The President’s Corner: “Leading Through the Storm”

As we have entered into the fifth month of the Great Pandemic, no one could have imagined that Exponents would have shut its doors for all that time. I remember holding an emergency staff meeting on March 9th, after we received word that a participant had tested positive for the coronavirus. We assembled and I informed the staff that we will close down, implement a complete cleaning and disinfection and would be back at work in two weeks – at the latest. Hmm!

Well, my mother used to say, “Man plans, but God unplans”… True wisdom indeed. But even within the fear, uncertainty and anxiety that accompanied the shut down, Exponents still managed to find opportunity within the many obstacles to providing services. Replacing on-site services with tele-health and tele-audio engagement, our clinical personnel worked 8 to 10 hours per day to make and retain contact with our participants. We also implemented Distance Learning platforms for our CASAC and Recovery Coach Trainings and established a 24 hour crisis hotline to provide triage case management and referral services. Simply put, we made the best of what we had to carry the Exponents message, even in the face of crisis – and that message was that “we meet people where they are, but we don’t leave them there”!

In addition, Exponents hosted a Town Hall Webinar, entitled, “Leading Communities of Color In Times of Crisis”. The panelists included Saeeda Dunston, Executive Director of Elmcor; Ingrid Floyd, Executive Director of Iris House, Ann Marie Foster, Executive Director of Phoenix House and myself. This will be the first of a series of Exponents-hosted Town Hall meetings that will explore the major transformative issues with health and social equity. Conversation of lessons learned from our panelists as they discussed navigating the structural barriers to service delivery and how these lessons will continue to shape the future of human services in communities of color.

RWC Is Staying Connected

Since the start of this pandemic, the Judith L. Chiara Recovery and Wellness Center (RWC) was ready to take this challenge head on. Our first brainstorming meeting was March 26th, only a few weeks from being sent home early with uncertainty and tons of unknowns. We visited our mission - what can we do? How can we stay connected? Then Zoom was re-discovered and we decided to give it a shot! Every Peer Recovery Advocate and Recovery Coach from RWC reached out to participants and invited them to our first Zoom meeting.

We started out with one meeting. Then it became a once a week meeting. The participants couldn’t get enough and they started asking for more meetings. Now RWC is having groups via Zoom twice a day Mondays through Saturdays. Our topics range from financial education, self care and goal setting all while exploring their own recovery journey. We also have support groups, virtual karaoke nights and spoken word. It was important for RWC to keep the socializing and peer network going whether they showed up once or for every group. The participants knew we would be there for them. Along with groups we also had one on one support via telephone.

RWC has a maned 24/7 dedicated telephone line that was very helpful to the entire agency. We were very fortunate to have that line. The 24 hour line helped connect the agency with participants, referrals and help reconnect participants to services that were lost due to various reasons amid the pandemic.

I would like to end this by saying thank you to our wonderful Exponents community for coming together and making it work!!!!!!

Joseph Turner, JD
President/CEO

Dedicated Members of the Cleaning Crew taking a break with Joe Turner, CEO (far left).

Shayra Vega, Assistant Director, JLC Recovery Wellness Center
Before re-opening our doors, Exponents worked diligently, under the supervision and guidance of Samantha Lopez, Executive Vice President/Chief Operating Officer, to develop safety plans for participants/visitors and staff outlining what systems were going to be put in place as precautionary measures to ensure everyone’s safety as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Exponents used its talented pool of staff and peers to help put systems in place to protect all that come through our doors on a daily basis.

Wendy Jenerette, Sr. Director of HR, created social distancing and precautionary posters that are located throughout our space. The posters help to remind everyone to keep 6 feet of distance from others as they walk throughout the facility. In addition, she created a sign reminding people to wear masks, to help protect themselves and others while on the premises.

Exponents’ management team looked at our vast and talented pool of peers, to further assist with keeping staff and visitors safe. We restructured the function of Cornelia Carlyle to help screen individuals that visit or work at Exponents and to ensure that before they are allowed access, they are not exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms that could put others at risk of contracting the virus. Ms. Carlyle is supported in her new role with help from Roy Calderon, who will provide wellness checks to our Spanish-speaking community members.

Ms. Carlyle has over 7 years of experience as a Nursing Assistant. She greets everyone that enters Exponents’ premises with a wonderful smile, touch-less temperature scanner, and a questionnaire that everyone is required to complete, concerning possible exposure to COVID-19. Together, she and Roy help keep Exponents community members safe and healthy.

Yvonne Soto, Director of Transitional and Vocational Services

As Exponents continues to meet the new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and its particular impact here in NYC, we quickly became aware of the mental-health related challenges of our community members. Isolation, depression, anxiety challenged many of us in one way or another. Grief over the loss of loved ones as well as what life was like pre-COVID exacerbated the symptomology of those living with mental illness. For individuals in recovery from drug addiction or those actively using (Exponents’ works with people where they are in efforts to move them forward), the desire to self-medicate or increase use was a real concern for several among our community.

Through consistent communication via telephone and videoconferencing our participants and peers were able to have candid conversations about the challenges they faced on a daily basis. We are proud and simultaneously humbled that 4.5 months into the pandemic, we’ve not lost a single peer. No small feat.

Through generous support from Amazon in the Community’s (AITC) COVID-19 Community Response Efforts, we are happy to announce the Resiliency Project, a video collage of personal testimonies from our peers on their challenges related to managing the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the inherent strengths they utilize to support themselves and their families and communities. We look forward to its release in mid-September as we commemorate National Recovery Awareness Month.

National Recovery Awareness Month is sponsored by the federal Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). It is meant to increase awareness and understanding of mental and substance use disorders and celebrate the people who recover.

Donald R. Powell, Mhs
Sr. Director of Programs & Development

US Health Resources Services Administration, HIV Care Services
US Center for Disease Control (CDC)
NYS Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS)
Department of Health and Human Services

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, Inc.
NYS Department of Health, AIDS Institute
The Council of the City of New York

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Exponents’ Harm Reduction program has been providing phone counseling since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants have expressed such gratitude, for Exponents providing a connection for counseling and emotional support during this time. Many have expressed that they have been lonely and isolated but having a connection to their counselor made this time less scary. They feel like they are cared for. We have also been conducting education and supportive groups. Many participants stated that, by joining a Zoom group, they feel less isolated and can share more with their peers. Some choose to call into the group in order to get connected. During individual and group sessions we are able to assess our participant’s needs and provide, not only emotional support but referrals when necessary. Overall, this unique predicament has enabled us to be more creative in reaching and engaging those who need us the most. It gives me peace of mind just knowing that I work for an organization that is so forward thinking and really lives the mission of “Meeting People Where They’re At”.

Dana Diamond
Director of Health Services

Leadership Training was held in February and March for the members of our Senior Leadership team. The training was facilitated by Saeeda Dunston, Executive Director of Elmcor Youth & Adult Services, Inc. Saeeda is recognized among her peers and human service providers throughout New York State, as having the depth and breadth of programmatic, administrative knowledge in developing and implementing culturally competent programs and services as well as leadership and management training. The training was delivered from an anti-racist, anti-poverty lens and challenged many of the beliefs we often hold regarding communication styles, vulnerability and gatekeeping.

In continuously developing our professional and leadership competence at Exponents, we are indeed fortunate to have Ms. Dunston as one of our change agents.

Donald R. Powell, Mhs
Sr. Director of Programs & Development

To Our Generous Supporters

Thank you for helping us bring hope to those in need. Because of you our work will continue.
Hats Off to Our Family

On our weekly staff and peer Zoom meetings, we celebrated “Outrageous Hat Contest” finding humor and celebration in these turbulent days.

And the winners are!

Victor Velazquez, Director of Training & Recruitment

Christopher Balijko, ARRIVE Peer Counselor

Hats Off to Our Family

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