

Suite Talk: Yvette Bairan, CEO of Astor Services for Children & Families

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The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been extraordinarily difficult for families with young children. For families with youngsters dealing with mental health challenges, this period has been even more difficult.

In this week's edition of Suite Talk, Business Journal Senior Enterprise Editor Phil Hall speak with Yvette Bairan, CEO of Astor Services for Children & Families, about her organization's work during this unprecedented time. Bairan became CEO of the Rhinebeck-based nonprofit in January after serving as interim CEO since July 2019.

For the benefit of those unfamiliar with Astor Services for Children & Families, what is the organization's mission and history? And what is your history with this organization?

"The organization has been around for over 65 years and the focus is to provide children's mental health and welfare services and early childhood development services to both children and families in the Hudson Valley area and in the Bronx. We started in New York City and established a residential treatment facility in Rhinebeck. And from there, we've expanded over the years to provide more community-related services.



“I’ve been at Astor for about 13 years and the reason why I came is because I really loved the mission of Astor. I’ve always been very interested in doing community-based services, and I was always interested in mental health. The organization had such an amazing reputation in the Hudson Valley and in the Bronx that if you speak to anyone about Astor, they consider Astor to be the experts when it comes to children’s mental health services.”

Who are the children you work with at Astor and what are you doing to help them achieve their fullest?

“The children that we work with at Astor have many different types of challenges; some have severe emotional disturbances, many of them have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, some of them come to us with post-traumatic stress disorder from having instances of abuse. You know, we have children who come to us with suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and many difficult issues that they confront for a variety of reasons. A lot of times, that translates to having challenges in the school setting and their homes — and socializing with other children can also have great impact on them.

“Our goal is to make sure that they reach their fullest potential by providing them with as many services as they need and also by making sure that their families are engaged in services that they may need, as well. Oftentimes, we find that it’s not just the child who needs services, but it’s the whole family because there may be issues of substance abuse in the family or there may be issues of where the child is actually in the foster care placement.

“We’re dealing with a lot of trauma that is really heartbreaking. We have kids who have gone through a lifetime of trauma by the age of 10 and they have experienced things that many of us as adults have never experienced in our lives. Our goal is just to make sure that they live as much of a healthy and productive life where they can see themselves happy with the future.”

Has Astor been offering residential services during the pandemic?

“We still do residential services on our Rhinebeck campus — we have about 40 children in residential services. The majority of our children that we serve receive outpatient mental health services. They go to our clinics or they may receive telehealth mental services now because of Covid.”

How has the pandemic impacted both the Astor organization and the children that it serves?

“There has definitely been a lot of challenges. When you run a 24-hour facility like our residential program, there isn’t the ability to work from home. There was one weekend where we ended up having 14 employees call out because they were either ill or because they were exposed to someone who had Covid.

“From the client perspective, one of the biggest challenges has been an increase in mental health needs — we might have a child come to us with maybe one diagnosis of mental health where it might have been that they had depression. Now, because of Covid, we’re seeing that not only do they have depression, but they have anxiety and trauma, as well.”

How has Astor’s financial needs been impacted during the pandemic?

“Astor receives funding from the state government and local government, through grants and some private foundation funding. We do a lot of managed care billing, too.

“No one is doing any kind of real fundraising because you’re not able to hold any events. We used to have a whole set of events that we would be able to have in a year, whether that was a golf event or a gala. All those things are now virtual. But even doing the virtual events has really been challenging because you’re not getting the same audience or the same resources and funding that you would get from the events that we used to do before. So, that has really hurt us quite a bit.

“And we have so many additional expenses associated with either premium pay — because we’ve had to pay staff additional money just to come to work because they’re afraid — and that wasn’t money that was budgeted. We’ve had to purchase thousands of PPP masks, shields, gowns and sanitizers in order to mitigate exposure. The CARES Act has helped with some of that, but it hasn’t been enough to take care of all the expenses that have come as a result of Covid.”

What is on your agenda for 2021?

“Vaccinations. One of our primary goals is just to encourage as many of our employees and the clients and families we serve to get vaccinated. We want to make sure that we have a workforce that is safe. And we want to start to make sure that we’re addressing the trauma that Covid has caused on our clients and the families.”

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