POTS Responds to COVID-19

the Recipe

Feeding Our Neighbors, Nourishing Our Community.
Everyone wants to go back to ‘normal’ and just being able to do the simple things. One client is taking this situation as strongly, which is being part of the community and helping us better appreciate what we still have: a love of one another as neighbors based on our common humanity.

The recent novel coronavirus outbreak poses a new challenge to our community, different from any it has experienced in the past because it requires us to practice “physical distancing.” POTS has always been a very personal and in-person community. The attachment we feel to POTS comes from being in the building, from those in it, and from working together while being together. Because of the program changes that are necessary to keep everyone safe and served, much of that bonding has become unavailable precisely when many may be looking for more of it.

POTS is learning how to serve in this environment, whether it is through understanding the best ways to connect using the many forms of available technology or through creative ideas from community members about how we can improve our new processes. We are still here to listen over the phone, by email, and at POTS for those seeking food or mail. We will listen, we will adapt, and we will continue to serve, always keeping in mind our mission.

In my years at Part of the Solution, time and time again, I am continually reminded of what an incredibly special place this is. The situations I have witnessed and the people that I have met at POTS have truly put into perspective what it means to cultivate and to be a part of a loving community. This situation is no different: I am seeing the camaraderie in the staff, desire to serve and support among volunteers and donors, and a cooperative spirit among clients. Perhaps because these new realities create new barriers, they may help us better appreciate what we still have: a love of one another as neighbors based on our common humanity.

from the Executive Director

POTS was founded during the recession and homelessness crisis of the early 1980s. The founders created POTS with the intention of feeding the hungry and providing a place of gathering where guests could find community with volunteers and staff and where the humanity of all was appreciated.

POTS has grown as an agency since then. It has many more staff and more structure. The number of clients and service types have expanded. Through all those changes, POTS’ mission to be a loving community for all who come to its door has not. POTS continues to be that loving community: a place of gathering where clients, volunteers, supporters, and staff come together to create solutions and build a stronger community.

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Since the start of the Coronavirus pandemic, Part of the Solution (POTS) has gone the extra mile to protect and serve its community. The organization has taken several precautions to prevent the spread of the disease to staff, clients, and volunteers. Standard hours of operation have been modified to accommodate client needs while adhering to guidelines of social distancing. Many staff now work remotely to decrease person-to-person contact. There have been frequent deep cleanings of POTS’ service and office spaces. And POTS’ customary service protocols, like served lunches in the Community Dining Room, Food Pantry “shopping” experiences, and one-on-one case management appointments, have been significantly adjusted.
Against this rapidly-changing background, the organization remains committed to its values of Community, Hospitality, Respect, Empowerment, and Justice. On any given day, it is the warm interactions between staff, clients and volunteers which create the welcoming atmosphere at POTS. It is so deeply ingrained in the POTS way of being, that one who experiences it on a regular basis might take it for granted. But with ever-increasing restrictions and regulations, that atmosphere is becoming harder to maintain. POTS staff work regularly with clients who have experienced discrimination or mistreatment, or who may be down on their luck and are lacking a sense of hope. Practicing social distancing has made securing the trust of new clients and maintaining rapport with existing ones a growing challenge.

POTS’ Volunteer Coordinator, Stephanie Caban, is charged with keeping volunteer services consistent and morale high. Describing the new atmosphere at POTS, she notes “many guests are thanking us for staying open,” but adds, “maintaining this new level of distance can be tricky, and it can be a bit hectic making sure all the communication is consistent and updated. I miss being able to physically show how I care for the people at POTS. I miss shaking hands with our guests and hugging my colleagues.”

Before the pandemic, POTS was a source of both literal and figurative stability in the lives of its clients. Matthew, a Day-to-Day Services client, expresses a mix of frustration and gratitude: “I had a clothing appointment with Theresa, I can’t get any clothes now. You’re saying ‘I can’t do this, I can’t touch that, stop here.’ This is too much, all these changes, too much. But I’m glad you’re here. You know, my mother predicted this back in 1973, when we were in England. She was a specialty nurse and she knew that this was going to happen! That a virus would break out like this!”

For a population already experiencing frequent food and housing insecurity, a surge in unemployment is causing a new level of anxiety. POTS’ Workforce Coordinator, Jonathan Escobar, says many clients “…are expressing concern about getting a job with all the current restrictions and companies closing down due to the pandemic. Or if they do get employed, just staying healthy. Yet others are more worried about finances in terms of paying their monthly bills, especially rent, since they live paycheck to paycheck.”

Ronald, a regular client at POTS, says that in spite of all of the sudden changes and hectic environment, he is “…waiting here all day—all day if I have to. I get my SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. I got here at 5 or 6 in the morning just to see if my check got here. I’ll just keep waiting. I’ll be here to eat lunch, yeah. I would normally be inside POTS, just resting and waiting… Oh I definitely think y’all should be open. Is anyone saying y’all should be closed? No, y’all should be open now.”

At a time when most Americans can take steps to ensure they are well-cared for during this pandemic, the lack of resources that many POTS clients experience is a jarring reminder of our society’s persistent disparities. Acts of care and kindness are needed now more than ever to assure POTS clients that they are not on their own during the crisis. POTS’ resilient staff, dedicated volunteers, and loyal community of institutional partners and individual supporters are going all out to preserve the organization’s role as a critical Bronx institution.

Emirelys Tavarez, a POTS Case Manager serves clients both remotely and in-person. She describes the stress staff can feel: “Front-line staff who must continue to work on-site show up and risk their health and their families’ health to help the community. They’re under a lot of stress from all sides, from changing their service model, to not having sufficient volunteers, to dealing with how COVID-19 has changed their work and home lives, to being scared that they will catch it and take it to the vulnerable populations in their homes. [I’ve] learned that POTS and its staff are rooted in its mission and that we will do the best we can for the community at large.”

“Acts of care and kindness are needed now more than ever to assure POTS clients that they are not on their own during the crisis.”
POTS Immigration Justice Corps Fellow Catalina Odio provides legal advice to clients dealing with immigration issues. She observes how “things that used to be really quick, like applying to get someone’s immigration file from the government, can now take hours or even days [and] that’s just for things I’m going to submit online. Don’t get me started on things that have to be submitted in hard copy…there are some things we just can’t do at all right now.”

Dana Carney, POTS’ Social Services Coordinator who has been working both in-person and more frequently now, remotely, is impressed “by the positivity and teamwork of the frontline staff, still holding down the fort so that those who struggle in our community have food to eat and are getting necessary mail. They are the POTS mission personified! As she contacts clients remotely she notes “some are surprised to hear from me and ask, ‘How are you doing? How is your family? Are you staying inside?’ I am touched by their genuine concern… What concerns me are the people I cannot reach, especially those that are homeless and without phones...”

Following a day of volunteering and seeing how the POTS Community has come together during the crisis, POTS Chairman Mark Miller characterized the POTS mission to create a loving community as “fully intact.” He said the Board of Directors realizes that “our services will likely be needed more than ever in the coming weeks and months.” Despite that, he added, “our commitment to the neediest of the Bronx and New York City remains in high gear.”

Over the past few weeks, the uniqueness and resiliency of the POTS community has been brought out in sharp relief. With many aspects of the organization changed dramatically almost overnight, POTS continues to dedicate almost limitless energy to fulfilling its mission of being a loving community that nourishes the needs of all who come to its doors.

In November 2019, POTS received some thrilling news. It was recognized by the Blackstone Charitable Foundation as one of the top non-profits around the world that are tackling complex issues in their community with creative and impactful solutions. Stephanie McGowan, co-chair of POTS’ Junior Board and a Blackstone employee, represented POTS throughout the competitive process of the Foundation’s “BX Gives Back Challenge”—an international competition in which non-profit organizations were nominated by Blackstone employees who then made in-person pitches, including a final presentation to top executives, in support of their chosen charity. Stephanie’s hard work in preparing multiple presentations paid off: out of 173 applications from 251 employees, POTS was one of just five winners worldwide to be awarded a $100,000 grant!
POTS is truly grateful to Stephanie and those at the Foundation for their support. Being recognized by one of the world's top investment firms increases POTS' visibility more than ever to the corporate world and opens up new opportunities to inform people about the life-changing work POTS is doing to strengthen its community. This recognition also affirms the significance of POTS' efforts to create a more just world. More and more companies like Blackstone have been committing themselves to addressing inequity by supporting organizations they see as best aligned with their social interests.

So what did Blackstone see in POTS? How do POTS' efforts align with Blackstone's responsibility to its community?

Stephanie feels that “...both POTS and Blackstone seek to create a positive economic impact as well as long-term value in the communities in which they operate. What I think really stood out to the Blackstone Foundation about POTS is the multiplier impact: For every dollar spent, POTS gets nearly six times leverage in terms of community benefit. These impressive results are not just numbers. The influence that POTS' work has on its clients and the Bronx community is undeniable. This is why for me, advocating for POTS to receive this grant was a no-brainer. Not only is POTS physically a part of Blackstone’s local community—being that its facility is only 9 miles away from Blackstone’s offices—but Blackstone and POTS also share the common mission to make social progress and improve the lives of those in need in our community.”

POTS’ one-stop shop program model, a now-proven best-practice, exemplifies the kind of purpose-driven cause that many corporations are seeking to support.

Stephanie added another reason she is such an avid POTS supporter: “POTS’ innovative approach combined with its entrepreneurial spirit allow the organization to continuously do more and expand its impact in the community. And even with all of the hard work involved, the environment is always warm and welcoming. When at POTS, you can feel this warmth and see the clear commitment to helping everyone that comes through the doors looking for help.”

More recently, both POTS and Blackstone demonstrated their unwavering dedication to serving as support systems within their communities. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, POTS has been working to adapt its service offerings to best accommodate clients’ existing and new emergency needs, while adhering to guidelines set to maintain the safety and health of members of the POTS community.

In March, the Blackstone Charitable Foundation granted POTS an additional $100,000 to assist individuals and families during this critical time of need, and help POTS continue to deliver its services in the most efficient manner.

As this very special partnership between POTS and Blackstone continues to grow, it will exemplify the major impact that corporate and non-profit organizations can have when united by a common motivation to invest in their communities.

Community Spotlight: Stephanie McGowan

Stephanie McGowan has been a part of the POTS community for many years. As a young girl, she was introduced to POTS through her local parish, the Resurrection Church in Rye, NY. She volunteered there as a child and into adulthood, gaining firsthand experience of POTS’ services and its life-changing impact on the Bronx. Stephanie also feels connected to the Bronx through her parents, both of whom attended schools there.

“I love being a part of the POTS community because there, I’m surrounded by a group of really caring people. I’m so impressed by the way that people there make POTS’ work their life’s work. Everyone has such a positive attitude, and there is an overall aura of gratefulness and dedication to serving the community. I also love seeing the direct impact of POTS’ work on people in the neighborhood who need help.”

As POTS has always held a special place in Stephanie’s heart, it is no surprise that she would want to step up to take a leadership role in the POTS community. In 2019, Stephanie became co-chair of POTS’ new Junior Board, a leadership group which supports initiatives to raise funds for POTS, and grow community institutional awareness. Stephanie is “excited to help build the ‘next generation’ of POTS supporters by expanding awareness in NYC (and beyond) of the amazing work POTS does.”

The Junior Board volunteering at POTS in early March. Pictured are (front row, l. to r.) Stephanie McGowan, Kate Murtagh, Shannon Raymond, Micaela Christophe, Dan New; (back row, l. to r.) Nicholas Raho, John Connor, Araya Henry, POTS volunteer Jasyn, and James Kennedy.
Staff Spotlight: Lucia Alanis

POTS’ Legal Clinic is a key part of many clients’ journeys to long-term stability and self-sufficiency. The Clinic’s attorneys and advocates provide direct representation and advice to clients facing eviction in the Bronx. They also preserve clients’ access to affordable housing, both through subsidies and public housing. When clients face financial emergencies that put them at risk of eviction, the Legal Clinic puts together a package of past-due rent payments from an internal fund and through advocacy with other providers, to eliminate the risk of eviction. Additionally, the Clinic provides advice to clients improperly denied the benefits needed for maintaining decent living conditions. The program annually provides nearly 1,000 individuals and families with legal services. Because of the Clinic’s hard work, POTS was able to prevent a record 439 evictions in 2019.

Lucia Alanis came to POTS in May 2016 after graduating from University of Texas, Austin. After participating in service and advocacy in college, she knew she wanted to make a difference in the lives of people in need. She came across a POTS job posting and immediately fell in love with its mission and the overall community. Through the Legal Clinic, we see so many individuals and families who really need help, whether they’re facing eviction, need legal representation, or some type of financial assistance. When we meet with our clients, I can see that they are comforted by the guidance, advice, or advocacy we provide — even when we are not able to solve each and every one of their problems. It is extremely rewarding for me to work at POTS and serve the underserved!”

She treasures the close connections she gets to make with clients while assessing their cases, and she also loves her team: “We all really support each other when we need extra help, and I can always count on [Supervising Attorney] Beth [Maris’s] guidance on cases, even when she is super-busy… just the best team and supervisor!” She adds, “There’s a huge demand for the work we do, making it nearly impossible to serve everyone with a small team such as ours. My goal this year for the Legal Clinic is to continue doing great work, while brainstorming ways to be more efficient, increase our capacity and reach more people.”

A Pinch of Policy

On February 24th, the new federal rule on Public Charge went into effect in most states in the U.S. “Public Charge” is a ground of inadmissibility - a reason that a person might be denied a green card, visa, or admission into the United States. An immigration officer must decide whether that person is likely to become dependent on certain government benefits in the future, which would make them a “Public Charge.” The Public Charge rule, first proposed in October, 2018 and finalized in August, 2019, could impact immigrants who receive benefits from critical low-income assistance programs, such as SNAP, Section 8 Housing Vouchers, Medicaid and long-term Medicare, as their participation in these programs could result in being denied permanent residency.

As the implementation of this rule is causing fear and confusion among many in the POTS community, here are a few important points to remember:

• Public Charge does not apply to all immigrants. Many immigrant categories are exempt from the Public Charge ground of inadmissibility, such as those applying for naturalization, U-Visa holders, T-Visa holders, asylees, refugees, and many other categories.

• This law mainly impacts those seeking green cards through family members by including a large and discriminatory range of “positive” and “negative” factors in the Public Charge calculation, including age, health, assets, income, credit report and score, health insurance, English proficiency, job skills and receipt of public benefits.

• A Public Charge determination does not include participating in emergency food programs, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, school meal programs, Child Health Plus, or other critical services that are not explicitly listed in the published rule.

• Recipients of public benefits should not discontinue or alter their benefits until after consultation with an immigration expert, and should know that any benefits received before February 24, 2020 will not be counted against them.

POTS is committed to being a loving community that helps all who come to its doors. The organization will continue to serve its neighbors in need no matter who they are or where they come from.

The Recipe is grateful to POTS’ Immigration Justice Corps fellows, Catalina Odio and Jeffrey Vides Urrutia, for their assistance in preparing this story.

Source: Cityharvest.org
Like all New Yorkers, the POTS community is confronting harsh new realities. As this crisis continues, these challenges are only deepening the instability many POTS clients already face. The loss of a job, or the diminishment of assets or other income, can exacerbate problems like food or housing instability, limited child care opportunities, access to healthcare, and behavioral health issues, among other problems.

We are finding that we need to address our community’s needs in new ways—and at new levels. Some of these needs are growing very rapidly. POTS anticipates a corresponding growth in the need for funds in the coming months as our most vulnerable neighbors begin to experience severe hardships.

The POTS Board of Directors has decided to create a special Emergency Response Appeal with an initial financial goal of $500,000 to be raised by June 30. We anticipate that this goal can be achieved through a combination of individual and institutional contributions. Gifts to this campaign will help POTS make sure that we can meet these needs as they emerge, and be a source of strength and hope for the community.

For more information on how you can support the Emergency Response Appeal contact POTS Director of Development Dan Rostan at drostan@potsbronx.org.

To receive the Recipe and other email updates contact acollard@potsbronx.org.

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