



SECURE PROGRAMS

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NON-SECURE PROGRAMS

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BOYS GROUP HOME

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GIRLS GROUP HOME

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To Whom it may concern,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my story as a frontline worker during the pandemic.

In March of 2020 we received the news, as did the rest of the country, that we were experiencing a pandemic. None of us truly knew what that meant or what we were about to experience.

Our company, same as most began to experience a budget crisis. Courts were no longer placing youth in secure facilities. Our 56-bed secure unit went down to six residents. Working as one company, the Group Homes continued to operate at full capacity while multiple staff were out on furlough to help make up for lost budget company wide.

Employees throughout Prairie Lakes were offered voluntary furloughs. I assumed the top three positions at the Girls Group Home and began working very long days, often 12 – 14 hours. I was learning new roles with less than a 24-hour notice. In effort to not add to our budget crisis, I offered to roll all of my overtime to comp time to be banked for a time when we were no longer in financial crisis. I lost extensive amounts of vacation time over the last year as there was no one to cover behind me if I took a day off, and there was simply too much to do with the increased workload.

Furlough employees were now making \$600 extra a week to stay at home safely while the rest of us were working very long hours under highly stressful circumstances with no additional compensation. In late fall most, furlough employees were able to return. They were not used to the increased workload the rest of us had all been working, this was not an easy adjustment for most.

Youth were placed in the Group Home short term until a foster home could be located as it was believed by county workers that this was the safest option for youth during the pandemic. The Group Home began to experience high turn over rather than the long-term placements that our staff and youth were accustomed to. Transitions tend to be stressful for youth and we often see an influx of behaviors during this time. Youth were frequently pulled out of placement prematurely. As a result, the youth did not have the opportunity to settle in let alone complete the treatment goals they were placed to address. Most youth have since been referred back to the program as they were not allowed the opportunity to learn the skills to be successful in foster homes and the community.

Youth were quarantined to the Group Home and no longer able to hold jobs, attend school in person, outside services, go to the YMCA, etc. Youth were also not allowed to go on home visits. Twelve youth with emotional and behavioral issues were quarantined to the house and yard 100% of the time. I often had to go out to my car to make confidential phone calls as there was no privacy within the Group Home during business hours.

Staff had the very difficult job of trying to explain to the youth why they couldn't see their families in person. The youth struggled to understand the seriousness of the situation. This was especially made difficult as most of the youths' families went on with life as normal. While the girls were quarantined to the Group Home; families were attending gatherings, shopping and doing all the fun summer things as if nothing had changed. Staff had to continuously explain to the youth the risk of being out in public. Youth were confused on who they should believe, their families or staff.

Staff had to learn to navigate technology as court, outside services and meetings were now being held virtual. Zoom, Docs to me, Google duo, Microsoft teams; were all programs that had to be uploaded and navigated. School was now online and our technology struggled to keep up. We spent thousands of dollars trying to upgrade our WiFi so 12 youth could be online at the same time during school hours. Staff were trying to teach parents and grandparents over the phone how to upload and use these programs so virtual visits could be had.

At the beginning of the pandemic I purchased a sewing machine and taught myself how to make face masks. In my spare time and using my personal funds to ensure all of our residents and staff had masks when none were available to be purchased.

Due to budget crisis and quarantine we had to get creative with recreational activities. During my time away from the Group Home I reached out to the community asking for donations for recreational and craft supplies. After work I spent many evenings driving around to collect donated items. We became creative to keep the youth busy and distracted with theme dress up days, creating dance routines, homemade slip n slides, and Friday night dance parties.

I was working such long days and had no one else at home to let my dog out. I was granted permission to start bringing my dog to work. Theo became our make shift therapy dog for the kids and staff.

My worst fear came true in December. COVID hit our house. Six of the twelve girls contracted COVID. Fortunately, none of the kids experienced severe symptoms. One complained of a headache, one complained of loss smell for a few days, most complained of boredom while being quarantined to their bedrooms (a good sign as kids who complain are kids who are healthy!). During this outbreak I was the only staff to contract COVID, another thing I am very grateful for. I did get sick and experienced multiple COVID symptoms. I worked from home all throughout my quarantine. Nearly eight months later and I still don't have my sense of smell or taste.

I was not able to see my mother for a little over a year. She has significant health issues and since I was working with the public, she couldn't take the risk. I wasn't able to spend time with her until she was fully vaccinated in late April 2021.

Throughout all of this my main goals were to keep my residents and staff safe while helping to keep our company from closing down as so many others did. I've worked at the Group Home for 23 years and take great pride in the work we do with At Risk Youth and their families.

This is just my story. Each of us have our own. I'm very proud of my staff as we all went above and beyond and together during one of the most difficult times we will ever experience.

Amy Krupke

Program Director

Prairie Lakes Youth Programs, Girls Group Home