



Saluting the frontlines

Andrew Wyatt takes Briony Smith inside the mental health frontlines

By Briony Smith Special to the Star

Andrew Wyatt was never much of a FaceTime guy—he hadn’t really video-chatted with anyone until his daughter was born. But, over the course of the past month, he and his colleagues at Progress Place—a community organization specializing in mental health support—have had to go pro. Wyatt is the mental health unit supervisor at Progress Place, which, during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, has taken its support services virtual. Progress Place has extended the hours of their peer support chat service, the Warm Line. There are at least three virtual support activities per day, ranging from yoga to seminars on how to keep busy at home. “I’m also regularly taking phone calls from members to chat, and provide wellness checks, and support and case management as needed,” says Wyatt.

Clients are reveling in this new form of community. “It obviously doesn’t replace the face-to-face connections, but it’s so important to see people that you know, and for someone to be excited when they see your face pop up on a screen.”

Wyatt and his fellow staffers also brave the outside world daily to deliver free meals to members who live nearby, providing wellness checks. “Food security is incredibly important for our community,” Wyatt says. “For people who are low-income, it’s a huge challenge to access healthy food. This helps provide people with a sense of hope that we’re all going to get through this together.” Recently, Wyatt says, a community partner client cried when he got his food because he was so relieved to know that he didn’t have to brave the grocery stores.

The wellness checks are essential too. When a recent check revealed that a woman had become psychotic, she was taken to the hospital to receive mental health services. Another wellness check on a woman showed that she was consumed with fever. At the hospital, she tested positive for COVID-19. She’s now back at home, quarantined, receiving regular telephone support from staff. Both checks occurred in the past 10 days.

“For years, our goal has always been outreach and preventing people from isolating at home because it can make people more symptomatic and lead to hospitalizations,” says Wyatt. “Now we’re at a point where people don’t really have a choice—they’re being told to distance and isolate. It’s critical to remember that, for a lot of people in our program, a sense of community has been taken away from them because of their illness, whether it’s because of a schizophrenia diagnosis that has left them without a job, friends or sometimes even family, or whether it’s from an anxiety or depression diagnosis that stems from bullying. So being able to facilitate virtual activities or hand out meals to our members has ensured they continue to have that same sense of community that a lot of us take for granted.”

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