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Care Design NY Salutes Direct Support Professionals

Care Design NY salutes service providers and their dedicated Direct Support Professional (DSP) employees who are providing person-centered care to thousands of our members, individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD), especially those who reside in group residences during this pandemic. The DSPs are critical to ensure the individuals they support in residences obtain the help they require including bathing, dressing, managing prescriptions, preparing meals including feeding those who need this assistance, offering encouragement, scheduling, transporting and accompanying them to medical appointments, communicating with family and friends, and doing everything they can to ensure their everyday needs are consistently met.

I spoke to a DSP employed by AIM Services Inc., a non-profit charitable organization providing dedicated support for over 3,000 individuals with disabilities in upstate New York. She has worked in the same group residence for 20 years. This residence supports ten people with I/DD, ranging in age from 40 to 80 years old, who require varying levels of supports to live a quality life.

She described how COVID-19 has temporarily changed the lives of those with I/DD and for the providers of community-based disability supports in group homes. And while they are experiencing similar ripple effects of the Coronavirus, like everyone else in America, there are also profound differences.

Her workday begins at 6:00 am. Prior to COVID-19, she would help the residents with their morning routine so they would be ready when the scheduled transportation arrived to take them to their work settings throughout the community.

Only two of the residents did not leave the home due to their age or the severity of their disabilities and other DSPs would be assigned to their care. She would spend most of her shift meeting administrative responsibilities, such as following up on the medical appointments each resident requires.

COVID-19 changed everyone's daily routines when New York State was put on PAUSE with the Governor's executive order to stop the spread of COVID-19 by closing schools and nonessential businesses. These closures included the day habilitation programs for the intellectually disabled and halted visitations to group residences.

At first, she stated, it was very challenging for the individuals to grasp and comprehend what caused their world to change overnight and why they were suddenly not allowed to attend their day programs, work in the community, and/or see friends and family.

Today, thanks mostly to the staff's reassurances and conversations, they better understand that COVID-19 is a sickness that spreads easily from person to person. Staying at home is essential as it is particularly dangerous for individuals with chronic health conditions.

One of the keys to helping them process this information and manage the abrupt change in their lives, she explained, was a new, positive, and daily structure developed by the AIM DSPs to help the individuals cope and prosper. She described what sounded like millions of other households across America during the pandemic -- different generations under one roof, in self-isolation trying to find a new normal for keeping occupied, managing conflict, learning at home and developing life skills with schools closed.

While the separation from their daily routine outside the home and not being able to see family members has been a huge and heartbreaking disruption, she stated, the AIM staff is using technology to help individuals and families maintain their connections with regular phone chats to FaceTime.

She also described a new routine for the residents with a positive structure for each day. This is helping to keep everyone happy and content. And the silver lining for her, amid COVID-19, is having additional time with the residents. In the last six weeks, she and the other DSPs have introduced daily rituals for each resident from letting them choose the day's featured meal to choosing a favorite activity to complete.

Each resident chooses a favorite pastime to put on the schedule. One individual chose a manicure, another resident sketching U.S. Air Force planes, while another opted to watch western movies. Other pursuits scheduled randomly throughout the day include puzzles and games. Every afternoon there is a card game.

The residents in the home are very considerate of each other, she went on to tell me, and enjoy helping each other. Last week, one of the individuals celebrated his 80th birthday. Everyone in the home had a special role in the celebration and enjoyed looking out the window when AIM staff from other locations drove by the home in a car procession with banners and singing from car windows.

This weekend, they planned a fun and safe outing to an ice cream car hop that is opening for the season. Staff will take turns taking one resident across town to get a frozen treat delivered car side. And when the weather warms up, they are looking forward to taking a walk along the river near their home and having a picnic.

The residents are enjoying the newly created and choreographed activities to pass the COVID-19 social distancing time. They are successfully managing anxieties and worries, and these residents are putting their trust in the DSPs to that they will get through this as a family.

We can all learn tips and techniques from this AIM team for creating a solid routine that works for everyone during this period of self-isolation. DSPs are truly the embodiment of everything good in the world amid a terrible storm.

#NewYorkTough and #ApplaudDirectSupport.

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About AIM Services, Inc.

Located in Saratoga Springs, AIM Services Inc. is a non-profit charitable organization serving over 3,000 individuals and families mainly in Saratoga, Warren, and Washington Counties, with a reach covering all eastern New York. AIM provides supports and services unique to each person's individualized needs, goals, and dreams. AIM's mission revolves around promoting inclusion, independence, and self-confidence in those they serve through community-based services, advocacy, and education.