

Pillar Care Continuum staff makes sacrifices to keep at risk clients COVID safe - COVID-Ep14

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

- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:05 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 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 Purna Rodman, president and CEO of Pillar Care Continuum in Livingston, New Jersey. Welcome, Purna, and thanks for taking the time to talk with us today.
- PURNA RODMAN: 01:07 Hi, Joan. Thank you for letting me speak to you today.
- BANKS-SMITH: 01:10 Let's just start off by talking about the organization and how it serves those with challenges.
- RODMAN: 01:18 We started off as Cerebral Palsy of North Jersey, CPNJ. In fact, we didn't have that name then, but back in 1953. Parents got together because there was nobody there to serve their children. And because of that, we grew to be really expert in handling disabilities, but especially disabilities for people with medical needs. So that's one of our great specialties is that we have medically fragile people can come to us. We have grown since then. Now we serve probably 100 different disabilities. So we changed our name to really reflect that. And that's everything from physical disabilities to intellectual disabilities. We also serve all age groups. So we start off with an early intervention program serving children of 500 families in their homes. And the way that program works is really a therapist goes into the home and now remotely goes in, works with the parents and helps them with the skills they need to help their child. We have two schools, an elementary school and a high school. Then we have adult programs, which we have day programs for adults. We have three large day programs. We also have 7 [inaudible] going to twenty group homes across the state. And our region is Northeast New Jersey. I tell people, if you think about Essex County and all the counties that it touches, that's really where our footprint is. Even though that's [inaudible] physically small, it's about 40, 45% of the population of New Jersey lives there. In addition to that, we also do in-home services and in-school services for people who don't need to be at a group home or don't need to be going to a private school.
- BANKS-SMITH: 02:53 Since receiving the emergency grant, how has it helped your organization during this pandemic?
- RODMAN: 02:59 As you can imagine, when March hit, it was a really difficult time for us. It was a really difficult time for everybody. But unlike some kinds of programs, our group homes

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cannot close. So we could go remote with our schools. We could go-- we could temporarily close our day programs. But the group homes, they need us 24-7. We had to keep them open 24-7. And in addition to that, as things progressed, we then started having people be sick, staff be sick, residents be sick. And out of that, we have a lot of paraprofessionals doing most of the work in those group homes, which means that their salaries aren't that high. We did this-- and this is-- Kessler can be really proud of this. People call it hazard pay. We called it dedication pay, or an extra \$3.00 an hour, for just working in the group homes, and then another \$3.00 if they were working with people who were COVID positive. We began to, from our private donors, we were able to collect the money for all the PPE that we needed. Although I have to say, at first we couldn't even get masks. So we had to slowly get that. And we couldn't get gowns for people. So we bought \$1.00 ponchos that they could put over them and did whatever we could. So it was all [make ship?]. With that, it really encouraged not only the staff who were there, but it encouraged other staff because we then had a new day shift because people weren't going out any more to their day programs. So we had additional staff we needed. And that encouraged people to come work for us.

RODMAN: 04:28

That had an impact on the state. The state, after we did this kind of initial period of paying for that and the Kessler grant supporting us doing that, the state decided that they would do the same thing. So the Kessler grant helped us from March, middle of March through the end of April. And on May 1st, the state started paying for that. So what I mean by, Kessler can be proud of that, is that it was not only did they give us the starter grant to do that, we were able to inspire the rest of the state to do that. So it had an impact much beyond even the dollars you gave us.

BANKS-SMITH: 05:02

Wow, that's fantastic. It gets difficult because you have people that can't leave these group homes, so you need to have people who can go in and to service and take care of the community.

RODMAN: 05:14

Right. And they are very physically dependent. Half of them are military and half of them are not ambulatory. So they have to be lifted and moved. Some of them are on feeding tubes and other things like that. So there's a lot of contact with body fluids. The people in the group homes, they were really that third set of heroes that people weren't talking about. There were the doctors and nurses. And I'm not underplaying what they did. We lost 600 health care workers in the first three months in the New York area. So I'm not underestimating that at all. But they were like the other set of people that people didn't think about who were also frontline. And not frontline just in the way that somebody delivering your food is, but frontline that they were actually working one-on-one with people who were often very ill.

BANKS-SMITH: 06:01

Unless you're in it, you don't even think about that.

RODMAN: 06:03

That's right. That's right. And, you know, there was one time, this was very early on, and somebody came up to get some gloves and masks and all that. And I was helping her carry it down to her car. And I said, "How are you?" And she said, "Oh, all the residents are fine. And they're a little nervous. They kind of know what's going on but they are doing well." I said, "Well, no. I meant you, not just the residents." And she said, "Oh, the staff is understandably nervous, and they kind of figured it out. And

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some people have been out and they can't come in, but others are kind of doing extra hours to make up for it." I said, "Well, how are you personally?" Her nature wasn't to even talk about herself. I said, "How is that working with your family?" She said, "Well, I'm not living with my family. I have elderly parents and I have a child. So the grandmother's taking care of the child, and I'm staying with a friend so I don't bring back COVID to them." And when she told me that, I thought, she never would have even mentioned it to us. It wasn't even something to complain about. But beyond that, I thought, there are probably a thousand stories like that we're not hearing all the time. So this is kind of what your money was going to help support who were making that kind of sacrifice.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:14

Wow. Well, thank you so much for sharing. It's just a tremendous amount of work that you're doing in the community and we really appreciate it.

RODMAN: 07:22

Yeah. And thank you again. Kessler support for us has been really important over the years. And you've been a good friend, and the financial support has made a big difference for doing things that we couldn't do otherwise.

BANKS-SMITH: 07:35

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