

# LIFEWORKS' SPOTLIGHT

January 2021



This month, Lifeworks' Spotlight takes a closer look at the changing use of technology and the staff behind the scenes supporting our efforts to maintain critical connections during these times of "social distancing" and isolation.

## MAINTAINING CRITICAL CONNECTIONS DURING A PANDEMIC

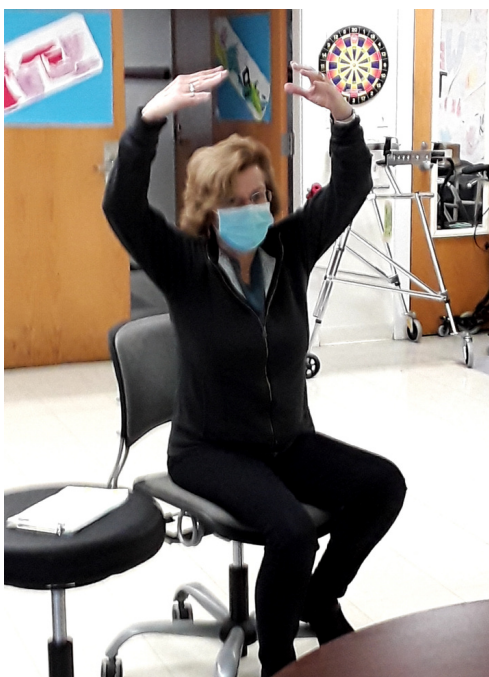
Featuring Interviews by  
Kathy Montal

Lifeworks provides services to over 2300 people and their families, with an operating budget of over 27 million, employing nearly 450 people with the essential role- to advocate with and for those we support. Lifeworks staff have been working all day, every day, since March 16th doing their jobs in different environments, in a different way, utilizing all forms of communication and access to support the people we serve. Our agency has made investments in technology to enable staff to provide essential services to our families. This month, we will spotlight this recent systems' change and introduce a few key players in the process.

Through our new website, [www.lifeworksarc.org](http://www.lifeworksarc.org), launched in October 2020, daily activities led by our staff of the William Abel Therapeutic Center and Connections programs, can be accessed through our events calendar.

Day hab staff run weekly Arts and Entertainment, Cooking, a Reading Group, weekly games and Friday wrap up meetings to reflect and discuss additional hybrid programming. This is inclusive of participants being served in our program here in Westwood and at home.

Physical therapist, Deb Reckert, also runs regular virtual exercise programming on Tuesday afternoons (pictured here). Staff have provided interactive virtual holiday celebrations in place of family or community gatherings.



Our Family Support and Autism Support Center staff are providing virtual programs and weekly ZOOM support groups for dads, grandparents, parents of young children and a residential support group for parents. In collaboration with our Department of Developmental Service's (DDS) area office, Lifeworks also has coordinated the purchase of iPads and Chromebooks for families in need to allow them to participate remotely. Lifeworks Day Habilitation and Life Enhancement programs have been providing an increasing variety of virtual programs, through Zoom, Facetime, and conference calls to the people we serve for months. Our Shared Living and AFC programs continue to accept referrals and provide services and supports through this pandemic. Lifeworks has made great utilization of Tele-health, including a full transition of the supports of Harbor Counseling to a Tele-health model through much of this crisis. And, our LES program pulled off an amazing virtual employment awards banquet with participation from hundreds! In March, Lifeworks established a Task Force of leadership that met daily and now weekly to address issues across all programs of the agency.



Lifeworks' IT Specialist, Nick LaMarca, pictured at left, could not have imagined how he would play such a critical role over the past year. Originally studying computer networking in college, Nick's career path was heavily influenced by his dad's career as an IT Administrator for Massachusetts Public Schools. Nick has been busy assisting with technology needs for COVID-19 testing of direct care staff. He also travels between the Lifeworks' administrative office in Westwood, Lifeworks Employment Services in West Roxbury, and Norwood as well as all of our residences to ensure that residents in the community are connected to Lifeworks staff through technology. His job is to troubleshoot, distribute, replace, and install both hardware and software.

Being able to interact one on one with staff is what Nick LaMarca enjoys best.

"Learning new technology can be frustrating, but I enjoy assisting my co-workers with varying skill levels and he adds is very appreciative of the patience staff has shown when trying to resolve an issue. In his position, he has learned to expect the unexpected. He particularly enjoyed a call from a resident in one of the group homes who was having an issue with his Play Station. Nick is now his "go to guy".



The pandemic has also altered the way programs are run at Lifeworks Employment Services. Community Resource Specialist, Lisa Donovan's pre-pandemic role was finding volunteer activities, job skills training and offsite activities. Lisa has risen to the challenge of figuring out how to shift to virtual programming. Each week, LES Norwood posts on Facebook its full schedule of virtual programming which includes employment skills training, arts and crafts, a cooking class and a "drums alive" fitness class. "We worked with a group of scientists who take pictures of ocean animals. Participants were tasked with identifying the photographed animals." Another group was tasked with identifying different stars in pictures. (Lisa is pictured here on the right).



Our home-chefs like Cyrus Sethna and Kate Sally (pictured on the next page) have shared their recipes and delicious creations on social media. Kate is also one of a few individuals attending a virtual twenty-two week "Serve Safe" class with an emphasis on COVID-19 safety protocols. At the end of the online class, Kate has proudly received Serve Safe Certification, which she happily shared on Instagram, which will enable her to work in the community at restaurants or cafeteria settings. Lisa Donovan says virtual participation has really taken off. At a virtual talent show there were 60 participants who joined in. Although some participants have lost a bit of their independence, needing assistance with technology, others are really thriving, participating even more so remotely. "One individual hardly ever participated in the activities on site. Now he's one of the most vocal participants we have on Zoom!". The Zoom schedule of activities are consistent but change about every three months. For safety sake, the Norwood group has limited their time out in the community. They do take occasional trips up to the Lifeworks Employment Services facility in West Roxbury, which has more space for socially distanced activities.

The hiring process at Lifeworks now has a virtual component to it. Individuals seeking direct care positions at the residences, are interviewed via Zoom in addition to the initial tour and interview at the residence. Danielle Warzecki, Vice President, Residential Services says, "We have found that applicants seem more relaxed during a virtual interview from their own homes and tend to share information more freely."

If the applicant does well in the first two virtual interviews, they are invited to come into the group home following strict Covid-19 safety protocols; masking up and social distancing from staff and residents. "Body language and the ability to communicate with our residents is something our directors look for in a potential candidate.

It is also important to see if the applicant makes eye contact when speaking to the housemates. It demonstrates respect for the individual and a comfort level", explained Danielle. While it is a lengthy process, job applicants gain a great deal of information, enabling them to see if it is a good fit. Despite the pandemic's challenges, Danielle is happy to say they have hired several individuals that have quickly become an asset to the organization. To learn more about employment opportunities, please see our website at [www.lifeworksarc.org/careers](http://www.lifeworksarc.org/careers).

**"ONE INDIVIDUAL  
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Lisa Donovan, Community  
Resource Specialist at Lifeworks



There are unique stressors and challenges that could worsen mental health for people with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis. Under the leadership of KayLee Blanchard, our Harbor Counseling Center staff and clinicians are exploring new training opportunities to deliver mental health services and approaches to this specialized population due to the pandemic.

The Center has also been available to staff grappling with grief or anxiety issues. People with disabilities report higher levels of social isolation than their "nondisabled" counterparts (O'Sullivan & Bourgin, 2010). Some may experience intensified feelings of loneliness in response to physical distancing measures. To combat social isolation and loneliness, we are constantly adding new programs and methods to include and reach out to people through technology. This investment in technology and professional development of all of our staff to use assistive technology has continued into our physical spaces. Although our programs are not at full capacity, we are equipping all of our program spaces with smart TV's so that staff and participants can interact with individuals being served at home. People can exercise, cook and celebrate together with their Lifeworks network of staff, colleagues and friends. To check out our ZOOM schedules, please see the calendar on our website at [www.lifeworksarc.org/calendar](http://www.lifeworksarc.org/calendar).

