For the hundreds of frail elders and adults with disabilities SteppingStone serves, 2021 began in very bad place. The COVID pandemic was surging to its highest level in San Francisco and California had extended the stay-at-home order indefinitely. Health care systems were disrupted, support services and social activities were greatly diminished. Our participants were sheltering in their homes, which were often small one-room units (SRos) and unsure what to do as the pandemic worsened. The vaccine had become available in late December, but it was difficult to access for most clients.

Since the shutdown began ten months earlier, SteppingStone’s team members had been making daily wellness calls to participants and providing information for care at home. “Doorstep visits”, mailings, and deliveries of food and other essential items complimented the daily phone calls. SteppingStone social workers helped clients address other challenges such as housing and connected them to services and supports from other providers.

A key priority in the first months of 2021 was to educate participants about vaccination. SteppingStone’s nurses, who are well known and trusted by their clients as they have been caring for them for months or years, led this effort. In the course of daily wellness calls, nurses educated participants about COVID issues including vaccination, speaking to them in their preferred language. If so desired, they would coordinate scheduling the vaccination itself. By late spring, 95% of program participants had been vaccinated.

By mid-March, new infections in San Francisco had diminished and SteppingStone began to prepare to resume in-Center Care activities, closely monitoring the public health guideline to do so. We hired the additional staff needed to have clients in Centers and purchased substantial amounts of personal protective equipment for staff and clients. Each Center reconfigured its layout to be able to provide socially distanced care. All Centers purchased some new equipment, most repainted and one, Mabini Center, was able to replace its kitchen with the support of two anonymous donors and a grant from the Bothin Foundation.

On July 6, SteppingStone’s four care Centers reopened to participants. However, to meet social distancing requirements, attendance was limited to less than half of normal operation. This means that on any given day, 60% or more of all participants are receiving care remotely, while the others are attending their Center.

Dan Gallagher

SteppingStone in 2021 - Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director
This "hybrid model" provides greatly improved care to participants who can now be examined and get therapy in person multiple days each week. But it also means that SteppingStone is operating two complex methods of care simultaneously, requiring high levels of coordination among staff. These care models vary among Centers as each team strives to provide the best care to their particular group of clients.

There has been agency wide changes this year, including a new contract with the San Francisco Department of Disability and Aging Services to operate an Alzheimer’s Day Care Resource Center at our Mission Creek Day Health Center. We hired for the open Director of Services and Outreach position, promoting Diana Almanza, who has been the Program Director at our Mission Creek Center. We are in the process of hiring an Outreach Coordinator to expand our effort to engage and connect with San Francisco's most marginalized populations.

The agency’s long history of advocacy on behalf of our clients continues. I have been involved in many discussions with local and state officials how to best reopen congregate services safely and otherwise improve care for the populations we support. I continue to serve on the board of the California Association for Adult Day Services (CAADS), becoming President of the board in January 2022, and as Co-Chair of the San Francisco Coalition of Agencies Serving the Elderly (CASE).

Our frontline staff at our four Centers have persevered throughout the many stages of the pandemic, the delta surge, the endlessly changing health guidance, and the urgent needs of the hundreds of people they serve. I am proud to tell you that over 90% of SteppingStone's program participants have been able to maintain their health and remain in their homes over the course of this year. Nearly all are vaccinated and some are receiving booster shots to keep themselves safe. These are remarkable achievements.

Someday this pandemic will end and the horrors and heroics of this time will be history. In this report, you will see photos of SteppingStone staff who are part of the worldwide response of health care professionals remaining resolute in the face of this terrible pandemic. You will see them at their best, caring for their clients, doing their job day after day, and helping participants get through this extraordinary health emergency. I am beyond proud of them and the work they do caring for the most vulnerable residents of San Francisco.

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Enhancing Care for Program Participants During a Changing Pandemic

Mabini Center nurse Wendy Zhou talking with participant. Continuous health monitoring by nurses is essential to help clients maintain their health.

Mission Creek Center Occupational Therapist Melissa Nazzal with participant. Occupational Therapists help clients develop and retain skills needed for daily living.

Sometimes we dance. Maria Martinez, Mission Creek Center Activity Coordinator, dancing with participants. Dancing is a favorite recreational activity.

Jamie Lew, Occupation Therapist at Mabini Center, leading a ZOOM therapy class. All Centers offer online therapy for participants that cannot come into their Center.

Presentation Center Asst. Social Worker Janice Lau training participant on his new GrandPad. We provided dozens of GrandPads, tablets and notebooks to clients so they can access online activities. (Photo-Karen Ande)
Food insecurity has been a major problem for many clients during the pandemic and remains difficult for some. Here a Golden Gate Center Program Aide is making a food delivery.

Mission Creek Center Program Director Diana Almanza and Program Aide Mersy with client exercising in the Center’s gym. It is not unusual for multiple staff to be assisting a client at the same time.

Deirdre O’Bryan, Physical Therapist, leading a TheraBand class at Mission Creek Center. Exercise classes are very popular at all Centers.

Golden Gate Center Physical Therapist Elaine Dong and Program Aide Mandy meeting with a participant. All day, every day, staff members monitor participants’ health.

Naomi Childs, Mission Creek Center Social Worker, checking a client’s temperature at the Center’s entrance. Everyone is screened before they enter a Center.

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