New FSW COVID-19 program helps vulnerable groups

By Victoria Bresnahan

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A Port Chester teenager battling COVID-19 was successfully able to quarantine from family members for two weeks after receiving aid and resources through a new program provided by Family Services of Westchester (FSW).

“When I got (the virus), I was kind of scared because I thought my family was going to get it,” he said. “I didn’t want them to get sick. At the same time, when I got it, I was isolated from my family, so I was kind of alone. I could not be with anyone because I didn’t want them to get sick.”

His father—who asked that he and his family not be named—reciprocated his feelings of anxiety. When he learned his son had contracted the novel coronavirus, he was immediately concerned considering the severe symptoms the illness can cause.

Though the 13-year-old has since recovered, he said he dealt with headache and stomach pain while shielding himself from his family.

The patient and his family were able to receive much-needed supplies and resources through FSW’s new Pandemic Supportive Services Program. The initiative homes in on helping minority and vulnerable groups in Port Chester and throughout Westchester who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and are more likely to struggle with financial and medical challenges.

"With quarantine, we are going to try our best to give you what you need so you don’t have to be outside," FSW caseworker Denise Santiago said.
Residents who are quarantining due to contracting the virus can receive free resources such as prepared meals, personal protective equipment and contact tracing. The program’s team performs periodic wellness checks on the families throughout the day as well.

While the teenager remained in his bedroom for most of his illness, his father—who’s primary language is Spanish and for whom Santiago translated—said he received masks, gloves, hand sanitizer and thermometers through the program to ensure family members would not contract the virus.

Data compiled by the American Public Media Research Lab found there is a mortality disparity between Blacks, Indigenous people, Latinos and Pacific Islanders when compared to Whites in the U.S. The death rates they compiled found one in 1,350 Black Americans and one in 3,100 White Americans have died from the virus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found some racial and ethnic minority groups are more affected by the virus due to societal inequalities. These inequities include access to healthcare, discrimination and being employed as essential workers.

Port Chester, a racially and economically diverse community, has accumulated almost 1,300 cases of the virus. FSW’s program is the first in the county to offer this level of support to families struggling with COVID-19.

“We do know that there is a high population of the Hispanic community (in Port Chester), so this program is definitely needed in that particular (village) of Westchester,” FSW Program Supervisor Shellise Dixon-Rawls said.

“Basically, we are doing a checkoff of what they need, and we try our best while they are quarantining to help them with those resources,” Santiago said.

The program, which officially started the first week of June, is funded through an initiative from County Executive George Latimer.

“This is George Latimer’s vision,” Dixon-Rawls said. “He wanted to see this come into fruition.”

FSW assesses each family’s needs to ensure they have the appropriate resources while quarantining, Santiago said. While food and medical supplies are high-need items, she said families also need mental health support due to the anxiety this highly contagious virus can cause.

Some of the families the program targets are undocumented or suffer from anxiety due to trauma from the disease. Santiago said FSW connects them with teletherapy and counseling to ensure their mental health stays intact.

“It’s a wonderful program,” Santiago praised. “Sometimes we want to help more and more, but sometimes there’s some resources that are not available and we actually go out of our way to help out. I think we pretty much cover everything.”