

## **COTS: Coping with COVID-19**

The current COVID-19 emergency has made us all familiar with the phrase *shelter-in-place*. But what do you do when you don't have shelter?

For COTS, shelter and housing have always been urgent concerns. Thirty-two years ago, Mary Isaak and Laure Reichel established the organization, Committee on the Shelterless, to care for people living in the streets, under bridges and behind buildings. Three decades later, COTS remains committed to providing shelter to the shelterless, meals for the hungry, and avenues to permanent housing to homeless individuals and families who come to us in need.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves adapting to new and sometimes paradoxical challenges. Here at COTS, each day brings unprecedented challenges. How do you safely operate a congregate shelter when social distancing is an absolute necessity? How do you best protect the health of an extremely vulnerable, and often transient, population? How do you screen for a virus when tests aren't readily available? How do you continue to provide a full range of services when your volunteer base needs to remain at home?

We'd like to share some of the ways in which we're meeting new challenges and continuing to provide shelter, housing and support services to those who are most vulnerable.

### **COTS Emergency Shelter Programs**

At the Mary Isaak Center, our adult emergency shelter, new social distancing requirements mandate that we reduce the number of guests by about half to keep everyone safe (56 people, versus 112). As we continue to work with our other homeless service providers and our county to ensure that everyone who needs shelter has it, we have increased sanitization and cleaning protocols in our dorm and common areas. Guests with colds or coughs sleep in a special area of the dorm, surrounded by temporary walls. Everyone, including staff, is required to wear masks per new recommendations. We continue to monitor the health and wellbeing of our shelter guests, and those who present with symptoms are referred to Petaluma Health Center (PHC), which guides us as our healthcare partner. PHC is currently providing clinic services to shelter guests through daily telemedicine appointments.

At our Kids First Family Shelter, even at about half the normal capacity due to new distancing recommendations (about 6 families, rather than 11), accommodating the

around-the-clock needs of parents and children involves extra measures. With school closures, we are helping students and families transition to “homeschool.” A recent corporate grant has allowed us to purchase six mobile devices to help our school-age children stay actively engaged in online learning. Meals and groceries are being delivered to the shelter to minimize the need for families to leave the shelter.

In both locations, volunteer engagement has understandably slowed. Staff members who are able to work on-site are diligently working extra hours, and shelter residents are stepping in to help with the heightened cleaning requirements.

### **COTS Recuperative Care program**

Our Recuperative Care program continues to accept referrals from partners St. Joseph Health and Kaiser Permanente, but has been reduced from six beds to a capacity of three. These clients are homeless patients who have been discharged from the hospital stay but still need somewhere safe to recover. Our partners test patients for COVID-19 if they are exhibiting symptoms and do not refer any person whose results are positive. Even with the advantage of relative isolation, Recuperative Care guests – and staff who provides care for them – are required to wear masks.

### **COTS Homelessness Prevention & Rapid Re-housing Programs**

These programs provide resources, referrals and limited financial services to a) prevent homelessness and help keep someone permanently housed, and b) rapidly transition someone from homelessness to housing permanency. We are seeing a marked increase in individuals reaching out for assistance and are currently compiling a waiting list so that we may serve as many people as possible, as well as referring into the county's Coordinated Entry service. With record numbers of people experiencing joblessness, we expect demand for these services to rise dramatically over the many months ahead.

### **COTS Supportive Housing Programs**

A crucial component of housing stability is continued case management. COTS operates four supportive housing programs, which provide permanent homes to about 200 people throughout Sonoma County. COTS staff continue to provide case management during this time through ongoing individual support and referrals, using video chats and phone calls. An important new component of this support includes virus education and prevention. Delivery of supplies, including meals and resources as appropriate, are provided through safe drop-offs.

### **COTS Outreach Program**

Our Outreach team continues to work throughout the county to help those who are living in the streets and encampments. Our Community Outreach Specialist delivers food daily to those who can't come to our kitchen for meal services and safely engages with those presenting with COVID-19 symptoms. He continues to monitor those

who are vulnerable because of age or health conditions that increase their risk of contracting the virus. Our Recovery Outreach Specialist visits and monitors clients struggling with addiction or in substance abuse recovery. He ensures that people get to their needed healthcare appointments and have access to their medications while they remain in treatment.

### **Mary's Table**

The COTS kitchen, Mary's Table, serves more than 8,000 healthy, homemade meals each month, and through a generous private foundation grant, these meals are provided free, 365 days each year. We are adapting our services to help prevent the potential spread of COVID-19. Residential meal service in the dining room is now limited to 15 guests at a time to allow for safe distancing, and food is brought to each diner once handwashing is complete. Table surfaces and chairs are sanitized between seatings. We continue to provide nutritious meals to anyone experiencing hunger in the community, but now provide these in to-go boxes to adhere to safety standards.

While the full impact of COVID-19 is yet unknown, we do expect it to have an exponential effect on the homeless community. In Sonoma County, 68% of homeless survey respondents reported having one or more health condition, making them particularly susceptible to illness, infection and death than housed populations. Increasing the urgency, a potential economic fallout could drastically increase the local homeless count and create an even higher demand for shelter and services. As that demand increases, so does the need for stronger sanitation, adaptable facilities, and additional staffing.

We are especially grateful for your concern and involvement during this time and understand that the pandemic presents challenges for each and every one of us. We ask that you keep COTS in mind as you consider your upcoming funding priorities. Our success – and the success of the people we serve – is a direct result of the ongoing support from people like you.

Thank you.