

August 27, 2021

Dear Legislators,

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you what it has been like and how it feels to be a front-line, essential worker as a Mental Health Professional at Fraser working in a Day Treatment setting for children with autism ages 2-6.

Day to day:

When we returned to work after a brief shutdown, we had to prepare for three changes of clothes per day (one for each of the day's two sessions, plus a 3rd before going home to family).

The children that returned first had the highest needs that were not able to be served well by virtual appointments for therapies.

We wore doubled masks and protective goggles, which was challenging because they would fog up all the time led to obstructed vision. My face was always moist. I was exhausted by the end of the work day. Even now as our protective gear has changed, wearing the masks for 8+ hours per day really takes a toll. I still get headaches and have trouble sleeping, as do many of my coworkers.

To work within safety guidelines, one other staff member and I worked very closely together every day in the same room in order to limit exposure for several months. We have been through so much together, and even with returning staff levels we are committed to each other and our clients—and that is why even though we are so burned out it's just easier not to use PTO for more than a couple days.

Another thing I want to make sure you understand is we were and still are at great risk every day. Even with wellness screenings, parents still send their sick children to day treatment. Before I was vaccinated, one example when I was afraid because was when a sick and coughing nonverbal child was in my lap for two hours and there was nothing I could do about it. Then when I inevitably got sick, I had to quarantine anyway according to standard guidelines and use up PTO because it wasn't Covid. At this point many of us went into negative PTO balances, without even using it for quality time off to recharge.

Isolation:

At the beginning of the pandemic, I quit second job to avoid exposure, even though it was also an "essential worker" job. I felt obligated to minimize exposure risk to my young Fraser clients.

No one except my coworkers know what I've been going through, so I have a hard time relating to people right now. For example, I was with family recently and they were all talking about their work from home plans and closing back down for the delta variant. I simply could not relate because I've been down here in the trenches the whole time every day. I didn't feel like I had anything to contribute to their conversation because our worlds have been so different.

Family impact:

As the world was shutting down my 92-year-old mother was transitioning to hospice care, and I felt so guilty taking a week of unpaid family leave time to get that all set up because I knew my limited number of coworkers and our clients needed me. I did use some family leave to spend her last days with her, and she passed away in June 2020, adding to the trauma of it all.

I also live in a multi-generational home with my daughter, son-in-law, 11-year-old grandson, and 9-year-old granddaughter who has asthma. Her lungs sound bad anytime she gets a cold, so I was terrified every day that I might bring Covid home to her.

During times I was quarantined due to potential exposures to Covid at work, my daughter would prepare and bring my meals to the top of the stairs. I isolated myself in the basement while my grandson moved out of his bedroom and upstairs to the couch.

I wanted to expose family as little as possible, so I changed how I shopped to ordering more expensive pre-boxed meal kits shipped directly to the house because I was on my way to work during early-morning shopping times reserved for older people and essential workers.

In the end, please know that it really just means a lot for someone to say they appreciate the hard work we're doing and that it matters. Acknowledging all our trauma goes a long way.

Thank you for listening,

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