

How a Stamford residential treatment facility navigated an in-house outbreak of COVID-19

By Tatiana Flowers_March 12, 2021 Updated: March 12, 2021 1:53 p.m.

https://www.ctinsider.com/local/greenwichtime/article/How-a-Stamford-residential-treatment-facility-16021475.php?cmpid=gsa-greenwichtime-result&_ga=2.213568339.650754586.1615822327-1134376019.1612899710

STAMFORD — For the first nine to 10 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Liberation Programs leaders considered themselves lucky.

While other Connecticut nonprofits were struggling with COVID-19 infections inside their facilities, Liberation Programs staff and clients had remained uninfected and healthy.

But that all changed on Dec. 27, when a client at Liberation House, the organization's Stamford-based inpatient addiction recovery program, reported he had lost his sense of taste and smell.

That number would soon rise to two dozen infected clients and staff, in total.

"We had to literally change everything about our work," said John Hamilton, CEO of Liberation Programs, a substance use disorder treatment organization with services spanning Fairfield County and offices in Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk and Bridgeport.



Liberation Programs President and CEO John Hamilton presents “How to Strengthen Resiliency in Families” regarding the opioid crisis during the Greenwich Retired Men's Association's weekly speaker series at First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich in Greenwich, Conn. Wednesday, Nov. 27, 2019.

Photo: File / Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

“We were able to deal with a COVID epidemic in our recovery program and seamlessly not disrupt service and provide them what they needed in their recovery environment,” he said recently. “The staff stepped up. The board stepped up, bringing meals in, and PPE.”

The story of how Liberation Programs navigated a mini-outbreak within its four walls at the Lib House facility, is one of triumph, resilience and success, Hamilton said.

“And it also gives hope for other nonprofits that are worried about an outbreak,” he added.

A mini-outbreak

Soon after the first Lib House resident reported his loss of ability to taste or smell, another client reported the same symptoms to staff.

Clive Johnson, medical director for Liberation Programs, recommended that the two men immediately quarantine and remain isolated from the rest of the community. The next morning, both men were admitted to Stamford Hospital. Upon their release, a few hours later, they were temporarily placed in isolation at a hotel, an arrangement led by Pacific House Shelter leaders, who had their own homeless clients already staying in those facilities.

“We then tested everyone else in the house,” said Maggie Young, chief recovery officer for Liberation Programs. “And once we tested everyone in the house, we ended up with a total of 24 individuals who were positive, and immediately we needed to, at that point, separate our house — so that we had one floor for quarantine and another for the general community.” Capacity at Lib House is 65 clients total, Young said.



Liberation Programs Chief Recovery Officer Maggie Young chats inside the Mobile Wellness Van in the parking lot at the YMCA in Greenwich, Conn. Tuesday, Jan. 21, 2020.

Photo: File / Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Following the separation, clients who tested positive began receiving all their meals and medications on that designated floor, and they were not allowed to leave the area unless there was an emergency.

During the public health crisis, Liberation Programs leaders realized they had to keep COVID-positive clients engaged, and not allow them to feel completely isolated, “so they still felt a part of the community,” Young said.

Lib House staff began wearing gowns, masks, shields and gloves, before bringing their sick clients food, medication and eventually Chromebook computers — to help them stay in contact with their family, friends and service providers.

The state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services provided PPE to the organization, while Hamilton submitted a proposal for emergency funding to the state Office of Policy and Management, which eventually allocated them \$91,000 from the governor’s emergency COVID-19 relief funds.

The money was used for a professional cleaning service, outside laundry services, catering for individually wrapped meals, and overtime payments to Lib House staff who sometimes worked more than 12-hour days. Liberation Programs also provided hazard pay to its employees, or extra payment for working under dangerous conditions.

When Liberation Programs leaders reported initial information about the outbreak to the city of Stamford for contact tracing purposes, the state Department of Public Health visited Lib House to give feedback on the safety of the facility.

“They were satisfied with the isolation and that we had PPE to make sure we could keep everyone safe,” Young said.

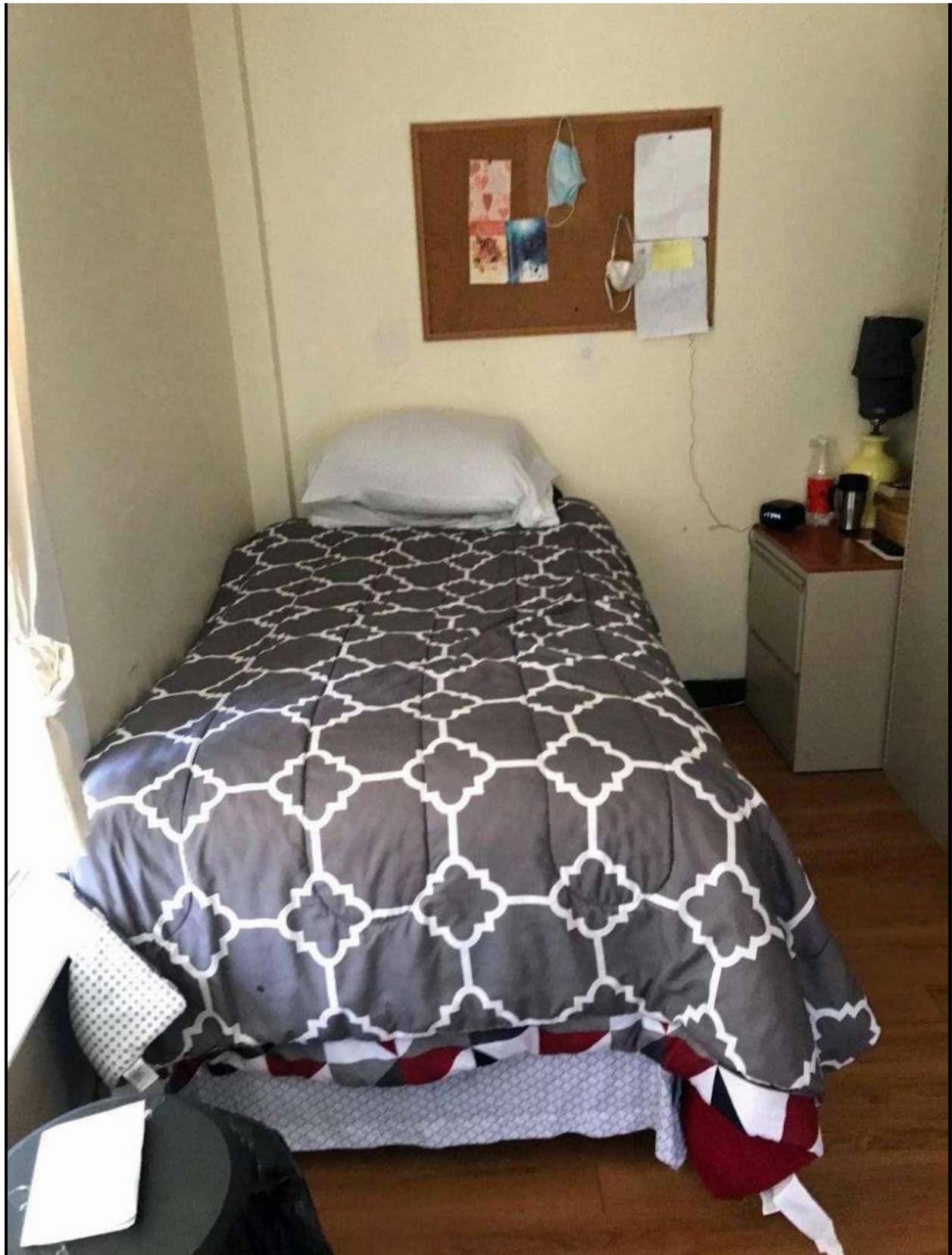
Greenwich-based Family Centers also provided a pop-up COVID testing clinic for Lib House clients and staff, Young said. Family Centers, which runs a drive-through testing site at 60 Palmer Hill Road in Stamford, brought its medical team over to Lib House, to test Lib House’s staff members and recoverees.

“We went over there with our PPE, set up a computer, had their patients complete a consent form, and one-by-one, we tested them, ran the results over to the lab and two days later, (we) provided their director with all the results, and they took the proper measures they needed, in order to make sure the outbreak was contained,” said David Robledo, outreach educator for Family Centers Health Care.

“And then we continued that two weeks later, just to ensure those who tested positive would be retested, to see if they could be reintroduced to the general population,” he said.



1of12 Mike Lee, clinical supervisor of men's services for Liberation House -- a Liberations inpatient treatment program -- is dressed in full personal protective equipment. The Liberation House facility had a COVID-19 outbreak within its facility that affected 24 clients and staff members in December.
Photo: Contributed / Liberation Programs / Contributed Photo



2of12A bedroom at Liberation House in Stamford, which provides inpatient substance use disorder treatment and support to individuals referred by the community and the judicial system. Photo: Contributed / Liberation Programs / Contributed Photo



3of12Stamford-based Community Health Center employees including nurse Juliana Wolfe conduct a vaccine clinic at Lib House, a Liberations Program, where people are in recovery from addiction, Friday, March 5, 2021, in Stamford, Conn. Participants were also able to schedule an appointment for their second shot in April. Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Three weeks later, all staff and clients had tested negative. The Lib House population, are all of whom are men in recovery from substance use disorders, are eligible for a vaccine, because they live in congregate care and/or are over 55 years old, Young said.

On March 5, through a separate collaboration with Family Centers, Stamford-based Community Health Center employees brought a vaccine clinic to Lib House, and all who were interested received a shot. That day, individuals were also scheduled for their second shot in April.

“Family Centers has a longstanding relationship with Liberation Programs, and we felt like we could be helpful in containing the virus,” Torres said.

For Cindy Ramdhanie, assistant director of Lib House, said watching her colleagues and clients fight COVID-19 was scary.

“There wasn’t a lot of information out there from other programs, on what they would have done,” she said. Ramdhanie and her colleagues relied on one another to come up with solutions and comfort fearful clients, she said.

“I think they drew from that, and it settled them a little more. I don’t want to say they felt comfortable with what was going on, but the anxiety and fear died down more, because that support was there,” she said.

In March 2020, Liberation Programs leaders had submitted a plan to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services “that should we need to have space to actually take care of people, who became positive, who were in our care, how would we do it?” Young said. “We used that as lessons.”

Liberation Programs leaders are eager to give advice to other nonprofit leaders, who may become enmeshed in a similar outbreak.

“Give them a sense of hope,” Liberation Programs CEO Hamilton said, speaking specifically, about clients. “Support each other and try to be creative in doing that, in whatever way is possible, because it is challenging and it can be unnerving and scary for people,” he said of staff members. “The key is to stay calm and work together.”