

Social Workers: Sometimes Unseen, Always Essential

by Benni Versaci, LCSW



For many, we are unseen essential workers, despite the importance of the services we provide.

When people think of essential workers at this time, doctors and nurses come to mind immediately, of course. Think a little more and grocery and retail store clerks are now right up there on the list. Maybe teachers are, too. But social workers? I suspect if you took a poll of the general public, social workers would not be given much thought. If you asked those same people directly if they thought social workers were essential, you might get an "umm..yeah...sure," unless you are speaking to a person who needs a service like care management. Otherwise, I think for many, we are the "unseen essential workers." Still, I have heard "you are my guardian angel" or "I don't know what I would have done without you" numerous times from clients and family members throughout my career. That sounds pretty essential to me.

As a moderate-sized social service agency owner, I always think about my clients and their needs. Providing care management means we are continually exploring resources and implementing new services to enhance lives. We serve vulnerable people, particularly adults with special needs, such as Autism, Downs Syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy. In the early weeks of the pandemic, once everything shut down, we struggled with how we were going to help our clients. Lots of phone calls and virtual

meetings were a start. We made check-in phone calls, had birthday drive-bys, and even sent care packages of masks and hand sanitizer to our clients. The business of helping people, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continued, was crucial.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that all accredited social work programs teach critical thinking skills that allow the social worker to "utilize creativity while navigating race and ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation." This skill set has allowed our organization to think outside of the box to obtain services for our clients. Thinking outside the box in person-centered planning means getting to know what is essential to each person, understanding their vision for their life, and developing an action plan to make that happen. For one client with Cerebral Palsy, the illness has affected her ability to move and maintain balance and posture. Therapeutic horseback riding turned out to be the solution. This service has significantly changed her life. She was able to get out of her house to interact with others and make invaluable connections with her horse and the instructors. She says this experience has given her confidence, and she is feeling physically stronger with improved balance.

A large number of our clients attend day habilitation programs. These programs provide education and training to acquire the skills and experience needed to participate in the community, including activities to support participants with building problem-solving skills, self-help, social skills, adaptive skills, daily living skills, and leisure skills. Day program activities and environments foster these abilities, creating positive social behavior and interpersonal competence, greater independence, and personal choice.

When congregate programs closed due to COVID-19, it was difficult for many to access virtual services; and even when they could, keeping focus for extended periods was challenging. Additionally, many parents have to work, so staying at home and guiding one's child through a virtual program is not an option. The situation again required the use of creative problem-solving and outside of the box thinking.

At Spectrum Care Management and Counseling, our social workers have set parents up as paid caregivers through New Jersey's Medicaid Waiver programs and other Medicaid funded programs. This is no small task. Despite the bureaucratic red tape the social worker has to go through, this has been a lifeline for the families we serve. In many cases, the pandemic has caused parents to be furloughed, or some have lost their jobs. Now they can stay home, manage each family member's needs, and still pay their bills. For those families who have lost loved ones to this pandemic, we have found immediate shelter, we have found caregivers to come into the home and help, and we have been their support—often unseen, always essential.



About the Author:

Benni Versaci, LCSW is the founder and President of Spectrum Care Management and Counseling, LLC. She has been providing care management services since 1999; clinical counseling since 2007; and support coordination since the program inception in July 2013. Learn more at www.spectrumcmc.com