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JEVS Still Making Hope Happen for Clients

By Sophie Panzer - April 23, 2020

It's mostly business as usual these days for JEVS Human Services, which is supporting clients facing unemployment, isolation, health issues and other coronavirus-related challenges.

"On the good news side, we were really pretty prepared to go to more of a work-from-home basis. We had some programs where we had telecommuters to begin with," JEVS President and CEO Jay Spector said.

He said staff members who normally assist clients with job searching are now stepping up to support them through the anxiety of social distancing. One staff member even had a session with a client while they both watched "Jeopardy."

The organization is preparing for a massive increase in clients for job search services, including counseling and use of the state's online job search portal, CareerLink.

"We're funded through Philadelphia Works, and we're going to be one of the major organizations pressed into action to help people who have been laid off back into work," Spector said.

Career counselors are working with current clients and reaching out to former ones who may need help again due to coronavirus-related layoffs.

"People feel very isolated, and they're asking, 'What can I do? Should I look for a job now?' The answer is yes, there are employers that are hiring," said Director of Career Strategies Peggy Truitt. "It's a great time to prepare your resume, prepare your interview skills and get your LinkedIn profile up where it should be."

JEVS has moved career counseling sessions and webinars online to reduce isolation and give clients a chance to voice their concerns about the job market. They are continuing their professional mentoring program, Cups of Coffee, over Zoom.

Since job applications and networking events are happening exclusively online, boosting clients' computer skills has been crucial.

"Another challenge with computers is if they don't have Wi-Fi and they don't have computers and they do everything on their phone. We used to say go to your local library but that's not an option anymore," Truitt said.

She said they are also increasing outreach to LGBTQ workers, who are highly represented in the hospitality industries, as well as college seniors about to enter the workforce during an economic downturn.

"Fifty percent of what we do is help you with nuts and bolts, interview skills and job search skills, but 50% is also emotional support we provide our clients. We're keeping them motivated, keeping them hopeful and helping them build their confidence," Truitt said.

One of the few JEVS career programs canceled due to coronavirus was Program for Offenders, which provides life skill and vocational training to inmates at Philadelphia Department of Prisons. JEVS staff worked behind the walls during March and early April, but their contract was suspended the week of April 13 when the prison reported cases of COVID-19 and made all outside contractors leave the facility, Spector said.

Other JEVS programs that provide face-to-face services are continuing in a modified form.

At ACT I and ACT II, JEVS' two opioid addiction treatment facilities in Olney and Kensington, nurses are still coming in daily to dispense methadone for people recovering from heroin addiction, but therapists are working with clients remotely to limit the number of people in the buildings.

Staff are also providing in-person care to residents of Community Living and Home Supports, JEVS' group homes for those with intellectual disabilities and behavioral health conditions.

"We've talked about social distancing (with residents). We've also provided people with masks. ... We reinforce hand-washing and other safety measures," said Clara Thompson, senior vice president of community living and home supports.

In addition to sanitizing surfaces and purchasing masks for residents and staff, JEVS no longer allows visitors to enter the homes.

"We didn't want there to be a lot of exposure with people going back and forth to visit family," Thompson said.

Prior to COVID-19, residents were able to volunteer with various organizations and even take art and cooking classes. This is no longer an option, but they can still go outside and have "porch parties."

Q JEVS in the news...

“Some of our homes have nice porches and yard spaces where they can sit. They’ve gone outside to get some fresh air and sunshine,” Thompson said.

She said the staff have been supportive of their clients.

“We really appreciate all of our frontline workers who are coming in and working every day with individuals.”

The purchase of personal protection equipment, extra cleaning supplies and premiums paid to essential staff in these programs has led to a rise in costs. Spector said the organization is losing money, but has enough savings and funding to stay afloat in the short-term.

“On the positive side, we’re learning new things. Our world is never going to be the same, and we’re going to be in this situation for a long time,” he said. “I’m really incredibly proud of our staff. Everyone is really pulling together and really concerned about their clients, and every day they’re trying to make hope happen.”