

[SPECIAL EDITION]

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COVID-19 impacting providers across MA

Despite program closures, services still critical for residents throughout state

Like many of her veteran fellow human services leaders, Square One president and CEO Joan Kagan has led agencies and care staffs through recessions, budget cuts, blizzards, gas explosions and even, once, a tornado.

But the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting Massachusetts state of emergency that has shut down thousands of human services day programs statewide, and severely affected hundreds more congregate care programs, is "unprecedented," she said.

"There is no guidebook. We are all making decisions the best we can," said Kagan, whose agency provides early education and care to nearly 1,500 Springfield-area families annually at or near the poverty level. So far, her 170-member staff is intact, and she's working to keep it that way.

"We're worried about losing staff and enrollment. We're worried about our families who are now at home who we know struggle with domestic violence, substance abuse and relapse issues," she said. To help ease the burden, Square One staff are checking in families via phone and web meetings, and hitting the streets to make donations of diapers, wipes, baby formula and food to needy clients at home.

Jim Cassetta, president and CEO of WORK Inc., an agency that provides employment readiness and job skills to people with a disability estimates his Dorchester-based agency lost \$120,000 in its first week of closure. Fifteen

staffers have so far been laid off, and 100 more will be added to the list if state officials are not forthcoming soon with relief.

The agency has also accumulated expenses it never could have predicted — \$45,000 for face masks and the costs of supplying food, supplies and medicine to 560 Boston families of clients now unable to work. Cassetta said: "I'll be 70 in June, and I have never seen anything like this."

Kagan and Cassetta, along with many Providers' Council members interviewed for this article, praised their staff for incredible resiliency, but also emphasized that state support is key to being able to survive and preserve services.

Waiting for state guidance and assurances on program funding has been difficult, leaders said across the board. Congregate care providers got some reassuring news in late March from the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, which said emergency relief of \$95 million dollars will be allocated across many 257 POS services.

For this first wave of stabilization, EOHHS is prioritizing congregate care and community services which, if closed, would result in individuals requiring 24/7 level of care. The amounts will be based on the average of December through February billing plus 10 percent. The additional 10 percent will not come with restrictions, with the expectation it will be used for staffing, supplies or anything related

COVID-19, see page 4



Above: Tayla Nogueira and Jen Perry from PRIDE Inc. prepare to deliver Meals on Wheels to clients. Right: Susan Garant, manager of PRIDE WRX, PRIDE Inc.'s packaging and production company, assembles janitorial supplies at the organization's warehouse in Taunton.



Program closure spurs HOPE

COVID-19 social distancing requirements have ushered in a digital transformation in communication, programming and service delivery among many nonprofits.

The innovations include widespread use of web-based conferencing programs and digital tools to replace face-to-face programming, as well as remote check-ins to replace daily visits.

At House of Possibilities on the campus of Stonehill College in Easton, Executive Director Katie Terino has been making use of Google Classroom to conduct client morning meetings, teach classes and deliver a variety of enrichment. A new Facebook group now connects members with their Stonehill College student "best buddies" who had to abruptly leave campus.

She said her members -- adults and children with developmental disabilities -- are rising to the challenge, and most have adapted to the technology

very quickly.

"Helping our members connect is making them so much healthier and happier. We are seeing technological capabilities we never saw (from them) before. They are completely engaged and using the mute and unmute and other functions," she said.

She has since opened up HOPE's remote services program to other Massachusetts nonprofits and recently held an informational call for more than 70 nonprofit staffers to share how they can follow in HOPE's footsteps.

Terino, a former school technology administrator, is well-prepared to lead in this capacity. She was in the process of making HOPE a paperless, cloud-based organization when social distancing and other COVID-19-related restrictions were implemented in mid-March.

Her advice to others using technology to replace in-person programming

HOPE, see page 4

CARES Act impacts UI claims

late last month, President Donald Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act into law, creating various avenues of relief for individuals and organizations that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One key provision allows nonprofits with 500 or fewer employees to apply for Small Business Administration loans of up to \$10 million to cover costs of payroll, operations and debt service.

The loans will be forgiven - in whole or in part - under certain circumstances, such as whether nonprofits keep employees on the payroll until June 30.

There are also expedited loan programs of up to \$1 million for eligible agencies to use for payroll, including paid leave, as well as health-insurance premiums, facilities costs and debt service.

The law also will reimburse non-CARES, see page 2

About this special edition

This month, we made a decision to abandon our normal, eight-page format for a special edition that focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic. We had the opportunity last month to speak with many of you about your questions, your concerns and your challenges. And in those conversations, all of us at the Council have been inspired by your commitment to the people you serve and your dedication to providing services through challenging times unlike any of us have ever experienced.

Human services providers are truly our other first responders, and the jobs being done by you and your staff are nothing short of heroic. Thank you for your efforts.

Michael Weekes
President & Publisher



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PROVIDERS' NEWS AND NOTES

New CEO to lead Thrive Support & Advocacy

Thrive Support & Advocacy's Board of Directors announced the appointment of Sean M. Rose as chief executive officer. Rose joins Thrive with more than 24 years of experience in the field.

"I am honored to join this remarkable organization that prides itself on going above and beyond for participants and their families," said Rose. He succeeds Michael Rodrigues, who recently departed to helm Council member **New England Village**.



Sean Rose

Welcome to new council member The Gavin Foundation

The Providers' Council would like to extend a warm welcome to its newest member, **The Gavin Foundation**. The Foundation, which joined in March, has been providing comprehensive adult, youth and community substance abuse education, prevention and treatments programs for more than 50 years.

Founded in South Boston, the organization serves over 10,000 clients each year throughout Massachusetts and beyond. More information is available about the organization on its website at www.gavinfoundation.org.

HSPCF distributes Census posters

In an effort to bring Census awareness to hard-to-count communities, the Human Services Providers Charitable Foundation, Inc. mailed more than 2,000 posters to Providers' Council members in March.

The posters – which include six different designs – have the phrase "I will be counted!" and encourage responses to the 2020 Census via website, telephone or U.S. mail.

The posters were done by the Human Services Providers Charitable Foundation, Inc. and the Providers' Council with support from the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Complete Counts Grant Program.

The posters also note that the Census impacts more than \$20 billion in federal dollars for Massachusetts; the number of congresspersons that Massachusetts will have advocating for human services interests; and business' plans to invest in communities, build offices, open stores and bring jobs to areas.

More information about the HSPCF Census efforts are available at the site providers.org/census. HSPCF also plans to mail reminder postcards and hold an online webinar in April for



The Census impacts:

Funding

- More than \$20 billion in federal dollars for Massachusetts, including funding for transportation and programs like Medicaid, Head Start and Section 8 Housing

Representation

- How many congresspersons that Massachusetts will have advocating for human services interests in the U.S. House of Representatives

Growth

- Businesses' plans to invest in communities, build offices, open stores and bring jobs to areas, as they search for strong population centers

For more on how to respond - including in other languages - visit www.2020census.gov/en/ways-to-respond.html

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Charitable Foundation

More info: www.providers.org/census

How to respond:

Online

- Visit www.my2020census.gov to respond online

Phone

- Call 844.330.2020 (English) or 844.468.2020 (Spanish) from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. Eastern Time

Mail

- A paper questionnaire will arrive in the mail

Federal law requires the U.S. Census Bureau to keep individual information confidential

human services organizations to learn more about the Census.

Council members with questions can contact Ravi Simon at 508.598.9686 or ravi@providers.org.

United Arc urges all to Be Counted



Providers' Council member **The United Arc** held its annual Coffee & Conversation event in early March, at which several United Arc consumers shared their stories of being counted to support this year's theme of "Be Counted — Census 2020." Sen. Adam Hinds, pictured above with event moderator United Arc Board Co-Vice President Janice Herlihy, attended, as did Rep. Natalie Blais and aides from Reps. Paul Mark and Susannah Whipps.

CARES: Federal act helps nonprofits

Continued from Page 1

viduals, as well as increased annual limits for charitable corporate giving. Individual giving gets new above-the-line deductions for non-itemizers as well.

Other worker-facing legislation recently passed requires employers with fewer than 500 employees, including nonprofits, to provide employees two weeks of paid sick leave, paid at the employee's regular rate, to quarantine or seek a diagnosis or preventive care for the coronavirus. Employees filing for unemployment may be eligible for up to \$600 in addition to state benefits through Dec. 31.

The federal CARES act also allows relaxed creditworthiness standards for applicants applying for certain economic injury/disaster loans and faster timelines to access \$10,000 within three days for salary and operating expenses.

Other provisions include tax deductions for certain donations from indi-

viduals, as well as increased annual limits for charitable corporate giving. Individual giving gets new above-the-line deductions for non-itemizers as well.

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The federal law also expands the number of workers who can take up to 12 weeks of job-protected leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act for coronavirus-related reasons. The provisions expire at the end of 2020.



PROVIDERS' COUNCIL

Envisioning change • Leading advocacy • Driving progress

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VIEWPOINTS FROM ACROSS THE STATE

Autism needs remain constant

By Lauren C. Solotar and Eileen G. Pollack

Within days of preparing the first draft of this article, our world was upended by COVID-19. Our commentary was meant to mark Autism Awareness Month in April, and we had been preparing to utilize this opportunity to educate the public about the needs, strengths, and challenges in this community, and what people could do to help and support. Then everything changed.

This global pandemic demands our full and complete attention as a society, and it can and will feel like there is little room or energy for other issues.

As we move into and through April, it is not surprising that calls for increased awareness of autism, earlier diagnoses and intensive interventions are all but drowned out by the urgency of the public health crisis we are facing. But those of us whose jobs revolve around providing services to individuals with disabilities fully recognize that the needs of this community are constant, despite the world changing around us.

Just weeks into what will inevitably be a long road, three areas of focus stand out for us as we adapt to this new reality.

First, responding effectively will require nimbleness, creativity and clear-sightedness. Program closures, quarantines and risk of exposure are testing us in a way that most have never experienced. May Institute and organizations across the Commonwealth, the United States and the world are grappling with how to ensure continuity of care in an unsettled world.

At May, we are re-learning what we already know to be true – that it takes a village. Our interdisciplinary COVID-19 Response Team, comprised of 14 staff members from across the organization, are coordinating strategy, meeting daily and communicating continually. Program by program, our clinical and administrative leadership is planning for and responding to the needs of individuals in our care. They are addressing

everything from overarching policies and safety procedures to the smallest details that will keep these children and adults not just safe, but happy and engaged and feeling secure.

Second, we must take the long view. Regardless of how well we respond to this tsunami of COVID-19 infections, experts warn of the likelihood of waves of new cases over the foreseeable future. We must be planning for today and tomorrow. By preparing staff for redeployment to programs with the greatest needs. By transitioning to online training and supervision to ensure staff preparedness. By thinking outside of the box in terms of different approaches to providing important services for people with autism and other special needs, and what those services might look like after weeks and likely months of an isolated society.

Third is prioritization of the needs of our workforce. We are preaching to the choir when we tell the human services sector that our employees are the first line of defense when it comes to the safety and well-being of the individuals in our care. We must advocate more fiercely than ever for the needs of our workforce.

People are anxious, frightened and uncertain of what lies ahead. And yet they are showing up, stepping up and doing a remarkable job providing stability, comfort and compassionate care in essential service programs across the state.

In spite of everything, it's still Autism Awareness Month. And awareness does matter. Perhaps more than ever. Perhaps this crisis will make all of us more aware of and empathetic toward not only the needs of individuals with autism, but of the needs of all of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities and our world.

Lauren C. Solotar is May Institute's President and Chief Executive Officer. Eileen G. Pollack, M.A., is the organization's Senior Vice President, Communications and Public Relations.

ALTR sees major rate increase

By Christopher White

It is amazing how quickly things can change. A couple of weeks ago – when we were still talking about things other than the impacts of COVID-19 – the major buzz in the provider world revolved around the newly released Adult Long Term Residential (ALTR) rates.

While the COVID-19 epidemic has overshadowed much of the good news embedded within these rates, there are some positives to be taken from the new method by which the Executive Office of Health and Human Services is setting rates.

First, let me be frank: These rates are not perfect. In fact, one of our colleagues, with tongue firmly in cheek, noted at the rate hearing on March 13, "These are the best rates we've ever had to complain about." That's a story for a different day, though, as I want to share the good news today.

In many ways these new rates are revolutionary, and they have clear implications for all future Chapter 257 rate reviews. When compared with the manner in which new rates had been established in the past, the methodology used by EOHS for the ALTR rates is significant enough to be considered "revolutionary."

Before these rates, EOHS had set Chapter 257 rates by selecting a year of UFR data to base the new rates on in the current review – and it wouldn't always be the most recently available UFR data either. Additionally, the UFR often contains salary and benefits information that is suppressed and not based on costs in the actual employment market. EOHS would often review inflation and set a cost adjustment factor below the rate of inflation. While providers would advocate for changes at rate hearings – pointing out flaws in the rate development – the final product would rarely change.

But with the current ALTR rates, we've seen positive changes. EOHS agreed to use an objective, market-re-

lative measure – data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics – to benchmark key direct care and clinical positions. They also agreed to use a standardized tax and fringe percentage; brought vehicle-related expenses into reality by using actual lease figures; and made adjustments to occupancy costs that bring rates more in line with provider practices and expenses.

So how did these "revolutionary" changes happen?

We credit the improvement to some very effective advocacy by leaders of the state's human services trade associations and their executives, starting with the Providers' Council's Michael Weekes and then engaging the other three trades – the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers, the Association for Behavioral Healthcare and the Children's League of Massachusetts.

Collectively, they worked with EOHS leadership, focusing on the workforce crisis that has been plaguing the human services sector. Talks continued for nearly a year, with both sides carefully listening to each other. In addition to giving thanks to the four trade executives, EOHS personnel – especially Secretary Marylou Sudders, Assistant Secretary for Administration and Finance Alda Rego and Undersecretary for Human Services Catherine Mick – all deserve our gratitude for getting this over the finish line.

With the new ALTR rates published and more rate hearings expected to take place in the coming months for the beginning of FY '21, we're looking forward to working with our partners in state government to ensure market-based rates for human services programs and fair wages for the dedicated direct care workers, nurses, clinicians and other staff who provide critical services to the consumers in our care.

Christopher T. S. White, Ed. D., is a psychologist and the president & CEO of Road to Responsibility in Marshfield.



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COVID-19: Organizations work to provide services

Continued from Page 1

to extraordinary expenses as a result of the impact of COVID-19. The 10 percent increase will continue from March through June.

EOHHS said it will continue to analyze the needs of the remaining EOHHS 257 POS services once the initial \$95 million is distributed to human services providers. There is a separate, but parallel process occurring for services provided under MassHealth.

In addition, in mid-March EOHHS announced it will be making an "administrative infrastructure payment" and provide an additional reimbursement opportunity for organizations who provide DDS-funded day and employment services and MassHealth day habilitation services to bill for telehealth services. The administrative payment will be available for day providers that continue offering care coordination and telehealth services to members. It will fund 80 percent of the average previous three completed months of billing or spending.

Remote and/or telehealth services will be billed at their normal rate of reimbursement, or a rate of reimbursement as developed by the applicable agency and approved by EOHHS for new remote and telehealth services. At press time, DDS was planning to release rate guidance on the remote/telephonic delivery of day services, including Community Based Day Supports, and Individual and Group Supported Employment.

Some other services under Chapter 257 were still waiting to learn how they would be compensated for services for which they were unable to bill due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Chris Tuttle, president/CEO of Peabody-based Bridgewell, said his agency's day programs have gone remote for now mostly via virtual web-based programming and family check-ins. Of the organization's 10 group homes, some of which house medically fragile residents, staffers in protective gear help organize family "visits" via tablets or though protective

windows.

"It's remarkable how our staff is rising to the situation. We are finding staff being incredibly creative and engaging. They are truly dedicated. It's heartwarming to see how everyone has stepped up in this crisis to make sure the individuals we serve are comforted," said Tuttle.

Tuttle said he is very worried about his fellow day program providers, particularly small ones, who may not be able to reopen many months from now when the health dangers are alleviated.

"If providers must close day programs, they will not come back on-line because the staff will have to move on. When the curve flattens there may be fewer programs available to our populations and that is one of the real tragedies of this pandemic, that we will be moving backwards," he said.

Across the state, some programs have already had to lay off day program staff. Some have been able to re-deploy day staff into in-house residential settings or find them temporary placements with other providers in the sector, thanks to temporarily state relaxed regulations on hiring procedures and background checks.

Top of mind for those managers who have had to issue layoffs or furloughs was preserving health benefits for workers for as long as possible.

At PRIDE Inc., Executive Director Joanne Storrs and a handful of other senior leaders are delivering more than 75 Meals on Wheels on behalf of Bristol Elder Services in Fall River. They perform wellness checks with each daily meal delivery.

But with the Taunton-based fee-for-service day programs vacant for the past two weeks, the consequences have been financially profound, she said.

Thirty-five employees have been laid off, with jobs promised back to them after the crisis has passed. "And I am doing everything possible to keep this business from going bankrupt so there is a business for them to return to," she said.

For now, she is keeping staffers' health care intact. "There is no way I

was going to lay off 35 people and put them on COBRA (insurance) that they can't afford." Other workplace benefits, like dental insurance, had to be cut for now, she said. "I don't know how long we can do it, but it will be as long as we can."

Several leaders worried that sector employees would be lost to a crop of new jobs in retail and delivery from large corporate employers like Amazon and CVS who have been on a COVID-19 hiring spree, advertising entry level positions at \$17 and \$18 per hour.

Out in western Massachusetts, most day staff at Berkshire County Arc are helping to support residential operations, and Communications Director Dave Singer praised the Berkshire County staffers for "incredible commitment to the work," especially in group homes that have a resident in quarantine.

"We are using every connection possible for supplies like gowns, masks, gloves. Staff across western Massachusetts search for supplies daily in stores," he said.

At Malden-based Triangle, Inc., which supports daily activities of employment, the community support model has been drastically altered, said president/CEO Coleman Nee. "Our model is 75% out in the community, and right now we can't even be in our building, and the job sites are being taken away. It's particularly heart-breaking that we can't comfort our clients in person," he said. "Our clinical staff is doing their best to help with the anxiety. They support our folks and families to lessen the stress when they can."

Nee also worried about the economic future for both his staff and clients, who enjoyed a selection of entry-level opportunities during a booming economy that is unlikely to return soon. Triangle has not laid off any of its 200 staffers and is busily trimming expenses to avoid having to do so. "I'll do anything I can think of because when this thing ends, you want to come out with the same team we went in with," Nee said.

HOPe: New innovative model helps connect clients virtually

Continued from Page 1

is to "think out of the box."

She said: "You have to ask yourself how to provide services asynchronously, and how can I retool my content?"

She gave several examples. TED talks can replace in-person speakers. YouTube knife and safety videos will replace in-person cooking workshops. Seated online workouts replace the typical morning exercise sessions. HOPe staffers plan to drop a gardening kit at the home of each member, so the group can embark on a longer-term virtual gardening project, culminating in cooking meals from the produce grown – all supplemented with digital instruction and online sharing.

The biggest challenge, Terino said, is making sure all members (and staff) have access to devices and internet. HOPe needed to loan out only three Chromebooks to members to get all 43 adult day members regularly to their morning meeting.

"To survive, you can't wait for the perfect conditions. You have to move forward for the sake of the organization and be a source of comfort to keep spirits high and anxiety low," she said.

Members' families have so far been supportive and grateful at HOPe's efforts. One parent of an adult member recently wrote to Terino: "I am in my kitchen now listening to (my child) talk to everyone. ... I have tears to see that he is enjoying this, even though he may be quiet."



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