

SywenskyLori_20201014

KIMBERLY KRATZ: Hi. My name is Kimberley Kratz and I'm here with Lori Sywensky from Turning Point to talk about her experiences in Allentown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal is to collect oral histories of people's unique experiences during the COVID-19 quarantine and the re-opening in the Allentown area, and to preserve that information for future generations to access. Our project has funding from the Lehigh Valley Engagement Humanities Consortium and we're meeting on Zoom on Wednesday, October 14th at 10:00 a.m. Thank you so much for your willingness to speak with us today. To start, would you please state your full name and also spell it for me?

LORI SYWENSKY: Absolutely, good morning. Lori Sywensky, and it's L-O-R-I, S-Y-W-E-N-S-K-Y.

KK: [00:01:00] Thank you. And will you please share your birthday?

LS: 7/26/72.

KK: Actually, I lost your sound there a little bit.

LS: Oh, no. Can you hear me now?

KK: Yes.

LS: Great. It's 7/26/72.

KK: Great, thank you. So this interview is expected to involve no more than minimal risks of answering questions about the past. You might become bored, tired, or frustrated during the interview. Hopefully not.

LS: You're not making it sound great.

KK: Some questions may make you uncomfortable. In recounting the past, there may be risk for emotional impact. There's no obligation to answer any question. If you have any concerns about your own mental health, please contact the National Alliance of Mental Illness at 1-800-950-NAMI or 6264 or you could email them at info@NAMI.org. Please be mindful that if you use the names of individuals other than [00:02:00] yourself, you may be violating their privacy. Instead, please try to refer to those individuals as "my friend" or "my co-worker." So for the consent portion, do you consent to this interview today?

LS: I do.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview being transcribed, digitized, and made publicly available online in searchable formats?

LS: Yes.

KK: Do you consent to having this interview being stored in the archives of Allentown Public Library, Muhlenberg College, and the Lehigh Valley Engagement Humanities Consortium's digital archives?

LS: Yes.

KK: Do you consent to Allentown Public Library and/or Muhlenberg College and the researchers using your interview for educational purposes in other formats including films, articles, websites, presentations, and other formats?

LS: Yes.

KK: Do you understand that you will have 30 days after the electronic delivery of the transcript to review your interview, identify any parts that you'd like to delete, and/or withdraw your interview for the project?

LS: [00:03:00] Yes.

KK: Do you understand that you are not receiving any monetary compensation for your time today and you are not required to participate by your employer, Allentown Public Library, or Muhlenberg College?

LS: Yes.

KK: Thank you. This project has been approved by the Muhlenberg College's Institutional Review Board and you may

contact Dr. Erika Iyengar, the current head of the Muhlenberg's IRB committee at ErikaIyengar@Muhlenberg.edu with any questions or concerns. Yay. We got through that part.

LS: Here we go, yes, I am familiar with the IRB process, so --

KK: So just by way of introduction because not everybody that's ever going to pull this archive is going to know, so please tell us about the services that Turning Point provides.

LS: Sure. Turning Point of Lehigh Valley, we've been around serving Lehigh and Northampton Counties for 42 years. Our mission is to eliminate domestic abuse and intimate partner abuse in Lehigh Valley through empowerment, [00:04:00] engagement, and education. We started out with the core service of an emergency hotline and safe shelter for women at the time in the '70s who were fleeing abusive husbands. And at that point the battered women's movement was our genesis. Since, over the past four decades, we have grown where we now continue to provide a 24-hour hotline and our emergency safehouse program, but we also have transitional housing, legal advocacy, individual and supportive group counseling for adult, youth, significant others. We have an array of prevention and education programs, and a number

of systems advocacy efforts that we do around engaging our community to be part of the solution with us.

KK: Thank you. So with respect to the COVID-19 and the pandemic, can you describe when and how you came to realize that things were probably going to be a little different?

LS: Oh yeah. [00:05:00] So in a normal year, up until this past year, we've been trending where we serve about 2,600 new people a year. About 10 percent of those folks or about 250-or-so adults and kids will stay with us in the shelter. The largest majority will be in the courthouses, where we have offices that help people with protection orders, and so our normal daily routine is that we have about somewhere in the ballpark of 25 to 35 people staying with us in shelter. On occasion, we would have people at the hotels if all of our rooms within the building were full, because we say our safehouse is a program, not a building. We never could be full. We will be committed to housing you if you need that and we're used to maybe helping 10 to 15 people a day at the courthouses, each at Lehigh Northampton with protection orders or help with the criminal justice system. So it's been a real variant since COVID. [00:06:00] I mean, the first week of March was when

I really personally noticed it. We've been following the news. I'm an avid news watcher, so certainly I was aware of it, but we hadn't really changed any practices. But because of a family emergency, me and my boys had to fly down to Florida - well made the choice to fly to Florida to see a family member who was in bad health and went down there. And so you started to notice on the flight itself some people seemed uncomfortable around people who were coughing. And I started to hear jokes about toilet paper, but honestly up until that point it wasn't really affecting us. It's amazing how quickly everything shifted in that very short two-week period because that week, I noticed little things that we honestly just sort of even kind of joked about in some ways. I had a meeting I was supposed to be at the following week in Harrisburg and started getting engaged in discussions, [00:07:00] "Do we or don't we convene 120 people in a conference room together?" But I was still signing off on travel requests to go to national conferences. This is all what was going on leading up until that two-week period. I remember it was that third week of March and having a meeting with my managers where we had convened and talked about, look, we

can set up chairs in our room. And there were about nine of us in that conference room within our safehouse building and said, "I purposely spaced out the chairs because this is now the new social distancing." We were just talking about this idea, and we were kind of like, "This is what we have to get used to and we have to wear the masks, and we need to be conscious of it." And then, I got a call from the school saying my kids' school was closing for the year. We kind of quickly all of a sudden went, "This is something where we have to start implementing some safety [00:08:00] protocols, but this is actually a level of seriousness we have not necessarily anticipated." My board, I already had started to provide some information and we had dusted off our old pandemic plan that we had to develop that I kind of always joked about. I'm like, "In the event of a pandemic, I'll be in a bunker." I mean, good luck to us all, but the reality that there was no level of planning that anyone could have foreseen to adequately prepare us. What we had were some policies around infectious disease, around staff time off, around alternate shelter, around flexible staffing. That certainly was able to help us but when this all came together at once, it was a whole different level

of reality. And we were fortunate in that because of some of the stuff the governor did honestly around declaring essential services and different things, [00:09:00] in our world what it did was allow us to continue providing services. So while from an organizational level I certainly had to kind of look at what sort of things do we have in place to help out our staff, our volunteers, our clients? We were able to continue to provide the full array of services and even despite the fact that we had implemented some things like administrative leave to allow people to take a day off with pay every week just to kind of manage some of the number of people in our buildings, I mean, I had staff that didn't even want to do that. So the fortunate part was up until April, even though it was certainly different, you had a whole different way of offering services, we were able to continue to meet the same need that we had prior to all this.

KK: Great. Did you have any difficulty in obtaining any supplies for whatever you needed on the daily basis?

LS: [00:10:00] Interestingly, there was a staff member from Muhlenberg who right before all of this had mentioned that they had a big supply of toilet paper and different things

that they were able to get us, so that was we said divine timing with having a house full of people in shelter with us, somebody had the foresight to donate a bunch of paper supplies and toilet paper right before they all disappeared off the shelves. We had a number of people in the community who started to come forward and volunteer to make us masks and different things. I had one on my desk, it was very nice. They put them in individualized bags with homemade masks telling us how much they appreciated the work we were doing and how they were rooting for the people that we were helping. So we were in a position that we were sometimes supplying masks to some of our partners that we needed to interface within the justice system who had not had those [00:11:00] available yet. So we were blessed that we have a really supportive donor base in the community who came forward and gave us a lot of the cleaning supplies and things that we may not have had an adequate supply of on hand. We did because of PPP funds and some of the government assistance programs that came out, we were able to get some funding about a month or so later. And when things started to loosen up a little bit in terms of supply chain, we have been able to stockpile

quite a bit at this point in time to just make sure that for the next year, we can adequately get through in terms of disposable household supplies, eating utensils, all sorts of cleaning supplies. So in that area, we were pretty fortunate.

KK: Wow, that's really great. Honest. It's nice to see that your community stepped up in that, given that situation.

LS: It's overwhelming.

KK: Did you see either anecdotally or statistically an increase in the numbers of [00:12:00] domestic violence constituents that you were dealing with during the quarantine?

LS: That's an interesting thing because I started by saying, "the numbers we typically see." Starting when the schools closed and when the governor declared our region one of those red regions. They had the scale of red, yellow, and green. Our numbers dipped really low. We knew anecdotally from some of the clients we were able to reach that their at least interpretation or their perception of the abuse was that it was worse, that they felt there was even more of an emotional strain in the household, that there were new tactics that were being used against them in terms of now where they might have been able to leave the house

before to go see some friends or go take their kids for childcare. [00:13:00] We had one woman who I know did tell one of our counselors not only was she not allowed to have her kids around anybody, including her family, because of the abuser saying they were afraid of contracting the virus but the abuser was also then requiring her to wash her hands to the point of redness, and sores, and different things, and doing that to their kids. So anecdotally, we were hearing some things that were really pretty terrifying that people were going through. Kids ranged from one of them saying, "It's kind of cool. It's like living in a movie," that we were able to reach, but other kids talked about being more depressed and feeling like now there was no hope; they don't even get to leave the house to see their friends at all. But our phones got quiet. And we were not surprised. I was looking up and had our outreach staff who [00:14:00] no longer could be in the schools or go to workplaces, but they were doing a lot of research into what are we seeing both in other parts of the United States and internationally? And honestly, we've had articles from China, Australia where we were all seeing at that point in time the same thing, that people were not reaching out for

help. And so that was concerning. We still had some people in our shelter, but it was at about 50 percent capacity as opposed to our typical 90 to 100. The people who were with us, when new people needed to come for shelter, we would have them go for a hotel for a week period at that point to see if they became sick. There really wasn't much testing available at that point or it was taking several weeks, but we felt like we had kind of created our own bubble in a lot of ways. Our staff who couldn't be at the courthouses or couldn't be at the schools were helping to cover shifts at the shelter and different things. [00:15:00] But it was quiet and a lot of the people who we'd be able to reach out for phone counseling would have to hang up suddenly because they were calling from basements, from cars, things like that. What I would say is where we noticed the big difference is the governor had put the Lehigh Valley into a yellow zone and so, prior to that, he had lifted the construction ban and we started to see some people who now that their spouses were working, or their significant others were working again, and they were able to have more time to get away. So we did have between those two factors, lifting of the

construction ban and then the switch over from red to yellow. We saw that when people had the opportunity to leave, some of them had been thinking about leaving for a long time but at this point took it serious, so we had more people coming to shelter. So we went from January to March having what for us was [00:16:00] a normal census and a predictable year. Well, I would say April and May, our numbers went down significantly in all program areas but then starting in June and then it's continued all the way up through the end of September, we've seen sort of an unprecedented increase in all of our service numbers. On a typical quarter, we would house about 70 new people in our safehouse program for instance. From July to September of this year, we housed 130, so it is double. Our courthouses, we'd on a typical day see, like I said, 10 to 15 people. We've had several days since the courts re-opened -- and they are addressing backlog, and they're doing some stuff to resume, but we're often experiencing 30 to 40 hearings in a day may be held. It started and it just hasn't let up.

KK: [00:17:00] Wow. I know you said you're an avid news watcher. How do you compare the media coverage of the

pandemic with what your actual experience has been all along?

LS: There's a lot of discussion about the crisis or in terms of the isolation people are experiencing, and I can just say certainly we see the same kinds of things I think you see on the news where there are some people who are really, highly concerned about their health. There are some people who believe it's a hoax. I think we're experiencing in terms of this and in terms of what we're seeing nothing terribly different, but the one parallel I keep drawing is the more I see about the isolation, and the depression, and the impacts on mental health for both [00:18:00] youth and adults, one of the things we talk a lot about with our staff and I keep trying to remind myself is this is what it's like to be somebody who's experiencing domestic abuse. This is your daily existence and so you are now dealing with the isolation you've had imposed on you as part of the abuse as well as the additional impacts of COVID. And so, I think that's the one thing where we kind of talk about the things we see in terms of what's being emphasized. Our clients don't have the luxury of having the isolation where you get to kind of stay home and enjoy family time, and

build lots of LEGO villages, and binge watch shows. I mean, I think that was so much of what it seemed as if the United States was doing. I think that was the part that for us, especially in the early months, was most striking was it kind of was talking about in terms of a break, or a time to reconnect, and we knew for us the reality was [00:19:00] people were being confined in a space with someone who was mistreating them. Their chance of hope was taken away and the fear of COVID was compounding their normal concerns and anxieties they had over a very fearful situation. For us, it was a dichotomy of seeing how a lot of people were at least portrayed to be experiencing it versus what we knew to be the reality for unfortunately a whole lot of our neighbors here in the Lehigh Valley.

KK: I have just a couple of more questions here for you.

Looking back to when you first realized what the impact of the pandemic might be, what would you tell your future self about how to react?

LS: I've been asked a few times lately in the context of funding reports and different things this lately.

[00:20:00] In the beginning, we tried to remain as calm as possible and that's a bit of a mantra for us, that we're an

agency that deals in crisis so we can't be in crisis. And so, we plan a whole lot. And we had the benefit where we had invested a whole lot in our technology infrastructure, so the ability to move things to a hybrid model and then a remote and virtual model was relatively easy for us. I mean, not to say it wasn't without hiccups, but we were lucky enough that a month before this, we had just switched phone systems and made it really easy to pick up the hotline from anywhere we needed to from any device. We were able to do a number of things. There were some things that I had been honestly a bit hesitant to get into like virtual counseling for a telehealth platform, but I found myself getting over. So there were times I found that in the beginning maybe I was [00:21:00] not as flexible as I learned I needed to be later, and so maybe that was a thing. We were really die hard on the essential services, and I think that from that point of view, that it was necessary. One of the things that happened was in April that we were essentially life-sustaining and, come April, we had a situation where in the same two to three-day period, we found out that one of the moms and her kids in our safehouse as well as some of our advocates who worked

out of a different location not in a safehouse had all tested positive for COVID. And at this point in time, there were still so many unknowns. I mean, I think at this point we've learned a little bit more, but this was terrifying, and the community was still on lockdown. So some of the agreements we had developed with established hotels, for instance, they refused to honor. [00:22:00] We were pariahs, and not only did they not want the people who had been confirmed as positive, they didn't want anyone who might have come into proximity with them. So that was a bad week, right? We had to politely, nicely start contacting people and then having the range of reactions. And we were having meetings. We had built a great team here. I think we have passionate, committed people in every single position from certainly managers, but to every frontline person and a number of volunteers, so I think that all helped. And so, we knew we had to though call it, and that was the hardest part. And maybe we should have done that a week earlier. I don't know, but in terms of we had people who had bonded with one another over the period of weeks and months living at our safehouse with us. [00:23:00] They did not want to go to a hotel. They didn't

want to leave. None of our staff wanted to go home and say that we had to offer things virtually. We are the agency that's used to being able to give someone a hug when they need it, not go home and be faceless and talking just over a phone when we really need in-person contact. So those are the things. That week was hard, and then the board sort of had -- they called it "intervention." If they see it, they'll understand but we've joked about it but kind of one point said, "Look, I think we're at the point where you and the staff have all been possibly exposed. You need to acknowledge that." And so, we had an entire agency quarantine, and that's the one where looking back I don't know that there's anything we could have done to prevent it. Really, the board, the board president, [00:24:00] the executive committee ended up in the tough position of having to pull us aside and say, "Look, we know you want to stay and keep going, but go home please." And then, we had to kind of quickly. So how do we set people back at hotels ahead of time? We would have been in a position of having hotels herd us away and say, "No room at the inn." We wouldn't have had the very nice people at the courthouse kind of politely, kindly tell us, "Please leave and don't

come back for a few weeks." And again, those were hard things to hear, and it was devastating to us. As staff, we felt like we were failing because we couldn't be here. Anyways, so that was a hard week. We quickly learned it was the best thing to do. We gave ourselves a few days and we had daily meetings, even throughout that weekend, to kind of connect with one another as management to kind of make sure everything was working. Lehigh County, Lehigh Valley Health Network, Meals on Wheels, they were critical at helping to develop [00:25:00] meals to our families. Lehigh County had partnered to provide a safe hotel space and Nani Cuadrado from Street Medicine at Lehigh Valley Health went in and helped to provide care to our resident and her family, so we had great people who reached out to me immediately. And Vicki Coyle of Meals on Wheels, it wasn't the first time. We had had a fire several years earlier and she was one of the first calls to say, "What can I do to help you?" And there she was again. So I think those were all things that we had built up over the years, so they were extremely helpful but again, the fact that we got to the point that we had to on that sort of

24-hour notice engage all of that and work out all those logistics is maybe something that could have avoided.

KK: Based on your experience, what would you advise future generations in terms of planning or just in terms of emotional impacts if they're faced or when they're faced with a similar situation?

LS: [00:26:00] The value of having a support network and sort of contingency plans I think is really important. We've invested in regular communications. We're constantly doing Teams and Zoom and everything else. And as much as there might be some fatigue with all of that, it also means that there's times where I've seen people now. I'm here today but we don't regularly work in the building every single day. We take turns. We're limiting staffing, but sometimes you see that person for real in person and you kind of forget that you haven't seen them in a few months because you're engaging constantly. So I think we've made a concerted effort to stay connected. Working with Dr. Nicki Johnson from Lehigh University who had her students do a wellness session on vicarious trauma impacts with our staff at a regular basis. Shanthi Project, we're working with them. They do two mindfulness sessions [00:27:00] per

week with our staff in addition to stuff with our clients, that we can do through Zoom or through the Doxy.me telehealth. But investing in the care of the caretakers I think is as important as it is focusing on our clients. We continue to work on our strategic plan. It was sort of one of those things where we had adopted it in February, right before the pandemic, and then we said, "Oh, that was funny. Guess we're not looking at that anymore." But we found that there were so many things in there around focusing on sort of next-step services for our clients, so transitional housing wasn't a dream. It's something that honestly if we could only keep our shelter half full, we really need to kind of look at. So then, what's the alternative? And that meant that we still had to agree to dedicate that 20 percent of our head space in a week or in a month to strategic goals. And I think that that helped, honestly. It helped us not get bogged down in the details of how crisis-oriented [00:28:00] everything is at the moment. So I think continuing to look at how do we help people and encourage them to take self-care time to connect with one another, to focus on something outside of just this immediate crisis and not just doing that for our clients

and for the survivors who are coming to us, but also for ourselves. So those are the things I think have been really helpful for us as an agency as a whole.

KK: That's great. And I think it sounds like the fact that your whole business is built around crisis intervention and the idea that, as you said, when you're faced with a crisis, you can't be in crisis. And the idea of all that strategic planning around that is such a huge help and probably a great thing to leave as a legacy to people to say, "Hey, this is important. All that strategic planning really meant something. It wasn't just a notebook sitting up on a shelf [00:29:00] that said Strategic Plan."

LS: Yes. Nobody's got any of those, right? But yeah, and it was such a significant effort that really had kicked off initially with a survey of our staff. And so, to not honor the time that they had given us to do anything with it. I know I personally felt compelled that some of it was really making Turning Point a model in terms of places to work because we have passionate, committed people. We are a non-profit. We are based on pink-collar wages, and we expect so much of people, and they're willing to give it. I feel blessed because at a time where I sat on a number of

calls and I listened to some agencies have to make tough decisions around whether or not they're going to do layoffs, or furloughs, or cuts through rescission. I took a budget [00:30:00] proposal in May to our board and said, "It's nothing exciting but we're lucky. We've got a rainy day fund we haven't had to tap into much. We are at a fairly healthy place at the moment and so, it's not an exciting budget but we're in a pandemic and it's a boring, regular budget. And that's a good thing." And they said, "We haven't had to utilize our rainy day fund and we are in a position to look at moving forward some of our strategic initiatives, so why don't you work with us and let's talk about what we can support?" And that took me by surprise. I was surprised that a really kind of conservative fiscal organization also said at this point in time it might be counterintuitive, but let's look at how do we invest in the organization with some of the money that we have been able to gain? And again, our investments have done well. It's things like that. We have generous donors, but that's for the mission. It's to promote the mission of ministry, [00:31:00] as one of our board members, [Don Hayn] always said, a retired minister. And so, we decided to go ahead

with things like let's just not give one-time bonuses. We did do hazard pay for a little bit. We decided to give all of our frontline staff a five percent increase this year and to build in a new sort of structure that gives them more career growth. We decided to also look at sort of how do we invest in some technology improvements because we've made a bunch of those but there are still some efficiencies we can gain and that's only going to position us better. So it really did help I think for our staff to recognize that this wasn't just a one-time recognition. We weren't giving you a pizza party. What we were saying was, "We're all in this together and you've given a lot. And this agency recognizes that and that you are us. You are not separate from the agency. [00:32:00] We owe you if we have the ability not to expand and grow into new things, but let's invest in you." And I think that that was really important at this point in time in particular to share with them.

KK: That sounds really terrific.

LS: It kind of was. Yes, I pretty much love the agency. I love our board and I don't know how many non-profits get to say that, but I think it's true.

KK: That's great. Well, listen. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day and coming into the office for this interview.

LS: Absolutely. So I got to see people in person today, so that was wonderful, and this was actually a pleasure. You don't get to talk about it too often when you're busy doing. We did a six-month sort of look back recently, but obviously I think I caught myself off guard getting emotional talking about it today. And I think that the idea of doing this and memorializing it, and I hope that there are some lessons that people can glean from [00:33:00] the experiences that many of us, because I've heard amazing things going on across the Valley and just really important shows of resilience. And so, I think if people are able to learn from that and use it to plan for any sort of shocking pivot event that we need to deal with in the future, that's worthwhile.

KK: Agreed. All right, thanks again.

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