

To the Minnesota State Legislature –

We, Alexandra Mueller and Laura Muench, work at St. David's Center as Mental Health Practitioners in the Autism Day Treatment program. We worked as frontline workers in a modified treatment model during the COVID-19 pandemic and would like to share our experience as you consider the distribution of the Frontline Worker Bonus Pay.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked as co-practitioners in a day treatment model providing early intervention services to preschool aged Autistic children and their families. We worked on a multi-disciplinary team of 7 – 8 people providing daily services to a group of six children who required substantial physical and emotional support. We closely worked with the families of these children in their homes and in center to transfer skills and treatment strategies across settings, with the goal of optimal development. The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the structure and ability of our work and continues to do so today.

Following a brief furlough, returning to our mental health practitioner roles at the end of April 2020 brought a significant amount of uncertainty, fear, and stress. We returned to bare bone teams of only 5 – 6 staff, despite still providing the same critical services to our clients. We began leading treatment rooms as solo practitioners, rather than our normal co-practitioner model. We increased our case load to serve a larger number of families in need, as well as to help keep our organization afloat. We halted all team meetings and processing times, which are critical to supporting staff morale and preventing burn-out. We immediately stopped in-home and in-center family services and worked solely with families over Telehealth; which is an incredibly difficult task with young autistic individuals. All while navigating the unknown of COVID symptoms, isolation periods, and days and weeks without team members due to such.

Within all of this, supporting children with Autism during this pandemic proved to be an especially challenging task. Due to all these shifts in programming, our clients' schedules, treatment rooms, peers and treatment team members were changed significantly – which increased their stress and dysregulation. As frontline workers, we were also working intimately with unmasked children who demonstrate difficulty understanding personal space, have difficulty with sensory experiences (i.e. washing hands) and frequently touch their mouth, face and eyes. Each day brought a new level of stress as we were unsure what we were exposing ourselves too and what we were potentially exposing the children and their families too.

Despite these challenges, we feel lucky and honored to have worked within this modified service model and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. If you could consider distributing these funds to workers like us, who showed up to support young children and their families despite the unknown of this disease, you would be validating our work and showing the community that what we do really matters.

Thank you for your time,

Alexandra Mueller and Laura Muench