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## **CPWD Offers Cares Act-Funded Mental Health Support for People with Disabilities**

While the physical toll of COVID-19 is clear to all, what's not as apparent is the toll on mental health. According to the CDC, from August 2020 to February 2021, the percentage of adults with recent symptoms of an anxiety or depressive disorder increased from 36.4 percent to 41.5 percent ([CDC, 2021](#)).

People with disabilities are even more susceptible to increased mental health challenges during times of individual and social stress. We often depend on resources and supports such as family, doctors, transportation services, personal assistance, and more to maintain activities of daily, independent living. There is also a sense of security and consistency that can feel disrupted for some when the state of our community, and more so the world, is suddenly uncertain and unpredictable. All of this can lead to increases in anxiety, depression or both.

When COVID-19 hit, we immediately transitioned all of our services online. As part of that, we went from offering 2-4 Peer Support Groups a month to 1-2 groups a day! This was, in part, to ensure that people with disabilities stayed connected and informed about community-wide updates and changes, and to offer skills training and ways to cope and survive the then yet-unknown impacts of the pandemic. What we found was that these regular Peer Groups also created a sense of well-being through the spirit of connection that supported mental health. Many participants shared about their struggles and increases in anxiety and depression, and for some, just connecting was enough to work through those challenges. For others, professional help was needed. And so we created an adjunct offering to our services whereby anyone who was involved with our services could also get professional mental health counseling at no cost to them.

Using Cares Act funds, we were able to offer individuals packages of up to 8 counseling sessions with a professional, licensed counselor, who is also an expert in living independently with vision loss. In addition, we offered a 4-week information and support series focused on nurturing mental health. A number of people with disabilities participated in the 1:1 counseling, and the 4-week workshop was so well attended that we re-offered it this fall with great turnout.



Beth Gustin and service dog Manolo sitting in the park

CPWD contracted with Beth Gustin, a licensed professional counselor, nationally certified counselor, and EMDR certified therapist to conduct 1:1 counseling sessions and run the workshops.

“COVID highlighted and exacerbated challenges that are inherent to people with disabilities, in particular people with vision loss,” Gustin explained. “Moving around in public, at the store, 6 feet apart, and so forth was so challenging that many avoided it, which led to increased isolation, and increased anxiety and/or depression.”

“This segment of people also lost forms of connection and their sense of independence,” she continued. “Through counseling and skills training, we worked on ways to effectively deal with the changes in our society as a person with a disability, and more importantly, found ways to redefine purpose given the losses. Skills-building in combination with redefining purpose has a significant, positive effect on reducing the experiences of anxiety and/or depression, and increasing overall mental health and well-being.”

CPWD is very pleased with Beth’s work and grateful for the opportunity to allocate funds to this critical effort. We hope to continue to find ways to support mental health well-being at this level for all people with disabilities in our community who are seeking such support.

Thank you, Beth, for all your efforts and work, and thank you to our staff and team for helping facilitate this important offering during a challenging time for all of us.

To find out more about Beth Gustin and her work, please visit her website: [www.transitioningthroughchange.com](http://www.transitioningthroughchange.com)