



FOCUS Matters

FALL 2020

Coping through the Pandemic, FOCUS Style

Fred and I flew home from our annual Florida vacation to a world that had drastically changed and was asking us to change with it! Safety was on all of our minds because no one knew what we were really facing.

We mobilized the troops throughout FOCUS and immediately began putting a plan in place for each program. But there were questions! How do we provide services and stay connected in a world that is brand new to all of us? How can we stay safe? How do we help our kids, adolescents, young adults, and families cope with this new world?

We met as a team, and we hammered out the COVID-19 Protocols for each residential program and developed staff cohorts so employees would work in only one program. We put the Fresh Start School online and closed the buildings, not knowing that over five months would pass before students returned. We staggered our staff, and we worked remotely. It was hard as hell and took all that we had as a team to make it work.

Donna
FOCUS Executive Director/Founder

Below you can read how each program handled COVID-19.

Shannon House

Adolescent Therapeutic Group Home

COVID-19 has hit all of us in one way or another. Working in a Therapeutic Group Home you have to think of the residents you work with, other staff, your family, and yourself. This can be very stressful, especially when so much of it is out of your control. Having coworkers who you can rely on and talk to has been important. Knowing you are not alone helps keep us going. Following the daily changing protocols has been a necessity, and by doing so, we have been able to keep our residents and staff safe.

Working with the residents at Shannon House during this time has been a challenge. But with creativity and teamwork, we have been able to maintain as much normalcy in the residents lives as possible. Over the last few months we were able to have an outside street graduation, some picnics/outings at local parks, and were able to safely transition one resident to an adult supportive housing program, which took some effort!

We are most grateful for the people who donated masks, PPE supplies, and food for the residents and staff, as you have helped keep us safe and healthy.



Becca
Program Clinician

Lauren
Program Director



Washington House Young Adult Supportive Housing

Change. The word we all have a love-hate relationship with is an ever-moving dance of adaptation and maneuvering. Some of us seek it, some dread the sound of it, but take a moment to think back to early March; where were you when EVERYTHING changed?

For our guys, Washington House (WH) was the place that took you in wherever you were and helped you make the changes you really wanted to make! But things took a frightening turn last spring as the entire world stopped, and our little bubble had to face actual change, head on!

Confusion was at an all-time high for our residents, and this time, no one had answers. Where do we begin when all signs point to literal “shelter in place.” What do you do? Who can you see? Where can you go? The unknowns, the shift in feelings, change in routines, and fears were on everyone’s mind.

As time went on, this was the overall theme here at WH; nothing stopped; things just changed. The protocols put in place both by FOCUS and DMHAS and the shut-in style of living changed some core aspects of supportive housing living. Instead of drivers and activity chaperones, our staff switched to chemists, personal chefs, and cleaning crews. Each change looked toward the path of least resistance in the fight to keep our residents safe.



The Washington House Lunch Bunch

WH thought outside of the box to help alleviate cabin fever. Since they were encouraged not to leave, an office corner store was formed where the guys could come to pick out their favorite snacks and receive weekly lunches from different area restaurants.

Although the warmer spring and summer months made it easier to gather, it also ushered in a new reality for some of the guys; venturing out again. As the state persevered in its battle against COVID-19, restrictions began to ease up, and suddenly the allure of that familiar independence came into play. Staff had to readjust protocols responsibly to ensure safety while also allowing autonomy. Fewer restrictions also meant something far more important to our guys, a chance to reunite with family.

Our guys had to adapt to a lot over the past 7 months but through it all, they kept on laughing and smiling.

I know I speak on behalf of my colleagues by saying that if it weren’t for us having the opportunity to show up ready to support these six guys, we would have lost our sense of normalcy in this new crazy world. They make it easy to show up, no matter what!



Enjoying lunch socially distanced outside

Thanks so much to the Friends of FOCUS whose generous donations of supplies and meals can never be thanked enough!

Wishing everyone good health, safety, and serenity in the times that lay ahead.

Nick
Transition Case Manager

Celebrating 20 Years of FOCUS in a Most Unexpected Way

FOCUS entered 2020 with excitement as our non-profit reached a huge milestone - our 20th birthday! We spent countless hours dreaming up ways to commemorate and celebrate this astonishing accomplishment. 20 years in 2020? How cool is that? But as we all soon found out, 2020 wasn't going to be so cool after all.

The pandemic, however, was no match for FOCUS. Our 20 years of experience as a small non-profit navigating an ever-changing economic and political landscape has formed strong will and resiliency.

Because no matter what challenges face us, one thing remains the same, and that is our passion. Our passion for the FOCUS mission, community, the lives we touch, and the lives that touch ours. Our passion allowed FOCUS to continue to thrive and, in some ways, draw our community closer together.

We found ways to celebrate. Avon Chamber of Commerce recognized FOCUS as Small Business of the Year, we exceeded fundraising goals in our Pave the Way campaign, UNICO awarded us a grant for sensory equipment, and we hosted our second annual Fore Autism golf tournament.

There were so many creative ways people supported FOCUS in 2020. Friends of FOCUS cooked meals and cared for our residents, golfers sold out our Fore Autism Golf Tournament, local restaurants delivered meals, and supporters donated PPE and masks and purchased supplies off the FOCUS Center for Autism Amazon wishlist.

In many ways, this year was unbelievable. It did not go as planned, but we are grateful for our programs' health, safety, and success—none of which we could have achieved without YOU.

Thank you for continuing to support us against all odds! Here's to another 20 years!



Popover Bistro in Simsbury donated food for Shannon House



Small Business of the Year from the Avon Chamber of Commerce



Receiving the UNICO National Grant



BLT in New Hartford supporting our Autism Sweets campaign



Enjoying lunch socially distanced outside



Our inspiration for Fore Autism, Jack teeing off!



Fore Autism Presenting Sponsor: AXA Insurance

Celebrating 20 Years of FOCUS



The Start of it all FOCUS Alternative Learning Center on Dowd in 2000



Fun in leaves 2002



Caving on one of the first of many adventures in 2000



Memories from FOCUS Festival for Autism/Fun Fest from 2003 to 2015



One of our first Autism Spectrum Unplugged Panels in 2006



Christmas at Shannon House 2008



A love for dogs 2009



Young Adult Services 2008



Group photo 2009



Wilderness School 2008



Day Program memories 2011



When we became FOCUS Center for Autism in 2011



Spelling FOCUS! during our Summer Program 2013



Team building at Wilderness School 2014



Annual Burr Pond canoe trip with Wilderness School 2014



Extended Day Treatment Graduation Ceremony 2013



Young adults residents at Washington House



First day ever of The Fresh Start School!



Our first ride in our new 12 passenger van 2019



Spreading awareness with our Autism Spectrum Unplugged Panel 2019



Enjoying the annual visit from our HEART International friends from Japan in 2018



Afterschool program 2015



Admiring transformations 2019



FOCUS founding class alumni TJ White visits The Fresh Start School with his big rig to inspire students in 2019



First day of Fresh Start School walk 2019



Three alumni drop in for a surprise visit in 2019



First annual FOCUS Rocks Bridge Street benefit concert 2018



Fresh Start Students filming Life on the Spectrum at Nutmeg TV in 2019



Banner from our second year of our annual Fore Autism Charity Golf Tournament 2020



Donna and FOCUS founding class alumni Alan in 2019



FOCUS Summer Program annual visit to Donna & Fred's farm



FOCUS Autism Spectrum Unplugged spreading awareness in 2019



FOCUS Center for Autism The Fresh Start School



Celebrating opening our Annex building for our Fresh Start School transition students 2019



Annual Thanksgiving Feast 2019



New sign & logo 2020

Fresh Start School - Private, Special Education Program

The Fresh Start School closed due to Covid on March 13th, Friday the 13th, might I add! The team met on the 13th to devise virtual learning plans and compile work packets to be mailed home for distance learning opportunities. We had many quick decisions to make regarding what virtual platform to adopt, how best to open up communication lines between home and school, etc. We ultimately adopted Google platforms for virtual learning. Speech and occupational therapy continued virtually, and clinicians also met online for their clinical sessions. The team worked closely with families to address any challenges that arose, and we took an individualized approach to modify plans to meet students' and their families' needs. We also incorporated social opportunities and offered weekly virtual groups, including Dungeons and Dragons.



The school put together a virtual end of the year "wrap up" session, where students and staff logged in and shared their appreciations for this unprecedented year that was meaningful for all. There was a reverse car parade for students who wanted to drive past the school and wave to their teachers, clinicians, and friends, and we celebrated three graduations, each with a socially distanced "parade" at their home.

The school was also able to provide a successful virtual extended school year program. The team put together many fun virtual activities for the summer, such as daily mindfulness sessions, a Zumba class, tours of work placements such as Mack and Molly's pet spa, a tour of Mystic Aquarium, around the world tours during cultural diversity week, and college tours. Again, we were able to individualize our program to best meet the student and their family's needs!

Over the summer, we were also hard at work to prepare for our in-person school reopening. When staff re-entered the school in August, we stopped in our tracks! It was as if time stood still; the whiteboard was marked for March with a single quote, "Seize the Day."

We formed a COVID-19 Safety Committee, and the team worked together to address the guidelines for reopening schools published by the Connecticut State Department of Education. In July, we collected input from parents in the form of a survey and hosted a virtual Q&A session in August.



Several building updates were completed in preparation for our reopening, including a new handicap accessible bathroom, installation of screen doors to increase the airflow in the building and taking out our fabric furniture to a storage unit. We had the buildings professionally cleaned before opening to ensure safety and well being for staff and students. We continue to employ a professional cleaner who cleans the Fresh Start School daily "as if my own child attended."

The team has worked very hard and are very excited to be with the students since the first day of school! Although things looked a bit different - everyone was wearing masks, and there were new daily routines, the students handled everything like superstars! We couldn't be more proud!

Maeghen
Director of Educational Services



Support Services

Like all of FOCUS Support Services Program has been affected by the pandemic. Providing social opportunities for young adults in the community became impossible, so we moved our groups to an on-line format. Zoom social clubs, including our collaborative group with Autism Resource Center, became the norm!



Hanging out at social club before the pandemic

It wasn't long before we realized that this wasn't enough for our young adults, so we began zoom nightly check-in meetings from 8p-9p. Now friends can visit and even make plans to get together on other platforms. Our goal was to help our young adults create friendships, and we continue to do that virtually.

Our Wednesday night 6p-7:30p Parent Support Group also moved on-line and because parents are in need of extra support right now we added a second meeting on Thursday night from 7p-8p.

Parents and other members of the community have joined with our Friends of FOCUS group and provided meals and supplies for our residential programs. They even donated gift cards for our Monthly Healthy Challenge winners!

We have also used this time to raise funds for our Young Adult Services. So far, we have raised \$500 from a tag sale and \$1500 redeeming cans and bottles. This fundraiser is on-going and you can help by dropping off your returnable cans/bottles with Sharon, at 7 Bidwell Farm Road in Canton. Our goal is \$500 more by Christmas!

Thanks for your support and please feel free to call (860-693-9128) or email sharon.cable@focuscenterforautism.org if you are interested in joining any of our programs!

Sharon
Support Service Coordinator

Pave the Way

Thanks to all who supported us over the past 20 years. We hope you will continue on this journey with us as we pave the way into the future!

Learn more at
www.focuscenterforautism.networkforgood.com



Pavement before construction starts



This project is well supervised!

King of the hill

Checking out the machinery