VERMONT
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

VERMONT CARE PARTNERS

Inspiring Connection

How Vermont is reshaping mental health care during the Covid-19 emergency

Overview

In the midst of a public health emergency, Vermont's Designated and Specialized Service Agencies (DA/SSAs) inspire us now more than ever. While navigating new state and federal policies, providers are still offering resources to local communities, providing treatment with clients using new technologies, collaborating with partners, and going above and beyond every day to get Vermonters the supports they need to stay well during the Covid-19 emergency. Join us in recognizing our valuable Vermont health care providers and how they are reshaping the ways Vermonters stay well.

Designated and Specialized Service Agencies

- Champlain Community Services
- Clara Martin Center
- Counseling Service of Addison County
- Families First in Southern Vermont
- Green Mountain Support Services
- Health Care and Rehabilitation Services
- Howard Center
- Lamoille County Mental Health Services
- Lincoln Street, Inc.
- NFI Vermont, Inc.
- Northeast Kingdom Human Services
- Northwestern Counseling & Support Services
- Pathways for Housing
- Rutland Mental Health Services
- Specialized Community Care
- United Counseling Service of Bennington County
- Upper Valley Services
- Washington County Mental Health Services

One Agency

1,100 telehealth meetings

4,500 Zoom Sessions with people in need

149,800 Telehealth Minutes

March 15 to April 15

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Embracing Technology

Because face-to-face contact in the community is currently limited, agency staff are striving to support their clients in new and innovative ways, with special thanks to telehealth (using virtual technology to connect).

- A majority of clinical and case management services are now provided via phone and telehealth.
- Mental health screeners are conducting confidential assessments via telehealth for Vermonters in crisis who are at their homes or in Emergency Departments.
- Agencies are providing tablet computers to clients so they can access telehealth services, and also setting up space and equipment in agency buildings so that clients who want access to telehealth can reach their team.
- Services provided by telehealth include time-intensive services that meet for several hours per week, such as intensive outpatient substance use disorder and sex offender treatment.
- Zoom, Skype, and other technologies are also being used to reach Vermont's youngest clients, including Head Start families, Parent-Child Center families, and those young children with Autism who are accessing Applied Behavioral Analysis [ABA] supports.

Reaching Vermont's Most Vulnerable Students

During extended remote learning related to COVID-19, DA school-based mental health services continue to support students, families, schools, and communities through a variety of collaborative and creative strategies. Families need supports to manage stress and to support their child(ren)'s anxiety or other emotional and behavioral challenges. These services support children/youth being available for learning. The pivot to remote learning has put even more stress and strain on vulnerable children/youth, making these social, emotional, and behavioral supports more important than ever.

"I actually miss school." *-A student at a local Designated Agency therapeutic school*

To facilitate emotional regulation through body-based and mindfulness activities, one agency created a shared activity calendar for all the children and youth they are supporting. With behavioral interventionists hosting a variety of scheduled group activities over Zoom, including music hour, art classes, story hours, lego time, exploring nature, students have continued social emotional leaning through social emotional learning games, social stories, and conversation. The virtual meet-ups not only give the youth and children time to engage with each other around shared interests, but often are providing their parents with a moment to catch their breath while their child is visiting and learning with providers.

One clinician is keeping teens engaged using the role-playing game Dungeon and Dragons in a virtual group where client participants can explore the advantages and disadvantages of expressing big emotions and "raging" using a powerful character. Others are getting away from the screen and setting up a real-life scavenger hunt with items staff know families have in their homes. They are also focusing on mindfulness practice with teens – checking in about their stress and needs and having some calm moments to just be together, even from a physical distance.

Many teams have coordinated with community partners to get delivery of free school meals, along with school supplies and other tools, while also providing support to guardians, including safety planning, de-escalation techniques and consultation. Behavioral interventionists are doing Zoom consultation with classroom teachers to maximize student engagement in distance learning, identifying relevant behavioral accommodations, and ensure supports are efficient and not overwhelming. Therapeutic schools are coordinating with sending schools to track who is reaching out to students, how often, and whether they successfully making contact.

Workforce Flexibility

92%

A school-based program in one of the regions of the state with this least connectivity reports that they have been able to reach 92% of the families they provide support to.

Care providers have had to respond with agility to the new rules about physical distancing and essential care. Because Covid-19 doesn't discriminate, leaders have chosen to make modification in sick, vacation and combined time-off, so that staff can be assured they can afford to take care of themselves or a family member.

Agencies are cross training staff who can then fill vacancies that arise due to lack of childcare, illness or family needs and stay employed. With limits in school-based programs during the closure, some of those school-based staff have been redeployed to residential programs. Similarly, they have developed and trained developmental services staff for potential redeployment to residential programs.

Throughout all of this, agency leadership wants to make sure staff feel connected. One agency is hosting a virtual coffee hour for their direct service staff; another has a wellness Facebook page for employees to connect with each other.

There has been an incredible increase in opportunities to provide emotional support to parents. Many parents are more engaged and willing to talk via phone or Zoom. As one SBC said, "We are relational opportunists" and it's working.

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Compassion in the Community

In uncertain times, the commitment of our care providers reminds us of the depth of compassion that exists in the world. They are being creative and continuing to support those they serve in innovative ways.

- Case managers serving people who are struggling with serious mental illness are grocery shopping, dropping and doing medication off for clients, and transporting clients to the agency for injections and curbside delivery of medications.

- One agency is partnering with a local college to provide meals to residents of group homes. Another agency has created and delivered over 200 care packages for clients, including art supplies, coloring and drawing supplies, and jigsaw puzzles, and medical supplies.

- Children, Youth and Family Services staff are creating "sunshine" care boxes for families, with food and household supplies. One chef from a school-based program is baking bread to be distributed to staff and families.

- Agencies are partnering with the local National Guard to be onsite during meal delivery days, providing outreach about mental health needs and supports in accessing basic needs.

- For some clients without access to remote services, agency staff are providing face-to face care including mental health crisis assessments, emergency examinations, and mental health warrants for people who are in need of inpatient care. ABA supports are offered to children with Autism, using health and safety precautions, at the client's home and at the agency. At one agency, these services are being provided at a public dance studio that belongs to a staff member's mother.

Impactful Interventions

Creative Supports.

One elementary school child was struggling with his math schoolwork and also with behavioral outbursts. His school-based clinician came up with an individualized, client-centered solution: she mailed him a pedometer so he could work on math (counting) and self-regulation (walking).

All adult residential programs have been able to implement practices so that there have been **no reported COVID positive cases in any of these programs** statewide thus far.

Many agencies are seeing **more engagement** from clients who previously struggled to attend in-person or community-based appointments.

1 **IMPLEMENTING POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR PHYSICAL DISTANCING**

staggering meal times and laundry times. outside campfires for residents to sit together "socially," sharing meals with other supports via Zoom

2 **LIMITING EXPOSURE**

staying home, limiting or restricting visitors, changing clothing when arriving/leaving work

3 **FOLLOWING GUIDANCE**

supplying scrubs for staff, PPE to staff and residents whenever possible. regular screening for symptoms, 14-day quarantine for new admissions