



Work of Frontline Mental Health Staff in Group Homes and Community Handled with Gentle Touch

She makes her rounds every morning with the 12 residents, many living with severe mental illnesses at Freedom Apartments in Middletown. Ben, not his real name, is having a day. His night light didn't work last night, and he needs it to sleep. He answers the door to his one-bedroom efficiency, with weary, uncertain eyes, revealing the fitful night of tossing and turning.

Before he has a chance to speak, his case manager points to the light, "I'll be right back." Again, there is knocking. With gloved hands, she places the new bulb in his. Such simple gestures help restore routines, which when broken, can lead some residents into a tailspin of confusion and impulsivity.

During this time of COVID-19 and police defunding, mental health case managers, mobile crisis clinicians, and access coordinators are working the frontlines to ensure that individuals with severe and emerging mental health challenges, some homeless and some in group homes, stay safe. Often this means mental health staff meet face to face with emotionally vulnerable individuals, who sometimes disregard the pandemic precautions. Their work is not without its hazards. At the time of writing, despite best medical practices, two of Newport Mental Health's case managers and two clients have been diagnosed with COVID-19.

Despite the risks Newport Mental Health Mobile Crisis Clinicians Ellen Fitzgerald McCallum and Will Tinney say they "feel lucky to be able to work".

"It's exhausting. It's draining, but our work is so important, especially now," said Ellen, who works the night shift assisting Middletown and Newport police. Although some may question her presence in the politicized police defunding movement, Ellen is a strong proponent of lifting the burden on police by expanding coordination with agency teams to assist them, especially on domestic violence, substance use and mental health calls.

It's not all gloom and doom, however.

"Many of our clients are dealing well with the pandemic," said Stephanie Bartomolucci, Access Coordinator, who navigates and schedules new and existing patients. "Although it may take longer to establish a relationship at the outset, many who do not drive are very happy because of telehealth." She noted that telehealth provides more flexibility, especially in times where child care or transportation concerns are an issue.

In short, the work of front line mental health staff involved in both a stubborn pandemic and political unrest can best be summed up by an enduring aphorism: It is what it is.