

Connection During COVID – the Camp Wellness Way

By Pamela Wagner

“I’m so glad you’re still open.”

This simple statement of appreciation has been spoken millions of times by last-minute shoppers and thankful late-night travelers across the world.

In March 2020, this phrase acquired an entirely different meaning. When the COVID-19 pandemic began to force sweeping changes to how we lived and died, people with mental health challenges and/or substance-use disorders, who were low-income or homeless, suddenly had to survive without many of the agencies and systems that they relied upon for support and sometimes their very existence. Individuals everywhere were at an increased risk of conflict within their homes, domestic violence, suicide, and hospitalization. Those who had few opportunities on a normal day found themselves with even less during the pandemic.

While businesses around the world were beginning to close and human interactions were rapidly moving into a safer digital realm, **Cheryl Glass, MBA-HCM, MCHES, CPRP**, program director at the University of Arizona Family and Community Medicine’s RISE Health & Wellness Center, had a difficult decision to make. Their program, Camp Wellness, serves low-income adults with mental health and substance-use disorders, many of whom also have significant physical health challenges. There were real risks in continuing in-person services for such a vulnerable population, and she knew there was an even greater risk of not.

“We know that isolation, fear, and a loss of daily routine can be as big of a health issue as the actual pandemic,” Glass said. “Our goal was to keep people alive and out of the over-loaded hospitals.”

With little time to plan, and part of her staff working from home due to their own health conditions, Glass began formulating a strategy to keep everyone healthy and the doors open for those who needed a safe place to be.

“I spent so much time looking up regulations - I’d look at guidance for schools, gyms, healthcare, restaurants, and colleges—especially the University of Arizona—because what we were doing was a hybrid of all these,” Glass explained. “The metrics I viewed most often were COVID-19 cases by day, COVID-19 deaths, demographics, and hospitalizations. The hospital bed usage and availability, ventilator usage and hospital-specific metrics were added in either late May or early June 2020.”

“Camp Pandemia or Camp Panda,” as the reduced-hours pandemic schedule was affectionately named, required that on-site attendance be by appointment-only, to maintain social-distancing regulations, with maximum capacities sometimes changing daily. It was no longer acceptable to “just drop by to say Hi!” which the program’s alumni would frequently do.

“Masks and social distancing made it difficult to clearly express that we still cared about them even as they were being exiled from the building,” Glass said. “We wanted to make sure that at least no one was sent away hungry, so we offered to-go food whenever we could.”

Camp Wellness routinely works with adults diagnosed with agoraphobia, depression, and other mental health challenges. Usually, staff work hard to convince people to leave their homes to attend classes. Now, they were tasked with asking their attendees to stay home, if it was safer there.

There was immediate concern that program attendees would be severely affected due to food and personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages and transportation challenges.

“I’d have a panic attack every time I went into the grocery store. I couldn’t stay there long enough to get even the bare minimums that I needed,” program alumni Rob* explained.

“We reached out to Sandie Hinojos, Community Programs Supervisor at the [Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona](#) and asked what we could do to help our students obtain food,” explained **Pamela Wagner**, Camp Wellness center support. “Even with everything that her own program was going through, Sandie didn’t hesitate to help us help others.”

Students who were unable to get to the Food Bank made arrangements for a Camp Wellness health mentor to deliver their food boxes to them instead. Any extra food, supplies and resources were distributed amongst students whenever possible.

Transitioning to providing services on an entirely digital platform was not an effective option, given the students lack of technology. So, a hybrid model was implemented in a matter of days. Webcams were harder to find than gold (and just as expensive) so a COVID-19 Support Grant from Arizona Complete Health/Care1st was instrumental in keeping Camp Wellness going. A private Facebook page, created for students to communicate with Camp Wellness and each other, served as a central point for weekly class schedules and important notifications.

Students were encouraged to attend virtually. However, many of them could not afford their necessary medications, much less a computer or smartphone. UA RISE Principal Investigator **Randa Kutob, MD, MPH**, suggested that a portion of the support grant funds be utilized to acquire low-cost smartphones with data packages. With the assistance of the UArizona’s Verizon representative **Donna Blotkamp** and a special pandemic communications offer, Camp Wellness was able to provide loaner devices to several students so they could attend classes virtually and keep in touch with their personal support systems.

Staff received a crash course in teaching via Zoom, while helping in-person attendees navigate the expansive safety protocols that were quickly put in place. Even with the strict COVID protocols, students were grateful to be able to settle into a pandemic routine, so their lives did not feel like complete chaos. They shared that they felt that pandemic precautions were taken seriously at Camp, which provided a sense of security during such an insecure time. Camp Wellness Nurse, **Guadalupe Lugo, RN**, recognized that something as simple as proper hand-washing techniques were not always easy. She found a creative way to have fun while showing students how to stay safe.

“I gave students a product called ‘Glo Germ’ to rub on their hands,” said Lugo. “Then, without any additional instructions, they were told to wash their hands. Afterwards, students placed their hands under UV light to see how well they did. If their hands were clean, they received fun stickers. If they weren’t, they learned how to do it better and be safer during the pandemic.”

Each day, in-person attendees were bombarded with mandatory temperature/symptom checks, masks and face-shields, hand sanitizer and other layered mitigation measures, depending on the current COVID rate-of-spread. The unprecedented need for masks exceeded supplies worldwide, yet without them Camp Wellness couldn’t remain open. Once again, the resourcefulness of staff and the generosity of the community came to the rescue.

Camp Nurse Lugo recalled, “I heard on the news that a lady in Marana had a group, ‘Masks for Hospitals’ that was sewing masks to donate so I reached out. They were so happy to help us! We’re still re-using those same masks—after proper sanitizing—over a year later.”

One classroom was specified as a “Zen Spot” where people could go by themselves to manage their stress or remove their masks to take deep breaths. This was especially important to lower anxiety from being out of breath after walking upstairs or getting used to wearing a mask for extended periods of time.

“It felt so good to help students feel better in the moment and realize that they weren’t alone in feeling panicked or breathless,” Glass said. “It was a great example of using the skills they’ve learned to work through a temporary uncomfortable feeling.”

Michele Keller, health mentor, made it her personal mission each day to coordinate her attire with her different masks, giving the students and staff something humorous to look forward to.

“Camp Wellness staff worked hard to make everyone feel comfortable, even with all of the PPE and protocols. Everything I had to do to come here was still worth it because of how much better being here made me feel,” alumni Luce* said.

While most students appreciated the extra processes that were put in place to keep them safe, there were others who did not. One student became so frustrated that she yelled, “You changed EVERYTHING,” to which, the staff responded, “The whole world changed!”

Even in those tense moments, a sense of camaraderie in the face of fear brought students and staff closer together. Some did not believe that the pandemic was real, and the extra precautions viewed as invasively ridiculous. Others with past gun trauma struggled to not panic when an infrared thermometer was pointed at their foreheads. Staff walked a fine line everyday between being person-centered, not increasing students’ anxieties and keeping everyone safe enough to stay open.

It's important to note that while Camp Wellness Health Mentors were providing support to the students, there were numerous people providing support to them as well. Because of solid pre-existing working relationships within multiple areas of the U Arizona, Camp Wellness was able to remain open. From the custodians making sure there was enough toilet paper and sanitizing cleaner, the business office locating additional supplies when none could be found anywhere, to the UA Facilities Management "Germ Busters," who would happily spray the building whenever there was a potential COVID case, everyone worked together for the greater good. Co-workers routinely reached out to make sure that each other's families had what they needed to survive, as well.

Those employees who were on-site created a strong bond to get through each day. Nurse Lugo took extra time out to dress in fun costumes ranging from Einstein, Frida Kahlo, and Janet Jackson—just to add some humor and smiles back into the workplace. Health Mentor **Mike Harvey** focused on being positive, even in the middle of the pandemic.

"I appreciate that I have a job where I get paid to help others," Harvey said. "Being stuck at home with nothing to do would have been worse for me."

There was an appreciable disconnect between the staff on-site and those working from home—neither group had an easy time, and their challenges were very different from each other. While on-site staff were just trying to survive and thinking of solutions in the spur of the moment, those working off-site felt left-out, confused, and isolated. Working with limited information and a different sense of urgency made it easy to have misunderstandings and become frustrated. No amount of communication was enough to understand fully what the others were going through. Team members still found ways to bridge these gaps, like calling each other during off-hours to listen and provide emotional support, helping each other through the stress of the unknown.

As the pandemic wore on, personal connections became even more important. Zoom classes could only provide so much interaction, and the stress from being isolated mounted. Health Mentors (who are also Certified Peer Support Specialists), began calling to check on students they hadn't seen recently, especially if the student had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Staff realized that people with minimal support systems were getting infected and often had no way to get the supplies they needed. That is when the PORCH (Peer Outreach for Recovery, Caring and Helping) Initiative was born. Care packages consisting of toiletries (including the elusive toilet paper!), stress-reducing activities, fruit and local resources were assembled. Whenever necessary, a loaner smartphone was included so that students could attend classes via Zoom and keep in contact with their health care team.

For those who were diagnosed with COVID-19 or placed under quarantine to await test results, an enhanced PORCH package included an electric kettle, thermometer, anti-diarrheal meds, electrolyte-replacement drinks, soup, etc. These were delivered by staff in PPE who took the time to make sure there wasn't anything else that they needed. Others would interact virtually to help with breathing exercises and to just be there for them during a very scary time.

"It broke my heart to see students who had been thriving and gaining ground in their recovery suddenly immobilized by fear," explained Health Mentor Keller. "There was a desperation, an acute depreciation of their quality of life. One student told me 'I would have died if Camp hadn't been here.'"

It's no secret that the pandemic brought mental health into a new spotlight.

Mental health concerns were suddenly no longer reserved for marginalized populations. Working from home, children learning remotely, and the threat of death with every breath made it OK to not be OK. Suicides were on the rise across all walks of life and the crisis centers were overwhelmed.

Camp Wellness knew that their services were more crucial than ever before.

The steps Camp Wellness took to keep students, family, friends, and their team connected, safe and moving forward during the most uncertain time in recent history was no less than miraculous.

So, in May 2021, when a longtime alumni of Camp Wellness walked into the lobby, breathed a sigh of relief and said, "I'm so glad you're still open," it was more than the sum of her words. It was a victory cry.