On Tuesday July 6, after a long fifteen months, all four SteppingStone Centers resumed providing in-Center care for participants. This is a joyous event, as clients end their isolation at home and return to their Centers. After months of telehealth calls, virtual services, and doorstep visits, our staff is thrilled to see their clients again, many of who they have known for years.

Because the pandemic continues, there are strict procedures in places to keep participants safe, including physical distancing, which limits attendance at Centers. In addition, city transportation services for disabled residents is just resuming, meaning that many participants have difficulty attending. As a result, most Centers are able to see only a fraction on their total clients on any given day at this time. Participants who are not attending the Center receive in-home care on other days via telephonic, video or doorstep deliveries. This hybrid model of both in-Center and remote programming will likely continue for the rest of the year.

SteppingStone has increased staffing significantly to accommodate the return of clients to the Centers while still providing remote services. We anticipate hiring even more staff in the coming months to maintain and increase care activities.

All Centers have implemented numerous improvements in their facilities in anticipation of the reopening, so clients are returning to refreshed and, in some cases, remodeled Centers.

A central activity in the early weeks of reopening is evaluating the health of participants and revising their care plans as needed. Clinicians are now able not just to see the clients, but walk with them and administer core tests to evaluate their health. Clients are also able to resume therapies using equipment in the Center under the supervision of staff, particularly Physical Therapists. Returning to the "gym" is one of the most desired activities among participants.

This reopening is a turning point event, which SteppingStone has been working toward for many months. It does not stand alone, but is linked to other key activities notably enhanced care, vaccination efforts and the establishment of hybrid support services. These are discussed below.

I am immensely proud of SteppingStone's staff who have endured the pandemic, maintained exemplary care programs for participants and now reopened their Centers. These accomplishments are the result of their dedication to the people we serve.
SteppingStone Activities in the First Half of 2021

In January of this year, the COVID pandemic was surging across the nation and new infections were occurring at rate ten times that of a few months earlier. Vaccines were not yet widely available and SteppingStone's clients had been isolating in their homes for months, in many cases with deteriorating physical and mental health.

As the largest provider of adult day health care in San Francisco SteppingStone serves hundreds of frail elders and adults with disability. 95% of program participants are elders with an average age of 75. All are disabled and many have some form of dementia, depression or other mental health conditions. Many live alone in small residences, so being confined to their homes for months poses a real danger to their health on top of the risk from the COVID virus itself. Most speak a primary language other than English and most did not have online access. They needed help to navigate the extreme circumstances that the COVID pandemic and the citywide shutdown had created.

The COVID surge in the winter of 2021 heightened our participants need for support and raised their level of anxiety. Racist attacks on minority elders in San Francisco and elsewhere made the situation dire. These issues impacted our staff as well as they pushed to deliver services and keep our clients healthy. Everyone was aware that we were providing absolutely essential support to very vulnerable people in the midst of a great crisis.

In time, as vaccines became available, the rate of COVID infections dropped dramatically and it became clear clients would soon be able to return to in-Center activities. SteppingStone's activities over the last six months therefore expanded to encompass not just enhanced care, but also efforts to help clients get vaccinated and return to in-Center care. These three elements of SteppingStone core activities over the last six months are reviewed below.

Providing Enhanced Care

By January of this year, SteppingStone staff had been delivering care remotely to clients for many months and augmented these efforts with enhanced care activities. Daily wellness calls are still central to the process, but were now supplemented by a plethora of materials, doorstep visits and virtual communication. For example, one Center’s Physical Therapist created instructions for using Therabands at home complete with drawings. These were translated to multiple languages and provided to all Centers. At another Center, the Activity Coordinator created culturally attuned recreational materials every week. (Games and other recreation materials are very helpful for people with dementia or anyone suffering from loneliness.)

Every Center developed its own newsletter to keep participants connected to their friends and included photos, artwork and updates. Small contests were held and reported in the Center newsletter. These were central to maintaining a sense of community within each Center’s clients.

Food insecurity has been a major issue throughout the pandemic and SteppingStone created a home delivery system to address it. Nearly all clients now receive weekly deliveries of food, adaptive equipment, or other essential supplies such as masks, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, etc. SteppingStone purchases food from the San Francisco Food Bank and supplies from other vendors, creating individualized packets and delivers them to clients.

Because of the need for clients to maintain their physical strength, our clinicians found ways to get training and instruction to them in their homes. These included extensive use of doorstep visits, which are multi-purpose activities that include deliveries and in-person evaluations by clinicians (i.e.-nurses, physical therapists and occupational therapists).
Helping Participants Get Vaccinated

Once vaccinations became available in early 2021, getting clients vaccinated became an urgent priority. However, all clients were isolated, most were not tech savvy enough to make online appointments and many were not well informed about the vaccination process. Because our staff knows their clients well, they were able to provide essential information and reassurance about the benefits of vaccination and do so in each client's primary language.

Once participants agreed to be vaccinated, SteppingStone staff was able to assist them in scheduling appointments and mitigating barriers, such as transportation and necessary assistance. We are immensely pleased that as of June over 95% over our program participants have been fully vaccinated.

Reopening Centers and Launch of Hybrid services

Clients began returning to their respective Centers on July 6 under new state guidelines. Daily attendance is restricted to comply with physical distancing requirements as well as difficulty in transportation for many participants. Because of this, most Centers are operating at around one quarter capacity for in-Center care.

The return to in-Center care is vital for two reasons: It allows clinicians to personally examine participants and provides clients with an opportunity to socialize in person. SteppingStone staff is now completing revaluations of all clients’ health status and modifying their care plans as needed. The therapy teams are once again providing hands-on care and instruction including the use of each Center’s gym.
Because the participants will only be receiving one or two of their days of care at the Center, they will continue to receive remote services. The phone calls, food deliveries, online classes, and doorstep evaluations will all continue.

Implementing these dual systems of care requires increasing staffing and detailed management of each participant’s health records. This is done through close staff coordination including daily huddles at each Center and joint evaluations by each Center’s multidisciplinary team of clinicians.

We expect attendance will grow at each Center over time, but this remains unknown given the uncertainty of the pandemic. What is certain is that the hundreds of frail elders and adults with disabilities, who SteppingStone will need support to maintain their health and remain in their homes. Using whatever means available to us, SteppingStone will continue to provide it.