

THE CLINICAL CANCER LETTER



TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS

Navigating a pandemic in the nonprofit space: Lessons learned from COVID-19 responses



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In March 2020, as the scope of the coronavirus pandemic became evident, the effects of a public health crisis rippled throughout every industry and facet of daily life.

These effects were compounded for those facing a diagnosis of cancer, those who are immunocompromised as a result of treatment, and those living in New York City, an early epicenter in the United States, and the national headquarters of our organization, CancerCare.

CancerCare is a national nonprofit that has offered free, professional support services to people affected by cancer for over 76 years—and this assistance did not stop in the face of COVID-19. CancerCare has risen to the occasion by expanding our programming with little disruption in service.

Though one would hope that events of this scale are few and far between, identifying the contributors to our success offers a playbook for us, and other nonprofits, to remain nimble and responsive in the face of future crises:

- Be prepared: Invest in forward-looking infrastructure and know your strengths,
- Listen to your community: Find ways to identify and assess needs—straight from those you serve,
- Engage your team: Embrace the creativity of program leadership and staff,

- Use your network: Leveraging existing partnerships to maximize impact,
- Keep communication open: Keep in touch with front-line team members, and
- Stay focused: Let your mission guide your actions, reactions and choices .

Be prepared

One of the most critical assets CancerCare possessed at the start of the pandemic was existing infrastructure for providing services remotely. In addition to in-person services at our Manhattan, New Jersey and Long Island locations, CancerCare has provided support over the telephone and online to clients across the country for decades.

We also began rolling out a telework program to our staff in 2018, saving us from researching unfamiliar technologies and implementing brand-new guidelines from scratch in the course of a week. Instead, our shift to a remote work environment involved scaling up policies already in place, and we were able to do so quickly and decisively for the safety of our staff and clients.

These elements reflect a continued commitment to future-oriented policies and preparations. Instead of being caught off-guard, we had a solid foundation for us to fully transition in-person office operations with little to no disruption in services.

Though one cannot reasonably protect against every possible adverse scenario, the best defense is a good offense: instead of waiting for a crisis to expose organizational gaps, proactively seek ways to update how you conduct business and how you serve your community.

Listen to your community

Being prepared helped us resolve immediate needs both internally and externally, namely by keeping our staff and clients safe through telework and by transitioning in-person services to the telephone.

Beyond this, we quickly realized that needs assessment was critical in order to identify how we could best help our constituency during a public health emergency. People living with cancer had to change their habits and their care plans to minimize their risk of exposure to the coronavirus, which included cancelling clinical and wellness visits, delaying surgeries, and isolating themselves from their support networks.

Through CancerCare's toll-free Helpline, callers—many of whom do not have other support systems in place—can speak to oncology social workers to receive psychosocial support and case management, learn more about our programs and get referrals to other resources. Compared to last year, our call volume increased 31% from March to July 2020, with a staggering 44% increase in April alone.

Direct contact with our community—both through the Hopeline, individual clients and support group members—allows our staff to collect frequent questions, common concerns, informational gaps, and practical needs on a rolling basis and in real time. With this information, we were able to anchor all of our responses in actual, lived experiences instead of making assumptions about the community's priorities and needs.

Though it may seem obvious, the first question when embarking on any new programmatic initiative is to confirm that the need exists—and once you've confirmed it exists, does it exist the way you think it does? What assumptions might you be making about accessibility, awareness or indirect costs and

concerns? Starting with foundational knowledge directly from those you serve is vital to providing the greatest benefit to the most people.

Engage your team

Leadership and staff alike were invigorated by the speed and decisiveness of our operational pivots. To capitalize upon and redirect that energy, all members of the organization were encouraged to cultivate creative ways to address the practical, educational and psychosocial concerns of our clients.

Strategies from all levels of the organization were approached with an open mind. Guided by insights gathered from those we serve, CancerCare was able to develop targeted, specific resources and programs to:

- Alleviate day-to-day hardships through a brand-new direct financial assistance fund, transportation program and case management service,
- Bridge informational gaps by developing fact sheets and hosting expert-led educational workshops, and
- Address emotional concerns, including feelings of isolation and anxiety, through our podcast miniseries, a special COVID-focused telephone support group, individual counseling and Hopeline support.

Working with key team members ensured that these responses were both relevant to our clients *and* executable by frontline staff. Incorporating individual expertise and being mindful of the universal struggles caused by a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic kick-started the process of earning staff buy-in to our coronavirus response strategies. This galvanized the sense of pride felt by all as we worked through difficult times.

When seeking ways to engage your team, consider your individual organization's culture and what brings your colleagues together. What shared passions, skills and goals can you center, and how can you invite everyone into the conversation?

Use your network

After over 76 years of serving those affected by cancer, CancerCare has built a solid reputation for excellence and efficiency in the patient advocacy space.

Multiple groups approached CancerCare to explore new partnership opportunities, sometimes utilizing existing pathways—like our capacity to process and distribute direct financial assistance—and sometimes building programs from the ground up, as we did for a transportation assistance program to connect patients with a safety-conscious car service company to get to and from their appointments. It is a lifeline for those who have lost access to their usual mode of transportation or do not feel comfortable taking public transportation in the current climate.

When considering how to leverage your own network, think about who is in your “neighborhood”: fellow nonprofits, industry leaders, community organizations, local businesses and more. How can you pool resources, contacts, ideas and access to better collectively serve your communities?

Keep communication open

Staff participation in designing our coronavirus-related initiatives was key—but it was only one part of the engagement equation. Maintaining open communication is a two-way street: we invited staff to offer their unique, fresh per-

spectives in the planning process, and we also needed to return those efforts by sharing regular updates from leadership about the resulting programs.

By spotlighting the impact of new initiatives, CancerCare was able to complete the circle and show how we'd all come together to make that possible. This further encouraged a sense of purpose behind our work, especially when coupled with our proximity to the pandemic's effects in the New York City area. Staff began asking about next steps and new projects more frequently, and we're proud to have maintained this engagement since.

The specifics of open communication and leadership updates will look different for every organization: it could be a daily message posted on an intranet, an announcement during an all-hands meeting, or a weekly all-staff email.

Reflect on the various touchpoints that your staff encounter most frequently throughout the day: where are they most likely to see and receive your message? How fast-paced is your environment, and how often does information change?

It is a delicate balance between open communication and inundation; your team will be the best guide in finding a happy medium once they recognize that leadership is open to listening and implementing the ideas of staff.

Stay focused

Helping people affected by cancer—whether patients, caregivers, families, the bereaved or professionals—has always been CancerCare's guiding star. This mission resonates universally with staff, clients, donors, funders and other stakeholders. The benefit of a clear and

simple goal is that it's easy to hold choices up against it and see if they align.

Most nonprofits have a clear mission, whether it's raising awareness of a particular issue, serving a specific community, protecting the interests of a group at risk or any of the countless other causes worth fighting for. With any initiative, partnership or process, it's important to ask: how does this advance our mission?

For CancerCare, we asked ourselves how our actions were supporting the people impacted by cancer. Here's how we answered, through the lens of a pandemic: We transitioned in-person services to the telephone so our clients could access our services from the security of their homes. We pivoted to a telework environment so our staff could stay safe and so we could avoid service disruptions for the people who depend on our free programs.

We opened new financial assistance funds to alleviate hardships caused by loss of employment and insurance coverage. We developed a new transportation program and case management service to help clients overcome barriers to care—including those that hadn't existed mere months before. We designed and vetted informational materials and workshops to fill educational gaps at a time when conflicting information was rampant.

Our efforts allowed us to respond nimbly to the changing circumstances of the pandemic, and we are proud to have continued operating at and above our usual capacity since the beginning. CancerCare has been lucky—but, in the words of Seneca, luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.