



May 1, 2020

COVID-19 has presented every person, business, and government with the responsibility to understand an almost unprecedented situation – at least unprecedented in our lifetimes. However, there are past pandemics that help us understand what can happen, such as the Spanish Flu in 1918 and the more recent H1N1 virus. By reviewing what different groups did in those situations, and the results of their actions, we have information that we can use to help us in planning out actions.

This pandemic struck with little warning and, for most, without a practiced plan that could be quickly implemented with a highly contagious and potentially dangerous disease. In many ways, LIFE*Designs* was better prepared than might be expected. Over the past two years we have been evaluating and updating our All Hazards Emergency Response Plan. This plan looks at all the different types of disasters that could threaten the health and safety of our clients and staff or the continued ability of the agency to operate. Because of this planning, we had already begun to prepare the Central Office to be able to continue operations from any location with electricity and internet access. We also had established internal emergency communications and operational procedures. This preparation by many members of the LIFE*Designs* staff meant we were able to respond quickly and decisively to the threat of COVID-19.

We immediately identified administrative staff whose work was essential to the operations of the agency and made sure each of them was prepared to work from outside the office. Other administrative staff members received training to qualify them to work directly with clients in the event our direct service staff fell ill or required self-isolation. Our nursing staff began to place multiple orders for personal protective equipment (PPE), develop a health monitoring procedure for staff and clients specific to COVID-19 symptoms. Our maintenance staff and group home staff began to increase stocks of food and other supplies to make sure we could provide for a 2-week period of outside supply shortages. Finally, we discontinued any activity that presented an increased risk of bringing COVID-19 into our clients' homes. This included closing our Community Integration Services (formerly known as LECO) and assigning that staff to augment residential staff. It also meant limiting or prohibiting visitors, unnecessary outside travel of clients, requiring all meetings involving non- LIFE*Designs* staff to be virtual, and protective self-isolation for staff who had been out of the area on their own time.

The Executive Team has met weekly since implementing our Emergency Plan to monitor the spread of COVID-19 in those areas we serve, our ongoing preparations and response, and the health of our clients and our staff. Toward this end we continue to review the recommendations of the CDC, information and recommendations provided by the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH), and the Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services (DDRS). We have also been in frequent contact with other similar agencies across the state to help us understand what they are doing and experiencing. Our staff have also developed new ways to provide services to clients, and there are interactive online activities available many times throughout the week for clients.

Because of the preparation and quick response of our staff, I'm happy to say that we have not had any clients or staff members diagnosed with COVID-19. But this doesn't mean we can stop our protective measures. We continue to have clients and staff develop symptoms similar to those of COVID-19, and the current recommendations of the CDC and most medical and scientific professionals around the country warn of the risk of relaxing existing protective measures too soon. We cannot risk the health and well-being of our clients, our staff, or their families by failing to follow these recommendations. This means that we will continue our protective measures until we determine it is safe for our agency to decrease them.

The following measures have been and will remain in place:

- All staff and other providers in residential settings will have the temperature checked as they arrive, will be asked about flu-like symptoms, and will be required to wear at least a mask (fabric or surgical) while in the home.
- All residential clients will be actively monitored by having their temperatures taken daily along with a review of flu-like symptoms. This increases to twice daily if flu-like symptoms are noted. Clients who can and are willing to wear masks will also be asked to wear one.
- Unnecessary travel with clients outside the home is prohibited. It is likely that travel and transportation will be done differently in the future.
- Visitors to residential settings are prohibited except for “compassionate” visits. Exceptions to this may only be made by the Service Coordinator in consultation with the Director of Residential Services.
- Our Community Integration Services program will remain closed until further notice. We expect significant changes in the way these services are provided will be required going forward, and we are evaluating what changes will be needed and the impact of those on our clients.
- All business meetings involving *LIFEDesigns* staff and outside individuals will continue to be virtual, by telephone or video conference.
- *LIFEDesigns* staff meetings should make the greatest use of technology to limit the need for in-person meetings of all types.

This is a challenging time for us all, inside and outside *LIFEDesigns*. Our staff at all levels continue to meet this challenge and place the health and safety of our clients above all else. Outside providers have modified their activities as needed, with many provider agencies implementing the same protective measures as we have. Our clients have also responded in an extremely understanding and cooperative fashion. As a result, this has served as a positive learning experience for all. Finally, the support and continued understanding of clients’ family members and guardians have been much appreciated.

Please continue to monitor our website for updates and contact the main office with any questions.

Sincerely,

Russell J. Bonanno, MEd
Chief Executive Officer