if we were even going to be able to work? How would we be able to provide the necessary mental health skills training services to the youth we were serving- for 4 hours daily in person, when now we were being directed to not leave our homes or have any contact with persons outside of our own household? For a short time, a couple of weeks only- we placed our "in-person/direct care services" on hold; providing only mental health check-ins with our clients over the computers through telehealth and zoom. Asking our clients (middle school aged youth and their families) to log on daily, a couple of times throughout the week was a huge challenge. They were already maxed out on screen time with their new way of receiving schooling. They were already so stressed out with the uncertainties of what was happening in the world; will the parents get to go back to work, how will their families shop and get food, who will help them if they struggle and how will they ever see their friends from school or their neighborhood... let alone how will they maintain their physical and mental health needs? But we as staff persisted. Setting up check-in's over the computer to ensure our clients and families were coping was what we could do at the moment; until we could do more, until we had a plan, an action plan to keep people safe AND provide services in-person once again.

As we entered the next weeks, the next phase of pandemic life, we resumed in-person services- with SO MANY precautions in place. We (just 3 of us, every day- together- through it all) staffed our groups (smaller group sizes of course, no more than 8, then later 10 people total) and planned for *so many more steps* to be in place throughout our workday... but we did it to establish SOME normalcy in a world that was ***no longer normal***. We implemented the following precautions: ***smaller group sizes, transporting limited number of youth at a time to ensure the 6' distances were in place, taking temps of the kids at the beginning and end of each day, making calls daily & weekly to families to screen for symptoms or possible contacts and the cleaning... oh so much cleaning... and all the mask wearing.. and the reminding- telling the kids to wash their hands... and stay 6' away from their friends.. ALL DAY. LONG.*** And they really couldn't comprehend why? At least not to the level they needed to, so we reminded them. And supported them and encouraged them ALL DAY. LONG.

We did this for months. Day in and Day out. ALL WEEK. LONG. FOR MONTHS. We were all they had. We were there to create a safe environment for them, to allow them opportunity to learn skills, to manage their mental health, to see their friends, to talk about their challenges and feelings and families and confusion; to have a little bit of what used to be normal. There was no one else to work at our program, people who were afraid- worked from home, no one stepped up or in to say 'hey- I will come hang out with a bunch of middle schoolers, wear a mask all day and sanitize everything (even including seat belts) after each of the kids all day long' ... ***so we did it!*** *We had to-* it was the only way the kids could have a shred of normalcy but mostly have support. Support for their mental health, support for the physical health and support to keep them going with their school work, their hobbies, and their lives. We did this. And now, while some businesses are still closed, when some people are still not providing in person services; we are still here. Doing this work, day in and day out. With precautions. Working in a new way, a more-safe way, because we have to and mostly because the kids need us to. We also have different kids now. Kids who not only have the mental health needs as they did before,

but kids who now have another level of needs, needs related to all the confusion and all the worries and all of the stresses that this pandemic has put upon them and their families. Kids who now need to learn a new way to learn, when learning was hard enough to begin with!!! Kids who now need to learn new ways to cope, when coping before was hard enough... kids who need to learn how to be with kids when the world told us to stay home and don't be with others.... This is tough work and the pandemic and changes that have had to be in place to keep kids and families safe have made it even more difficult. AND our kids need us to be here for them, they deserve us to be here for them, in person. Supporting them, encouraging them, teaching them and seeing them in person. EVERY DAY, ALL YEAR LONG...

And here we are, 16+ months after COVID struck, all healthy. Not a single kid in our group has yet to test positive. What we are doing is working... and we will keep doing it. FOR the kids!

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