

I am honored today to share testimony in regards to the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Howard Center's Mental Health and Substance Use Crisis programs.

While the news of the pandemic spread shock and disbelief among many, it did not take long to recognize the impact of the reality in how Crisis services would need to adapt in order to deliver safe, responsive services to the community and most vulnerable in our care.

Seemingly overnight, Howard Center's 24/7 mobile crisis team First Call for Chittenden County assessment and triage services launched telehealth screening and new protocols to maintain services for those without this capability. Crisis residential programs responded with quick reflexes to increase sanitization procedures, procure necessary PPE, and implement COVID screening for residents and staff. Outreach programs found themselves working in deserted streets with merchant businesses closed and faced the logistics of housing and feeding so many that were typically homeless, reliant upon panhandling and the social services to survive.

On the cusp of almost the one year anniversary when we changed the landscape of crisis services, many of the tireless workforce demand and continuous reiteration of policy, procedure, technology, and infrastructure is a blur. As essential workers, it was not question IF we would continue to deliver services, but HOW and balance the all too real health concerns and anxiety of our workforce with the care and safety of the community we serve.

I am tremendously grateful to the flexibility and dedication of our staff, the leaders who stepped up in every way to meet the need, and to who without - many more in our community would have most certainly suffered greatly.

We have learned much in this past year, among these lessons, the devastation of loneliness, separation from loved ones, and what happens when community and natural supports which provide the backbone of stability - falter. We've seen many deaths, more substance use and overdose, anxiety and suicide. Yet, if it wasn't for our essential workers and the ability to think outside the box, even move whole programs into other buildings to combine staffing, launch telehealth medical clearance for alcohol detox, and ramp up cross-training, we would have seen perhaps much more.

Crisis programs remain open, 24/7 365 days a week. Round the clock, we offer outreach, support, triage, assessment, safety, partnering with other first responders and programs to achieve equilibrium and serve as a "beacon of light" as one of our clients referred to us, to let individuals and families struggling in the community know they are *not* alone and we *will* get through this – together.

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