



SteppingStone Newsletter- Outreach to the Homeless/Recently Housed, Veterans and LGBTQ Community

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In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for access to adult day health care is growing as tens of thousands of frail elders and adults with disabilities are sheltering in their homes. To address this, SteppingStone is increasing outreach efforts and all Centers are enrolling new participants. This newsletter will focus on the agency's outreach efforts toward homeless/recently housed San Franciscans, members of the LGBTQ community, and veterans.



One group of San Franciscans that have been an ongoing priority for the agency is the homeless and recently housed. At our Mission Creek Center, an enhanced care program is provided for these participants and is overseen by Sharon Burchik, LMFT, Behavioral Health Specialist.

"Providing four walls is not enough for the people I am working with. They need ongoing support particularly during COVID," says Sharon. "I find that many of my clients are sleeping more, becoming depressed and atrophying both physically and mentally during this long period of isolation. They need to be engaged."

In response, Burchik organizes weekly activities such as discussion groups conducted by phone and including a women's group and a health Line. Sharon also visits all her clients weekly, often with a "coffee cart" as they live in the Mission Creek housing complex. This provides her an opportunity to make deliveries and evaluate the well-being of participants in person.



In addition to Burchik's program, the Mission Creek Center serves dozens of clients who were formerly homeless and do not live in the Mission Creek housing complex, but elsewhere in the city. In so doing, the agency leans into the expertise of the Center's Program Director, Diana Almanza, who has long experience serving the homeless.

"Perhaps 30% of our current clients were formerly homeless. They need ongoing support to maintain their health, often of a very

fundamental nature, such as getting medicines and making doctor's appointments. We are also seeing a tremendous increase in food insecurity that we are working hard to address.

"The average life span of a homeless person living in San Francisco is 55. I passionately believe that adult day health can change that for many, helping them maintain their health so they become and remain housed." Diana Almanza, Program Director, Mission Creek Center.

COVID-19 has created an unexpected opportunity to reach this population. Because of the pandemic, thousands of formerly homeless residents are now being housed in COVID-19 Alternative Housing by the City of San Francisco. This means they can be more easily informed and connected to services, including adult day health care. Twenty-two percent of those currently living in COVID-19 Alternative Housing are seniors ranging in age from 60 to over 80 years and many others are likely adults with disabilities.

"We do not know how long this temporary housing program will be offered or what will happen to these San Franciscans once the pandemic is brought under control. We do know SteppingStone can deliver care to many in the program and we intend to reach out to them immediately." Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director.

Another outreach program that has increased the number of participants during the pandemic is serving LGBTQ San Franciscans. Based at the Mission Creek Center this program provides enhanced care and outreach to members of the LGBTQ community. It is the first LGBTQ adult day care program in California and only the second in the nation.

The program coordinator is Ian Martinez. "Many of the program's participants did not feel comfortable accessing other care programs, but feel welcome here. The pandemic has made things very difficult for them, particularly the isolation. In response, I organize ongoing activities for the groups so they are connected."



Among these activities are multiple support groups via zoom every week which connect to activity packets created to spark engagement. Program Coordinator Martinez also calls all participants every week and makes doorstep deliveries to them including food and medicines as needed. LGBTQ program participants have had emergencies during the pandemic such as being hospitalized or losing housing that Ian has helped them address along with the larger team at the Mission Creek Center.

"I know this program is helping our participants during this terrible time. Just seeing how they enjoy talking to each other in ZOOM support groups reminds me how important community can be. Now, more than ever, we all need to stay connected."



Among the new members of the LGBTQ program and the recently housed participants at Mission Creek are veterans. This is not surprising as roughly 10% of all SteppingStone clients are veterans. They are participants in all the agency's programs and attend all four of our Centers.

Working with organizations that serve veterans, SteppingStone has maintained an ongoing outreach campaign towards this population. One recent partnership is with Swords to Plowshares, an organization that provides housing, health and wellbeing services, and financial support to veterans.

Executive Director Daniel Gallagher says, "Veterans have served our country throughout its history. We are honored to serve them."

The efforts described above are elements of SteppingStone's continuing determination to make adult day health care available to all San Franciscans in need, especially during this health emergency. We are aware that for many frail elders and adults with disabilities COVID-19 and the related isolation has created an urgent need for support across many communities. We are determined to provide it.

Photos:

(Top) Sharon Burchik, LMFT, Behavioral Health Specialist
(Middle 1) Diana Almanza, Program Director, Mission Creek Center
(Middle 2) Ian Martinez, Coordinator LGBTQ Program
(Bottom) Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director, SteppingStone

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