



# GRAND AVENUE *club*

*A community that works*

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## CREATING THE “NEW NORMAL” FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee, June 12, 2020

Grand Avenue Club (GAC) of Milwaukee has long fought against the abandonment, isolation and stigma of people who face the challenges of mental illness. But the COVID19 epidemic has forced massive changes. Rising to the challenge the GAC shows a path to the “new normal” for other Milwaukee nonprofits.

The Grand Avenue Club (GAC) helps people move beyond the shame and isolation often caused by mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, major depression and bipolar disorder. Members of GAC, working side-by-side with a dedicated staff, actually run the organization. They are not “patients” or “clients.” They rediscover the dignity of work, at first working voluntarily running GAC and later for quality employers in the community. On March 18, 2020, the GAC closed in-person operations. All of a sudden, members could not come downtown to meet their colleagues, run GAC, or be recruited for paid employment positions in the community. And closing down the economy threatened the jobs that many members held in local corporations, restaurants and service organizations.

“The Covid-19 pandemic is a real challenge to us,” explains Dr. Rachel Forman, GAC’s Executive Director. “First, we have to keep people safe. But the other challenge goes to the heart of our philosophy. We build face-to-face relationships with people who have spent years and sometimes decades in isolation or at the margins of society. We all wondered whether the epidemic was going to be the demise of the Grand Avenue Club.”

Refusing that fate, the GAC staff got to work immediately helping members survive the “Safer at Home” policy. Both staff and members delivered food and household supplies to members in need. They started 7-days-per-week contact with members via phone, email and social media. They ramped up the Facebook page, which now sees hundreds of posts and comments every day with members sharing recipes, asking for advice and offering daily life survival tips to each other.

Nikki Lelinski, Program Director, describes the unexpected benefits of moving to a “hybrid format.” She says, “members with cyber-skills have taken up new and highly valued roles in the GAC operation. People who could not come downtown, because of physical disabilities or work schedules, now participate remotely and at any time.” Breaking down the divide between staff and members is critical to the “The Clubhouse Model of Psychiatric Rehabilitation,” and now more than ever before, everyone is engaged in finding new paid work opportunities in a changed economy.

On June 1st, GAC resumed programming at 210 E. Michigan Street and is implementing a phased resumption of members and staff working together at GAC. The survival of non-profit organizations is crucial for a more inclusive Milwaukee, according to Paul Brodwin, PhD, the incoming vice-president of the GAC Board of Directors. “It’s a tough time for non-profits that want to reduce the enduring disparities in our society,” he said recently. “But improvising and jumping into new digital media, while respecting the long-term mission, is necessary and doable for groups like the GAC, who are dedicated to the flourishing of all Milwaukee residents, without exception.”

For more information about GAC (210 East Michigan Street, Milwaukee WI) or to take a tour, please contact us.

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