

Nexus-Mille Lacs Family Healing Frontline Worker Testimony

Jennie Heinen – Nexus-Mille Lacs Family Healing Milieu Supervisor

I have been in my line of work for almost 6 years now, within this time so much has changed and happened, some good and some bad. However, the last year and half has been emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting. While most of the world can operate remotely, that is not the case where I work. Our clients need us here and present with them, 24 hours a day. If we choose to not show up, our clients have no one to care for them and our clients cannot just go home. Some of our clients do not have a home or someone to care for them. Our clients depend on us to provide them with a place to live, to teach them daily living skills, and provide them with the 5 basic needs that everyone has a right to.

Over the last couple of years, my line of work has had a significant decrease in people willing to do this job or be able to make the sacrifice for this job. Mental illness has gotten tremendously more complex just within the last 3 years, yet it feels like nothing is being done to assist this crisis. Now to top it off, we have a pandemic at our front door. Our clients have severe mental health problems and are not able to fully understand what this pandemic means; they only feel the isolation it is causing. This pandemic is taking away from the 5 basic needs that we should be providing to our clients, yet we are stretched beyond the limit any person should have to endure and we are not capable of providing the basic needs for our clients.

Our clients do not understand the toll this is taking on their caregivers. When the pandemic hit, I was pregnant, and we were already facing challenges with having enough caregivers present. I put my health, the health of my unborn child, and my family's health at risk to show up and be present for my clients. I worked the quarantine unit, as there was not many of us that were willing to make this sacrifice. People may say, that was your choice, and your right it was my choice. I choose to be there, to be there for my clients to do the absolute best I could to provide for their basic needs. Every day when we show up for our job in this pandemic, we are choosing something greater than ourselves.

Why do I do it? Because I love my job. I care for my clients. I believe they deserve everything that I can possibly give them. My hope is that it makes a difference for them and they know they are cared for by someone. I am not going to lie and say every day when I walk out the door and leave my children that I do not feel guilty, because I do. I question if I am doing the right thing as a parent, going to work in a pandemic, putting my children at risk. It is hard, really hard, and it feels like the rest of the world is just making it harder. We need more support from everyone, because when the next wave hits, I am scared that I will not be able to make the sacrifice or commitments needed to continue to do what I love doing. I am scared for my coworkers and their families; I am scared for my clients and what that will mean for them. Where I work it is my second family, I care deeply for my coworkers and my clients, but without more support we will not make it and that thought alone is terrifying.

Rob Stiles – Nexus-Mille Lacs Family Healing HR Manager

I am writing this testimonial from the perspective of an HR professional at a residential treatment facility in hopes of shining a light on the challenges that our front-line staff have faced during the COVID pandemic and shutdown.

As a 24/7 residential facility, social isolating/distancing, and working from home was not an option for our direct care staff. Every day they continued to show up for work and expose themselves to the potential of contracting the virus from another staff, youth, or vendors & visitors that frequent our

facility. Precautions such as masks, hand sanitizer and personal hygiene provided us with some protection. However, the risk was always there, every day. Not only did our staff have to be conscious of their own health to help keep our kids safe, but they had to take on the extra responsibility of becoming teachers or teachers' helpers when our on-site school shut down. While the teachers were able to conduct sessions from home, our staff were called upon to fill in as help desk technicians, teachers' aides, and classroom monitors; answering questions regarding assignments and aiding those who had difficulty with the virtual classroom.

In an industry that is notoriously understaffed to begin with, the challenges that were faced by our staff were only exacerbated by staff and youth that either experienced symptoms or who contracted COVID. Youth that experienced symptoms or contracted the virus needed to be quarantined which required a staff to be always with them. Staff that experienced symptoms or that contracted the virus needed to be quarantined for a length of time, keeping them away from the facility.

Our front-line workers are not any less "hero's" than the front-line workers at any hospital or any other congregate care facility. The services that are provided to the "at risk" youth are a vital part of our societal structure and they deserve to be recognized.