



Letting Empathy Guide the Way

How One Social Service Organization Adapted During the Pandemic

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“**W**e are in this storm together, but we’re all in different boats.” A member of my staff quoted those words from a Vatican document in a recent meeting, and they have remained in my mind ever since. These words eloquently express why it’s so vital to let empathy guide our decisions as we navigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic — and they are an especially poignant reminder for organizations like Holy Family Institute that manage social services, education and other essential resources for families facing difficult situations. Our goal since the beginning of the pandemic — and since our founding more than 100 years ago — has been to help families stay afloat, weather the storm and come out better equipped to deal with whatever harsh weather may come next.

Holy Family Institute was founded in Pittsburgh’s Emsworth neighborhood in 1900 by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Originally an orphanage, we have adjusted to changing social conditions and changing understandings about what works best for children and families. We now provide a wide range of services to children and families. These services include mental health and drug and alcohol counseling, special and alternative education, family counseling, energy assistance, behavioral intervention and prevention programs, student assistance programs and shelters for unaccompanied minors. Our multiple program options provide many children with the “wraparound” services that life challenges require. Our latest initiative, Nazareth Prep, is an independent Catholic high school that focuses on college and career readiness for students who can’t afford private school tuition.

EDUCATING DURING A PANDEMIC

Education comes with its own set of challenges, even without the added stresses of a global pandemic, so you can imagine the year our students have had. Navigating from in-person learning, to online learning, to a hybrid model, then back to in-person learning, has demanded far more flexibility from students and teachers than any “regular” school year.

When we abruptly switched to virtual classes last year, our most urgent challenge was bridging the technology gap. Many of the students who attend our Specialized Learning School, a referral-based school for students with behavioral and academic challenges, did not have computers or internet access. Teachers delivered and mailed lesson packets to students so they could keep up. Over time, with our own funds and additional resources from the Pennsylvania Department





of Human Services and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, we distributed laptops and hotspots to seamlessly connect students with their teachers and classmates.

Unfortunately, even the latest and greatest technology cannot solve all challenges created by online learning. Attendance rates dropped at both schools as our students — particularly young children unaccustomed to sitting in front of the computer all day — struggled to focus in the virtual environment. Online learning also eliminated one of the most essential safeguards we provide to our students. Normally, if a student shows signs of distress or abuse, their teachers can initiate an intervention process. With students at home, it became much more difficult for teachers to monitor their well-being and identify problems.

While I applaud our teachers and students for their efforts to adapt to the challenges and restrictions of the pandemic, it has become evident that virtual learning cannot replace the social and emotional benefits of attending school in person. Thankfully, both Nazareth Prep and the Specialized Learning School have kept students in the classroom for most of the pandemic, only making the switch to online learning temporarily during case spikes. Although the last year has presented once-in-a-lifetime challenges, it also has reinforced the importance of classrooms where students can play, learn and grow in camaraderie.

RESPONDING TO FOOD INSECURITY

Even if quality education is available, how can we expect a hungry child to focus on his or her homework? Throughout the pandemic, we have seen an increase in the number of families lacking access to adequate food sources. Many of the households in our community have lost some or all of their income, forcing them to make an impossible decision: should they prioritize paying for bills, rent, food, medication or transportation? As childcare centers and schools closed for weeks at a time, forcing parents to stay home from work, families grew even more vulnerable.

Most students at our Specialized Learning School rely on the free and reduced lunch program to provide an important part of their daily nutrition. When we shut the school down for

several weeks to flatten the curve of infection, school counselors made frequent calls to families, encouraging students to keep attending and engaging with virtual classes. The overwhelming response staff heard from parents? “We’re not worried about school; we’re worried about putting food on the table.”

As soon as we heard about this urgent need, we committed ourselves to being part of the solution. Our staff adapted daily to get nutritious food

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into the hands of families. Staff collected donations with a local church partner and delivered the items to students’ doorsteps. They connected families with other resources like food banks, diaper banks, donations from World Vision (a non-profit humanitarian organization), unemployment benefits, and rent and energy assistance.

High school students at our Specialized Learning School — whose work opportunities had been curtailed due to the pandemic — volunteered after school to pack bags and help with distribution. We also created the Blessing Bags program, which provides food for students to take home to their families over the weekend or during school breaks. It was a welcome encouragement to watch our community mobilize so quickly to meet this most critical need.

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Another central challenge of the pandemic, which we encountered among clients of all ages, was its negative impact on mental health. According to a recent study published in *The New York Times*, a quarter of 18- to 24-year-olds said they had seriously considered suicide last year.¹ Our counseling staff has witnessed a moderate rise in suicidal ideation in teenagers and preteens and a significant rise in depression and anxiety as a direct result of isolation, pandemic-related

stress, and the loss of important social opportunities provided by sports, extracurricular activities, anticipated social events and regular contact with friends. These mental health struggles exist independent of income level.

In-Home Family Services Counselors, who help parents provide a safe and healthy environment for children while dealing with abuse, addiction, attachment disorders, grief or mental health issues, continued to visit families at home with safety protocols in place. In addition to these routine check-ins, staff regularly employed communication and coping therapies to identify new stressors, address issues as they arose and connect families with additional resources if needed.

Mental health counselors also have juggled these increased needs with the added challenge of virtual therapy sessions. They have shown impressive flexibility and creativity in keeping clients engaged, especially in virtual therapy sessions with young children. During these sessions, staff has used art therapy and online games to put clients at ease and encourage communication. For example, one counselor asked a distraught young child to go on a scavenger hunt to find something that brought her comfort in her house. She came back with a favorite stuffed toy, which her counselor used to help her to learn vital self-soothing skills. While this pandemic has certainly challenged each of us in different ways, these everyday encounters remind us of the disproportionate harm it has dealt to the most vulnerable members of our community.

SUPPORTING OUR STAFF

Caught up in the rush of adapting to virtual counseling sessions, driving to in-home appointments, and developing online homework assignments, we knew that prioritizing self-care was becoming more difficult — yet also more important — than ever before.

Before the pandemic, home was a safe space, a refuge from the stress of the job. But the shift to remote work and telehealth sessions has kept that stress lingering around the kitchen table after the workday ends. Staff members have worked harder than ever, handling their own pandemic-related insecurities while supporting clients who were under even more stress than usual.

To encourage a mindset of self-care, we've borrowed a mantra from airline safety, reminding each other often to put on our own "oxygen masks" before helping someone else. We encourage every employee to do something daily (such as meditating, taking a walk or reading 10 pages in a book) to promote their own physical, mental and emotional health.

I began a Friday Feelings reflection sent to all team members. Each week I tried to find words to uplift, console and challenge: uplift spirits tired of Zoom meetings, console team members who lost loved ones to COVID, make suggestions to relieve stress and loneliness, and challenge racial bias after the murder of George Floyd. I received such a good response that I plan to keep this up even after the pandemic ends.

FACING UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES AND LOSS

It has been a year of both unprecedented challenges and unexpected solidarity. While I have been, and continue to be, uplifted by the many examples of resourcefulness and kindness, I have also been a firsthand witness to unique hardships and profound grief in our community. It feels as if COVID-19 has left no aspect of life untouched — not our day-to-day routines, not our plans for the future, not even our relationships with the people we love most.

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Last year, a student (who we're not naming to protect his anonymity) transferred to Nazareth Prep as a freshman in the midst of the pandemic. Only a few months after in-person classes began, he lost both his grandfather and his mother, who was his primary caregiver. It was an unthinkable heartbreaking situation. The student, who now lives with his uncle, has shown great resilience and strength despite his profound grief.

I was so proud to see Nazareth Prep's staff and the entire student body rally around him. The



school took up a collection to ease the financial burden of transitioning to a new living arrangement, he was provided additional academic support, and teachers maintain contact with his family to ensure that his needs are being met both at home and at school.

All of our students at Nazareth Prep, whether they are facing hardships or not, have access to counseling, supportive adult role models, and expert advice and guidance from career coaches, faculty, and internship site mentors on post-secondary pathways. But we have found that engaging more with students' parents and guardians over the past year, especially when students are on a remote learning schedule, has been critical to attendance, assignment completion and student engagement. This increased communication has been the silver lining of the tumultuous academic environment of the past year.

LOOKING FORWARD WITH RESILIENCY AND HOPE

At this writing, the vaccine is rolling out rapidly across the country and making incredible progress in our home state of Pennsylvania. I am hopeful that before too long, we will have achieved population immunity and returned to some level of normalcy.

Recently, the Head of School at Nazareth Prep,

Rita Canton, was stopped in the hall by a student who told her, "I'm so happy to be here." It is heartening to hear our students' optimism and joy, to see them display resiliency and excitement about learning, and to join them in their youthful hope that things will continue to get better.

Our work to overcome the challenges of the pandemic and its impact on our most vulnerable students and clients must and will continue. I have faith that our staff is prepared for the task. I am confident that they will continue to sign in, show up and make a difference in the lives of our neighbors every day.

SR. LINDA YANKOSKI has served in an executive role with Holy Family Institute for more than 40 years, including 30 years as president and chief executive officer. A \$29 million nonprofit organization with 360 employees, Pittsburgh-based Holy Family is among the region's largest social service/educational organizations.

NOTE

1. Dr. Perri Klass, "Young Adults' Pandemic Mental Health Risks," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/well/family/young-adults-mental-health-pandemic.html>.

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