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Pandemic affects nonprofit's group homes

By Jackie Lupo

Staying home during the coronavirus pandemic is hard enough for families that have been self-quarantining for weeks. It's even more difficult for the staff at group homes for the developmentally disabled, such as the 16 run by Irvington-based Abbott House.

The group homes are located in private houses in Westchester and Rockland counties and the Bronx. Residents' ages range from their teens to middle age, and their disabilities include conditions such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, and brain damage. Where they are placed is usually based on age, capabilities, or a combination of these factors.

Most homes have five or six residents, and staffing averages about six people spread over three 8-hour shifts, plus a social worker and a registered nurse. The direct service providers (DSPs) that work with the residents earn \$14 to \$15 an hour.

According to Abbott House CEO James Kaufman, the rate of absenteeism among DSPs due to coronavirus infections, or due to exposure or fear of exposure, has dropped since March, when he worried that staffing shortages would require him to consolidate residents from different houses under one roof.

"Fortunately we didn't have to do that," he said. Now, he said more workers are coming back than are going out. "We're low staffed, but we're not skeleton staffed."

In the six weeks since mid-March, 40 of Abbott House's 210 group home staffers in Westchester, Rockland and the



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

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Bernard Scudder

Abbott House

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Bronx, tested positive for Covid-19 and were out sick. Four were hospitalized, and one worker in Rockland County died.

Since the state-mandated quarantine began last month, Kaufman said, “Close to 20 residents have tested positive out of about 100 in the group homes, with 3 percent requiring hospitalization and one passing away. I don’t want any of these guys sick. Many have a need to touch, and you can’t do that now.”

Personal protective equipment (PPE) can be hard to come by, Kaufman said. “In a house where more of the individuals may be [Covid] positive but asymptomatic, we follow the [state] Department of Health and Office for People with Developmental Disabilities [OPWDD] guidelines for quarantine — wearing gloves, masks, and gowns. We’re trying to do this in all the houses.”

Abbott House administrators are also having staffers return to the same house each day rather than rotate among different group homes.

Kaufman said the DSPs are “terribly underpaid. That’s part of what bothers me.” Abbott House has doubled the pay for DSPs who work in a house where a resident has tested positive for Covid-19, but is not hospitalized. “It’s a huge financial burden,” he said. “We have to be judicious and careful because we didn’t get any additional money to do it. It hasn’t been made clear whether we’ll be reimbursed at all, but we felt we had to do it.” The group home program is funded by Medicaid and administered under the OPWDD.

Justine Christakos, Abbott House’s vice president of programs, said many residents

have families or advocates, but they are unable to care for the disabled at home. Other residents with less severe developmental and intellectual limitations live in the group homes as a move toward more independence. Some are employed or do community work, such as delivering Meals on Wheels or volunteering at an animal shelter.

“Since the lockdowns there are no more community outings,” Christakos said. “A lot of our people who are employed have to stay home. So we’re all self-quarantining. We don’t allow for visitors in the homes, so they’ve had to speak with their families on FaceTime.”

She said that some of Abbott House’s healthy staff members have been pulling double and triple shifts to fill in for staff members who have tested positive or are self-quarantining for family reasons. In addition, because the day programs at Abbott House have been closed down, their employees are being called on to cover for absent group home employees.

At an Elmsford group home for six adult men, ranging in age from 40 to 55, a staff of nine usually provides round-the-clock care over three shifts.

“The men have been in the house for at least 20 years. They are a family,” resident manager Bernard Scudder said on April 24. “Five of the gentlemen are basically independent. Two need some supervision and one needs [more] supervision. They basically have different afflictions that keep them functioning less than you and I do.”

According to Scudder, who resides in Dobbs Ferry, the home was short one staff member who was out on leave, and another one who tested positive for Covid-19 and won’t be back until May. “For us, we’ve done everything that we possibly could to make [the residents] comfortable,” Scudder said. “They’ve taken it with a grain of salt, and we are keeping them busy.”

Some of the men are accustomed to a degree of independence. “The biggest issue for our guys is three of them [ordinarily] can come and go by themselves,” he said. “Not being able to do that has been stressful for them.” He said one of the men, who works at the Stop & Shop in White Plains, was eager to get back to his job.

Ziel Thompson is the residence manager of a group home for eight preteens and teens in Pleasantville. Currently there are five on-site because the rest are staying with their families. So far, none of the staff or residents has tested positive.

“One of our biggest challenges has been for them to go home — they get very anxious to see their family,” he said on April 27. “Our program usually is to go home on Friday and return on Sunday, but since Covid hit they haven’t been able to physically go home. They just started going home maybe last weekend. They were in here for almost five weeks without any visitation. What we have in place now is... they’ll go home every other weekend in order to limit the transporting back and forth.”

Thompson, who commutes to work from the Bronx, said that as the restrictions have dragged on, remaining quarantined has become difficult for the residents.

“As the time went by and it got longer and longer, they said, ‘This doesn’t make sense. None of us are sick.’” But the nurse who works at the home has been educating them about the virus, and the residents have been watching the news.

Thompson and his staff have had to come up with ways to occupy the residents, who can no longer participate in their usual recreational activities. “They all struggle with it in a different way,” he said. “No matter what games you play, no matter what you find for them to do, they’re still bored,” he said. “You have to think outside the box to keep them entertained.”