

COVID-19's impact on The New England Center for Children

Life at The New England Center for Children (NECC) has certainly looked different during the past four months. At the start of the pandemic and throughout this public health crisis, NECC counted on the expertise and counsel from Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders and state health officials. Following their recommendation, on March 16, NECC closed our day school program and Southborough campus facilities. We immediately re-deployed resources to maintain a safe and healthy environment for the **121** residential students entrusted to NECC's care.

Senior leadership staff immediately formed an Emergency Management Team who met daily to monitor the situation, prepare a sound plan to protect and care for our 1,100 staff and 589 students served from our Southborough campus. Beyond the immediate need to sanitize and seal offices, classrooms, and shared spaces throughout the Center, considerations were made for the children with autism and their families, so that they could continue to benefit from the programs that help them on a daily basis.

As many students in our residential program could not be sent home to weather the pandemic without 24/7 care, our staff pivoted to provide for these students in more ways than one. Food service staff became caterers – preparing and delivering nutritious breakfasts, lunches and dinners to the residences seven days a week; health service staff became triage nurses, administering COVID tests, and monitoring symptoms of every student and staff; maintenance staff repurposed classrooms at the school, renovating them to serve as an isolation unit that was ready when we had several students at one residence test positive; and teachers became technology trainers for parents now tasked with helping their children with remote learning.



The day school remained closed from **March 16 through July 5**. Teachers, clinicians and specialists provided remote learning opportunities for students, including art, music and adapted physical education video lessons and zoom classes. Students also had weekly zoom calls with their Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and licensed Special Education teacher.

For students in our residential program, NECC made two important decisions to minimize exposure risk to our most vulnerable population. First, we ceased visitation by family members, deliveries, and other non-essential personnel on March 16 until June 13. Additionally, direct care staff working with our residential students were given the opportunity to self-isolate in extended stay hotel rooms in the area. In total, **135** staff moved into hotel rooms from mid-March to mid-June at substantial cost to NECC.

The results of all these efforts, thanks to the guidance and concern of state health officials, were remarkable. Of the 18 residences owned and operated by NECC, only seven had a positive staff or student. Since March, **19** staff tested positive for the virus and **15** students, and all have recovered.

Throughout the pandemic, NECC provided training related to COVID prevention and preventive measures to all of our employees. We strictly enforced mask wearing, physical-distancing, frequent hand washing, restricted visitors from entering NECC properties, and put preventative measures in place for essential delivery services. All NECC staff and affiliates followed the guidelines set forth by the Massachusetts COVID task force.

Due to the cooperation of staff to implement the Commonwealth's guidelines and willingness to wear personal protective equipment, we were able to successfully contain the coronavirus within our residential program. Our staff's willingness to work with positive student ensured that we were able to continue to serve our students without the need of any hospitalizations.

To date, NECC has invested over \$3 million to support the following efforts in the fight against the coronavirus: hazard pay for staff working with residential students, frequent cleanings and sanitization of highly touched surfaces, additional cleaning supplies, the purchase of personal protective equipment (although some emergency supplies were provided by the Commonwealth), and frequent and rapid testing of students and staff, again provided by the state of Massachusetts.

Overall, the partnership between NECC and the Baker Administration's COVID task force was successful, and we were able to provide much needed services to some of the Commonwealth's most challenging students.

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