Introduction

The first six months of 2020 were a tumultuous time for SteppingStone and our clients as the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed San Francisco. The virus is not only a profound threat to the health of the frail elders and adults with disabilities that we serve, but it has also upended the manner in which we provide care. This mid-year report provides a review of our activities from January through June 2020 as well as the current status of the agency.

2020 Activities

SteppingStone began 2020 in a strong position, enhancing both the care we provide clients and growing attendance at each of our four adult day health care Centers. Outreach campaigns were underway to reach underserved populations including the LGBTQ community and homeless/recently housed San Franciscans. Within the Centers, all staff positions were filled and activities such as music therapy, Body Dynamics and several group-counseling sessions augmented standard programming. New outreach campaigns, focused on residents of SROs in the Chinatown and Tenderloin neighborhoods, were finalizing materials and targeting specific housing facilities.

As the year began, we were monitoring the corona virus outbreak and understood that it posed a profound risk to the health of frail elders and adults with disabilities. Early in the pandemic we took steps to provide care at the Centers as safely as possible by following CDC guidelines including screening all staff and clients, enhancing cleaning, implementing social
distancing, having participants and staff wash their hands frequently, etc. As the crisis deepened, San Francisco issued a shelter-in-place order that suspended care activities in all four SteppingStone Centers. With Governor Newsom’s order a few days later, all community-based adult service centers in the state were closed.

SteppingStone realized the danger to our clients from both the pandemic and the sudden closing of our Centers. Given this, we were determined to continue to provide uninterrupted care despite the sudden shut down.

The Centers were closed on Friday March 20 and the following Monday, March 23, without missing a single service day, our staff were contacting clients telephonically, providing wellness checks, case management and other support. Staff worked from the health records of each client, as well as their personal knowledge them, to monitor their health conditions and track their status.

By the second week, we had assembled teams of nurses, social workers and other clinicians operating out of each Center calling their clients and providing assistance. These staff are well known to the clients and their families, who welcomed the support. Service calls were provided in the primary language of the participants, of who about half speak a primary language other than English (Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Tagalog, Spanish, Vietnamese, etc.).

We found many of our clients in a state of distress because of the abrupt ending of the program that had provided them daily care for months or years and for most was their principle social activity. They needed additional assistance including specific health information and referrals to other programs. Some situations were urgent, such as needing help to secure medications and food. SteppingStone staff provided support and case management, following up with physicians, pharmacies and other agencies. Beginning almost immediately staff was delivering food, medicines, masks or other essential supplies to meet clients’ urgent needs.

All of this was done because we recognized the need to provide support for our program participants, but there was no model or guidelines for remote care services. Fortunately, SteppingStone’s staff are very experienced and developed methods to provide care for their clients. Given the crisis, staff members were very motivated and saw themselves correctly as essential personnel. They showed up day-after-day to provide support to program participants and keep them well.

There was, however, no way to bill any insurer for these services, as all billing was dependent on providing in-Center care, which was now impossible. As a result, the cost of providing care during the first two months after the Centers closed was covered from SteppingStone’s financial reserves, though we also received emergency grants from several previous funders. The decision to continue to operate using reserves with no guarantee of payment was made by the management of the agency and the board of directors. Cash flow was closely monitored.

After several weeks, the care model that was being used by SteppingStone and other adult day health care programs across the state was officially designated as “Temporary Alternative Services” by the California Department of Aging. New regulations and procedures were developed and are now in place. These regulations allowed Medi-Cal insurers and others to resume paying for these services.

As time passed, we sought to increase services for our clients and added staff to each Center’s team, primarily Activity Directors. This has allowed for increase engagement with clients including providing
written materials such as health information, games, activity lists, etc. that became increasingly valuable as the shelter-in-place order continued. For clients with dementia, who comprise over 40% of all program participants, the closure of the Centers was traumatic and their caregivers needed assistance keeping them engaged. In addition, many of our clients live in very small homes; many live alone, and most do not have internet access so providing other options for activities was essential.

We began “doorstep visits” where staff would go to a client’s home to do a visual wellness check. This was often done in conjunction with deliveries of materials or supplies and would not involve entering the home, but conversing at the entryway. This allows staff to visually appraise clients for possible problems such as weight loss, weakness or confusion.

The daily calls and regular visits are greatly appreciated by our program participants, their caregivers and family during this time of extreme isolation. In addition, the robust care management provides essential support of food and medicines as well as addressing new health issues that arise.

By early May, two months after the Centers were closed by the shelter-in-place orders, remote care teams were fully engaged providing care for their clients. Discussions were underway how to expand services including increasing staffing and using new remote care tools, such as video calls to provide care and services. However, at this point a new challenge emerged that threatened to permanently end community-based adult service programs, including SteppingStone.
State Budget Crisis

On May 14, SteppingStone and other community-based adult service/adult day health care (CBAS/ADHC) agencies were stunned by a proposal from Governor Newsom to revise the state budget in such a way as to end all support for our programs. Driven by a large budget deficit created by the pandemic, the Governor proposed to permanently end all funding for adult day health care programs by July 1, 2020. This halted SteppingStone’s plans and forced senior staff to focus on advocacy efforts to defeat the proposal. This discussion also caused great worry among our clients who feared that they would lose the support they were receiving from the agency and any hope that the Centers would someday reopen.

SteppingStone, as the oldest and largest adult day health care agency in San Francisco, immediately moved forward connecting with our partners and supporters to save the program. The agency has long been a leader on education and advocacy efforts. Currently our Executive Director, Daniel Gallagher, serves on the board of the statewide California Association of Adult Day Services (CAADS) and chairs the San Francisco Coalition of Agencies Serving the Elderly (CASE).

Upon learning of the proposed budget cut, SteppingStone immediately wrote our state representatives (Senator Weiner, Assemblymembers Chiu and Ting) alerting them of the situation and seeking their support. We also alerted all our supporters by email asking them to weigh-in with their elected officials. We participated in the legislature’s deliberations and our Executive Director provided testimony to the Senate Budget Committee.

Working with the statewide California Association of Adult Day Services (CAADS), we coordinated our efforts with other CBAS agencies across California. CAADS hired expert staff to assist them, held briefing webinars every week and created online tools and resources that could be used by organizations across the state.

Throughout this effort, we were in close communication with our San Francisco partners, Self-Help for the Elderly, Bayview Senior Services and L’Chaim of Jewish Family and Children Services. Each group took action on their own including reaching out to elected officials, the media and their own constituents.

The efforts from many groups across the state led to strong opposition to the cuts in the state legislature, which passed its own FY21 budget maintaining support for CBAS/ADHC programs. Finally, on June 22, the Governor and legislature approved a new budget continuing support for our programs. The budget crisis delayed some planned SteppingStone actions for several weeks. It also put the agency on notice that future changes in funding were likely.
Status and Plans for Remainder of 2020

The Centers Without Walls model has now been operating for four months with each Center’s staff providing care for their clients. We are in the process of significantly increasing staffing including all nursing and social worker support staff as well as the physical and occupational therapists. This will include increased doorstep visits and enhanced remote care activities using Zoom or other streaming services for therapeutic and recreational activities. Center teams are now providing well over a dozen distinct services to clients most of whom receive multiple services each day depending on their needs.

Using Zoom and other streaming services presents a series of challenges that we are now addressing. Training staff is a key issue as is maintaining confidentiality for our clients in accordance with HIPAA guidelines. However, the most significant barrier is that most of our clients either have no internet access or have minimal familiarity with online services. Language can be a barrier as well.

We are addressing these issues and moving forward. We have already begun conference calls among clients as a form of social activity so they can remain connected to the friends they made at the Centers. We will be offering exercise classes on Zoom having purchased a HIPAA compliant version of that application. We expect more clinicians will be using this to reach participants in the near future, notably physical therapists. Finally, we are reaching out to partner organizations to develop plans to help our clients get online, something that has long been an issue for low-income seniors in San Francisco.

The need for robust support provided to seniors and adults with disabilities has only increased since the advent of the pandemic. SteppingStone is aware that more people need our services and is planning an outreach campaign to let health care providers and the public know about the services we currently offer. New clients continue to be enrolled in SteppingStone’s program primarily from referrals by social workers for people that need vigorous and comprehensive support to maintain their health.

At the time this report is being written, late-July 2020, SteppingStone operations are stable and growing. As the pandemic continues, the mental and physical health of our clients continues to be stressed and they need highly active support to remain healthy. We would estimate that in any given week, a majority of our clients are stable, but many, perhaps 30% are in need of extra assistance, some urgently. Between 5 and 10 percent have been hospitalized over the last four months, some returning home, but others passing away or entering skilled nursing facilities. Our goal is to reduce these numbers and help our participants maintain their health and continue to live in their homes despite the terrible times we are all currently living through.
Conclusion

The crisis caused by the pandemic is not over and the danger to frail elders and adults with disabilities from the virus and impact of isolation continues. SteppingStone is using all the experience and resources at our disposal, most of all an expert and passionate staff, to provide our clients the care they need to remain healthy, in their homes and with their loved ones.