How VISIONS is Helping Participants Stay Social While SOCIAL DISTANCING

During New York City’s “Pause” order, VISIONS has been working hard to ease the feeling of social isolation among our staff and participants. From hosting programs and workshops by video conference and phone, to checking in with older participants to make sure they are safe, VISIONS staff have gone above and beyond to educate, connect with, and bring joy to our participants during these uncertain times.

Story Continues on Page 3
We are providing more than 50 virtual health and healthy living classes remotely, using phone and video conferencing, and have continued to provide significant levels of service in all program areas by transitioning to virtual service provision when possible.

We are honored to have received generous support from the Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and the New York Community Trust COVID-19 relief fund to cover staff expense related to lost revenue. Thanks in large part to this additional support, we have not laid off or furloughed any VISIONS staff. We have also received grants for remote Workforce Training for New Jersey residents from the Kessler Foundation and from S&P Global Foundation for expenses related to COVID-19. Additionally, our Community Advisory Boards have put together uplifting virtual concerts and events that have helped to raise funds and awareness for VISIONS services.

VISIONS core values inform our work to confront all forms of discrimination and racism. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the Supreme Court decision affirming the rights of LGBTQ people, and the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, offer opportunities for action and hope for a better future.

VISIONS is Proud to Welcome 2 New Board Members

**Andrew S. Fisher, PhD**

Andrew S. Fisher PhD, joined VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired as a Director in March, following his retirement from the Lavelle Fund for the Blind on February 28, 2020, where he served as Executive Director for 20 years. Dr. Fisher will bring his extensive experience in supporting programs that promote the development of blind and visually impaired people of all ages, to VISIONS and provide guidance in helping to increase support and awareness for VISIONS Services.

**Robert Heidenberg**

Robert Heidenberg joined VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired as a Director in May. Mr. Heidenberg is the founder and Managing Partner of Heidenberg Properties Group, and provides the strategic vision for the group’s development, redevelopment and acquisition initiatives. Mr. Heidenberg is an active and socially engaged member of his community, and presently serves on the board of directors for Foundation Fighting Blindness. He is First Vice-President of Temple Emanu-El in Closter, NJ.
Workforce Highlight (Pictured Above): Virtual Jobseeker Action Meeting via Zoom
Guest speakers from Northwell Health, (Elizabeth Zgaljardic MSW, Program Manager, and Lesly St. Louis, Inclusion Specialist, discussed the general hiring process, provided tips for optimizing a resume, and gave insight on how to conduct successful video interviews.

Seeing What is Possible From Home!

Youth Services
VISIONS Youth Services and VISIONS Rehabilitation Departments have teamed up to host virtual Pre-Vocational skills workshops. Participants learn important work-readiness and independent living skills, while receiving tips, tricks, and insights from VISIONS staff about how to prepare for their futures.

Workforce Development
VISIONS Department of Workforce Development has begun holding weekly virtual Job Seeker Action Meetings, allowing participants to connect with companies actively looking to fill new positions, and learn about navigating the job market in this ever-changing climate. As a result of these workshops, some participants have begun working remotely as contact tracers for the State of New York.

Unpaid Caregiver Support
VISIONS Unpaid Caregiver Support Program has begun offering workshops for caregivers of older adults (60+) with visual impairments or grandparents (55+) who are the primary caregivers to children with visual impairments. A chair yoga and meditation workshop led by Jenniera Senatus (Jenn), a certified yoga instructor from the NJ YMCA branch, introduced caregivers to centered breathing to induce a feeling of relaxation and calm, followed by a gentle yet effective strength and flexibility-based workout that included guided meditation to increase self-awareness. The program also offered a workshop titled, “Remember the Good,” led by Dawn Sanchez and Rachelle Fernandez, focusing on the different experiences of loss, grief and ways to address the accompanying feelings. The workshop helped caregivers recognize the difference between grief and depression, as well as strategies or ideas that could be applied to everyday life.

Rehabilitation
VISIONS Rehabilitation Services Department, has transitioned to offering its programs and services to participants remotely. Licensed social workers have been contacting participants via phone, FaceTime, or ZOOM to provide counseling and assistance with applying for benefits. Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapists (CVRT) and Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists (COMS) have been working with participants on the following independent living skills: Braille, color identification of clothing, organization skills, smartphone instruction, financial management, keyboarding, and interpersonal skills. O&M staff have also provided instruction on travel applications and human guide instruction, while Occupational Therapists (OT) have offered “fall-prevention exercises.” All rehabilitation staff have been conducting wellness calls, ensuring that our participants have food, shelter, and social interaction.

VISIONS Center on Aging
VISIONS Center on Aging has begun hosting remote activities over Google Hangouts and by phone, allowing participants with varying levels of technical skill to enjoy these activities. Staff are communicating with over 300 participants, performing safety checks and assisting with tasks including completing the census; locating pick up food sites; locating testing sites; and understanding economic impact payment information, medical services, and other benefits related to COVID-19.
Participant Feedback

“Shannon’s fitness classes have been on and off for 15 years. She’s as good and fantastic as she was when I first started, even in this new format over the phone. It’s been a great way to keep myself busy and connect with others while we quarantine.” – Paula D.

“Visions has been great for me. I’m not sure what I would do without everyone. At a time like this we really need you guys.” – John D.

“These phone groups are wonderful. It gives us a way to keep in touch. There are classes that are so nice and a great way to end the day.” – Catherine B.

“I really appreciate all of the services. Everyone is so wonderful and everyone cares.” – Marion H.

It was sometime in early March, I was hanging out with a few friends, when I received a news notification saying that New York State had declared a state of emergency. I didn’t really know how to feel. It was kind of scary, but despite the rising number of confirmed cases, it still hadn’t reached the city, so while concerned, I didn’t really feel like I had something tangible to actively panic about.

It wasn’t until the first COVID-19 cases in Manhattan that things really started moving quickly for me: schools were moving online, CUNY students were taking to Twitter because, somehow, public schools were showing no signs of going online. And then CUNY did halt online classes, and suddenly it was real. My dorm suspended visitation, people were hoarding toilet paper, and my new word for the foreseeable future became “wild”. (As in “$800 for hand sanitizer? That’s wild!”)

Within a few days of being in the dorm, with half of the residence gone and the shriek of ambulances cutting through the night (not necessarily unusual since I lived around multiple hospitals, the eerie factor was nevertheless increased with a global pandemic happening), I knew I wasn’t going to enjoy this isolation thing. So I packed a few things and headed to the home of one of my closest friends.

I’d met Zulay when we were around ten or eleven at summer camp, but we lost contact before that summer ended. Randomly, I would hear her name, and remember bonding over shower caps and asthma while we waited to get into the pool. Then, three or so years later, we reconnected at Visions, both working at the snack bar. We continued working together: as office assistants or hanging out at Selis after our respective internships.

And when my dorm ultimately decided to close, it’s with Zulay I continued to stay—for her wifi mostly, but she benefits from my baking so, I think it’s a pretty symbiotic situation we’ve got going on.
In January, youth participants toured Google’s New York City headquarters, to learn about the ways Google makes its workplace accessible and fun. Participants also explored the many career opportunities available at Google.

Through a connection with New York Cares, Work Experience Training participants got to tour Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group’s New York office and participate in an activity where groups worked together to pitch a new product to VISIONS and Mitsubishi staff.
Pre-COVID-19 VISIONS Center on Aging Highlights

A special thanks to the Korean Traditional Music Orchestra for the Blind for not only putting on a private show for our participants, but for also providing them complimentary tickets to your live performance at Carnegie Hall!

A new fitness program was introduced to encourage participants to exercise and take control of their fitness routines.

4th and 5th grade students from the Hannah Senesh Community Day School spent the day designing t-shirts and tote bags with participants.
VISIONS Center on Blindness (VCB) and Vocational Rehabilitation Center (VRC) Announcement

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff from VCB and VRC have been hard at work, adjusting their typical residential programs to better adapt to a “learn-at-home” environment, learning new remote conferencing platforms, and ensuring these programs continue to meet VISIONS and the New York State Commission for the Blind’s (NYSCB) high standards for vision rehabilitation programming.

**VCB**

Daytime and evening virtual sessions will take place July 23rd and 24th, and July 30th and 31st from 1:30 – 8:00PM, with an hour long break at 5:00PM.

- Daytime sessions consist of four, 50 minute sessions with ten minute breaks in between, running at 2:00–5:50PM.
- Programs will include prominent guest speakers; assistive technology, VCB Living (“blind life hacks”), and other topics, including trivia games and mindfulness.
- Evening sessions will run from 6:00–8:00PM, and will include a spoken word poet, talent show, and cultural appreciation/international night, among other engaging and educational activities.

**Assistive Technology Center**

In partnership and with approval from the NYSCB, the Assistive Technology Center at VISIONS VRC has been working remotely with participants for Readiness evaluations, Technology Assessment and instruction using the Canvas Learning Management System.

**VRC**

VRC staff have been working hard with the NYSCB to develop a hybrid learning version of its 15-week Pre-ETS and Employment Readiness program. This program will launch virtually with seven participants on July 6th, with the hope that updated regulations will allow participants to return for in-person learning on August 3rd.

In addition to virtual programming, VISIONS has been working to develop social distancing guidelines, and ensure all of its facilities, including VCB and the VRC are prepared and cleaned prior to allowing participants to re-enter. Safety is VISIONS number one priority.

**State of VISIONS Briefing at the Ford Foundation**

On January 22nd, 2020, VISIONS held its first “State of VISIONS Briefing”, featuring uplifting stories from current and former participants, remarks from VISIONS CEO, Board of Directors, Community Advisory Boards, and Foundation and government funders. The event also featured interactive demonstrations by VISIONS certified rehabilitation staff, on adaptive living devices and assistive technology equipment used by participants to maintain their independence.

(Left to Right): Dr. Andrew S. Fisher, Robert Schonbrunn (VISIONS), Anusha Sharma (White Ops), Nancy D. Miller (VISIONS), and Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez (DFTA).
On November 14th, VISIONS Queens Advisory Board held its third annual Party with a Purpose at Douglaston Manor, complete with delicious food, door prizes, and opportunities to network. The event honored two Queens heroes, Jiliana Rivera, R.N. (St. Mary’s Hospital for Children) and Dr. Vasundhara Kalasapudi (Executive Director, India Home) for their outstanding contributions to the community. The event netted over $28,000 to support VISIONS free services in Queens.

On March 7th, before the COVID-19 lockdown, VISIONS Queens Advisory Board held its third annual Cocktails for a Cause event at Good Company Tavern. Special thanks to Stephanie Belanich for serving again as the event’s guest bartender, Joe De Piola for donating his musical talent, and Gus Kercuku, owner of Bocconcini Restaurant and Mike Sackos, Aegea West for donating delicious food. The event netted over $3,700 to support VISIONS free services in Queens.

On February 8th, VISIONS Brooklyn Advisory Board held its annual breakfast at Applebee’s Atlantic Terminal location. Approximately 75 guests attended, raising $1,800 to support VISIONS free services in Brooklyn. Many thanks to Kiwanis for underwriting the breakfast.

The VISIONS Manhattan Advisory Board held its second annual Viva VISIONS event on February 27th, at Tacombi Empire State Building. The event, featuring delicious food and networking raised $2,300 to support VISIONS free services in Manhattan.
To Provide Virtual Entertainment, While Increasing Awareness and Support for Our Services, VISIONS Began Hosting These fun Friday night concerts bring local artists into the spotlight for a good cause. We appreciate these artists for lending us their amazing talent and personalities. Our last four concerts raised over $12,000 to support VISIONS free services. To watch previous TGIF concerts on Facebook, click a performer’s name or photo. You do not need to have an account to watch, but will need one to comment.

Gene DiNapoli
Vinnie Medugno
Kristin Kelleher
Drew Bordeaux

To kick off Mother’s Day Weekend, Staten Island Borough Coordinator Holly Bonner and her two adorable daughters held a virtual lemonade stand from inside their house. The stand, complete with lemonade, cookies, smiles, and sunshine (despite the cloudy weather) raised over $1,900 to support VISIONS free services!
Webinar: Seeing Participants Through A Pandemic

Hosted by CBS New York’s Lisa Rozner on May 28th via Zoom, this virtual event featured participants speaking about how VISIONS services have helped prepare them to navigate these difficult times, and how virtual services being offered currently, have helped them to move forward and acquire new skills. Watch a replay of this event by visiting https://bit.ly/2YJvf6G

VISIONS In The News!
Tap or click on an article title to read it online

NEW YORK TIMES
She Went Blind. Then She Danced
By Frank Bruni
https://nyti.ms/2Qhljgw

LOHUD (USA TODAY)
Internship Offers Visions of an Independent Future
By Robert Brum
https://bit.ly/2zFnzC0

FOX 5 NEW YORK
MTA Pilot Program Aims to Make Subway Travel Easier for Visually Impaired Passengers
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