



Providing Care During the Omicron Surge



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As this newsletter is being written, the Omicron variant of the COVID virus is surging throughout San Francisco and around the world with the highest level of new infections since the pandemic began. Frontline health service organizations such as SteppingStone are again being challenged to provide care for the people we serve and help them stay safe. This report lays out how this is being done right now, in mid-January 2022, and provides context for our approach.

The Needs of SteppingStone Program

Participants

Everyone SteppingStone serves is disabled and living with serious health conditions that threatens their ability to living independently. These include both physical and cognitive disabilities such as result from injuries, strokes, dementia, addiction and depression. 95% of participants are frail elders with an average age of over 75.

Most clients live in very small residences and many live alone. They need continuing care, including social engagement, to maintain their health. Isolation and loneliness are profound health risks for elders that can lead to a spiral of inactivity and depression. Not only is it essential that care not be interrupted, but that in-person care and engagement continue.

"An important takeaway I have from literature on COVID is that individuals who had a diagnosis of depression, anxiety, isolation were at greater risk of severe illness and death. My observations at Mission Creek Center is that this is correct and that the pandemic shelter-in-place orders exacerbated these conditions."
Diana Almanza, Director of Services and Outreach.



Staff Experience with COVID

SteppingStone's staff has deep experience caring for their clients, including the last two years when the COVID pandemic has been underway. From March 2020 through June 2021, all support was provided remotely using telephone, virtual or socially distanced methods. In July 2021, our Centers reopened on a limited basis and we are now operating both remote and in-Center care activities. Our goal is to provide the most robust care possible, while still keeping participants safe. Because client-centered care is fundamental at SteppingStone, the final decisions on how to receive care is made by the clients themselves and their caregivers.

Challenges during Omicron Surge: New Guidelines, Testing, Boosters and More

As the Omicron variant surge impacted San Francisco, SteppingStone staff prepared to make adjustments in care based on the new health guidelines. As a health care provider licensed by the State of California, we receive ongoing

guidance on how to respond to COVID and regularly participate in webinars from the Department on Aging. These cover a wide range of issues including testing of staff, set up of facilities, safe provision of care, addressing potential exposures and many more. In this way staff is able to both quickly implement best practice in providing adult day care, but also stay current on the latest information.

All SteppingStone staff are fully vaccinated and virtually all have received booster shots, the exceptions being those who are not yet eligible. Nearly all SteppingStone participants are fully vaccinated and most have gotten, or will soon get, booster shots. Helping clients understand COVID vaccination and scheduling appointments to get the shots has been a priority for our nurses for over a year.

Staff across all centers are tested twice weekly with an antigen test. Mabini Center is using the Binax Now antigen tests as part of the California Testing Taskforce, which involves reporting test results to help the state monitor the pandemic. Golden Gate, Mission Creek and Presentation Center staff are using the iHealth antigen test kits as they wait to get on-boarded with the California Testing Taskforce. SteppingStone has also received a very limited number of iHealth antigen home test kits that are being made available to participants as is possible.

"Like the rest of the nation, SteppingStone has been affected by shortages of and delays in getting the test kits. Ideally, all four centers would already be part of the California Testing Taskforce and we all would have more iHealth tests on hand to get out to the community. We are doing the best we can with the limited resources and hope to get more soon." Melissa MacDonald, Program Director, Mabini Center.



Care provided in each Center is tightly controlled to keep clients safe. Not only is the number of participants attending greatly limited, but physical distancing is closely monitored. N95 masks, or double surgical masks, are worn by all staff and masks are provided to clients. Some activities can no longer be offered and the number of hours participants can attend have been reduced, all in an effort to keep clients safe. However, they can still attend, see their clinicians, be examined in person and given

personal instruction on various therapies. They can also do the most popular in-Center activities: see their friends and use the gym equipment.

Whether or not a client attends in-Center activities is entirely the decision of each participant and their care providers. Some clients have chosen to receive services only remotely, others occasionally attend their Center and others come as often as they can. Clients have different needs and staff guides them as best they can, but ultimately care is client-centered at SteppingStone with each Center striving to provide the support each participant wants.

"A participant disclosed having symptoms that raised some concern among staff. Despite assurances from the participant that he would contact his principle care provider himself, the center did so on his behalf, resulting in an immediate appointment.

"I saw the participant the day after his appointment and he made it a point to relate that while he was initially upset we had called his provider, he reflected on it and was very appreciative of the level of concern the staff showed for his well-being in doing so. It is moments like that that firm my resolve to do what I can to keep these services available for our participants." Jimmy Goh, Program Director, Mission Creek Center.

Providing health care and support during the pandemic is very stressful for SteppingStone staff as it is for all health care provider across globe. Mindful of this, the agency is doing everything it can to support them as a group and individually. Because they function as Center-based teams, they of course provide invaluable

support to each other.

Finally, SteppingStone continues to expand services during this difficult time. The new Alzheimer's Day Care Resource Center is underway with plans being finalized and staff hired. The long delayed Outreach Program is expected to start shortly with the hiring of the Project Coordinator. Both of these will be reported on in future issues of this newsletter.



"Our eyes are on the future as we expect this virus surge to pass and more normal operations will resume. We are admitting new clients at all Centers and making plans for future growth. We are well aware that whatever happens next with the pandemic there will be a growing number of frail elders and adults with disabilities in San Francisco that will need adult day health care. We are taking steps to meet that need." Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director.

Photos: *(Top)* Diana Almanza, Director of Services and Outreach
(Middle 1) Melissa MacDonald, Program Director, Mabini Center
(Middle 2) Jimmy Goh, Program Director, Mission Creek Center
(Middle 3) Daniel Gallagher, Executive Director

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