

Riverside Township Mental Health Board Presentation  
The Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19  
Transcript

VERA WILT: Hello, I'm Vera Wilt, Riverside Township Supervisor. The township was founded 150 years ago to provide the most direct form of government, mostly focusing on social services to the community. Programs like general assistance, emergency assistance, assessor services, a food pantry, nurse's closet, senior programs, and the Riverside Township Mental Health Board are just a few examples of our services.

Today I welcome you to a Riverside Township Mental Health Board Presentation on an issue of great concern for all our residents. Earlier this year we had planned a public presentation on suicide prevention and awareness, but the stay-at-home order prevented that from happening. Since then the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted not only the physical health of our nation and the world, it has also created or exacerbated mental health concerns for all.

We have probably all observed stress, anxiety, and perhaps atypical behaviors in ourselves, our friends, and our loved ones. The psychological impact far outlasts the disease itself. The following presentation is the township's offer of assistance in coping and managing anxiety during COVID-19. The speakers today are from agencies that the Riverside Township Mental Health Board supports financially and partners with for the well-being of the residents.

Today's speakers will be Anna Padron Sikora (Pillars Community Health), Susan Bertuglia (Aging Care Connections), Amber Grzeda (UCP Seguin of Greater Chicago), and Monika Leja of (The Way Back Inn). They will address the special and unique concerns for various age groups and they will offer some tools and advice for coping. They will provide resources for our residents to utilize for more personalized help and support.

The Mental Health Board has established a Community Resource Center with office hours in the Town Hall to help navigate the path to social services and mental health agencies. They can be reached at 708-853-9578. Don't worry that contact information will be repeated later in this presentation and it is available on our website at [riversidetownship.org](http://riversidetownship.org).

Thank you for tuning in.

ON SCREEN:

Pillars Community Health: Health & social services, regardless of ability to pay.  
Languages: English, Spanish, some programs in Arabic and other languages.

Medical and Dental Services:

- Physicals and immunizations
- Adult and pediatric medical care
- Adult and pediatric dental services
- COVID-19 testing and services

Behavioral Health and Support Services:

- Crisis response
- Outpatient counseling
- Substance use disorder services-same-day assessments

#### Domestic and Sexual Violence Services:

- Free 24 hour hotlines and crisis intervention, assistance at ERs and courthouses
- Emergency shelter at no cost
- Counseling and more

ANNA PADRON SIKORA: Hi, my name is Anna Padron Sikora and I am a licensed clinical social worker and I work for Pillars Community Health. It's an agency that serves all the residents here in Riverside and our focus really is on providing physical health and mental health for the community. We are a Federally Qualified Health Center and also a Community Mental Health Center. And our three main focuses really are looking at health as medical and dental, looking at how to help community with domestic violence and sexual assault, and our focus is also on helping behavioral health. And behavioral health includes mental health services as well as substance abuse services.

So we are here to talk about how the impact of this pandemic has really affected us. Not just our physical health, but also looking at our mental health. And so, really wanting to talk about that. This pandemic has brought into the spotlight our own mental health and the conversation. We know that when we think about where we are now, it being four months into the pandemic, that we have different feelings and emotions because there is so much unpredictability with this pandemic.

But, we are not only managing our own anxiety and fears, but also our families, our neighbors, our community. How do we really help ourselves be the healthiest we can be, both physically and mentally, while also thinking about child development and where we are in our own transitions in our lives? Today we're going to talk a little bit about childhood and looking at early childhood through adolescence, looking at how the pandemic is affecting adults. Young adults, as well as older adults.

We want to think about, what does stress look like at different times of our lives? So for early childhood when we think about preschool, stress looks very different in children, right? A lot of times children don't have the words to express what they're feeling, what they're going through, so they act it out through their behavior. We as parents, as adults in their lives, we have to help them express what is the best way for them to communicate. In children it could look like it affects them in a way that they are not sleeping in the same routine or they're not eating in the same routine.

What we've been suggesting to parents is that really, the more we can keep routines would be the most helpful. If parents can help children have the same time to wake up and have breakfast and what time they're going to play outside, bedtime. These are things that become predictable and a lot of times are soothing for children. Especially when our daily routines have been so interrupted by the pandemic. A lot of the kids are not able to see friends and play with friends and so we need to help them socialize, even at a very young age, because these are things that have been interrupted by the pandemic.

Some of the other things to keep in mind is that children can be having an increase in nightmares or fear of being alone, fear of parents leaving. So we really do advise that when you are leaving to go to the store to run an errand, or if you have to go to work that you are talking to your child about where you're going, how you're going to practice safety, and that you will be returning.

These are all again things that we have control over in a world that may feel very out of control for young children. We also know that this can affect temper tantrums and so that children of a very young age get overwhelmed and their emotions get dysregulated so that they need an adult to be able to help them refocus and kind of regulate again.

So a lot of it has to do with the words we use and who we are to them in that relationship. So the more that we can model how we handle anxiety and fears, even at a very young age, even children that are non-verbal yet, they take that affect and emotion in. It's really important for parents that we're also checking ourselves in where our fears and anxieties are around this pandemic or other stressful situations. We also know that as we think about lifespans, there's many things that are consistently affecting us regardless of our ages. We'll be talking about that throughout this presentation.

Stress coming out as physical symptoms is very common, sometimes we don't know what to do with that anxiety and that stress. Even through young children all the way through older adults, sometimes that stresses in our bodies. And it comes out as headaches or stomach aches or overall other physical symptoms. These are things to pay attention to. We always want to be in contact with our doctors and be checking out, but also know that it's possible that the physical symptoms can be a result of the stress in the body. And again, this is from very young babies through older adulthood.

Another thing that we wanted to help talk about with parents is that we know that right now with the stress level being so high in homes, that trying to schedule a time to be with children one-on-one is really important. And a lot of the times we've been encouraging parents to have those conversations of how can we spend 30 minutes at least? And the child could pick the activity and then the adult, the parent, could pick when and where.

I think that this is how do we empower children in a time that feels so different to them than what they may be used to? So we're trying to create safety and security. As we think about children in grammar school, so looking more at the ages of six to twelve, we're thinking about how the shift from in school to home learning and what kind of losses have come with that. A lot of the children that we've been talking to are really missing their teachers and missing their friends and the predictability of what the school day was normally bringing.

These behaviors can come out as irritable, as aggressive, maybe excessive whining and complaining. Because there's not really a framework on why we're feeling this additional stress other than we know that there's a lot of fear and anxiety underneath it. Across the lifespan, things like sleep can be disrupted, the nightmares, the having fear to go to bed, or being inconsistent. We know that sleep for all ages, especially children, is very important. When children don't get enough sleep, that also increases inconsistent behavior, so we want to pay attention to that.

Excessive worries and fear, also wanting to make sure that we're encouraging questions. So one of the best things I think we can do for all ages, but certainly for this particular age, is to ask the child what they understand about COVID-19. What do they worry about, what have they heard? Because we've been talking about this for many months, and so the anxiety could have built up. And if we're not asking where they're at, what they're thinking, then we're missing an opportunity for children to be able to express those feelings of fear.

And now the conversation is also shifting to, what is it going to look like when we go back to school? And there's a lot of anxiety and fears around that and people, parents and children, are at different comfort levels with that. These are conversations that we really should be asking every day. The children are feeling it and they're hearing the conversation. So please, don't be afraid to really just ask children where they're at, what is it that they're worried about today.

Things about that have also come up is forgetfulness or distractive behavior. So what happens I think a lot of the time, is that children in particular this age act out because they're bored. Sometimes they don't know what to do with themselves, so it's kind of that any attention is better than no attention. It does challenge us as parents at this time to be creative about how we can keep children entertained and engaged in a different way than in other times when we had school or summer camps or pools and other activities. We really do have to be creative with how we can take more walks or how can we play more board games or puzzles? Kind of going back to the basics, but really trying to engage children of all ages, but particularly this age because they don't have the social outlets that they normally do with their friends or sports. A lot of sports and summer camps have been canceled and so we, as parents and as a community, really do have to step up and be creative in a different way as we move to adolescence.

We know that our adolescents have been also affected in a different way because the loss that has gone on with things that they normally would be able to do. So for instance, as you all know the end of the year did not end as it typically does. So there was a lot of a loss in the sense of like, we've missed prom or we've missed graduations. We've missed different special events that we expect to have every year. I think that a lot of times sitting with that grief has been difficult because it's not something that we're used to doing on such a regular basis.

I think allowing ourselves to have those conversations with our adolescents is really important, because there's going to be different losses that will impact them differently. So as a parent, maybe missing graduation is a very big deal, but maybe for that child it actually has more impact that they're not able to do their summer job. You want to be able to be on the same page to have those conversations and what is it that is really impacting their grief right now?

Symptoms of irritability, decreased energy, isolation from friends, ignoring regular social outlets, these are all kind of defenses and symptoms that are part of adolescence anyways. But we do have to pay attention on how they're affected at this time period and how it affects their daily functioning. Because we're still in the midst of the pandemic, we want to pay attention if they are isolating more than they usually were, we want to pay attention if they are angry or irritable more than you're used to seeing.

We want to pay attention to see if we need additional support for those kinds of behaviors. Across the life span the most important thing that we could do as caregivers would be to demonstrate patience and tolerance and reassurance. That's how we help others feel safe and secure. We want to continue to encourage routines and whatever we can have control over our day, that usually helps people feel more at ease.

We want to encourage verbal and creative outlets and thinking about what are some resources, even online, that are available to children in adolescence. But even to adults and older adults that we could tap into right now, there's many things that we could look at online. Also thinking about the conversation of health and how to keep ourselves safe emotionally and physically during this time. We know that there's a lot of information out there, but it is really important to continue to remind children through adolescence of wearing face masks and social distancing and why we're doing this and how important it is to really address when we are not feeling well. Any conditions that come up, we really do need to be paying attention to, to health and emotional health at all times.

As I think about loss and grief, it takes us into a discussion into young adulthood. When we think about that transitional age of children that are graduating from high school and moving on to college or to working, that all of that also has been interrupted by the pandemic. Thinking about all the different scenarios that we're hearing of what colleges and universities and work are doing. It's a loss in the sense that it's not what the parent or that child was expecting this to look like. It adds another layer of how complex this transition can be for folks.

We want to acknowledge that this is a different experience, that this is not something that we have gone through before. It's going to trigger different emotions. Across the lifespan, what we want to think about is that, in the past when we have been in situations that are overwhelming, that are difficult, that are traumatic, what were those coping skills that helped us get through that? What is it that we did at that time that was most helpful? Because that's going to look different for everybody.

As I think about the young adults and the transitioning to the real world, or the working world, or the school world, that we want to be thinking about how can we still take care of ourselves in the midst of helping the community, helping our families, helping our neighbors? Those are important things to keep in mind. And also self-care is important through the lifespan, but as we think about our young people and all the different pressures and tensions that are going on right now, we want to continue to have social spaces for them to do that in a safe way.

There's a lot of really great advocacy groups going on online or different resources. A lot of the universities are offering free classes and free courses. How do we use this opportunity to really kind of better continue, to better prepare us for when we are on the other side of the pandemic?

When we think about children and adolescent and young adults, I touched on how important it is for us to also have our own self-care. Things that have been helpful and that we have been talking about is how do we limit the amount of news that we're taking in? We know that for all ages, it could be very overwhelming to be listening to constant information about the pandemic. One of the suggestions can be that you do really limit how much time, how much you take in every day.

Another way is that maybe being able to read about it where you have more control of the information you take in, either by the source or how much you want to engage in it. Sometimes with the actual news you don't have control of what you're listening to and that can be overwhelming, especially if it's on a constant basis.

Thinking of coping and coping skills, how can we really look at what brings us joy, what gives us calm? I know a lot of people have been using nature as a calming force, and so taking walks, going outside, being able to be in fresh air in the sun. How do we do that in a safe way, but that it's also giving us a break from the isolation that we're all experiencing? What is it that brings people joy? And that's going to look different for everybody. Being able to also acknowledge for you, what is calming? So some people meditate, some people listen to music, some people really find comfort in pets.

Taking this time as a reflection of what is important in your life and how do you have more exposure to what's meaningful and important. So as we think about different different stages of our lives, as challenging as this is, it has provided an opportunity to talk about mental health with less stigma. What that means is that we want to be able to have these kinds of discussions without having judgment around mental health. We're all in this together and we are experiencing stress and anxiety and depression in different ways over the last several months. But, how have we been able to also

cope with it and also know if we need some additional supports?

I know we're going to be talking more about supports and resources at the end, but really what the most important thing is that you live in a community that has a lot of resources to provide for all families and individuals so that you do not have to suffer alone. As a community, we're here to provide those additional supports.

ON SCREEN:

#### Aging Care Connection

We are advisors on all matters related to the issues facing older adults as they age.

Serving older adults, caregivers and family members from 38 communities in five townships: Leyden, Lyons, Norwood Park, Proviso and Riverside.

#### Programs and Services

- Adult Protective Services - We receive and investigate reports involving older adults (60+) and disabled adults (18+).
- Aging Well Neighborhood
- Benefits Assistance
- Caregiver Support
- Comprehensive Care Coordination
- Congregate Meals
- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren
- Information and Assistance
- Options Counseling
- Special Diet Home Delivered Meals
- Transitional Care
- Transportation Assistance

SUSAN BERTUGLIA: Hello, my name is Susan Bertuglia, I'm a social worker at Aging Care Connections. We're a not-for-profit social services agency that offers resources, services, and supports to older adults, people over the age of 60 in the community. We also provide adult protective services to older adults and adults with disabilities.

Our service area includes 38 different communities in five different townships, and we offer lots of different programs and services for older adults. They include things like benefits assistance, options counseling, home delivered meals, care coordination. We have an aging well neighborhood that I'm going to talk about a little bit later, and a caregiver support program that I'm also going to discuss a little later on in our conversation. We offer things like transportation assistance just to name a few.

So we offer many different kinds of services to older adults in the community and we've definitely seen a continued need during the COVID-19 pandemic, as older adults are forced to shelter and place and socially isolate. Anna just gave a very comprehensive overview of how COVID related stress, anxiety and depression can present across several developmental stages. She looked at early childhood through middle age, and now we're going to take a look at how anxiety and depression can manifest themselves in older adults. And talk about ways that we can support older adults and help them cope while we're all trying to navigate this very uncertain and unpredictable healthcare landscape.

So let's first take a look at anxiety and depression pre-COVID. There's a common misconception out there that anxiety and depression or a normal part of aging. We kind of make the assumption that when people get old they tend to get depressed or a little more anxious, that's just kind of the way it is. When

in fact, this really isn't true. Anxiety and depression are not a normal part of aging and obviously perpetuating this myth can really harm those older adults who are struggling and who would benefit from some type of intervention or help.

In fact, detection rates of anxiety and depression tend to be lower among older adults than in other age groups. And they may be more hesitant to talk about their feelings because they may see it as some sort of weakness or character flaw. And doctors may be more hesitant or less likely to ask about it, especially if the older adult patient isn't bringing it up on their own.

So, there are certain common factors that can put older adults at risk for anxiety and depression. This isn't an exhaustive list, but these are some examples of risk factors to older adults. So things like chronic medical conditions, like heart disease, or COPD, or high blood pressure, and diabetes, a disability or a diagnosis of a new medical illness or condition, neurodegenerative disorders like alzheimer's disease or other dementias, sleep disturbance (we sometimes call it poor sleep hygiene), or insomnia. Bereavement, so losing people we love, which tends to be more common with advanced stage anyway, but complicated or chronic grief that might go along with this. Overall feelings of poor health, physical limitations, side effects of some medications, loneliness and isolation which, we've learned through studies can be as damaging to one's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It's especially a salient issue right now with our shelter in place. Reduced sense of purpose and fear of dying. So these are all things that, even during normal times, could put older adults at greater risk for anxiety and depression.

So I want to take a look at some of the challenges for older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who are already at risk, because of some of the factors that we just mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of risk. But, for those who perhaps weren't struggling prior to the pandemic, trying to navigate the uncertain new pandemic landscape may have placed some of them at risk for anxious or depressed feelings that they may not have experienced before. So this may be the first time. It's understandable if you look at what's happening in the world. We're socially isolating, so a lot of older adults can't see their grandchildren, they can't see their friends or other loved ones, and this is true whether they're living at home or whether they're living in some sort of senior facility.

Many older adults are unable to participate in hobbies and activities that they previously enjoyed. Many aren't getting the same level of assistance that they depended on pre-COVID, in order to remain safely and independently in their homes. So this may be cut because they're afraid of giving COVID-19 to family members, or they're afraid of getting it from family members, or they're afraid of getting it from caregivers, or caregivers are afraid of giving it to them. So there's just a whole host of reasons why they may not be getting the help that they really need and that they were receiving previously.

And health experts are telling us that older adults are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill or dying from COVID-19, and this obviously presents just a greater level of vulnerability that can feel very scary to older adults. Anna mentioned media coverage and you know, the news coverage about COVID-19 is available 24/7. It's on the radio, it's on the TV, it's in the newsprint, it's very easy to start experiencing some level of information overload. And hearing too much can feel overwhelming and triggering for a lot of people. So there are lots of reasons why we need to check in with the older adults in our lives and really watch for signs of anxiety and depression that we may be either overlooking or maybe attributing to other things.

So, let's take a look at how anxiety and depression present themselves in older adults. We want to look at how they might manifest themselves. Oftentimes anxiety and depression go hand in hand, so I'm just going to throw out some things to look for. Again, this is not an exhaustive list, but it just gives us a few things to watch for if we feel like something is a little bit off, either in ourselves or in the older adults in our lives.

So some things to look for: sadness or feelings of despair, excessive worry or fear, racing hearts, shallow breathing, trembling, nausea, sweating, muscle tension, feeling weak or shaky, unexplained or aggravated aches and pains such as a worsening arthritis, or worsening headaches, irritability, changes in appetite like weight loss or weight gain, loss of interest in socializing or hobbies. This one can be a little tricky to pinpoint, because of our current situation we're being forced to stay at home and socially isolate. But, you know if you notice that an older adult isn't really interested in doing their crossword puzzles anymore, used to like to read and really isn't wanting to do that anymore, that would be a sign. Lack of motivation or energy, so sometimes an older adult might not necessarily express feeling sad, but they may report feeling really low energy, and so that's something to keep an eye on. Memory problems or forgetfulness, scary thoughts or panic, difficulties with concentration or decision making, sleep disturbances like insomnia or nightmares, feelings of loss of self-worth, so worries about being a burden, feelings of worthlessness or self-loathing. Slow movement or speech, or conversely a noticeable restlessness, increased use of alcohol or drugs used to self-medicate, recurring thoughts of death or suicide, and neglecting personal care like skipping meals, forgetting to take medications, neglecting personal hygiene, those types of things.

So obviously these can all be signs of other conditions as well. Ultimately, it's very important to speak with a doctor if you have concerns and you're seeing these things. But, these are some of the things just to be aware of if you or an older adult you know is being negatively impacted by one or more of these symptoms.

So now we're just going to take a quick look at how we can help combat depression and anxiety in older adults. To piggyback on Anna's comments, we're living in a time right now of just great uncertainty for everyone. The information that we're receiving from the media, from health officials, government officials, it changes every day. There's so much we're still learning about the COVID-19 virus, so much we still don't know. So for some, this uncertainty can cause an enormous amount of stress, it can significantly impact their well-being. For others, the impact might not be quite as profound, but it may still be of concern.

For older adults who are experiencing a significant impairment in normal functioning, as a result of anxiety and depression, the best place to start is with their doctor. You could speak to their primary care physician, or another doctor, or member of their healthcare team that they really trust. Medication and counseling, or some combination of the two, can be really successful in treating geriatric anxiety and depression. So that's something to consider. For those experiencing a more situational depression or anxiety that's really related maybe specifically to COVID-19, it could mean that medication and therapy are only going to be needed short term to help them get over that hump until things have calmed down a little bit, and we're in a place in which things feel a little bit safer and we have a better understanding of maybe how to prevent or to treat the virus.

One thing to think about when consulting a physician and to discuss treating an older adult for depression or anxiety with medication. It's really preferable to find someone who has experience working with older adults. The way that psychotropic medications are metabolized by older adults can be very different from the way they're metabolized in younger age groups. So older adults taking

psychotropic medications may be at times more prone to balance issues, to falling to gastrointestinal issues. So you just want to make sure that you're working with a practitioner or prescriber who's really savvy about treating older adults with those types of medications.

Just an aside, we heard Anna speak previously about Pillars, her organization. For older adults who are in need of psychotherapy and counseling, Aging Care Connections makes referrals to Pillars pretty regularly because they have several wonderful clinicians who are very specialized in working with older adults, and they do a great job of helping clients work through the issues that they're experiencing, whether the issues are directly related to COVID-19 or not.

That said, not every older adult who's struggling right now is going to need medication or therapy, obviously. For a lot of folks, it may just be more a matter of figuring out ways to bolster our feelings of self-efficacy, by doing things that help us find meaning and purpose, and by controlling what we can. So I have a list of a few ways that we can help take back some of our control and reclaim some sense of purpose in our day-to-day lives. And this list comes from AARP, so I'm just going to read some of these.

One idea is to develop a plan to connect with family, friends, and loved ones. Trying to talk to family and friends to develop a plan to safely stay in touch during social distancing, which can be tricky sometimes. But this is especially important for older adults who are living alone. So touching back on the media and media consumption, we really want to try to limit that, try and take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Because hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can really heighten feelings of anxiety and depression. And it's important to think also too about when you're consuming media. It's best to try and figure out times during the day when you're able to do that in limited quantities, and then not to consume media right before trying to go to sleep.

Anna touched on on the idea of nature and living things, and caring for living things can provide a real sense of purpose and improved health. Aside from things like cats and dogs and other small mammals that we can keep in as pets, I was thinking that for people who maybe can't make the financial commitment, or don't want the responsibility or emotional commitment of a dog or cat, something like a butterfly habitat could be a fun and meaningful way of staying in contact with nature and having something to care for.

Taking care of your body is another really important thing to do in order to stave off anxiety and depression, engaging in physical activity whenever possible. So for seniors, sometimes with limited mobility this can be a little bit difficult, but things like walking even at a very slow pace, or chair exercises, or light stretching can be very beneficial. They can help calm tension, get us moving a little bit.

It's also very important to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, we want to try and avoid alcohol and obviously drug abuse. We want to avoid too much caffeine and avoid nicotine if possible. And as mentioned previously, it's also important to really get enough sleep.

Some other things that that we can do for ourselves, for the older adults in our lives is to encourage listening to music or finding other activities that bring joy. So for example WBEZ, our local National Public Radio station, has a list. They're maintaining a list of live virtual concerts so you can go to their website to find that. Lots of different wonderful concerts to listen to. Things that'll keep your mind active, like doing puzzles. I think Anna mentioned this, jigsaw puzzles, crosswords, sudoku, reading, or

doing art projects, scrapbooking. Things like that just to keep our minds occupied and also to help just improve cognitive function can be helpful.

Anna also mentioned using calming techniques. So things like deep breathing, stretching, meditation, prayer, even things as simple as taking a warm bath, or taking a warm shower, or sitting with the pets can be really beneficial. There are lots of, as Anna mentioned, lots of guided meditation CDs, or phone apps. One that I've heard a lot about is a calm insight timer. There's one called meditation for fidgety skeptics, and there's even a free app called COVID Coach, which is helping people sort of manage stress and build resilience, and just increase well-being during this COVID-19 pandemic.

So I have lots of resources, there's lots of information out there for anyone who's interested. I believe that they'll be flashing my phone number and email address on the screen at the end of the show and I'd be happy to send people links if they're interested, so that they can peruse some of these resources.

So another way to combat or stave off anxiety in depression is to laugh. Comedy can be very healing. So we can do things like watching funny tv shows or movies or chatting with friends who bring us joy and make us laugh. I found online the website of something called the National Comedy Center Anywhere. So it's a website that offers free comedy content and could be fun for people who maybe don't subscribe to things like Netflix and such. Even Youtube has fun videos of of old timers like Carol Burnett and Johnny Carson that could definitely be fun to watch. So those are just a few ideas for that.

And then finally the last item on AARP's list is to think about maybe consider creating short personal videos that can be shared between family and friends. And again, we may need to help the older adults in our lives navigate some of those technological pieces. But, those can be great ways of keeping our minds active. Hopefully, keeping anxiety at bay and helping us take control in some small way, given the the current situation.

So earlier I mentioned Aging Care Connections: Aging Well Neighborhood, and we call it AWN. And AWN is currently offering a number of programs and classes on the Zoom platform. They're doing it in ways that are very secure, so people can feel comfortable about signing up for those. And just to mention a few of what they're offering. So, they've got two exercise classes a week on Zoom, a weekly brain health series, health and wellness seminars, they've got age educational seminars that are related to aging and aging well specifically. They've got social programs, like trivia games and that type of thing. They've even, because of demand from the older adults that are using all of these great programming, they're now offering a technology training class to just help older adults navigate some of the technology questions that kind of come along with things like Zoom and such.

So, I spoke with my colleague Alison Scanlett at Aging Care Connections, who's in charge of the AWN program, and she said she's gotten such positive feedback from the programs that they've put out there to people. Participants are saying that the classes are really a bright spot in their day. Just having the schedule of classes helps them plan their week, it helps them meet the need for connection that they're really thirsting for. And it's actually helped many of them feel less nervous about technology, which gives people an added sense of competency, just around the whole technology piece, which maybe they've never felt before. So again, for information about that you can call Aging Care Connections and they'll put you in touch with Allison. And you can sign up for some of those programs if they're interesting to you.

I do want to touch very briefly on Aging Care Connections caregiver support program. They're doing a lot. They've done a great job of helping support caregivers during the pandemic. We all know that being a caregiver is really tough. It's a tough job during normal times, but it's been particularly hard for many people during the pandemic because they feel trapped. They're socially isolated, they can't do anything with their person outside of the home. The caregiver support program is offering a number of great virtual support groups for caregivers. They've got just regular caregiver support groups, support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren, they have a dementia support group, they even have a monthly virtual memory cafe for individuals with dementia and their caregivers. And they do a fun little activity every month together.

And then on another note, I have a colleague Mackenzie Voss (sp?) and our Aging Care Connections intern, Alejandra. They just launched their Coffee and Conversation telephone support group, and they call it a virtual space that aims to foster connection, openness, and well-being for older adults during COVID-19. That launched on July 13th, it runs every other Monday through August 24th. So feel free to drop in for conversation and support if you feel like that would be helpful to you. So those are just some ideas of ways to stay engaged and connected while we're sheltering in place and maintaining social distancing.

And just quickly, just for more practical issues, I know that Aging Care Connections has done a great job of providing home delivered meals and shelf stable meals for people who were feeling anxiety around not being able to go to the grocery store. We've provided fans and air conditioning units for people who can't access cooling centers right now, and who may not have air conditioning in their homes. So again, I've found lots of great resources to share. I'm happy to share them with you, so feel free to reach out to me by phone or email and I can send you links to all of these things.

So quickly to wrap up, what can we do to help the seniors in our communities and neighborhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond? We want to check in frequently. So in this time of social isolation, it's easy for problems like stress and anxiety and depression to really slip under the radar and stay hidden. So aside from checking to see how things are going with older adults in our lives it really helps them to feel connected when we reach out, and it helps to combat that social isolation.

We want to keep an eye out for older adults in our neighborhoods and communities who may be vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and abuse. Right now we're not as connected as we were pre-COVID. People don't have their eyes on older adults as much as they did pre-COVID, so mistreatment of older adults can really go under the radar as well.

We want to encourage the older adults in our lives to adopt some of the practices that we talked about a few minutes ago. And again, you want to help them get started with those things, especially if it's tech related, as needed. We want to encourage them to engage in safe social activities like Zoom and telephonic based meetings and programs. We want to help them navigate that, if needed, get them started, help them work on that in practice. We want to help them download and practice using smartphone apps for the relaxation and guided meditation until they feel comfortable using it on their own.

And obviously, we want to offer assistance in getting them to a physician or a mental health professional, as needed. And finally, and this is to Anna's point as well, we really want to be calm and reassuring. We want to validate their feelings and we want to let them know that they're being heard. I want to reassure them that there's no shame in struggling with these kinds of feelings, because we all

struggle from time to time. Many of us are struggling right now, but in life in general, struggle is part of the human condition.

So just even above and beyond COVID-19, you may have heard the phrase, "It's okay not to be okay." We really want to eliminate the stigma around mental health issues, particularly for people in this population, who aren't necessarily used to asking for help, for talking about their feelings. And we want them to feel safe asking for help, and we want them to ultimately get the help that they need.

ON SCREEN:

The Way Back Inn

Services offered:

- Residential Extended Care
- Outpatient

Populations served:

- Alcohol and Drug Dependence
- Gambling Use Disorder
- Polish-American Recovery
- Military/Veteran Recovery

SUSAN BERTUGLIA: I just spent some time talking about Aging Care Connections and the services that we provide, and now I'd like to introduce you to two colleagues of mine, Monika Leja and Amber Grzeda. Both come from other community-based agencies, and they're partnering with me to staff the Riverside Township Community Resource Center, which is a fairly recent initiative, and which is located right here in Riverside. We'll talk more about the Community Resource Center in just a few minutes. But first, Monika and Amber are going to tell us a little bit more about the agencies that they're affiliated with, and what their agencies are seeing in terms of issues and such that their clients are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MONIKA LEJA: Hello, my name is Monika Leja. I am a licensed clinical professional counselor at The Way Back Inn. Our agency offers extended residential and outpatient services for adults suffering with chemical dependence and gambling use disorder. We also have a program for veterans and polish-speaking individuals.

Unfortunately we have felt the effects of COVID immensely working with addiction. Overdose is up by 18 percent and fatal overdoses are up by 11 percent. We're seeing an increase in social issues that would typically be diluted by work and school. This is contributing to a rise in domestic violence and abuse. You get a population that really needs a structured schedule and healthy social outlets and put them in quarantine, and for some of them this is enough to be fatal.

When it comes to the gambling, the gambling establishments closed down during COVID, so naturally you'd think that would help solve the problem. However, not being able to gamble has caused immense feelings of anxiety and anger, and this is increasing the suicide rates within a population that already has a 20 percent suicide rate. We are striving to keep people connected and to help re-establish coping skills. We are trying to get people engaged and get them connected through Telehealth, and we are slowly starting to integrate face-to-face services with safety measures in place.

ON SCREEN:

UCP Seguin of Greater Chicago

Providing services to children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

#### Children and Adolescent Services

- Foster Care from birth to 21, including specialized care for children with behavior or medical challenges.

#### Adult Services

- Community Day Services/Life Skills Training
- Meaningful Employment
- Residential Services
- Respite Services
- Social-Recreation Services
- Transition from School to Adult Services
- Assistive Technology

AMBER GRZEDA: Hi, I'm Amber Grzeda from UCP Seguin of Greater Chicago. I'm the Director of Adult Foster Care and Intermittent Services. Our agency provides services to children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Our children and adolescent program offers foster care services from birth to 21, specializing in children with medical and behavioral needs.

Our adult program offers services in helping kids transition from school to adult services, finding meaningful employment, providing day and life skills training, respite services, special recreation, accessing adaptive equipment, and residential care.

We've seen extreme disruption in routine caused by the pandemic. It has led to an increase in needs among our foster children, as well as our adult participants. Most of whom are already vulnerable due to the disabilities in co-occurring medical and mental health and behavioral health conditions. As we shelter in place, we are social distancing, making extensive use of personal protective equipment, and adhering to strict hygiene practices. Our staff have adjusted from providing in-person services to now remotely using telecommunications to support physical, mental, and other health services.

As we are adjusting to our new normal, our agency is proud to be partnering with these agencies, as well as the Riverside Mental Health Board, in the creation and implementation of the Community Resource Center.

SUSAN BERTUGLIA: So, now we want to talk a little bit about the Community Resource Center, which we call the CRC for short, how it came about and the types of support that we offer to the Riverside community in general. So in the fall of 2017, the Riverside Township Mental Health Board conducted a Community Needs Assessment. And they did this through a community forum, interviews, and an online survey to gather information and feedback from Riverside Township residents on mental health related issues that residents felt needed to be better addressed or more readily available.

The Riverside Township Mental Health Board received close to 300 responses to their inquiry. And through this information gathering process, they learned that there was concern raised by residents about a perceived gap between the need for certain services and the number and availability of those services. So those include services to address things like substance abuse, the needs of older adults, the needs of children, the needs of those whose first language isn't English, access to the services of

psychiatrists, access to affordable prescription medication for mental health related issues, and access to special recreation services.

And so it was from this inquiry and the responses received, that the CRC was born. And it's really a collaboration between our three agencies, Aging Care Connections, UCP Seguin, and Way Back Inn. But the initiative itself is supported by the Riverside Township Mental Health Board.

AMBER GRZEDA: The Community Resource Center has been in operation for a little over a year. We have been working with residents to link them to a variety of different services. Some of these include mental health services, addictions counseling, housing, disability services, assistance with medicare open enrollment, and assistance in completing applications for employment, Medicaid, and SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps. We do ask for any services requiring assistance when completing applications, that you have an appointment. And we can be reached at 708 853 9578.

MONIKA LEJA: If we cannot provide the services that you're looking for within our three agencies, we will work with you and with other agencies to provide a warm handoff. It was the idea of collaboration that actually got us started on an up-and-coming project that we have at the CRC right now. And this is something that we're calling the Community Resource Guide. We took a look at what types of resources members of the community were in need of.

We put our heads together and came up with a guide that will ultimately serve as a list of referral options. The resource guide is separated into sections, offering multiple resources for any given need. Some of the services we included referrals for include aging, disability, mental health, substance use, domestic violence, legal housing, and food. The resource guide isn't available yet, but it's coming soon. We're going to take a few minutes now to go over some frequently asked questions.

SUSAN BERTUGLIA: So, the first frequently asked question is: Is there a cost associated with receiving help from the Community Resource Center? And the answer is no, there's no cost. Our referral service is free of charge.

Another question frequently asked is: If I utilize the services of the Community Resource Center, will my information be kept private? And yes, of course all client information is kept confidential, and we only use it to assist people in linking them to various services and supports.

AMBER GRZEDA: Another one is: Can you help me if I don't live in Riverside? While the Community Resource Center was developed to assist residents of the Riverside Township area, we are able to help anyone with seeking assistance, regardless of their zip code.

The next one is: Are you a crisis center? No, we are not a crisis center, but can connect you to crisis services if needed. If no community resource specialist is available at the time of your call and you are experiencing an emergency, we would ask that you please hang up and dial 9-1-1.

MONIKA LEJA: You may be sitting and wondering where we're located: We are located inside the Riverside Town Hall at 27 Riverside Road. We are on the first floor, across the village offices.

And lastly: Are we open during the pandemic? We are not currently physically present at our Riverside Town Hall office, but are working remotely and corresponding with clients by phone.

Please call our number at 708-853-9578 to be connected with the community resource specialist. If one of our staff members is not available immediately, please leave a message and we will return your call within 24 to 48 business hours.

We are following state guidelines closely and look forward to returning to Riverside Town Hall once it is deemed safe and appropriate to do so.