

Push From Virus Spurs Telehealth Remedy at Astor Services

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CATHOLIC **NEW YORK**

By JOHN WOODS



After reporting in the last issue about how archdiocesan Catholic Charities was initiating steps to meet the needs of the wide swath of New Yorkers it assists, particularly in the changed society all around us, it seemed like a follow-up was in order.

Our lives, especially here in New York, have been turned upside down by the coronavirus, with the likelihood of more of the same to come.

We work differently, we socialize differently, we shop differently, we attend Mass differently. Many of us are sick, or know people who are; many other people have died. It is an unsettling time, to put it mildly.

A couple weeks ago, Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, executive director of archdiocesan Catholic Charities, spoke to me about how Charities was adapting its programs and services to meet the needs of the people it serves. Last week, I had a chance to talk with Yvette Bairan and Dr. Todd Karlin, who both hold top positions with Astor Services for Children and Families, which offers a broad array of mental health, behavioral health and educational services for children and families in the Bronx and the Hudson Valley.

They shared a pretty remarkable story of how Astor Services almost overnight was able to roll out dramatically new ways of reaching its clients literally without skipping a beat.

Naturally, in these times, the emergence of the coronavirus played a significant role in the changes. As the virus was forcing the closure of many businesses last month, Astor Services was able to quickly pivot from mental health clinical services done on a face-to-face basis to telehealth services now provided primarily through Zoom conferences, FaceTime and phone. The change kept clients and staff, working remotely, safe and secure while needed services were uninterrupted.

The transitions for the various programs were accomplished within a matter of days, and the real proof came in the numbers, which showed that the amount of counseling sessions was “better than normal,” according to Ms. Bairan, who is the chief executive officer of Astor Services.

“Our productivity is over 100 percent of what we would normally be,” she told me in an interview last Friday.

Ms. Bairan said another telling indicator was that 85 percent of clients in a recent week had already scheduled another session.

When asked if she was surprised at the smoothness of organization’s transition to telehealth, Ms. Bairan replied that she was confident that her staff would handle the change better than other organizations that didn’t have Astor Service’s experience with the format. “I expected us to rise to the occasion—how we did, how well we’ve been doing—I did not expect it,” Ms. Bairan said.

It takes a great team to deliver results like that, and she said the dedicated staff and leadership are hitting the high professional notes while they are dealing with the needs of their own children and families while working remotely from home. Operations staff members that put the technology in place and keep it running well also perform a vital function.

A key to the successful transition was Astor Services’ movement into telepsychiatry over the past year or two, Ms. Bairan said.

Dr. Karlin, the assistant executive director of clinical services at Astor Services, said the conditions presented by the coronavirus quickened a transition to telehealth counseling by licensed professionals that was already well under way. Astor Services was working on a plan with the state Office of Mental Health, with a pilot program ready to launch. “When this happened it opened the floodgates,” Dr. Karlin said.

The state and federal governments both moved quickly in providing allowances to make sure mental health services continued for kids, he said.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Karlin said, concerns about anxiety and depression are on the rise. “We’re in the middle of a traumatic event,” he said.

Kids with a history of behavior problems who are not able to go out and socialize with friends because of the coronavirus can find those problems exacerbated, Dr. Karlin said.

One of the things he stresses, especially at this time, is to develop and promote expectations “around routine and normalcy,” including a schedule for learning and other work as well as time for breaks for exercise and fun activities.

“We talk about making sure that, even though it might be comfortable for kids to spend the day in pajamas, to make sure that they’re getting dressed.”

Ms. Bairan and Dr. Karlin said an effective way Astor Services has been able to provide fast and reliable information to clients and the larger community is through a newly created hotline at 1-866-ASTOR01.