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COMMENTARY: Long-term care; it's not just nursing homes

Apr 16, 2020

The Arc/Morris opened its first group home for people with developmental disabilities in 1983. From the very beginning, our work was predicated on providing normal home-like environments.

In the years since, assisted by local officials and caring people in neighborhoods throughout Morris County, development continued. Today, The Arc/Morris provides housing and services for more than 120 adults. We are your neighbors. We are also a crucial part of the non-institutional long-term care system in New Jersey.

And then there was a pandemic.

One morning, a group home resident was discovered by staff to have fallen out of bed. An ambulance was called, and he was taken to the hospital.

The next day, he was diagnosed positive for corona virus. The news hit like a ton of bricks. And so began a whirlwind of activity to try to meet the incredible challenge of supporting adults with developmental disabilities in group homes and apartments across Morris County.

The day programs we also operate were closed in early March. But you can't close someone's home. And you can't leave adults with developmental disabilities alone for 14 days to shelter in place. Our residents require 24/7 supervision and support. And that means daily, round-the-clock staffing. Just like in a nursing home. Only we're not a nursing home. Our facilities provide long-term care, but are not classified as health-care facilities.

We recognized immediately that we needed to provide resources to staff who were being called upon to risk their own safety to continue to provide for the needs of our residents.

We needed personal protective equipment (PPE). So, we reached out to officials in the state agency that oversees operations such as ours. Response at the state level has been modest, at best; they issued guidelines, and urged us to be creative.

Fortunately, our local, county and legislative officials went beyond that. They listened, and appreciated the immediacy of our need. They helped us to begin to acquire PPE for staff. That has enabled us to start to make a stand against this virus.

But our staff are the true heroes of this crisis.

Lacking the full preparation and resources that we would have preferred, our direct care workers have become front-line essential health care workers.

Despite the fear of direct impact from the virus, they continue to come to work every day, because they remain committed to their residents.

They are battling to sustain this very fragile system of care. It is a battle that continues to this day.

Staff is most urgently needed. Please contact the Human Resources Director Ben Wreh at 973 326-8750.