



Statement of Coronavirus Pandemic Impact at youthSpark to Government Partners

(As of March 30, 2020)

Implications of the Coronavirus pandemic on At-Risk Youth

While government officials, non-profit and corporate leaders work to address immediate high-level human service needs--like imminent risk of homelessness and hardships due to health and economic impacts of coronavirus--youthSpark's work continues to be a part of meeting these critical needs. Child abuse experts know that in the coronavirus pandemic vulnerable children face a heightened risk of abuse and neglect as coronavirus-related school closures and public safe spaces keep them in homes that may be unsafe and away from educators, law enforcement, and social workers. As reported in a recent *USA Today* article (March 23, 2020):

Advocates for children are already seeing a sharp spike in families reaching out because they are in crisis. Teachers, administrators, school counselors and other educational professionals report one in every five child-mistreatment claims in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Child protective service agencies across the U.S. received 4.3 million reports alleging abuse and neglect of 7.8 million children in 2018 alone, according to the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Of those children, nearly 678,000 were determined to indeed be victims. Most suffered from neglect; the rest from various types of physical harm, the agency said.

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect – including parental stress, economic instability and housing insecurity – increase in situations like this, according to Dr. Melissa Merrick, president and CEO of Prevent Child Abuse America. “School and workplace closings greatly increase stress in parents’ lives,” Merrick said, adding that children with existing behavioral problems are prone to act out as their parents’ tension levels rise.

“I think we are going to see more cases of child abuse,” said Lisa Pion-Berlin, president and CEO of Parents Anonymous Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides coaching and support to parents.

Calls to the group's National Parent Helpline for families in crisis have spiked 30% in the past week, Pion-Berlin said. They're coming from mothers and fathers stressed about child care, food insecurity and other fears arising from the coronavirus crisis.

At youthSpark, we recognize and understand that not all homes are happy homes. In 2019, 45.5% of our new referrals were for family and in-home conflict. In-home conflict does not go away just because everyone is forced inside. With increased stress and pressure, in-home conflict is likely to increase.

We are adjusting to how we work, whether in the workplace for adults or in their schooling for children. Adults are adjusting to teleworking, and our kids are adjusting to tele-learning. Last year, 51% of our clients were struggling with some form of educational disconnection, such as navigating attendance due to lack of parental support or accountability which are often beyond their control. Educational disconnection increases the likelihood that youth will leave high school before graduating, have fewer meaningful economic and job prospects, and have a higher chance of involvement with the criminal justice system as adults. Tele-learning will pose new challenges for all youth, but especially those already struggling to connect.

Many of our clients have already reported increased anxiety with the uncertainty of when things get back to normal. Approximately 30% of these children are already coping with the negative effects of trauma exposure through physical or sexual abuse. And 25% of our clients are self-medicating by abusing substances.

For our young people, creating a safe place inside may be harder to do when everyone is sheltering into place in a variety of unusual circumstances. Video meetings make some adults uncomfortable, so imagine having to talk about traumatic things virtually. Or when a parent is hovering over your shoulder. Or if there are more people in your home than normal. Things many people take for granted--like a working refrigerator, for example--is a hurdle we are trying to overcome while we remain in triage mode...and talk about healthy relationships. Right now, our priority is to put out the critical physical, social and emotional "fires" until normalcy resumes.

Ensuring that kids can properly hear from us and engage with us while family life happens around them is a hurdle we are actively working to overcome. Getting them earphones would be a fairly normal task, but COVID-19 is a hurdle that will not stop us.

Our kids are already working to make adjustments and stay engaged. For example, "Leah", one of our previous Voices girls, called the front desk to see if we would answer. A trafficking survivor now trying to advance her career in nursing school, she is now 19 years old and experiencing barriers leading her to give up on her dream. She completed her nursing associate degree but cannot get a job due to previous legal issues. She felt defeated and that her hard work was in vain. Despite the crisis, we forge ahead to find legal help and expungement resources, while offering crisis and therapeutic services.

There are many challenges. One of our girls, who has a new baby, needed to get to the doctor, this crisis prevented us from helping. Another girl is having a hard time adjusting to a new environment because her primary caregiver, her grandmother, has tested positive for the virus and is now under quarantine. Another parent, whose child has been missing since the time of referral approximately one month ago, reached out to us because the child had been located and placed into a behavioral health facility for stabilization. A Fulton County Juvenile Court probation officer contacted us and we were able to connect the family with services. “Ms. Smith” called us the following week and wanted us to know that we are helping to save her daughter’s life and she contemplated placing her back in foster care prior to connecting with us. There are many, many issues like this that at-risk youth are experiencing all around our community and failing to tackle these specific realities will inevitably result in terrible consequences.

Operational and Financial Implications of the Coronavirus Pandemic on youthSpark

As of Monday, March 16, 2020, our Youth Services Center is temporarily closed to the public and our staff is now working remotely. This follows the closure of the Fulton County Juvenile Court and their requirement that all individuals not deemed critical to be at the Court to work remotely. We have transferred our main phone lines, activated Zoom accounts for teleconferencing, and instituted a telework policy.

One of the main issues we are experiencing is that our youth who are used to "dropping" in are no longer able to do that. Because the court is closed, families in crisis who would normally seek proactive services to address their needs are unable to do that now. They are in a reactive mode because they are unable to leave their homes--meaning “traditional” referrals have decreased. We are also addressing the impact of our youth not being able to have immediate access to resources that are made readily available by youthSpark at the Center (e.g., food, clothing, etc.).

How youthSpark is Addressing the Coronavirus Pandemic

Serving our Youth

We have developed an emergency plan to deliver as many services as possible in a remote or mobile manner. Throughout this time, we are working to be intentional about identifying any gaps or setbacks due to COVID-19, trying to help our youth get back to normalcy, or helping them put things back together if they are experiencing more abuse and neglect in the home.

COVID-19 has changed the way we reach our kids, but we were prepared because traditional interventions have always been tough for our kids to connect to at times. We have also always provided very individualized services and this is, now more than ever, extremely critical.

Kids rely on seeing supportive and smiling faces at our Youth Services Center every week and having a safe place in our Center to talk about challenges. In-person experiences in the Center are currently not possible, but we have transitioned to virtual services, including technical assistance to partner agencies and community members who call us looking for direction on how to navigate what they are encountering with their youth, for example. We are committed to using platforms and strategies (many of which are also commonly used by exploiters to recruit and isolate victims) to connect with kids where they are while they are unable to come visit us during normal hours at the Center.

We have managed to provide a continuum of services including offering group sessions, support, and assistance to youth and families involved with Fulton County Juvenile Court. The opportunity to provide services outside of the Youth Services Center is still ongoing; moreover the participants have adults they trust to advocate and assist with providing support beyond the walls of the Center. The youth are able to connect via text and Zoom.

The robust support provided extends to all youth as well as identifying resources that may assist families struggling with providing the basic necessities to their families. This includes, but is not limited to, collaboration with other agencies, daily review of updates from school systems, and updates regarding healthcare and services available. We are also able to conduct our intake process now virtually and are implementing document signing technology to receive parent approvals.

In addition, we are:

- Moving quickly to maintain critical contact, transitioned to online services in one week and 50% of regular attendance are receptive and remain engaged.
- Using time where youth may not have as many outside influences or may not be connected to "bad adults" to ramp up trauma-informed care or therapy to make a bigger impact and create more space between them and behaviors or activities that they perceive as normal--increasing the likelihood of increased positive behavior change.
- Because of COVID19, all homes should have access to free basic necessities offered to the community at-large, like Internet, food banks, etc, that allow families to sustain their own households. Our continued case management ensures our young people and their parents are able to identify and overcome barriers to accessing these resources and other services needed to address individual challenges.
- Expanding services to all FCJC involved youth and community-NGO partners (not just YSC kids) to offer critically-needed social media and internet safety courses, as well as empowerment workshops, like virtual vision boards and docudays.
- We are working with FCJC to get critical info out en masse for all FCJC youth and families, including YSC youth.

We are also continuing to provide the following services:

- **Case Management** (refers to a collaborative process that assesses, plans, implements, coordinates, monitors, and evaluates the options and services required to meet health and human service needs.)
- **Assistance Applying for TANF/Government Benefits** (includes making victims/non-offending caregivers aware of the availability of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] benefits and other government benefits, assisting the victim/non-offending caregiver in completing the required forms, gathering the needed documentation, accompanying the victim/non-offending caregiver to the agency, making follow-up contact with the agency on behalf of the victim/non-offending caregiver, responding to requests for records, etc.)

- **Criminal Justice Support /Advocacy/Accompaniment** (refers to support, assistance, accompaniment, and advocacy provided to victims/non-offending caregivers at any stage of the criminal justice process, includes initial police report filing, testimony, post-sentencing services, and support.)
- **Crisis Coordination** (refers to the coordination of communication among professionals and victims/non-offending caregivers regarding activities resulting from the victimization. Includes actions necessary to expedite a case for victim protection, initiation of legal actions needed to protect the victim such as probation revocation, etc.)
- **Emergency Financial Assistance** (refers to cash outlays [including gift cards and gas cards purchased for emergency purposes only] for food, clothing, short-term alternative emergency housing [hotel due to capacity at shelter], and other support services such as toiletries provided to primary and secondary victims.)
- **Group Therapy** (refers to psychological, psychiatric, and/or other counseling- related treatment for groups by a Georgia-licensed/certified and trained professional, to provide emotional support in crisis arising from the occurrence of a crime. This includes the delivery of psychotherapy.)
- **Individual Support** (refers to providing victims/non-offending caregivers with information and tools to empower them to advocate on their own behalf in securing rights, remedies, and services from other agencies, recovering property collected as evidence, assistance managing practical issues created by the victimization, providing follow-up contact for continued services or connection to additional resources, accompanying the victim/non-offending caregiver to appointments with social service agencies to obtain services necessary for their recovery, assisting the victim/non-offending caregiver with obtaining lock replacement/repairs to ensure his/her safety, and notification of victims compensation program and/or eligibility.)
- **Interagency Advocacy** (refers to securing rights, remedies, and services from non-criminal justice system providers on behalf of victims/non-offending caregivers. This includes responding to requests for records from other service providers, intervening with employers, school administrators, creditors, bill collectors, and landlords on behalf of the victim/non-offending caregiver. Such interventions can be regarding allowances for with employers, educators, landlords, creditors and others for court dates, absences, past due rent or bills, advocacy to amend credit reports)
- **Non-Traditional Therapeutic Intervention** (refers to activities provided by the agency to improve and promote healing, which responds to the emotional, mental, social, financial, or physical needs of victims. Must be based on the targeted needs of individual victims and provided by the agency.)
- **Provide Information Explaining the Criminal Justice Process** (refers to information and assistance provided to victims/non-offending caregivers explaining the criminal justice process and what is happening at each stage of the case in the system.)
- **Referral to Services, Support, and Resources Available – Non-Victim Service Provider** (referral to other services, supports, and resources [includes legal, medical, faith-based organizations, address confidentiality programs, etc.]. Refers to contacts with victims/non-offending caregivers, during which available, supplemental, services and supports are identified.)

- **Referral to Services, Support, and Resources Available – Other Victim Service Provider** (refers to provision of information about available programs and services provided by other victim service providers, if agency is unable to provide victim/non-offending caregiver with needed services and supports)
- **Support Group** (refers to the facilitation of supportive group activities through a structured curriculum led by staff/volunteer, contractor, or peer. This includes non-therapy based sessions facilitated by licensed professionals. Does not include one-time only curriculum.)
- **Therapy from a Licensed Clinician/Counselor** (refers to psychological, psychiatric, and/or other counseling- related treatment for individuals, couples, and family members by a Georgia-licensed/certified and trained professional, to provide emotional support)
- **Transportation Assistance** (refers to the provision and coordination of transport service. Transportation needs arising due to victimization may include transportation assistance to ensure access to agency services, as well as attend court hearings/proceedings, medical appointments, etc.)
- **Victim Notification of Criminal Justice Events** (refers to communications with victims/non-offending caregivers and on behalf of victims/non-offending caregivers to notify them of hearings and appearances, etc.)

The privacy and safety of our kids remain a top priority and we are working to ensure clients' private information is kept confidential at this time. Due to the nature of the nationwide public health emergency and our dedication to continue providing services in a timely and effective manner, not all communication can be guaranteed to be held to the typical privacy standards provided by youthSpark. We pledge to abide by all Health & Human Services laws (amended due to COVID-19 [Under this Notice](#)): OCR will not impose penalties against covered health care providers for the lack of a BAA with video communication vendors or any other noncompliance with the HIPAA Rules that relates to the good faith provision of telehealth services during the COVID-19 nationwide public health emergency.

Internal Operations

Preparedness Plan

Together as a staff and Board of Directors, we are promoting the practice of everyday preventive actions including using health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources, such as our local and state public health departments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These include: social distancing, including avoiding close contact with others, along with basic hygiene of washing hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer when soap and water is not available; covering coughs and sneezes using a tissue or the crook of an elbow; washing hands after using a tissue to wipe the nose or mouth; staying home from work or school if sick; and, avoiding touching of the eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.

youthSpark COVID-19 Response Communications Plan

The following youthSpark COVID-19 Response Communication Plan has been designed and activated to help us reach all employees, clients, families, and constituents outside of youthSpark.

1. *Internal Communications*

- All employees will be regularly reached via email to be informed of the latest updates.
- The Executive Director will monitor developments from Fulton County Government and communicate these with the Executive Team and Board of Directors.
- The Operations Director will manage the communication process and receive and respond to employee concerns.
- Go-to resources have been established to help distribute key resources.

2. *External Communications*

Our team has developed a communication plan to address our constituents outside of the organization, to include news media, grantors, clients, community partners, volunteers, etc.

- Our website is updated regularly with information on COVID-19 facts, the impact on our services, and the safety measures we have put in place to keep our staff, clients, and families safe.
- Updated information is sent out via text to our families in regards to community resources, our weekly services, and information related to Fulton County Juvenile Court.
- We've provided the links to United Way of Greater Atlanta and Georgia Family Connection Partnership, Inc. which provides the most up-to-date guidance from the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and trusted news outlets from across the state.
<https://gafcp.org/coronavirus/>