The Family Van’s Response to COVID-19
April 1, 2020

At The Family Van, we believe that our services are more important than ever as we work to support our communities and disseminate information to keep people safe and to reduce community spread of COVID-19.

It is our mission to provide free, accessible, culturally and linguistically appropriate preventive healthcare to those who need it most. We welcome everyone, without judgment, but with warmth and compassion. Personal interaction was the common thread in the 9,755 health screenings and 3,200 visits to The Family Van last year.

We are providing services in new ways to help our clients take control of their health since the pandemic is currently preventing us from providing our traditional curbside services on the mobile unit. We are sharing multi-lingual community resources and safety guidelines, hosting call-in hours, and calling clients directly.

We have been preparing and distributing multilingual educational and safety information about COVID-19. Most notably we are distributing fact sheets which were translated into 35 languages by a group of Harvard Medical School students, in conjunction with 175 other medical students around the country: [https://covid19healthliteracyproject.com/#languages](https://covid19healthliteracyproject.com/#languages). We are also providing information and connecting clients to other social service resources, as well as delivering homemade masks to our communities. Leveraging our deep roots in the community has enabled us to hand out this information to our clients through church communities, dropping flyers off at local supermarkets and pharmacies and through our social media channels. By sharing guidelines and safety recommendations in people’s native language, we are not only saving lives, but also preventing further community spread.

Everyone at this time is feeling a sense of isolation and anxiety. To address this, we have been hosting call-in sessions. Clients have called in about a variety of health questions, but mostly those that relate to the virus. They are often uncertain of what steps they should take, where they should go to get help or if they should get tested for COVID-19. Our team is able to listen and direct them as to what steps to take next. Sometimes talking it through and having a caring ear can do a lot to bring comfort and support, giving people the courage to take that next step.

To further connect with and support our community, we have been providing telecare - calling and texting clients directly. Here are some of the interactions we have had so far:
We called a 74 year old woman who lives alone. She has diabetes and was running out of medications and glucose test strips. She was afraid to go out and decided to go without these important supplies instead of risk being infected. Speaking in Portuguese, our staff explained that prescriptions could be delivered to her house. With the client on the line, she called the pharmacy and the interpreter service at Boston Medical Center, and scheduled the delivery.

Our staff dropped off formula, diapers and wipes to a mom who was in immediate need. The mom remembered us out in the community and she called the office, and we were able to deliver these important supplies to her.

One client said she is no longer working and therefore does not have any income to send to her family in Mexico to support them. This has been an extremely distressing time for her, being at home is debilitating because she can’t help herself or her family and she is feeling depressed. She was grateful for our call and to have an understanding person on the phone to discuss her feelings. We reassured her that she is not alone in feeling this way, and we are always here to listen and support her, and that we have resources to connect her to clinical services.

Another client asked us to council him on safety and social distancing tips for him to share with his employees because they are still doing construction work. We provided him with social distancing measures, told him to make sure his workers wash their hands frequently, and emailed him copies of the visual flyers to hang around the work site. He said he was going to share this information within his community, his church and in the prisons where he administers church services.

When a client from East Boston answered the phone, he said “Gigi from The Family Van?” and he was so happy. He said his family has been calling him, but he never thought his other family, The Family Van, would call him! Then he said, “Gigi, I love you; I love Rainelle, I love the work you do.” He said he had been home for 8 days and wanted to know how much longer he would have to stay home. Our staff told him how important it was for him to follow the guidelines, to stay home and stay safe, not just for him, but for the whole community and the health care workers. We told him we would keep calling him to check in and see how he was.
Having been in the community for 28 years, we are able to connect with vulnerable and hard to reach individuals and educate them about the coronavirus in words they understand. We are grateful that our commitment to the community has put us in a trusted position to be able to share this information, as we do our part to be a good neighbor and to keep people safe.

Finally, with our sister program Mobile Health Map, we hosted a national webinar with mobile clinics across the country. We had over 330 people join the call where we shared best practices and ideas about supporting our communities during this crisis. You can find the link to the webinar here.

The year 2020 has already brought significant challenges. None of us know what will happen, but we do know that The Family Van will be supporting and serving our community today, tomorrow and always.

We are always here to answer questions. Please call us at 617-442-3200, or email us at family_van@hms.harvard.edu