



THE LATEST NEWS
PUBLISHED FOR OUR
FRIENDS & FAMILIES

Spring 2021



Looking

Forward

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear friend,

In the year since the COVID-19 pandemic began, all our lives have been transformed in one way or another. How we work, how our children attend school, how we spend time with friends and loved ones, the stresses we have confronted, and for some, our health, have all been affected. Much is different than it was before March 2020. It is incredible to think about the broad and, certainly in some ways, lasting impact the pandemic has had on our world, our local communities, and our families.



In our own way, we have each paid such a dear price. Some have lost loved ones, others have been ill, and some are experiencing the layered impacts of mental health issues that are reverberating through our society in the wake of these hard months. My heart and prayers remain with those who have experienced great loss. I hope all who have been affected will find a path to health and peace over time.

And now, as the days warm after the long winter and flowers begin to reach upward toward brighter days, we too begin to look forward. As Gemma looks to the future, there are many things to be hopeful about.

- Through our newly formed **Southwest Initiative**, we have launched an effort to assess the needs of the community. We are reviewing what services are already in place, and we are considering additional ways we can provide services through our Preheim Center in Southwest Philadelphia. Gemma has formed a committee that consists of members of the Gemma Board, Gemma's staff, and colleagues from other nonprofits who provide assistance to the Southwest community.
- After the closure of our residential program in Rosemont, we continue to explore opportunities for other ways we can serve children and teens with acute psychiatric needs.
- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work** continues at Gemma, coordinated by three staff co-chairs working in collaboration with national consultants from BCT Partners. We are invigorated as we evaluate our internal processes and aspire to live into our value of Gemma being a place that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.
- **Across our residential, community based, and education programs**, we are beginning to evaluate the steps and timeline necessary to safely resume in-person services, visits, and operations.

Despite the challenges and uncertainties of the past year, Gemma remains steadfast in our commitment to provide the highest quality caring services possible for children, youth, and families. In this newsletter, you will read examples of some of the challenges for Gemma this last year, as well as some of the triumphs, both large and small, experienced in recent months by our staff and youth and families we serve.

I am so grateful for the grit and dedication our Gemma team has shown, and so grateful for you, our friends and partners. You play such an important role in helping us to fulfill our mission. Thank you for partnering with Gemma to make hope shine. With your support, we are truly transforming hope into action every day for precious and deserving youth and families who continue to need us now, more than ever.

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristen".

Kristen E.M. Gay, Ph.D.
President and CEO

Martin Luther School: Not Quite Business as Usual



When the pandemic hit in March 2020, schools across the country were faced with the question of how to continue educating students safely. **Martin Luther School (MLS)** was no different, and like so many others, had to quickly pivot and did so amazingly well. Within one week, MLS had online learning up-and-running for its 200 Kindergarten through 8th grade students. They set up virtual classrooms, developed a structure for the school day, put systems in place for students and families to seek support, and even delivered Chromebooks to students who needed them. Although planning is underway to resume in-person instruction as soon as safely possible, hopefully with our Extended School Year program beginning in July, MLS continues its virtual programming.

During this virtual education year, the teachers and staff have provided synchronous, live instruction in virtual classrooms, including music, art, and P.E., in addition to ensuring that students have access to their regular supports, including speech and occupational therapy, counseling, and more. This structure certainly has required teachers to flex their instructional muscles. "Early on, this was foreign to all of us," explained Rafiq Williams, MLS Principal. "Along the way, we've learned new skills and new ways to educate students."

Another challenge that MLS had to overcome was getting materials to its students, who hail from more than 40 school districts throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania. A plan was hatched, and prior to the start of each trimester since the pandemic began, MLS' dedicated teams have safely assembled and

delivered supplies to students' homes in a contactless manner, including pencils, paper, books, materials for art projects, and even dirt for a science project! "The students have really enjoyed seeing their teachers and staff in person, even if it was at a distance," shared Williams.

MLS administrators continue to evaluate how its new system is working. "This school year, we built on the lessons we learned last spring and over the summer," explained Maria Taylor, Supervisor of Special Education. "We made adjustments as we needed to but continue to do everything we would be doing if we were in person, including bringing on new programs." At the start of the 2020–2021 school year, MLS moved ahead with plans for a new math curriculum and built on successes from its new reading curriculum introduced the previous school year. "Overall, the students have done well academically and made great progress, some grade levels have even seen a 100% increase in literacy," shared Sasha Gachelin, Dean of Students.

For some students, it has been difficult to stay engaged while learning virtually, but others love remote school and are flourishing. Students who were once reserved and disengaged are now enthusiastically participating in discussions online. "He has blossomed," said Siobhan Canavan, Supervisor of Clinical Services and Admissions, of one student who barely spoke when school was in-person. "He's participating in class, chatting with other students, and seems comfortable being himself. It's been amazing to see how far he's come."

"While the past year has presented a number of challenges, MLS faculty and staff have been steadfast in their efforts to educate and support students. "I am so proud of MLS," said Eva Morrison, Vice President of Education. "The MLS staff are committed to our students and have been able to put themselves aside amid a pandemic. We have had to learn so much this year. And at each turn, the staff has been willing to take risks, fail, and try again. This combination of perseverance and humility allowed us to exceed every expectation of a virtual school for kids with emotional trauma."



Small Wins Add Up to Healing

In a year that has brought hurdles for everyone, therapists in Gemma's **Outpatient Behavioral Health Program** take every opportunity to celebrate a "win" in a child's life, no matter how small it might seem. "During the COVID-19 pandemic, life has been extra challenging for our kids and families," says Jaime Coale, Senior Outpatient Supervisor. "Yet there continue to be 'wins' to cheer." In this program, our skilled and caring professionals provide individual and family therapy, as well as medication management, for children and teens.

For some, success might be consistently finding a quiet place in the home to log on for their virtual therapy session. It might be using a new coping skill when they feel angry rather than yelling or identifying a "feeling word" without prompting from their therapist. In working together, therapists along with children and families set small, manageable goals that build upon each other, and ideally lead to bigger successes.

When the pandemic began, Gemma's Outpatient Program shifted services online. Plans are being developed to safely resume in-person services, but for now, therapy continues to be provided via telehealth. "It's been a challenge," says Beth Richey, Director, Outpatient Behavioral Health Services. "Children are so burned out from hours of online school that they are finding therapy to be another digital chore versus the fun or calming relief once experienced."



To tackle this challenge, Gemma's therapists have worked creatively and tirelessly to engage youth and families remotely. "Many therapists have pets who like to make planned and unplanned appearances during a session," says Richey. "This has been a fun way to engage youth who are having difficulty finding the motivation to engage in another screen-based activity." Another example, Richey shared, "one client, who enjoys baking, showed off their baking skills while talking with their therapist."



Our supporters have helped make this work possible, too. Thanks to generous friends, Gemma was able to provide "telehealth kits" (shown left) for our youth with items to help them fully participate in telehealth therapy. All neatly packed in a drawstring backpack, kits included earbuds for privacy, stress toys, drawing supplies, a writing journal, and more. We also were able to provide therapists with donated Bluetooth headsets (shown above) to aid them in their work.

As one therapist shared, a seven-year-old boy excitedly unpacked his telehealth kit while on a video session with her, and jumped right into using the feelings chart, stress toys, and white board he had just received. With these tools, the program's small successes continue to add up and ultimately lead to that big success we envision for each and every youth we serve:

hope and healing.

Foster Family Care: Providing Loving Homes



Every child deserves a caring and safe home, and Gemma's **Foster Family Care** program works to make that vision a reality for children experiencing emotional and

behavioral difficulties. Often, the children served through this program have experienced abuse or neglect. The Gemma team provides training and support for dedicated foster or resource parents who offer compassionate care and structure to help children and teens heal and flourish.

Currently, the Foster Family Care program is working with more than 120 parents who have signed on to provide stable, loving environments for children in need. Some have a long history of serving as foster parents, such as the Dixons who are at 27 years and counting. Gemma's program recently recognized the Dixons for their dedicated service. "Their commitment to children's wellbeing is exemplified by the care they recently provided for a child that they welcomed into their home on short notice after

a traumatic experience," said Stacy Chamberlain, Case Manager. During their tenure as foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dixon have fostered 18 children in need of a loving home, adopted two with special needs now in their late 20's, and provided respite care for dozens. "Their expertise in nurturing and providing guidance to children with all personalities, abilities, and behaviors from pre-school age to young adult is truly exceptional," shared Chamberlain.

The Dixons are not alone in their steadfast commitment to providing caring homes for children and teens. In fact, four of our current foster parents have served in this role for more than 15 years through one of our legacy organizations, the Village or Silver Springs, now merged as Gemma.

As Chamberlain said, "The Dixons' willingness to help all children and open their home time and time again is a testament to their warm and caring nature. Their patience and dedication are second to none!"



Gemma Services is pleased to be launching our newest program, **Family Based Mental Health Services**, and to welcome Isabelle Gauthier, MS, LMFT as the Director! Gauthier comes to Gemma with 10 years of experience providing support and assistance to children, adolescents, and families struggling with

parent-child relationships, depression, anxiety, grief and loss, trauma, and truancy issues. "We are excited to have Isabelle join the Community Based Programs team and the Gemma family!" shared Melissa Harvey, Vice President, Community Based Programs.

Welcome!

Family Based Mental Health Services utilizes two-person teams to provide intensive in-home therapy and case management for families. The teams will work with families to help them improve coping skills, strengthen family relationships, and link them to resources they may need in the community. The first team is in place and beginning to serve families this month, including those of children preparing to return home from Gemma's Residential Treatment Program. "Early data shows that when Family Based Services overlap with residential treatment, it can shorten a child's length of stay in a residential program and reduce the likelihood that they will return," explained Harvey. "These are hopeful outcomes for the children, youth, and families we serve, because we want to support children and families in their communities whenever possible."

A Year of Creativity

"I cannot say enough about how resilient, creative, flexible, and accommodating our ABA staff have been during the pandemic," said Tristan Dahl, Clinical Director, **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)** program, which serves youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders. These teams, along with those from our **Intensive Behavioral Health Services (IBHS)** program, which also works with school aged-youth who are experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties, have had to muster a great deal of ingenuity and flexibility this last year. "The pandemic itself brought many changes, and on top of that we shifted to new state-level regulations last year," Dahl explained. "There have been tons of changes to our program, and our staff has stuck with us and adapted."



Both of these Community Based Programs continue to function in a hybrid status, providing services both in families' homes and via telehealth, depending upon the family's needs. "For both programs, we have found in-person services work best for some of our younger children, so whenever we can work in-person, we do so," said Tiffany Young, IBHS Assistant Director. Dahl added, "During the initial shutdown, we transitioned to all telehealth services. However, we have been slowly and steadily returning to in-person work. We began assessing which clients were in the most need to determine who would need to go to crisis support or inpatient hospitalization if they didn't receive our services. As regulations have permitted, we have allowed in-person services for high-need clients, following all safety guidelines."

The IBHS program currently serves about 150 children referred by their schools or healthcare providers

because they are struggling at school or at home with behaviors and mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety. The team is comprised of master's or doctoral level Behavior Consultants and Mobile Therapists, and bachelor's level Behavioral Health Technicians. They work closely with families to help them and their children gain tools to build resilience and achieve their goals. The ABA team currently serves more than 100 children and teens using a very specific, evidence-based therapeutic approach to help them improve their behavioral, social, communication, and adaptive skills.

Despite the pandemic, the programs are thriving thanks to the dedicated staff. "I'm proud to say that, even during the pandemic, our program has doubled in size over the past year, and a large part of that is due to our talented staff members," said Dahl. "Our staff has done a beautiful job in engaging kids in creative ways," says Young.

“Our staff have been incredibly creative and resilient through this time, and we are very proud of them.”

– Tiffany Young, IBHS Assistant Director

There are many examples of this ingenuity. "They are finding different apps that use video and drawing or movies and music to help support our clients," Young stated. One therapist turned sessions into a mock TV news show to help a child develop important social skills through role-playing, such as practicing greeting people, answering questions, and expressing feelings appropriately. The exercise culminated in a "show" with a question and answer section that included the child's siblings as "special guests." Other staff used activities such as holiday decorating to help children deal with the loss of a caregiver and even walking a dog "together" to create an opportunity for the child to talk privately rather than in a space in their home where siblings could hear.

Changing the way we provide services effectively has required dedication, something that is front and center for these teams. As Young says, "Our staff have been incredibly creative and resilient through this time, and we are very proud of them."

A Balancing Act

While the safety and well-being of the children in our care is always our focus, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought that into even sharper focus for our **Residential Treatment (RT) Program**. "Every aspect of the program, from food service to clinical care and more, has been impacted by COVID-19," explained Joan Plump, Chief of Staff. "New procedures for nearly everything had to be developed and communicated. This was made even more challenging because, especially at the beginning, the guidance was constantly changing."

During Spring 2020, the RT Program paused new admissions, discharged children far enough along in their treatment to be successful at home, and put in-person family visits on hold to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. As new health and safety procedures were enacted, new admissions to the program and in-person family visits, which were virtual for a time, both resumed.



During these challenging months, staff worked extra hard to balance keeping risks low while maintaining a sense of normalcy for the boys and girls in our care. "It was important to us to find ways to honor our traditions and let the kids have fun, while also focusing on keeping

everyone safe," said Malaika Henry, Residential Program Manager. With off campus trips also on hold, achieving that goal has meant finding ways to bring activities and experiences to the children on campus. "The staff have had to get even more creative in how they work with the kids," Henry explained. Field trips to museums, trips to movies, and dinners out at local restaurants have been replaced with virtual field trips, movie nights in house, nature walks on our expansive 35-acre campus, and "Fast Food Fridays" as a special take-out treat. Beloved Christmas traditions, like the annual holiday party and the children's selection of a new stuffed friend from the railing of their residence, continued with a few adjustments.

"Our kids have been troopers," shared Randi Gerencser, Residential Life Manager. While the year has brought changes to their daily routines and lives, the children have by and large risen to the challenge and have not shown an increase in unsafe behaviors. According to Gerencser, "The staff have been so impressed. Their resiliency has been incredible!" The same could be said for the staff, whose dedication and tireless work to support the children also has not wavered. Of the staff, Plump shared, "Not once have we been without staff, even when there were so many unknowns and the pandemic was at its scariest. The staff showed up ready to care for the kids every day. They have been amazingly resilient, too!"

Countdown!

Top Five Ways to Support Gemma Services

With the support of generous friends and partners, Gemma serves thousands of children, teens, and families each year. Here are some of the ways you can join us in our work to make hope shine!

5 Support Gemma's Staff Self-Care Initiative by donating gift cards (\$10 is ideal) to Wawa or Dunkin' for a nice treat. Larger donations to support burnout prevention programming for staff can be made on the Gemma website at <https://bit.ly/Give2Gemma>.

4 Design a project like a Confirmation, Mitzvah, or service project to help Gemma's youth and families. You could assemble gift baskets to celebrate adoptions, collect items for our good behavior store, and more.

3 Participate in an employee giving campaign in your workplace or submit a donation for a corporate matching gift to Gemma.

2 Purchase an item from our wish list (<https://bit.ly/Gemma Needs>) or from our Backpack and School Supplies collection (watch our website for details).

1 Make an unrestricted financial gift to support Gemma's ongoing work with at-risk kids and families. Gifts can be made securely online at www.gemmaservices.org or by check mailed to Gemma Services, 512 W. Township Line Rd, Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462, Attn: Development Office.

To learn more or ask questions about any of the options above, please contact us at info@gemmaservices.org or (610) 825-4440 x3206.

Thank You!



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Save the Date — FRIDAY, NOV 5, 2021



Gemma Services was formed by the merger of Silver Springs & theVillage.

FEATURING
**Chef Chad &
Hanna Williams
of
Friday Saturday Sunday**

Supporting Programs for
At-Risk Children, Youth, & Families

www.bidpal.net/chefsforgemma2021

In-Person Dinner & Auctions!

Event will be streamed for those at home.