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FEATURED

Boyertown Area Multi-Service adapts to creatively serve community amid pandemic

By Lisa Mitchell lmitchell@21st-centurymedia.com

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The Boyertown Area Multi-Service offers Grab & Go meals at its Senior Center in Boyertown. This was a response to clients specifically came to the Center for a freshly made meal. Since the Center could not feed them inside, the meals were packed to go. Clients drive up, are met by a team member, and are given their meal.

Submitted photos - Boyertown Area Multi-Service

The Boyertown Area Multi-Service continues to serve the community amid the pandemic by getting creative and adapting to COVID restrictions.

“The ongoing issue of food insecurity in our community continues to rise and we are positioning ourselves to meet the need head-on,” said Chris Stein, the new director of philanthropy for Boyertown Area Multi-Service.

“The pandemic has brought even more awareness to the services we offer, and we do not see the new participation of families ebbing, especially in the area of food assistance,” Stein said. “Multi-Service has met this, and many other needs in the community, for the better part of five decades and we welcome the ongoing challenge to do so.”

The Multi-Service is in the process of starting a capital campaign to add on to its 200 W. Spring St. building.

“Specifically, we need to increase our pantry storage space as well as fresh food service storage and prep areas,” Stein said.

The Multi-Service is a social service agency with a mission to provide resources and services to meet unfulfilled human and community needs within its service areas. The agency serves Boyertown and surrounding areas — Amity, Hereford, Pike, Oley, Bechtellsville, Gilbertsville and Pottstown.

“Our service area is broadly described as geographically extending out towards Reading and up towards Kutztown,” said Stein. “Anyone residing within these areas is eligible for services and assistance. We do not screen, nor turn away, anyone who comes to us to address food insecurities.”

Financial services require a meeting with a case manager to best ascertain how to provide short term assistance for long term benefits, he said.

“We are not in the business of just putting out fires, we want to help our clients build better foundations so as to help them achieve long term success,” he said.

FEEDING THE COMMUNITY

Grab & Go meals have replaced the in-person hot meals served daily at the Center.

“This was a response to our clients who specifically came to the Center for a freshly made meal. Since we could not feed them inside, we package them to go and clients drive up, are met by a team member, and are given their meal,” said Stein. “We have received great feedback on this approach and we are discussing how best to keep this in place going forward for those who may yet be reticent to come into the Center for a meal when we are allowed to do so.”

For Meals on Wheels, more than 200 diet-specific meals, such as low sodium and diabetic, continue to be cooked, packaged and delivered daily by a team of volunteers under the direction of the Multi-Service chef and his team.

The Center’s total food distribution has risen more than 300 percent at this point and is climbing, he said.

For Preston’s Community Food Pantry, prepacked food boxes for singles, aged persons and families are brought out to cars versus people entering the center as they previously did. Specific food needs, such as dietary requests, are met as best as possible based on current food stock.

“While general food donations have historically met the needs in this community, and even with our donations up more than 500 percent over last year, we have had to recently purchase food directly to keep up with the current needs,” said Stein.

The Multi-Service Case Management team has continued to assist those in financial need which has seen an uptick, he said.

“These meetings are sometimes held in the food distribution line so that a client can remain outside of the building, pick up food, and check in with a case manager all at once.”

Stein noted that the Berks County Office of Aging Services approved the Senior Center reopening plan before the Center offered any events, outdoors or indoors, and is aware of all that the Center currently offers to the public.

Transportation to medical appointments also continues.

SOCIAL EVENTS FOR BETTER HEALTH

Social events are mostly held outside on the property at the Senior Center or in an online format. The Senior Center is now open to a limited number of registered participants to enter at a time for social events indoors.

“The pandemic has shown that while the social services we offer are even more vital than ever, our social events are just as important to our clients,” said Stein. “Socialization is a vital part of any community and the pandemic has taken away much of it, especially for the aged population. This lack of interaction negatively impacts the overall mental wellness of our clients, so hosting these social events is also about responding directly to the healthcare needs of our clients.

We will continue to host events as long as we can do so safely and maintain compliance with all relevant health agencies and guidelines.”

Social events include socially distanced indoor bingo, Walking Bingo at Boyertown Park, parking lot Bingo, and Wake Up with Center Staff, as well as Zoom yoga and dance classes.

“Parking lot bingo — honk if you have BINGO! They love this one and we may want to keep it outdoors,” said Stein. “Wake up with Center Staff, we supply donuts, they bring coffee and a chair, and the Center staff sits outside with them for some morning conversation and socialization for the early risers.”

The “It’s 5 O’clock Somewhere” social hour is held outdoors and includes food, games and bring-your-favorite-beverage.

“It’s 5 o’clock Somewhere — bring your favorite adult beverage (just one!) and some lawn chairs and let’s hang out. We also provide non-alcoholic beverages and pizza. We distribute the food utilizing proper food handling precautions that pre-date COVID,” he said.

“Ice Cream socials are pretty straightforward but we mixed it up recently by having an ice cream truck come by the dispensary.”

And the response to these new events is positive.

“The response has been amazing to our social events and the participants continue to encourage us to offer more opportunities for people to see one another,” said Stein. “Our events do have participant limitations.”

Registration is required to maintain health department guidelines. Most outdoor events at the Senior Center have up to 75 participants, which are capped due to social distancing guidelines and the ability to maintain proximity to the Center. Additionally, there is a waiting list of more than 30 for outdoor events. If someone is on a waiting list for one event, the Center tries to make sure they are brought to the head of the list for the next event.

“Some are a little frustrated with indoor occupancy restrictions and limited time slots for indoor activities, but those time slots and occupancy are limited due to spacing tables and chairs out to comply with all health guidelines,” he said. “Our Center occupancy is additionally limited at this time because our Food Pantry storage has spilled out of the normal storage locations and now occupies half of the Center itself.”

The outdoor and online events will continue to be held at the Senior Center.

“Indoor events have just opened up and events will be added or increased if we can do so and maintain compliance with all relevant guidelines. The outdoor events, which we did not historically hold, have proven to be the most popular at this time,” he said. “Some of our indoor options (Exercise Room, Quilting Room, Activity Room) will also be added back on to the calendar in a limited fashion on a first come-first served basis with registrations being taken.”

THE RICKETS CENTER

The Ricketts Center in Pottstown, which is now a part of Multi-Service, is starting open classroom hours to support the virtual classroom model for Pottstown Schools.

“Students will bring their school-supplied laptop, we provide the space, lunch, and adult tutors to assist,” said Stein.

Registration is required as space is limited due to health guideline compliance issues.

Ricketts has also been a food distribution point for daily lunches to community youth and ‘family bags’ of food distributed weekly as well to families in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Online exercise classes and outdoor sports activities such as soccer clinics have continued at Ricketts as well for youth.

“The Ricketts Community Center, which only hosted events for approximately one month prior to the shutdown, was seeing upwards of 70 youth at that time for participation in events. COVID has dropped that on-site interaction to much less but the food distribution has multiplied to up to 800 meals weekly between individual youth meals and weekly family food bags,” he said.

Ricketts online events will continue as is and on-site events are slowly being added. The virtual school classes will increase on-site services to daily from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

For more information about Boyertown Area Multi-Service events and services, visit www.BoyertownAreaMulti-Service.org or www.facebook.com/BoyertownMultiService.

Lisa Mitchell

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Lisa Mitchell is an editor for Berks-Mont Newspapers, covering news and events in the Northeast Berks County area.
