

How Coaches in an Employment Program Are Adapting to COVID-19

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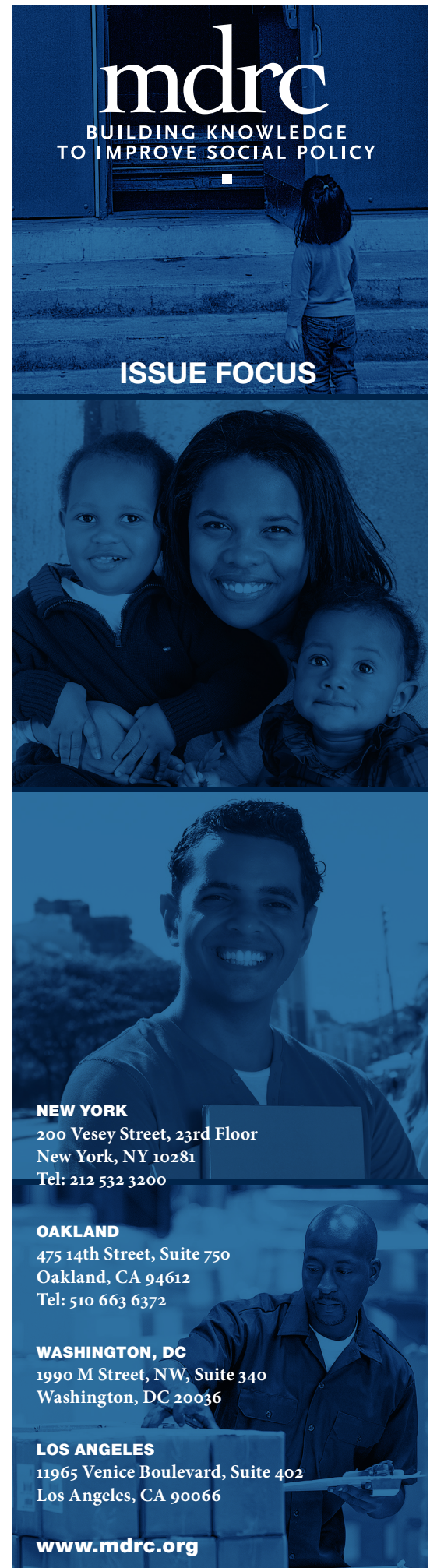
When Massachusetts declared a state of emergency and issued its COVID-19 Stay at Home Advisory in March 2020, A Better Life (ABL) — an economic mobility program originating in the Worcester Housing Authority — was in the early stages of expanding implementation to an additional 500 residents in three other housing agencies: Gloucester Housing Authority, New Bedford Housing Authority, and Taunton Housing Authority.

To help public housing residents improve their employment situations and financial well-being, ABL combines comprehensive case management, community partnerships with local service providers, an escrow savings account (where the housing agency deposits the money that residents would have paid toward increased rent when they increase their incomes), and work requirements. When residents enroll in ABL, they begin working with Family Life Coaches, who meet with them on a regular basis, support them in setting long-term and short-term goals, and connect them with resources in the community to help them overcome barriers to achieving those goals. Coaches also provide information and guidance on accruing escrow savings and on the program's work requirements.

In late April, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, which is overseeing the ABL expansion, convened the three housing agencies to discuss how the ABL program was meeting residents' dramatically different needs during the pandemic. Staff members highlighted the following lessons from their own early experiences. The pandemic has created an environment where both residents and program staff members are experiencing high levels of anxiety, which levels the relationship between the coaches and participants and opens a window for coaches to build a strong foundation of trust with participants as they support them through this stressful time and help them meet their basic needs. Coaches have pivoted to meet these basic and mental health needs by shifting the nature of coaching: They are helping residents set goals related to daily life and focusing on the whole family rather than the individual participant. Finally, the program's management has recognized that staff members must feel safe and supported if they are to continue to be effective.

- **The COVID-19 crisis has created an opportunity for ABL coaches to build strong, trusting relationships with participants, which will serve as an important foundation when the crisis lifts and participants can start working toward their self-sufficiency goals again.**

Public housing residents currently have a lot of anxiety related to basic needs. ABL coaches have realized that this moment is unusual in that it is a shared



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crisis for everyone. It has leveled the relationship between participant and coach, since coaches are experiencing many of the same day-to-day anxieties as residents. This new dynamic is creating a level of trust that otherwise would not have been reached. Coaches are providing immediate, tangible assistance to residents (for example, by dropping off boxes of food), which goes a long way toward building that trust. Although residents are not able to progress toward goals like employment and improved finances now, these strong relationships will serve as a jumping-off point when the economy starts to recover. Because of this trust, participants may be more likely to take steps toward work or education that they may not have taken before.

- **Usually, ABL participants set long-term goals in the areas of employment and finances and more specific short-term goals leading to them. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of goal setting has shifted from forward-thinking to in-the-now. This shift benefits participants now by helping them navigate the daily challenges of isolation, and in the future by building their experience with the process of setting and achieving goals.**

One way coaches have been responding to residents' overwhelming anxieties is by using goals to ground people in the moment. Coaches and participants are talking much less about the future because the future is uncertain for everyone, and talking about it can bring a lot of stress. Instead, they are focusing on what residents need today and setting goals related to those daily needs. These more immediate goals might include getting outside at least once every day, cooking with their children at least once in a week, making sure their children are up by 9 a.m. every day in a week, or having dinner every day during the week with the television turned off. Many residents are struggling with having to stay inside their apartments for long periods, having to homeschool their children, and being cut off from their social networks. ABL coaches have observed that setting goals at this small level is helping participants manage the daily challenges of isolation.

By focusing on these achievable daily goals, residents are learning to improve their own mental health in the moment, which will help them cope with challenges when the crisis is over. The practice of identifying a specific and achievable goal, sticking with it, and persisting even when there are many other demands on one's attention and energy involves skills that participants can use in the future when they set goals related to employment, education, finances, and well-being.

- **The COVID-19 crisis has pushed the ABL program to a more “whole-family” approach than it was taking before, when coaching was more centered on the individual participant.**

Pandemic-related school closures have put enormous pressures on parents. Families have their children home all day and parents are now responsible for homeschooling them. Consequently, conversations with residents about their children have become much more common. Many families have children with significant developmental, learning, and behavioral issues that affect the whole household. These challenges may not have been at the forefront of residents' conversations with coaches about employment and financial goals previously, but the pandemic has made these issues more pressing. Coaches now regularly ask participants how their children are doing, and are regularly tending to children's needs and safety while helping parents cope with the stressful situation.

- **The ABL program has focused a lot on mental health during this time. ABL has worked hard to connect residents to mental health resources, and mental health has been a big topic in conversations between coaches and participants.**

Many residents are extremely anxious about their finances during the crisis, and those who are continuing to go to work are anxious about the risks they face. For example, someone working in a nursing home may be grappling with whether she should continue to work if she has an elderly parent living with her. Coaches are checking in with resi-

dents frequently — usually weekly — just to make sure they are okay. A lot of time on calls is spent letting people vent their anxieties. Residents have said that they look forward to their calls with ABL coaches and that they appreciate having someone to talk to. A strong working relationship with a local mental health organization is allowing ABL to help residents cope with their anxiety.

- **Coaches are in a unique position to ensure residents' basic safety, and through their physical presence have been filling the hole left by many other service providers that no longer have regular in-person contact with residents.**

As a result of shelter-in-place requirements, residents have become disconnected from social workers, their children's teachers and school social workers, substance abuse counselors, and even medical professionals who would have been the ones to notice if they or their families were in severe distress. For many residents, coaches are the only people they are interacting with regularly, so coaches are the only ones in the position to notice if residents or their families are unsafe. A coach may pick up that a person is in a mental health crisis, a substance abuse crisis, or a domestic violence situation when nobody else would. A coach may notice a child has bruises that signal the family is in deep need of support.

- **Ensuring staff safety has been essential so that staff members can continue to be effective.**

ABL staff members are on the front lines of the pandemic, picking up groceries for elderly residents, picking up prescriptions, and doing many other things to support vulnerable residents. They are also hearing from residents who are in extreme distress while they are dealing with a lot of anxieties of their own. Program managers have expressed that it has been very important to make sure that staff members feel secure and continue to feel good about their jobs, and to have constant communication with them about how they are feeling. Managers have focused on helping staff members care for themselves and have provided them with many confidential resources through their insurance companies. They are making sure not to put pressure on staff members with expectations that things should be operating normally and at 100 percent.

ABL has gained valuable insights from operating a self-sufficiency program during the COVID-19 pandemic. The anxieties and pressures the pandemic has created for public housing residents and ABL coaches alike have transformed the role of the coach. These anxieties and pressures have allowed coaches to build trust with residents. They have temporarily shifted the nature of coaching from helping residents set long-term self-sufficiency goals to helping them set more immediate goals related to daily life. And they have shifted coaching from a focus on the individual to an approach that takes into account the well-being of the whole family. Further, managers have recognized it is important to ensure staff members' safety and well-being, so that they can continue to support residents. These insights can be valuable to any social service program that serves essential functions in supporting its participants and cannot pause operations for a pandemic. ABL has demonstrated that it is possible to pivot to meet participants' needs in a crisis, in a way that sets up the program and its participants for future success.

The following A Better Life staff members contributed the insights summarized in this brief: Elizabeth Auwerda, Lisa Brayton, Erik Hinderlie, and David Houlden from Gloucester Housing Authority; Esperanza Alejandro-Berube, Cindy Medina, Ana Ribiero, and Ceuma Rosa from New Bedford Housing Authority; and Karen Cruz, Deana DeBarros, Nicole Campbell, and Colleen Doherty from Taunton Housing Authority.