

ESSENTIAL SUPPORT IN TIMES OF CRISIS

COVID – 19 has dramatically impacted the lives of everyone in our community. Early in March, faced with the real probability that the Governor of Washington would issue an order for people to shelter at home, the management of Morningside, not knowing the extent of the order, made a commitment to support individuals with significant disabilities. It was determined to provide support physically to those who needed direct face to face interaction and via phone, text or video conferencing for all other individuals Morningside serves.



Jonathan Pleger, CEO Morningside

Many clients who were working at essential businesses were asked to work more hours at their jobs, so Morningside assisted them in learning new tasks, etc. “These clients needed more support, because they had to adjust to longer hours along with the stress around the situation”, said Jonathan Pleger, President/CEO “along with new work protocols and PPE (personal protection equipment) necessary for doing their jobs”.

Morningside was ready to make a shift with staff to work from home since the technology was in place to do so. Staff had Microsoft Surface tablets and synced smart phones to conduct business, but most staff had never worked away from the office for extended periods of time, so there was a learning curve for them to ramp up to work efficiently from home.

Teams met via Skype daily at first, to connect and understand how the new parameters of work were developing and to support one another. Safety for staff and clients was paramount in everyone’s mind as all were learning more about the disease daily. Reassuring clients, both those working and those at home, was a big priority.

It is unknown at present how many of the hundreds of clients that Morningside supports long term will return to work. Of the 361 persons with developmental disabilities supported working in the community in January, 125 were working or supported at home working; others continued to be supported at home to hone their skills through tasks staff suggested. But regardless of the eventual outcome, Morningside will be there to assist them. The good news, as Jonathan pointed out, is that all these clients have great work histories.

Technology played a critical role during this time. Don Hayden, VP Technology, said that at first when it became apparent that staff needed to work from home, “my reaction was ‘no problem’, its business as usual. Over a decade ago, we bought our first VPN (Virtual Private Network) appliance and we invested in the infrastructure (servers and laptops) so staff could work remotely if needed. While we had the technology and capability in place to work remotely few staff took advantage of this until COVID-19 came about.” Morningside invested in the lightest equipment that met the technical requirement for staff to use – Microsoft Surface tablets – so staff could easily slip the device into a secure carrying case. Don said, “Training staff unfamiliar with how to use the VPN tunnel was the first item on the list.” The Morningside technology staff also faced the fact that the VPN was not designed for such robust usage. Don and Morningside’s contracted technology guru, Josh Gay from Perry Creek Networking, found later versions of the SonicWALL firewall that could accommodate the bandwidth needed plus the additional licenses. They discovered a product by SonicWALL that offered a virtual solution that could support staff working remotely. Don said, “I have probably worked harder over the last three months than I can recall working in a long period of time, ensuring people have the technology resources they need.”



Don Hayden, VP Technology Morningside



Stacia Gerdts, staff trainer and job coach

For direct line staff, moving from a face to face, "hands on" approach to coaching to remote contact was a challenge, given the different types of disabilities and communication styles of those supported. Few clients were actually on the job; most were furloughed. Stacia Gerdts is both a staff trainer and job coach, and indicated that the adjustment presented its difficulties. Stacia said, "It was challenging on all fronts, in terms of space and time, not only for yourself but for those you support. Technology was a challenge at first, but learning how to communicate, learning what access clients had [to technology] and what my capability was to match them to their skill level was hard. Teaching how to instruct over the phone while viewing a video (with a person you are familiar with) proved to be difficult for both the client and myself. Maintaining motivation in this environment over three months has been difficult".

Moving from an office environment to connecting with staff remotely was "a lot to take in" said Shawna Harper, Program Manager, who supervises a team of job coaches. "The three direct support managers (in Thurston County) drew up a plan to assist Employment Consultants to remain on the job, but from home. They gave them guidance that was updated regularly during the time the state was under the order to shelter at home. The guidelines were to "Support the client, make sure they are safe, and make sure all are okay. Check in with their residential care provider or parent. We focused on making sure those clients still working were supported, along with their supervisors. For those who were not working we maintained relationships with the employer and client to make sure they could go back to work once the order was lifted. Staff dropped off activity booklets that were work related to keep them active." Shawna explained that now that Thurston County is in phase 2, staff are ramping up and preparing for clients to go back to work, assisting them with wearing facemasks. Some people with disabilities have special dispensation where they don't have to wear a mask because of their disability. She added, "We must respect both client and staff comfort level to be in the community during this phase where people can work. We supported staff through a daily Skype Q&A meeting, where they could connect together and talk about what was working and/or problems they were having." On May 21st, Shawna had a team meeting in the parking lot (maintaining social distancing) covering a whole range of topics and training as well as eating pizza and handed out "Bravo" awards to staff (a small Oscar statue and certificate) for their work during this time.



Shawna Harper, Program Manager

If you would like to read client stories who are essential workers please go to our Facebook page.

Like many other businesses, we do not know what additional challenges will arise to confront us as we deal with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. But one thing is for sure, Morningside staff will be there to support all of our clients and each other and get through those challenges together!

WELCOME MIKE HORN



Mike Horn, Vice President Employment Services

Morningside would like to introduce and welcome Mike Horn as Vice President, Employment Services. He served for 22 years in the US Army, retiring as a First Sergeant. Most recently, Mike worked at Pac Mountain Workforce Development Council as Program Manager for My Journey Out Beyond. My JOB provides workplace readiness, essential skill-building, mentoring, and work-based learning experiences to incarcerated youth to prepare them for meaningful careers upon reentry.

He says he came to Morningside because "We share the same values of ensuring people with disabilities have access to the same opportunities as everyone else." The connection with individuals with disabilities is personal to him. In addition to having a disability himself, his 17-year-old daughter has developmental disabilities. He talks of the challenges of being in the military with a daughter in special education services, moving locations regularly. "It's like you start all over every single time." Mike shared his understanding the challenges of learning the system in a new school district. "Once she found her passion, she started doing well." She has become proficient in American Sign Language and serves as a Teacher's Assistant in the life skills class."