

SAINT FRANCIS MINISTRIES

Hi Lites

SPRING/SUMMER 2020



Saint Francis
MINISTRIES

FAMILIES
& STAFF
CONNECT
DURING
COVID-19

PG 8

HEROES  WORK  HERE 



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Our Mission

Saint Francis, providing healing and hope to children and families.

Saint Francis Ministries publishes the Hi-Lites newsletter four times a year.

To receive future copies of Hi-Lites, subscribe online at saintfrancisministries/newsroom.org.

At Saint Francis Ministries, we work hard to be faithful stewards of the Earth's resources, as well as our own. That's why we have created a user-friendly, easily accessible version of Hi-Lites that you can view online anytime. Past issues are also available to read and download. You can find them at www.saintfrancisministries.org/newsroom/hi-lites.

If you'd rather not receive the printed version by mail, please contact Lindsey Decker, and we'll happily remove you from our Hi-Lites mailing list.

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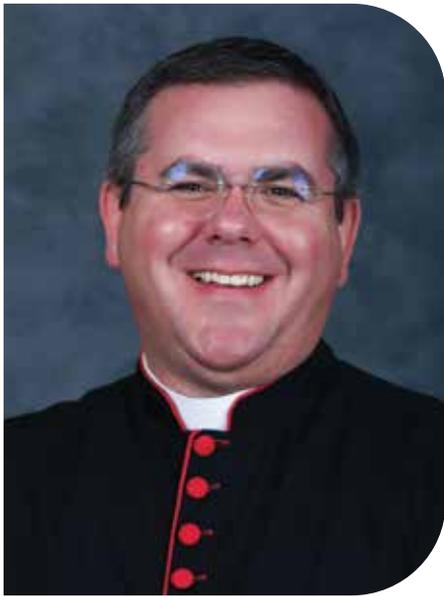
Saint Francis
MINISTRIES

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A Message From Fr. Bobby

COMMITTED TO PROVIDING HOPE



**The Very Reverend
Robert Nelson Smith**
Dean, President, and CEO

I suspect that my most significant take-away from the COVID-19 crisis will be the re-affirmation of the interconnectedness of human beings and communities. If anything, this experience has reminded me just how much we depend upon each other. Like yours and many other families, my own has had to adjust to social distancing, shelter-in-place, and anxiety about the health and safety of our loved ones. Through it all, we've grown even more grateful for those who risk their comfort and health for others. We've found extra meaning in those small, seemingly insignificant moments of human interaction.

In light of this unprecedented experience, there was simply no way we could publish the next Hi-Lites issue without addressing COVID-19 and its effect on Saint Francis and the children and families we serve. It has touched virtually every aspect of our individual and communal lives – how we work and learn, spend our leisure time, interact with each other, and care for the most vulnerable among us.

This Hi-Lites issue looks at the Saint Francis response to COVID-19. In these pages, you'll read how front-line staff responded – through technological innovation, creative

thinking, and compassionate action – to a new reality while maintaining continuity of service to those we serve. You'll read how individuals, churches, and communities continue to partner with Saint Francis through the Care Portal and the Crisis Response Fund to provide essential material and financial support for children and families. You'll learn how Saint Francis is taking the lead in child and family advocacy, helping guide federal and legislative policy that serves the needs of at-risk families. Finally, you'll read how Saint Francis is developing nimble responses to potential future crises through high-level, comprehensive planning.

If you take anything away from this issue, I hope it's the understanding that Saint Francis leadership and staff remain committed to providing healing and hope to children and families through any challenge. Whatever happens, we will always adapt, adjust, create, and advocate for the dignity and worth of human beings. We will never abandon our conviction that unconditional love heals and redeems lives.

I remain deeply grateful for your friendship and support.

May God bless you and keep you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Fr. Bobby". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Support for Urgent Services Needed

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented shift in how Saint Francis Ministries approaches the services we provide for children and families.

Impacts from the pandemic unfolded over several months in the communities where Saint Francis works, and the organization expects to see long-term challenges. With an initial focus on supporting staff and clients in staying safe and healthy, Saint Francis has begun to develop new ways of serving children and families and to prepare for a future that looks different than it did in March.

“We expect the need for our services to become even more pressing,” said Fr. David Hodges, chief development officer and president of The Saint Francis Foundation. “It has been critical that we have needed resources. We all are concerned about how families and their finances will become strained. Those needs are likely to be physical - support for things like food, clothing, and medicine - but they also will be emotional and spiritual.

“The likelihood that stress and anxiety will lead to an increase in child abuse is high,” he added. “Already, communities are seeing escalating reports of domestic abuse. We must be prepared

to answer the call for help to supply support and resources that we surely will receive in the coming months.”

In response to identified needs, The Saint Francis Foundation created the Crisis Response Fund to financially support the work being done to serve children and families.

In the time of COVID-19, meeting needs has meant additional technical resources like tablets and establishing internet connections so families could stay in touch virtually, finding resources and ideas to help parents home school, and brainstorming ways to help little hearts deal with such a significantly changed routine.

“We have quickly adapted to ensuring as many employees as possible can work from home through enhanced technology supports,” said Rachel Marsh, vice president - advocacy. “We’ve monitored in real time changing federal and state guidelines that support our use of telehealth and televideo in staying engaged with clients, and keeping parents and children connected with each other.”

The Saint Francis Outpatient Behavioral Health team has been conducting telehealth sessions that allow them to support vulnerable clients even when they couldn’t meet face to face.

“When I look at the way Saint Francis has responded to this crisis, I’m reminded of how honored I am to be part of this team of caring, dedicated professionals,” Fr. David said.



If you are interested in supporting the increased needs brought about by COVID-19, donations can be made online at saintfrancisministries.org by selecting the Crisis Response Fund. In addition, checks can be mailed using the enclosed reply envelope in this issue.



Policy & Advocacy Team Moves Quickly to Support Saint Francis Children, Families

As world leaders officially declared a coronavirus pandemic in March, Saint Francis Ministries' policy and advocacy team began the important work of determining how children and families would be impacted.

They collaborated to gather information about the organization's work on a national and international basis to build a plan that would allow them to advocate in ways that would better serve those who depend on us.

"It was important that we consider all aspects of what was occurring as we developed our advocacy response," said Page Walley, chief public policy officer. "We had to look at federal policy and access to stimulus money that would support nonprofit programs serving children and families. We had to consider that many of our clients would be laid off from work, that we would see increased anxiety and stress among those we serve, and that our own employees would be significantly impacted as schools closed and spouses were laid off."

The result was a plan using a multi-pronged approach that took into account all of those factors and allowed Saint Francis to be adaptive and creative in its response to the pandemic.

"Even as we looked at the COVID-19 pandemic as a health crisis, we also recognized that the necessary stay-



Dr. Page Walley
Chief Public Policy Officer



Marlo Nash
National Director of
Partnerships and Policy



Rachel Marsh
Vice President of Advocacy

at-home orders could put families, children, and communities at risk," said Rachel Marsh, vice president of advocacy. "School closures, social distancing measures, economic impacts, and escalating stresses can increase risks of domestic and child abuse or neglect – all of which can have long-term impacts."

Preparing Financially

To make sure Saint Francis and our community partners would be prepared financially to quickly adapt programs and services to protect children, families, and staff, the policy and advocacy team worked successfully in Washington to have nonprofits included in the federal stimulus package. Those funds were critical to ensure support for nonprofit family services providers to sustain and adapt to changing outreach approaches, such as expanded telehealth needs.

The grants and research members of the team worked with The Saint

Francis Foundation in support of the Crisis Response Fund that encourages individuals and communities to help support the needs of foster care, kinship, family preservation, and other work being done at the local level.

Putting Family First

As experts in the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), federal legislation passed in 2018 that is considered the most significant change in child welfare in decades, Saint Francis leaders also delved into how the FFPSA could be used to help states in the current crisis.

"As the child welfare field explores ways to offset and address the impact of the pandemic on families and children, it makes sense to include the Family First Prevention Services Act as part of the response and recovery effort," said Marlo Nash, national director of partnerships and policy. "FFPSA is a family-centered and trauma-informed law that gives

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LITTLE MIRACLES:

The Generosity of Many Supports Saint Francis' Work



Darlene Miller will be 85 years old in August.

She has spent much of the last few months of her 84th year tucked in behind her sewing machine, making more than 1,300 masks for the Grand Island, Nebraska, community where she lives. In fact, her masks have been shipped throughout the state, and some landed at Saint Francis offices where they were gratefully received for children, families, and employees.



Darlene Miller, made more than 1,300 masks for Saint Francis.

Darlene started making masks for her family and friends, and then – she laughs and admits she's not quite sure how it happened – the enterprise grew.

On a fixed income, Darlene used up her material stash from a lifetime of sewing projects, and has relied on donations of fabric, elastic, and thread to keep going. Those supplies, she said,

often arrive when she least expects it.

"I call it a God thing," she said. "I'll be caught up, and I don't have any elastic or I'm on my last spool of white thread. The first couple of times, I panicked and started tearing stuff apart in the sewing room trying to find some elastic. Then you look in a box that you have gone through a half a dozen times, and there, laying on top, will be a package of elastic. I call them little miracles. And I like the little miracles."

Now, Darlene doesn't get upset when she's running out of needed items. "I say, 'Well, God it's up to you. You want me to make some more, you know what you need to do.' And he does it," she said.

Generous, kind-hearted people like Darlene and supportive community organizations have poured their kindness on Saint Francis Ministries throughout the pandemic.

From sending hundreds of homemade masks, many through the CarePortal organization that works through faith communities, to grants that have assisted Saint Francis' work in numerous areas, the kindness and support have definitely felt like a "God thing."

"We have been grateful for the support we've received in the form of masks, hand sanitizer, grants to

support our work, and prayers to bolster our hearts as we have taken on the challenges of COVID-19 in recent months," said The Very Rev. Robert N. Smith, dean, president, and CEO of Saint Francis Ministries. "As well-received and needed as each of these donations was, it was also important to know that we have the support of incredible communities who believe in us and what we do to make a difference for children and families."



Staff shown with donated materials such as masks and sanitizer.

It's difficult to enumerate all of the gifts that have impacted Saint Francis. For instance, **McCormick Distillery**, like many distilleries, switched their production, and then donated 15 gallons of hand sanitizer. **Great Plains Manufacturing** in Salina also donated hand sanitizer.

Mahaska Bottling Co. donated 1,500 sports energy drinks to staff at Salina West residential facilities, while **Dillons** grocery donated \$10,000 in gift cards to help feed foster and kinship families in Kansas and Nebraska who



Fr. David Hodges (left) and employees of Mahaska Bottling Co.

are struggling during the pandemic. It is impossible to list all who stepped forward to help through donations of time, materials and dollars.

Saint Francis also was the grateful recipient of several grants that supported the work we're doing.

The Kansas Health Foundation

granted Saint Francis \$25,000 from its Impact and Capacity Grant fund to help expand the organization's tele-video capabilities for Outpatient Behavioral Health Services. When the pandemic required social distancing, Saint Francis moved many of its services online, including therapy and substance use treatment. This helped clients continue to receive needed services in the safest manner possible.

Salina Regional Health Center also gave \$10,000 to support telehealth.

"It is imperative we continue building our telehealth and telecommunications infrastructure now in order to provide effective services that will keep clients and employees safe," said Tom Blythe, president and COO. "We anticipate that COVID-19 distancing measures will be utilized far into the future. It's important to continue treatment and progress while maintaining safety and stability in the home."

The Salina Area United Way granted \$1,000 to support kinship and foster families with urgent needs.

"Kinship families that Saint Francis serves are often older relatives, and they frequently are on a limited income that doesn't allow for fluctuations in demand on their resources," Fr. Bobby said. "Foster and kinship families may not have the resources to transport students to receive free meals being offered by community resources or they may be quarantined and unable to go out.

"We are appreciative of the Salina Area United Way for having such a strong understanding of what situations like this mean for vulnerable families and for stepping forward to meet critical needs in our community," he said.

The Greater Salina Community Foundation

met needs of the Salina West Residential facilities through a \$3,618.75 grant for sanitizing services and purchase of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE).

"Salina West provides essential in-patient treatment for children and youth with severe behavioral and mental health needs," said Jerry Slaight, executive director of residential services. "This much-appreciated grant will help us manage costs of the deep cleaning and sanitization necessary and will also meet needs for additional PPE we have ordered."

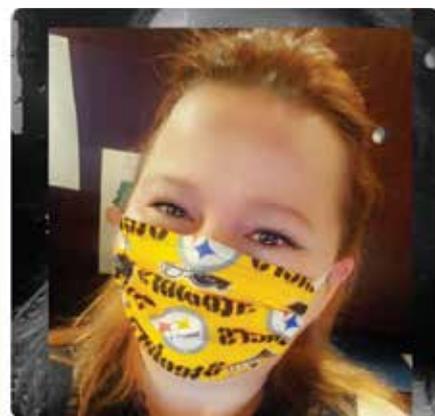
Among the PPE being purchased are thermometers, which are used to check staff as they report for shifts and to regularly check residents, surgical face masks, and supplies to make masks.

As part of their continuing support to St. John's Ministries & School, a subsidiary of Saint Francis, **The Soule Family Foundation** graciously donated \$25,000 for the purchase of telehealth IT equipment and PPE during the COVID-19 period. The Foundation made the donation in honor of Donna Vanier, a philanthropist and committed supporter of St. John's Military School, who passed away in May 2020.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic is far-reaching, and everyone has assuredly felt concern as the country responded to shelter-in-place orders, strained resources, and anxiety and stress.

"Through the pandemic and in the coming months, Saint Francis is grateful and honored to be supported and to be reminded that we all belong to each other," Fr. Bobby said.

"I turn as I often do to the words of Desmond Tutu, who said, 'My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours. We belong in a bundle of life.' I am grateful to belong, in the midst of the unique challenges we're facing, on the same path with so many who find their hearts called to help."



Jeannie Logan, compliance tech, wears one of our donated masks when working.



Saint Francis Staff, Foster Families Cope with COVID

Each summer, Preston and Kami Lubbers of Kingman, Kansas, pack up their family and head to Lake Afton near Wichita to relax on the water and spend time together. This year, they didn't wait for summer. With six children (biological, adopted, and foster) ranging from 10 months to 14 years of age, sheltering in place under one roof together, the pull of the lake was stronger than ever. Nothing de-stresses like the gentle lapping of waves against the boat and a baby goat in a bathing suit.

"Jelly is our bottle-fed baby who goes with us," said Kami. "The kids love her and like to help care for her. She's a huge hit at the lake. It's comforting to sit and spend time with her, especially when you're stressed."

The Lubbers are just one family trying to cope with the uncertainty and anxiety brought on by the coronavirus crisis. Many families served by Saint Francis, as well as those of employees, are having to learn new ways of working and living together. The most successful may prove to be those who can do so with creativity, patience, and even humor. All of them will need support.

As states started issuing stay-at-home orders in March, many families were forced to figure out how to balance



The Lubbers family likes to social distance at the lake. Jelly is a bottle-fed baby goat that likes to go to the lake.

working from home with schooling from home – while navigating all the adjustments and interactions in between. School districts and colleges abruptly ended in-person classes, sending thousands of students home to finish the school year online. Many employers, including Saint Francis Ministries, mandated that those employees who could work from home should do so. On March 23, Saint Francis restricted the number of visitors to its offices and instituted CDC-recommended coronavirus safety measures for those employees whose jobs required they go in. Eventually, Saint Francis closed its offices to visitors and limited the number of employees who could work inside at one time.

From the beginning, Saint Francis leadership began crafting strategies and policies to support the health and safety of children, families, and employees while meeting state mandates for persons in care.

"Saint Francis places the highest priority on the health, safety, and well-being of our employees, youth, and families we serve, as well as the wider community," said Chief Operations Officer Tom Blythe. "We are committed to ensuring our employees and those we serve are safe during the challenges we face regarding COVID-19. We remain in continual contact with local, state, and federal officials regarding the best course of action to protect everyone and reduce the spread of infection."

For essential workers, whose job requires close and frequent contact with those they serve, stay-at-home and social distancing guidelines made doing that job especially challenging. Not only were Saint Francis workers required to adapt to changes at their job, but like many other parents, they've had to deal with new routines at home. Foster parents in turn had to adjust to new realities. They've had to learn different ways of doing foster care, even as they continue to provide for multiple children in their house.

"We are committed to ensuring our employees and those we serve are safe during the challenges we face regarding COVID-19." – SAINT FRANCIS MINISTRIES



Whetstone family makes time with their biological kids during the shelter in place.

"COVID has definitely been challenging," said Lacey Whetstone. "I had to look to Saint Francis for some direction because while I have childcare, I didn't want them to go. We have a nurse in our home daycare, and I felt she deserved that spot and that security."

Both teachers, Lacey and her husband, Anthony, were already sheltering at their Arkansas City home and trying to finish out the school year while caring for their four biological kids, ages 16, 14, 12, and 9, and the two toddlers they foster and are in the process of adopting.

Fortunately, they'd already developed a strong relationship with the toddlers' biological grandmother, who not only helped care for the little ones but lent a hand with the Whetstones' other kids too.

"We have such a good relationship with her," said Lacey. "Our own kids see her as grandma, and she loves it because she was lonely. We've spent holidays together, and she checks on

me and makes me casseroles. I got so much more out of fostering and adoption than I gave these kids. It's made my life much richer."

As in normal times, routine is essential. For the Whetstones, that means a daily ride for the toddlers in the car after lunch so they can see cows and spend time in natural surroundings. After that, they go down for a nap so Lacey can work uninterrupted. Snatching time throughout the day for work is a refrain echoed by Saint Francis employees.



Erica Romero, permanency specialist, balances working from home with her home school duties.

Permanency specialist Erica Romero is the single mother of three girls, ages 7, 6, and 4, and she's been working from her Buhler, Kansas, home since March. Although she tries to maintain a routine for herself and for her daughters, it's not easy – especially since their house is small and Erica doesn't have room for a dedicated workspace.

"I wake up early, exercise, and start getting stuff ready for their day," she

said. "I'll begin work at eight, but I try not to plan too much for them early in the day because they're kind of cranky in the mornings. Same with early afternoon. They're not used to being with each other all the time, and they don't understand that when I shut the door, I'm at work. I try to plan meetings and video visits with clients around those times. Sometimes, that means video visits in the evenings and on weekends. We have only one tablet that they share for school, so between that and me working, we don't get a lot of school stuff done during the day. So, we'll work on it after we eat dinner. I have to admit, it's been tough."

Whether foster families or employees, Erica says they all need support. She receives some help from family, but they're not available during the day. And her church is closed for now. She says it's important to check up on each other, cook or deliver a meal, or even babysit if it's socially safe. Also, remember the children. They can feel forgotten in all the craziness. A note or small gift (if acceptable) can work wonders.

"We're trying to juggle new things, while maintaining the same standards from before the virus," she said. "It's a battle between our capabilities and our desires, and most of the time we can't achieve both perfectly. I think it is important for people to remember that this situation isn't normal. There is nothing that prepared any of us for this, and we need to give each other grace, lots and lots of grace."

Care Portal Meets Urgent Needs During Crisis

Headed for an appointment across town with two little children in the back seat, the last thing Carolyn needed was car trouble. Yet, that's what she got. Ever since she volunteered to provide kinship care to her 3- and 4-year-old relatives, she'd relied on that car to transport them to doctor appointments, visitations, and case management meetings. Now she had no vehicle. And though she works full-time, the repair costs were way beyond her means. She relayed her predicament to her Saint Francis case worker, who submitted a needs request to CarePortal, and within hours a local church had stepped up to pay for Carolyn's car repairs.

For many Saint Francis workers and the families they serve, CarePortal has been a godsend, especially during the coronavirus crisis when so many are stretched to the limit by stress and economic uncertainty. Founded in Kansas City, Missouri, CarePortal connects churches with child and family welfare agencies to provide material support to foster, kinship, adoptive, and birth families, as well as to teens aging out of the foster care system. Saint Francis Ministries currently partners with CarePortal in six Kansas communities and hopes to soon extend that collaboration into Texas and Nebraska.

Jae Hedrick works as a development officer for Saint Francis, but she also oversees CarePortal on the Saint Francis end. She, along with a couple

helpers from Customer Care, vet every CarePortal request made by a Saint Francis worker. Once they've determined legitimate need, they post the request to CarePortal ... and wait. Usually within minutes, several churches respond to meet the need. Jae and her helpers have a pile of stories like Carolyn's.

"That's what is so beautiful about CarePortal," she said. "It's organized so families make an outside connection with a church in their own community. It's like having someone you can call on when you need a hand. Most of us have someone like that, but the people Saint Francis serves are often isolated and generally turn to government or other agencies for assistance. There's not anything wrong with that – good people do great work in those agencies – but it's a special thing when people are served by people who aren't paid to do it."

It also saves those other agencies money. To date, material support provided by CarePortal in Kansas alone has kept nearly 1,000 children out of foster care and allowed about 1,200 to remain with their current placement. Help from CarePortal enabled nearly 750 children to reunite with their birth families and almost 70 to join adoptive families. All this has saved the State of Kansas hundreds of thousands of dollars, as well as healed families and changed the lives of hundreds of children.



Jae says the key to CarePortal's success is the relationships it creates and supports. Churches like the program because they know Saint Francis has thoroughly vetted the need. They trust it's real. And, for those members unable to foster themselves, it offers them a practical way to contribute and lend help.

"That's why I'm so thankful to be part of this," said Jae. "These are real human beings taking money from their own wallets or giving extra stuff they have in their garage to meet the needs of people in their community. CarePortal does amazing things by just enabling us all to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Churches are changing the trajectory of at-risk families simply by treating them like human beings."

Items requested most often through CarePortal are beds, dressers, living room furniture, and car seats. Churches interested in partnering with CarePortal are encouraged to visit careportal.org. The need is especially acute as families try to cope with social isolation and restrictions.

Advocacy Team Moves Quickly

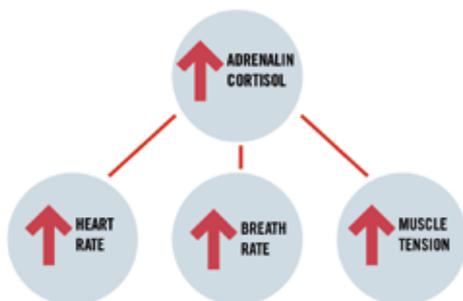
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The Traumatic Experience of COVID-19

Trauma is any experience that leaves a person feeling hopeless, helpless, or unable to do anything about their situation. Trauma can be experienced by victims, witnesses, or those related to either—and even by hearing the details of the events.

The perception and experience of the incident is what matters most, and the “trauma tsunami” approaching from COVID-19 will have devastating social and economic consequences.

THE STRESS RESPONSE TRIGGERED BY TRAUMA



Some stress is tolerable but it is only meant to last short-term. When trauma is prolonged and exaggerated the nervous system becomes dysregulated.

SYMPTOMS/REACTIONS

EMOTIONAL

Anger, fear, hurt, worry

BEHAVIORAL

Aggression, hyperactivity, impulsiveness

COGNITIVE

Difficulty with focus, attention, problem solving and decision making

PHYSICAL

Stomachaches, headaches

Trauma's Impact on Individuals, Families, Communities, and Society



FINANCIAL STRAIN



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE



SUICIDAL IDEATION



NEED FOR HEALTHCARE



SUBSTANCE ABUSE



NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH



VIOLENCE



CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

While we know trauma is a fact, so is resilience. Despite the threat of an upcoming trauma tsunami facing our nation, there is hope.

Join the National Trauma Campaign today at ctipp.org

Learn more about the impact of trauma at starr.org/ctipp and ctipp.org/trauma-informed-resources

DRIVEN TO HEAL

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federal, state, and tribal governments the ability to work in concert to reach, preserve, and treat any family whose child has become at imminent risk of entering foster care as a fallout from the pandemic.”

Partners who impact the child welfare system will need to work together to remove barriers to implementing the FFPSA and infuse existing and newly written prevention plans with provisions that are responsive to pandemic-induced adversities.

Trauma-Informed Care

“The impact and effects of the pandemic likely won’t be fully understood for months,” Marlo said. Early indicators show significant increases in mental health challenges,

domestic violence calls, and in some areas, incidents of severe child abuse and child maltreatment reports.

It underscores the importance of Saint Francis’ involvement with The National Trauma Campaign, a national grassroots campaign that focuses on urging government to incorporate trauma-informed policies into all of their work.

“The Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP) launched just as COVID-19 began to spread worldwide,” Marlo said. “What the country faces now underscores the important message of CTIPP, which is how critical it is that evidence-based practices to strengthen children and families must be at the foundation of the policy decisions we make.”

The effects of trauma, in general – and now the impact of quarantining and the pandemic – must be addressed at every level of government for the sake of caring for children and families,” Marlo said.

Continuing efforts

The Saint Francis Policy and Advocacy team continues its work to support the life-changing programs and services Saint Francis Ministries provides. A significant part of their work is helping to educate government leaders, legislators, and other stakeholders about child and family well-being, and what evidence-based measures can be put in place to support our vulnerable and at-risk populations.

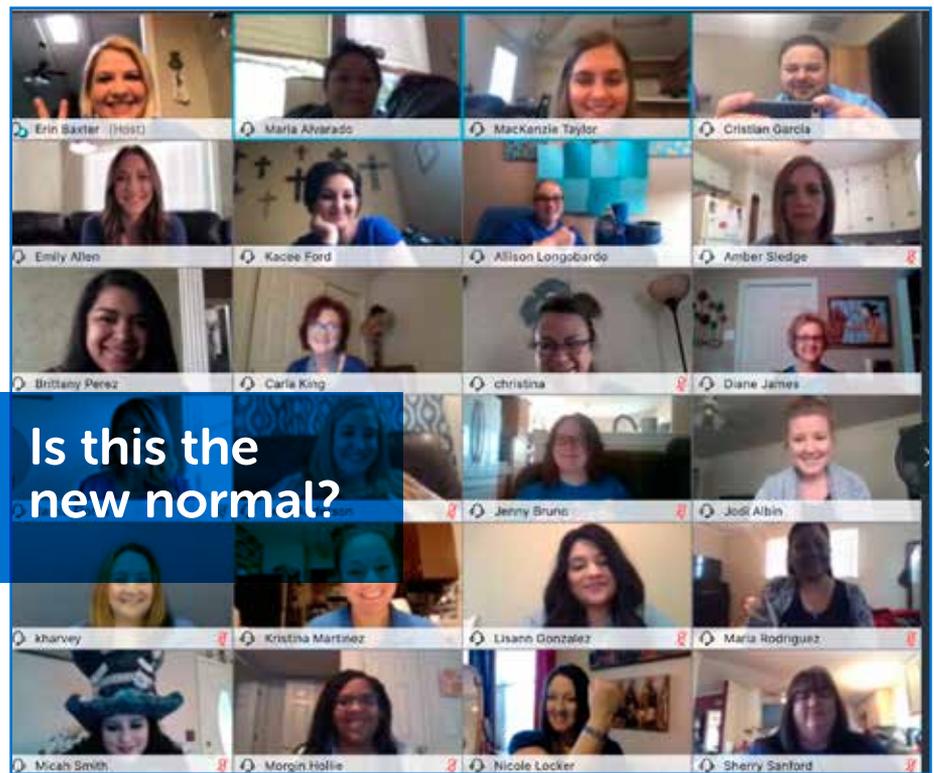
Employees & Families Face New COVID-19 Realities

As the full extent of the COVID-19 crisis became apparent in early March, Saint Francis Ministries implemented a range of adaptive measures to ensure quality of care to children and families in each state we serve – while also keeping employees safe and healthy. Leadership and staff in Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and El Salvador developed a variety of creative ways to stay connected to children and families even as states issued stay-at-home and social distancing orders.

In March, Saint Francis closed its offices to the public as a safety measure and directed those employees who could work from home to do so. Travel restrictions were also put in place. Those who could not work from home could come into the office but in fewer numbers. All these measures required that Saint Francis social workers, therapists, and support workers creatively adapt – which they did. Although not comprehensive, the following offers a snapshot of some of the ways in which Saint Francis workers and foster families are supporting each other and the children they serve.

Oklahoma

As employees began working from home, twice-weekly video meetings enabled staff from across the state to connect in ways previously unimagined, according to Chris Gill, executive director for Oklahoma. With permission from the state, Oklahoma



A zoom meeting of our Saint Francis Texas team has become the new normal.

workers also began conducting monthly home visits by video, and in April hosted the first foster family support group by video. This was followed by a weekly support group for foster youth. "Despite the adjustment, staff have been able to provide a high level of support to our foster families in these trying times," said Chris. "Some families even expressed feeling higher levels of support because of more frequent staff contact, made possible because staff weren't spending as much time on the road. Several of our foster families have also helped by stepping up and taking additional placements."

Nebraska

"We have been providing telehealth

since the middle of March to protect our therapists," said Joan Schwan, executive clinical director. "We also meet regularly with the state and other providers on a COVID call to stay up-to-speed on changes."

The clinical team has also delivered therapy supply bags to economically stressed families so they would have the necessary materials for their therapy sessions. Staff are also making activity/educational bags for children and working with local churches to get masks for everyone in each foster home. Additionally, workers are conducting social distance yard checks that enable them to meet with children in person while maintaining social distancing.

“For video visits, we developed a code word for each client,” said Joan. “We are aware that at times someone could be just off camera and listening in on a session. If a client feels unsafe to talk, they use the code word and we immediately move to yes or no questions.”

As in Oklahoma, staff have reported an actual increase in interaction between birth parents, foster parents, and court personnel thanks to video conferencing and people working from home.

Texas

Erin Baxter, community engagement advisor, said foster families in Amarillo, Lubbock, and Abilene have stepped up to support each other by providing respite care and accepting additional placements.

“The foster family applicants we have in process right now have been very flexible in terms of attending online trainings and have been patient as we’ve navigated technical difficulties. Everyone we’re working with has handled the unknown with grace.”

As in other states, technology is proving essential.

“We have one family who currently has twin 18-month-old boys placed in their home,” said Erin. “They have kept family connections a top priority by having the boys connect with each birth parent once a week via Skype. Although this is not the most ideal way to maintain that connection, it is one way they have gone above and beyond to support family ties during this unprecedented time.”

Arkansas

Saint Francis staff in Arkansas created an online “Wellness” group through which they check in on each other, share information, and discuss ways to best provide care for the families they treat. Arkansas Program Director Nicole McCauley said the team is also leaving care packages with games and activities for families sheltering in place.

“Our staff have been extremely proactive in working through virtual platforms with families who have been ill or who can’t have visitors,” she said. “Using precautions, our staff continue to meet in person with our other families in the field. We’re fortunate that we’ve found a reliable source for masks, so we can help protect our staff working on the front lines.”

Mississippi

At Bridgeway and Cheshire, where Saint Francis provides independent living and supported employment services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, staff is paying special attention to residents’ mental as well as physical health.

“We’re communicating regularly with residents to monitor their uncertainty and anxiety levels because this pandemic situation can create added stress,” said Jason Kirkland, director of operations. “We’ve also taken steps to reduce traffic on the grounds by restricting the number of visitors, delivering medications to residents’ apartments, and limiting contact among residents unless they’re engaged in outdoor activities with

appropriate social distancing. Staff are shopping for groceries for them and accompanying them for regular trips around the walking track so they can get exercise and a change of scenery. We’re using every means possible to help residents stay connected to their community and with family members.”

El Salvador – International Ministries

In El Salvador, Saint Francis has a three-pronged pandemic response strategy: coordinated leadership and partnership (working with United Nations agencies and other NGOs to coordinate a collaborative response), food security and nutritional needs (introducing additional food crops to the moringa farm component of the HOPES project) and trauma response (focusing on pandemic and post-pandemic risk factors like violence, domestic violence, and mental health).

“El Salvador ended the 2020 school year early, and since 80 percent of students in the San José Obrero community lack internet access, we’re working with the school to implement an education plan,” said Angela Smith, vice president of international ministries. “The school doesn’t have a printer or computer to make materials for the children so we are helping implement solutions with long-term impact to ensure children can continue their education at home.”



Learn how you can support Saint Francis Ministries’ response to the COVID-19 crisis at saintfrancisministries.org.

More Than Ever, Children Need A Vigilant Community

Staying home during the COVID-19 crisis is supposed to be a safety measure that protects our community, ourselves, and our children from further spread of the coronavirus. Unfortunately, for many children, home is anything but a haven – especially when so many families already at risk must live in isolation together for extended periods of time.

As neighbors, friends, and extended family also practice shelter-in-place,

Francis posted those photos on Facebook and Twitter, along with information and tools for helping children trapped in potentially abusive situations. That message assumed greater urgency than in years past.

“This is a particularly dangerous time because many of the ‘respite’ options, such as school and work, are not available to parents and children,” says Pamela Cornwell, Saint Francis

temporary respite from abuse and receive a healthy meal. Teachers are usually the first to notice signs of abuse or neglect and report them to the authorities.

In at-risk families, social isolation and economic uncertainty add to an already stressful situation, increasing the threat of abuse and neglect to children in the home, along with other forms of domestic violence. That’s why, according to Pam, everyone

Saint Francis employees supporting Child Abuse Prevention Awareness



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child neglect and abuse become even more difficult to spot. With that in mind, Saint Francis staff took the opportunity to raise awareness about child abuse and to promote the physical and emotional well-being of children and families in safe, stable, and nurturing environments during Child Abuse Prevention Month in April.

Throughout the month, Saint Francis employees shared photos of themselves with one fingernail painted blue to represent one in five children who are abused or wearing blue on Fridays to highlight Child Abuse Prevention awareness. Saint

Ministries’ clinical director. “It can create tension and pressure in the home. So, it’s important during this time for us all to remain vigilant and to reach out to anyone we might have concerns about.”

Approximately 678,000 children were abused or neglected in the U.S. last year. Children are most often victims in families dealing with serious stressors that can include poverty, unemployment, and substance use. As employers lay off parents or send them home to work, schools and daycare centers are also closing. School closures remove one of a child’s safe spaces, where they get

within a community needs to help protect its most vulnerable members. That can be especially difficult when quarantine or social distancing widens the space between people in need and neighbors and care providers.

Saint Francis social workers, therapists, and support staff have employed a variety of strategies to support families, protect children, and ensure continuity of service. Those strategies include video conferencing, social distance yard checks, and home visits utilizing personal protective equipment. Staff have also developed “code words” for clients to use if they feel unsafe communicating during

a video conference session. To help reduce stress within families, Saint Francis moved some respite care training online and began delivering coronavirus supplies, care/activity packages, and gift cards to foster and birth families.

"It's going to be especially challenging for us during this crisis to know when families are stressed or children are mistreated because families in which it occurs tend to not be socially visible anyway," says Pam. "It's going to take a concerted effort by people close to them to intentionally reach out and offer support. Don't wait for them to ask."

Even with social distancing there are actions we can all take if we suspect a family is overwhelmed and struggling:

- Reach out by phone or social media. Go check on them. Let them know you care. Offer to help with errands or babysitting. Bake them a casserole or a batch of cookies. Anything you can do to help relieve stress within the family will help lessen the risk of abuse or neglect for children in the home.
- If you can do so safely, organize a play date at your house with your own kids. Keep the number low and limit it to an hour or two. This gives parents some space and allows the children respite from the stress at home.
- Refer them to the National Parent Hotline (855-427-2736), which provides free counseling and resources to parents 24/7.
- Be vigilant. You might be the only hope for an abused child. Call the National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-4-A-CHILD) to report suspected abuse. The hotline offers crisis intervention, information, and referrals to thousands of emergency, social service, and support resources. All calls are confidential.

IT Team Thinks Creatively to Get Equipment to Remote Workers

Saint Francis Ministries leaders moved quickly to ensure the safety of employees by getting as many as possible to work from home.

While that was impossible for some positions, many offices could move staff home and still enable them to work efficiently and effectively. But that also meant ensuring they all had the equipment they needed to be effective.

John McDowell, vice president of information systems, and his team worked round-the-clock for several weeks, tackling multiple challenges to make sure staff were supported.

"We went around to various locations and picked up any unused laptops, fixed them, and then deployed them to staff in need," John said. "Many of our employees had been working off

of desktop computers, and we were able to make use of laptop computers we received as part of our partnership with St. John's. We set those up to tie into their desktop computers at offices.

"We literally used any resource that we could in order to make it possible for our staff to have the flexibility to work remotely from home during the pandemic," he added.

Along with getting hardware to staff, the Information Technology team purchased licenses for staff to use a Virtual Private Network, or VPN, which is the way Saint Francis ensures its records are safe and secure when staff are working outside the office. They also had to set up an additional VPN because there were so many employees using the system remotely.



IT staff preparing to mobilize laptops.

"It was a challenge, and it was an all-hands-on-deck situation for the IT team," John said. "I'm proud of the way our staff came together, and their willingness to think creatively gave them the ability to get equipment into the hands of our staff so that Saint Francis could have a productive remote workforce. We were proud to do our part."



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Your Help Makes All the Difference

As the full extent of the COVID-19 crisis became apparent, Saint Francis social workers, therapists, and support staff began thinking of ways to adapt that would protect children, support families, and ensure continuity of service to everyone in our care. Almost immediately, you jumped in to help - sending masks, personal protective equipment, sanitizer, and coronavirus cleaning supplies to Saint Francis offices in your communities. Churches and individuals stepped up offers of assistance through the Care Portal, delivering much needed material support to families.

We've said it before – Saint Francis cannot do this alone. Strengthening families and protecting children takes all of us working together, and you certainly proved up to the task. Thank you for your generosity during this crisis. Thank you for partnering with Saint Francis to sustain our community and support its most vulnerable members. Your friendship makes all the difference in the world.



Looking for more ways to help?
Visit saintfrancisministries.org.