

Alternatives, Inc provides 24 hour support to those with intellectual disabilities during COVID-Ep15

\*\*\* Recorded on December 10, 2020. \*\*\* [Listen to it here.](#)

JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:04 [music] This is Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. In May of 2020, Kessler Foundation awarded nearly one million dollars in COVID-19 emergency grant funding for nonprofits faced with the challenges of serving people with disabilities in New Jersey. The recipient organizations were current or former grantees of Kessler Foundation's Employment Grant program. Kessler Foundation provided 37 grants of 10,000 to 40,000 dollars to help with unanticipated needs and expenses. In this miniseries, we talked with grantees past and present who received emergency funding to help offset the cost of both technology and personal protective equipment. The various organizations had to adopt alternative ways of connecting people with one another and keeping staff and clients safe. Today, I'm speaking remotely with Carolyn Suero, vice president of Emissions and Development at Alternatives, Inc., which is located in Raritan, New Jersey. So welcome, Carolyn.

CAROLYN SUERO: 01:07 Thank you so much, Joan, for having me.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:08 Can you tell us a little bit about your organization and how you serve people with disabilities?

SUERO: 01:14 I appreciate the opportunity to share some information about Alternatives and also how we benefited from the Kessler emergency grant, I should say. Alternative's provides a variety of services to approximately 500 individuals throughout nine New Jersey counties. Those counties are Somerset, Middlesex, Hunterdon, Warren, Ocean, Monmouth, Morris, Union and Mercer. The agency was founded in 1979, and since that time we have provided supports to enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live in community-based settings as opposed to institutional or congregate settings. We currently provide residential services, housing, day habilitation, supported employment and case management services to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. But we also provide supported employment services to the deaf and hard of hearing population. And we provide a variety of services to homeless families, as well as those with mental illness and substance use diagnoses. So we're fairly diverse and fairly large organization. Our history includes efforts to strengthen and expand services available in the community for people with various disabilities and to provide person-centered supports that are necessary to ensure that each individual has the opportunity to live a fulfilling life while being integrated into his or her community. We are licensed by the New Jersey Department of Human Services and we are also CARF accredited. Our strategic plan initiatives include goals for adding housing and residential service options for people with disabilities, as well as expanding and strengthening employment supports, among other goals.

BANKS-SMITH: 03:10 Well, you're certainly quite involved with the counties and the communities and the folks that you serve. The emergency grant that was awarded to you, how has that helped your organization during the pandemic?

SUERO: 03:20 Due to the nature of the services provided by Alternatives, which includes 24 hour residential program serving individuals with intellectual and developmental

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disabilities, we needed to maintain the majority of our programs and services throughout the COVID-19 crisis, although a minimal number of our services have been provided remotely. So many of our clients, because of age, disability, underlying health conditions and so forth, are considered high risk and particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. At the onset of the pandemic, the agency implemented several very rigorous safety protocols to ensure and maintain the health and safety of our clients and our staff, who are interacting on a daily basis with our clients. With the safety of those folks, our clients and our direct support professionals as our top priority, back in mid-March, when all of this kind of started, we activated our continuity of operations plan and that addresses crisis management and planning. And we began holding regular remote leadership team meetings to kind of adjust our procedures and protocols as new information became available. And the need for PPE, personal protective equipment, was at the top of the list during these meetings. Initially, we had no experience. Well, I shouldn't say we had no experience because our programs use some PPE on a regular basis, even outside of a crisis situation. But we didn't have experience with the need to acquire this level and this certain types of PPE. With our staff, when their shifts are complete, they return home and into their communities and have contact with their own families and others. And then a new rotation of staff arrive for each shift.

SUERO: 05:16

So we felt it was imperative that we take several preventative measures to ensure the safety of our vulnerable population, and that included protocols for PPE. So as a result of the very generous emergency grant received from the Kessler Foundation, as well as some obviously a lot of planning and forethought, Alternatives has been very fortunate to have had a limited number of positive COVID clients and staff. We also, just from a financial point of view, we estimated early on that the cost of PPE and other related supplies was going to run well in excess of \$100,000 dollars in just the calendar year alone. As a nonprofit facing ongoing budgetary challenges in meeting the needs of our clients and in paying a living wage for our direct support professionals, this grant was especially important and a godsend, really, and it allowed us to secure masks and gloves and gowns and face shields and hand sanitizer and alcohol swabs and paper products and all of those tools necessary to keep everyone safe. Allowed us to stock up early on, and it allowed us to maintain a supply on an ongoing basis. So it's been wonderful and we're very, very grateful.

BANKS-SMITH: 06:39

Good to hear that. A lot of other people have been safe by having the proper PPEs available to them.

SUERO: 06:46

Yes.

BANKS-SMITH: 06:47

We did want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

SUERO: 06:50

Fine. It was my pleasure. And I again, appreciate the opportunity. And thank you again for what you're doing to help organizations like Alternatives. If anybody would like to learn more information regarding Alternatives, we would invite you to visit our website at [alternativesinc.org](http://alternativesinc.org).

BANKS-SMITH: 07:11

To learn more about Kessler Foundation Center for Grant Making and Alternatives, Inc. links are on the program notes. Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our

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