Todo esto es tuyo
(All of this is yours)
A Letter to our Clients
by Jack Marth, POTS Director of Programs

One of the founding visions of POTS is the idea that there is “no us and them”; whether we are staff, volunteers, clients, board members or supporters, we are all one. It’s an ideal we try to live up to, but at the same time we are keenly aware that no matter how hard we try, the reality is many of us enjoy privileges we cannot extend equally to our clients. In other words, despite our best efforts and best intentions, in practice there is still an “us” and “them.”

The way we are forced to operate now during the COVID-19 pandemic has made reality even more stark. Since late March, it has pained me each day I come to POTS when I see our clients unable to enter our building, a building that was designed to offer a hospitable welcome, to show all that come to our doors that we value and care about them and want to treat them with dignity and respect. Under the pandemic protocols, we are forced to stop our clients at the door and ask them to wait outside, sometimes in the rain or heat. We apologize and do our best to get them bags of groceries, lunch to-go or vital mail as quickly as possible. I’m proud that our staff and volunteers do their best to be efficient so that the lines are usually not too long. Unfortunately, images of long lines outside of pantries and food distribution centers have become the emblems of the food instability crisis which the pandemic has created in so many communities throughout the United States.

The numbers don’t lie. Since March 20, POTS has been providing an average of 8,200 meals to 150 households or 450 people each day through the Food Pantry, versus a 2019 average of 2,700 meals to 75 households a day and 225 people. That average papers over the dynamic of the situation where we have been seeing consistent increases in service over time. For a couple of weeks in June POTS was providing groceries to over 200 households a day. This equates to nearly 11,000 meals for 600 people, every day. From March 20 through the end of June the Food Pantry served nearly 3,300 new households, households that had never come to POTS before for food.

POTS’ other front line staff, case managers, attorneys, advocates, mentors, social worker and workforce coach are observing a crisis level of need as well. Many of the clients we serve have lost earned income as the service industries where they worked cut staff or completely halted operations. Our dedicated staff do what they can to ameliorate the deprivation and insecurity of this lost income, but the public and private resources that are available still leave huge gaps. At the same time many of our families were already living in over-crowded apartments, doubled and tripled up. The closure of schools and the stay-at-home orders add additional levels of toxic tension and stress, leaving our clients with literally no room to escape.

Yet even in this crisis situation we are constantly inspired by the grace and resilience of many of the clients we are privileged to serve. There are clients who have become their own mutual aid operations, coming to POTS to pick up food for an elderly neighbor or a single mother stuck at home with children trying to do remote learning. POTS has been able to help some clients with private grants that generous donors have given us to reach the stay-at-home orders add additional levels of toxic tension and stress, leaving our clients with literally no room to escape.

We sorely miss having our clients in the building that was built for them. We look forward to the day when the doors at 2759 Webster Avenue are once again wide open, when we can greet each other with a handshake and a smile not hidden by a mask, and when all of us together can continue to find new and better ways to be part of the solution.

This issue of the Recipe, entitled Todo esto es tuyo (All of this is yours), is dedicated to our amazing clients who inspire the work of POTS staff, volunteers, and Board members every day. The words are spoken often to the many who are in disbelief about the quantity and quality of what POTS offers to them with nothing asked for in return. We proudly publish this special edition in both Spanish and English. Let me know if you would like a printed copy.

Kymberly Deane, Editor • kdeane@potsbronx.org
Coping in the Age of COVID: Challenges to Mental Health

Amid a growing pandemic, individuals all over the world are struggling to maintain a sense of security. Persistent shortages of hand sanitizer, and disinfectant spray, as well as record-breaking unemployment numbers are just some of the indicators not only of tangible instability, but also pervasive anxiety.

Whether fears are stemming from the potential or actual loss of a job, uncertainty about how bills will get paid, or concern about the health and safety of loved ones, these matters are leading to increased mental health problems nationwide.

Even with new data about the virus being published each day and the countless ways that society has been working to adapt to life’s new normal, tensions attributed to the virus are at a high level. According to studies conducted by YouGov at the end of June, an average of 51% of people in the U.S. are still very worried that either they or their friends and family will contract the virus or become seriously ill and die. 49% of Americans still fear that their finances have been or will be severely affected by the pandemic. 27% of Americans are worried that their children’s education will suffer because of the pandemic. And 72% of Americans believe that the pandemic will have a long-lasting negative impact on society.

MULTIPLE OBSTACLES

As we take a closer look at mental health within the POTS community during this chaotic time, multiple community-specific issues resulting from COVID-19 are coming together as drivers of stress and anxiety. POTS’ new family-focused stability and self-sufficiency mentor, Loammy Rivas, discussed the fears that clients have about staying afloat for the sake of their families and children:

I have a client who lives with her husband and her two children, and they are undocumented. She cannot read or write so she hasn’t been able to log on to her children’s devices so they can access schoolwork remotely. She expressed to me how she feels foolish, useless and it’s really beginning to take a toll on her. She began to cry as she explained how overwhelmed she feels. I let her know that she is amazing and that there are resources that can help.

For non-English speakers the economic impact of this crisis is worsened by a lack of awareness of and/or access to available supports which only compounds the emotional stress. In particular, the limitations on undocumented immigrants seeking employment, benefits, and monetary resources create tremendous anxiety, placing them at even more risk of experiencing mental health challenges.

ISOLATION

Another source of stress is isolation. POTS’ stability and self-sufficiency mentor, Hamilton Esteban reports that “Some clients are having a tough time adjusting to the changes and limitations on the amount of contact they can have with family members.” According to Psychiatric Times, medical experts have found that “longer periods of physical isolation, especially if experienced as involuntary, without an adequate and convincing explanation, or accompanied by financial losses can compound risks of adverse mental health consequences of physical isolation.” Being quarantined can take a big toll on individuals with pre-existing mental health challenges, as seeing friends and family may have been an important part of their care.

Even "stay at home orders" can be daunting for impoverished families because their living quarters may not be large or comfortable enough to reside in for long periods of time.

SURVIVOR’S GUILT

An increasingly common source of depression is survivor’s guilt. Defined by MedicalNewsToday, survivor’s guilt occurs “when a person has feelings of guilt because they survived a life-threatening situation when others did not.” As many individuals know of a friend, family member, or acquaintance who has contracted the COVID-19 virus or even died from it, some may feel guilty as they question if they have done something wrong by surviving. POTS’ Social Services Coordinator, Dana Carney, LMSW, discussed a client’s battle with survivor’s guilt:

The client has had meals delivered from the Meals-on-Wheels program for over a year. He had made friends with one of the employees who often delivered his meals, but she suddenly stopped coming and was replaced by someone else. When he inquired about her, he was told that she had contracted COVID-19 and had passed away at her home. He said that the last few times he had seen her, he was not wearing any PPE and he had teasingly said to her, “Don’t come back here without a mask on!” After learning of her death, he had a lot of mixed feelings - survivor’s guilt, anger and profound sadness at the loss of someone he barely knew but enjoyed seeing each day. He said he wanted to write a letter to the program, letting them know how much he had appreciated Karen and the program, but also urging them to take better care of their workers.

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The Other Pandemic: Soaring Unemployment

The Coronavirus crisis has impacted lives everywhere, but for the people POTS serves in the Bronx it has been particularly devastating. POTS’ mission is to help people move from crisis to increased stability and ultimately self-sufficiency. Entrenched poverty makes the crisis much worse for many POTS clients.

Even before the pandemic, the Bronx was one of the most impoverished places in the nation. The high cost of living in major cities like New York means that for many, even steady full-time wages may be insufficient.

According to a 2018 report by the Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement and the United Way of New York City, two in five working-age New York City households—roughly 2.5 million people—lack enough income to cover basic necessities like food, housing, health care, and child care. Yet only a third of them are officially considered poor based on federal income standards. The report also points to the Bronx as having the highest rate of families living below the self-sufficiency standard, with 55% unable to meet these basic costs.

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When the COVID crisis forced the closure of non-essential businesses, the resulting unemployment impacted workers in the Bronx especially hard. In March alone, a staggering 40% of employees earning less than $40,000 became unemployed. By April, New York State’s seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate had more than tripled—growing from 4.1% to 14.5%, while Bronx unemployment rose to 16.5%. By May the Bronx unemployment rate grew to 21.6% and June statistics show Bronx unemployment even higher—at 24.7%. This has meant that tens of thousands more Bronx families now fall below the self-sufficiency standard.

We asked POTS Workforce Coordinator Jay Escobar to comment on the changing landscape of POTS’ workforce development during the COVID pandemic.

The Recipe: Have you seen more people seeking assistance in finding a job since the start of the pandemic?

Jay: Right now the number of employment support intakes have been lower than one might think given the sharp rise in unemployment. There are a number of reasons for this. Many businesses are still closed. Clients are concerned about the lack of available jobs, and about the unknown health risks involved in taking on a new job during COVID. Many are also focused on obtaining unemployment insurance and just staying safe for now.

The Recipe: Despite the challenges of providing services over the phone and by email, POTS’ case management team has served 9,128 clients in the first five months of 2020 helping them obtain 1,116 new benefits collectively worth over $3.7 million. That’s impressive. Besides employment coaching and job skills training, what other kinds of help does POTS provide?

Jay: For many people who have lost their job, the first step may simply be to secure benefits like unemployment insurance, SNAP, and public assistance. Our case managers help each client as a unique person with a unique situation. I refer people to them for help in applying for benefits, and the case managers often refer clients to me for help in finding employment.

The Recipe: What do you recommend that people do during this time to sustain themselves if they have lost a job, and what can they do to prepare for a return to the workforce after the pandemic?

Jay: First, I would suggest you apply for unemployment right away even if you are part-time, or self-employed, as exceptions have been made during the pandemic for those individuals who wouldn’t normally qualify. Enroll in as many food pantries in your borough as possible to help with food shortages. Take free online trainings in workforce readiness as many providers have shifted their in-person trainings online due to COVID-19. Update your resumes, cover letters, and reference page, and obtain recommendation letters from previous employers. Finally, be persistent and set aside a minimum amount of time each day for your job search.

The Recipe: How do you see the landscape of Workforce Development changing once the pandemic subsides?

Jay: I think the landscape will be dramatically impacted. Especially because so many jobs are connected to small business that won’t survive this crisis. I think it will also negatively affect the number of new jobs as many industries will seek to further automate in an attempt to save on costs. Or they will try to do the same workload with less staff to save on payroll, benefits, etc. as they attempt to rebound during the re-opening process. That being said, I’m hopeful that certain sectors will make a comeback, for example the restaurant industry. Only time will tell when this will happen. Lastly, the staying power of certain sectors (food retailers, shipping warehouses, laundry-mats, etc.) that were deemed essential will also help provide some stability to the workforce.
When POTS opened its doors in 1982, volunteers were an essential component of the organization. The thousands of volunteers who have become part of the solution ever since have been exceptional—not only in terms of what they have added to the community, but also in what they have received in return. Beyond the opportunity to serve others, POTS volunteers learn about poverty—what it is and how it works, and how everyday people can make an enormous difference for their neighbors.

Groups and individuals come to POTS from close by and from across the country to give back to the Bronx community. Many feel a special kinship with POTS because they are former clients or neighborhood residents. For many more, volunteering at POTS has become a cherished family tradition over generations.

POTS’ Volunteer Coordinator, Stephanie Caban recalls a notable moment recently while working with a group of volunteers. “Given the amount of heavy food lifting we were doing, it was really cool to see them also making an effort to be present and to engage with the community—not to achieve a specific goal or aim, but to just be with them. I think they learned that day that both heavy lifting and being present require strength.”

The role of volunteers in keeping POTS operations going has become even more critical during the COVID crisis. The safe capacity for volunteers in the POTS building has been reduced, yet there is still much work to be done. POTS has served nearly twice the number of clients through its modified Emergency Food Programs through May 2020 as compared with the same period in 2019.

The Recipe caught up recently with several POTS volunteers and asked for their thoughts on why they contribute their time and talent, and on the changes they’ve noticed during the pandemic.

ZORAIDA PABELLON is both a volunteer and a POTS client.

“Our organization doesn’t offer what you guys offer, you guys are everything for everybody. Volunteering gives you fulfillment. Before the pandemic, you would be up close with the people. During the pandemic, it’s not the same. Before, you could be part of the whole experience. Sometimes they tell you a bit of their story and why they’re there. And now you don’t have that.”

TANGYA YOUNG is a new POTS volunteer and a local resident.

“I live in the area and was doing other volunteer work delivering Meals on Wheels to the homebound elderly. It was kinda far away and I wanted to do something...”
HILARY DUFFY is a POTS supporter and a New York City-based professional photographer.

I learned about POTS probably about 15 years ago through Donn Dolce, a family friend who was on the POTS board. He roped us all into becoming advocates and donors. More recently I began working in the pantry for several reasons. I like to use my Spanish when volunteering and I really admire the different arms of POTS’ services—not just for food insecurity but housing insecurity and the legal aspects of that, as well as one’s mental health and one’s physical well being—all critical to moving forward. It’s important to get all able hands on deck at this time, following all the health rules and regulations. And it’s all so well run. It’s thrilling, actually, to get involved and to know that you’re contributing in some small way.

CORNELIUS “CV” MCGINITY is an executive in the investment management industry who recently volunteered for the first time at POTS.

What was so impressive was how you guys package so much fresh produce and all those lunches, and at the same time promote an interest in people in both raising money and doing something good for the community.

ADIN PEPPER FOX is a junior at SAR High School in Riverdale.

Our school has a volunteer day every year for each grade and in 9th grade they took my class to POTS. That one day was my first exposure to POTS. Usually I go to camp for the summer. This year it was cancelled and I had a lot of time on my hands for four months. I felt like I needed to do something to give back to the community. There was something about POTS, like, helping people firsthand—you see them outside, you see them getting their food. So my friend Yahah and I decided to reach out and volunteer for POTS. With the changes due to the pandemic—it’s not the same anymore—you don’t have that direct gratification. But in your mind, you know you’re helping.

Staff Spotlight: Stephanie Caban

POTS’ volunteers are the heart and soul of the organization. All of the people who lend a helping hand bring life to POTS’ mission to be a loving community in the Bronx. During the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than shying away, volunteers have shown an even deeper level of dedication to their work. Despite the changes due to physical distancing guidelines, many continue to sign up to volunteer in-person.

This enthusiasm and commitment to service are well-reflected in the manager of these programs. If you have ever come to receive services at POTS, signed up to volunteer, or even just come to POTS as a visitor, it is likely you met our Volunteer Coordinator, Stephanie Caban.

Stephanie joined POTS in 2018, and like a missing puzzle piece, her arrival completed POTS’ Volunteering Program. She made it her personal duty to highlight the significance of volunteers in the POTS community through efforts like an Annual Volunteer Appreciation and Recognition Awards Dinner. Stephanie also led the charge in ensuring that volunteers who serve at POTS have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their role in the community by expanding the program to include an Immersion Experience for volunteer groups.

My favorite part about leading POTS volunteers is exploring the mission, vision, and values of our organization with them. We created the Immersion Experience as a service-learning program that invites volunteers to explore what it means to compassionately serve, and to serve ALL, as stated in the POTS mission. I love learning new things each and every day. Our volunteers help me to be better and to serve better.

Volunteering at POTS looks a lot different in the wake of the changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Personal contact with clients is at the crux of POTS’ volunteer work. Social distancing has made it difficult for both staff and clients to show and feel the love at the core of POTS. Stephanie notes that “since so much has changed, our mission has become harder to fulfill. Not seeing guests regularly, or having so many limited interactions with clients as they wait for meals or groceries makes me sad. I am passionate about the relationships I get to form with people who are living on the margins.”

Stephanie has seen first-hand the devastating effects of this global crisis and still devotes her time to serving others who need help on their journey to greater stability. She views each day as a new hurdle to overcome: “I think what’s been keeping me motivated is by constantly asking, ‘How do I love?’ I’m not going to say everything’s great and fine. It’s not. And it’s not always easy to say, ‘Let’s just focus on the positive!’ I just find new ways of loving people, and that is quite an exciting challenge.”
A Pinch of Policy

Thousands of New Yorkers are urgently trying to make ends meet in the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. To provide some relief as the height of the emergency in late March New York State announced an initial 90-day moratorium preventing all evictions through June 20. As weeks passed, seemingly without any improvement in the economic and social conditions created by the pandemic, an executive order was issued to extend the moratorium to August 20, 2020. However, a caveat was added to the extension— it only applies to tenants who can prove that they are experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19, mainly through their eligibility for unemployment benefits.

While this may seem like an easy task because so many are suffering during this time, the new condition presents issues for individuals who do not qualify for unemployment insurance. Undocumented individuals may also be at a higher risk for eviction, as many are reluctant to provide any documentation to the government that may reveal their status. Countless households may also be responsible for paying back-rent when the government holds cease.

In addition to risk of eviction, tens of thousands of New Yorkers are in danger of contracting the COVID-19 virus, as they will be required to prove their eligibility for the moratorium extension by attending court proceedings in person, despite the risk to their own health and the health of others. The new conditions of the extended moratorium do not explicitly protect those who are sick, caring for sick family members, or who are required or advised to self-quarantine from participating in eviction proceedings or from evictions.

POTS’ Supervising Attorney, Elizabeth Maris, emphasizes a gray area in this matter, as many details about legislation and possible rent support are still unclear. “There are many providers including POTS and HRA who are available to work with tenants at risk of eviction to help them develop a plan for how to handle rent arrears and successfully defend against a possible eviction.”

As POTS anticipates that its Legal Clinic will encounter many clients who are housing insecure because of the effects of COVID-19, it has expanded its emergency grant awards fund. This fund is available to our clients who are housing insecure or are facing eviction because of the pandemic, as well as clients who need to pay for copays on life saving medication, utilities, phone bills, and other smaller but critically-important costs.

Elizabeth also advises, “I think the advice to tenants in that area should be to communicate with their landlord to advise that they are experiencing a financial hardship (due to COVID), but that if they have specific questions about how and when to communicate, to seek advice by contacting the POTS legal team.”

POTS’ Legal Clinic has created an informative flyer titled, “Information on Housing and Benefits Cases During the Public Health Emergency As of May 29, 2020” equipped with helpful websites and phone numbers for clients seeking more information for their particular circumstances.

The Recipe is grateful to POTS’ Supervising Attorney, Elizabeth Maris, for her assistance in preparing this story.

Source: ny.curbed.com

Aida Rosario was inspired to come to POTS because of her late husband.

The real honest truth. I never knew about POTS. My husband, he was ill, he liked to go to the nearby Family Dollar. He used to say, “Come with me to Family Dollar,” and I would see all these people outside of the building. I would say, “What is this building?” And he would say, “This is where they help people.”

My husband had a friend who would come to POTS for food stamps and to pick up his mail.

Although her husband did not receive services from POTS, both Aida and her husband saw the impact that it had on his friend’s life.

My husband says, “When I leave ... this is where you gotta go and help people.” He was in hospice care. When he passed six months later, that’s when I went into POTS, and I asked how to be a volunteer.

Giving back to the community at POTS is always an uplifting experience for Aida, and even a form of self-care.

Volunteering at POTS has been so much therapy for me. Yes, I was tired the first couple of weeks when I started, but it was such a good tired. I look forward to the work each day I go to POTS. It saved my life, it saved my sanity. I worked in corporate for 36 years. When I was let go, I cried and cried because I lost my family at the office. I went through a depression, yes I did. But I get to have another family here. Every time I go to POTS, I’m a happy camper, I love it.

As a current client at POTS, Aida feels that volunteering at POTS is a great way to reinvest in the community that supports her.

Oh yes, definitely. All of the clients I’ve come across and spoken to, and I miss speaking with clients because of this COVID thing, I really miss the interactions with them, they’re like, “God bless you people,” and that just cheers me up. When we have had interactions with clients, they would always ask me how do I become a volunteer. I think if they could spare a couple of hours, lots of clients would come to volunteer. Because they see what POTS is about and how POTS treats them, POTS treats everyone with dignity and respect.
The Response Continues

Luis and Marisol live not far from POTS with their two boys, ages 6 and 4. With careful budgeting, Luis was able to cover the rent for their one-bedroom apartment using the income he received from his job at a local restaurant. When the pandemic came, Luis’ job was gone. They were worried—about the virus, their immigration status, and the lack of income to support their family.

So they came to POTS for help. They enrolled in the Food Pantry program, got help with SNAP benefits for the children, and started coming for lunch service, too. POTS is helping them with all their goals—finding new employment, learning English, addressing their immigration issues, and building a sustainable future. Their boys now participate in virtual tutoring sessions co-led by POTS and a Bronx-based school. Their lives were turned upside down by the crisis. But POTS has restored their hope.

Success stories like Luis and Marisol’s could not happen without the generosity of people who share POTS’ commitment to our Bronx neighbors and have contributed to the Emergency Response Appeal.

When the Appeal was launched in April, POTS set a goal of $500,000 in financial support by the end of June to help counter the multiple impacts of the crisis. The response was amazing and it came from all over the greater Northeast and beyond. Together, we raised $581,000!

But we haven’t reached the finish line yet. The public health and economic impacts of this crisis are still changing as are the needs of our community. Please visit POTS’ website at potsbronx.org to get more information on the many ways you can help.

POTS is able to continue saying Todo esto es tuyo because of people like you.

We hope you are staying safe and healthy, again, thank you for being part of the solution!

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