On the afternoon of March 16, 2020, our Clubhouse was mandated to close down. A complete shutdown with no members allowed was the one thing that I never thought would happen. But that was before the reality of COVID-19. Who would have ever thought that the world would be shaken to the core with this pandemic? Shutting down a supportive Clubhouse community will surely go down as one of my saddest days ever. Telling the members that they had to leave, we were shutting the doors, and I had no idea when they could return was definitely a low point in my career. I had to get my head around the whole thing, I was not prepared for this! I really had no idea what to do, how to “lead” my team. Thankfully, the staff team at High Hopes Clubhouse leaves little doubt that anything can be accomplished as long as we are in it together. We called, texted, emailed, Facebook chatted, all 160 members within a 4 hour time frame to give one simple message: “Our Clubhouse building is closed, but our Clubhouse Community is open.” We needed to ensure that our membership was safe and knew that we were here to support them, though it may be a different kind of support for now!

After some calls to colleagues and friends at other Clubhouses and Clubhouse International that evening, some tears, and maybe some colorful words, a plan started to develop. I am fortunate to work with an amazing staff and our equally amazing leadership team at the auspice agency of Kennebec Behavioral Health. We all had the same mindset: “We are going to do what is right.” There was never a time that I have been prouder to be part of High Hopes Clubhouse. Here are just a few of the things we provided in the early days of this pandemic: phone calls, text messaging, shopping for food and pet food, toilet paper delivery, emails, cooked and delivered meals, community resources connections, Zoom meetings, Facebook groups, Facebook live, cards, distributed phones and web cams, developed instructions for Zoom, covered TE sites, created phone trees, ran virtual house meetings, helped members get internet routers, made necessity bags for delivery or pickup.

Our services and reach out got even more creative as time went on and it was evident that this shut down was indeed going to be longer than two weeks or even two months. The staff team have spent hours a day on the phone, on Zoom, texting, driving, organizing and just “holding it together.” The good news is that our Clubhouse relationships are stronger than ever!

Continued Page 2
Our Clubhouse Community is Open!

We would like everyone to know that High Hopes Clubhouse is moving in phases to fully reopen our Clubhouse building. We are very excited to welcome back our colleagues and are working hard to ensure that our reopening is done in a safe manner, and that everyone can return as soon as possible. As of Monday, June 1st we were able to welcome members in smaller numbers from 8am-12pm and 12pm-4pm. I know, I know, this is so against our core Clubhouse Standards: Standard 1 “Membership is voluntary and without time limits.” Standard #3: “Members choose the way they utilize the Clubhouse, and the staff with whom they work. There are no agreements, contracts, schedules or rules intended to enforce participation of members.” These Standards will always be at the core of our Clubhouse. No fear, our entire Clubhouse community ensures that as soon as the pandemic has passed, we will uphold and better appreciate these Standards. As I write about the Clubhouse Standards it occurs to me, that we are doing really well at Standard #7: “The Clubhouse provides an effective reach out system to members who are not attending, becoming isolated in the community or hospitalized.” Wow, have we been good at this!

The other part of our phase by phase opening is a challenge as well. Social distancing, disinfecting, temperature taking, wearing masks, safety questions, washing hands, and more disinfecting is all a challenge to the Clubhouse community where we like involving everyone in everything! But we will get through this strange time, and never have to hear the expression “new normal” again!

I have never written a director’s section of the newsletter, I am rather against it in fact, but before I go I just want to say thank you to our Clubhouse members and their supportive families; the Clubhouse staff; Clubhouse International and our colleagues around the globe, the Waterville community members, Kennebec Behavioral Health’s leadership, board of directors and staff teams; the Advisory Council; all the local businesses that donated food, phones, and resources; and Cheryl Davis (my supervisor, who has put up with my whining, complaining, worry, and temper.) It is truly been all inspiring and rewarding to be part of this incredible community.—Lisa Soucie

THE BACKBONE OF THE CLUBHOUSE—James Sweet

“In my opinion the members are the heart and soul of the Clubhouse, however, the backbone of the Clubhouse is the staff. The staff have many roles, they are our supporters, our job coaches, our co-workers, our friends. They are there to guide us, encourage us and at times push us to overcome our self imposed limits. Staff want us to succeed. The Clubhouse staff give us hope.”

“This has been a challenging time for everyone. I think this will help the world understand the negative impact that isolation has on one’s mental health. Clubhouse is more important than ever.”—Maggie Bryant

“Enthusiasm is high for an awesome expectation to welcome commitment in the Mental Health Movement.” -- Kelly Jones
Our Pandemic Journey—Aaron Williams

To look back at the High Hopes Facebook page over the last three months, one can gain some sense of where we’ve come from and how we’ve grown over this incredible time of pandemic. In early March, most of us were aware of the COVID-19 scare that was in the news, but at the Clubhouse, we were celebrating our new floors, holding every day events, and looking to the future. “Side-by-Side” unit meetings and getting to work were standard fare. “News of the Week” videos were something to look forward to. There was a tour for the Waterville Police Department. We were starting to take wellness walks again after the long, cold winter.

We were looking forward to the Friday the 13th social, and flyers had been printed up for the March 19th Employment Dinner. Then, due to the virus, these events had to be cancelled. On March 16th, the last (though we may not have realized it at the time) “News of the Week” was presented to the live and present membership group. On that same day, came the announcement on Facebook: “We are sorry to announce that we will be closing the Clubhouse to members for the next two weeks.”

Since the middle of March, two weeks has turned into three months. But life has not stopped for the Clubhouse. Through the will power and ingenuity of staff and members (and with a huge assist from virtual technology—Zoom), we have not only moved on, but also grown, learned, and even improved. Yes, there are the negatives. Virtual friendship does not quite measure up to being present in person with people we care about. And there are the members we miss who haven’t—for whatever reason—stayed in touch on Zoom.

The whole “Zoom” thing has been a learning experience for everyone. Computers, smart phones, webcams, microphones, licensing, code numbers, broadband issues... but we have persevered. We hold house meetings, unit meetings, educational sessions, cooking sessions, and even virtual socials. The virtual attendance possibilities of Zoom have presented us with an interesting question: Can we retain some or all advantages of Zoom when resuming regular attendance at High Hopes?

Orientations Go Virtual

In light of the pandemic, many new members of High Hopes Clubhouse, myself included, have been introduced to the program virtually. The first orientation I had with High Hopes Clubhouse was over the phone with a staff member and a clubhouse member. It was very important for a member to be available for my orientation because it gave me good insight on how the program was run, and how it impacts other members. I learned about the four guaranteed rights of the Clubhouse, the three units that I could work in, and about the various meetings. I also learned about the different forms of employment that are offered to Clubhouse members. I was lucky enough to have an in-person orientation a few weeks after my virtual one, which really brought everything together. In my experience, the virtual orientation gave me the chance to learn about Clubhouse and have a more personal experience with that member and staff. Having the virtual orientation prepared me to come into the Clubhouse. It allowed me to come prepared with more questions than I would have if the in-person orientation had been my first. Although things are changing with the pandemic, virtual orientations and communications can be beneficial to new members of the Clubhouse. By Bianca McGirt
Transitional Employment

We are looking for opportunities for Transitional Employment!

Unfortunately, Joseph’s Fireside Steakhouse has made the difficult step of closing their doors due to COVID-19. Since we started our partnership with Joseph’s in 2011, they have employed 44 of our members through Transitional Employment. They have also hired on many of our members in supported employment positions. In 2014, High Hopes Clubhouse and Kennebec Behavioral Health presented the business with the James R. Schmidt Employer of the Year Award to celebrate the support that they have shown for our membership and our goal of giving adults with living mental illness a chance to work.

Kennebec Behavioral Health has hired on additional Transitional Employment placements to do sanitizing five days per week. This gives us two opportunities in the Waterville office and two in the Skowhegan office.
News from the Kitchen

Greetings from the Food Services Unit! We wanted to share some details about what has happened with our Food Services Unit during the shutdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though High Hopes Clubhouse was shut down to members physically, staff were still present and working.

We are excited about our new refrigerator and some changes we made in the kitchen! In March and April, the food services staff made meals for members who lived locally and did some deliveries for those in need. This meal reach out used up food from our freezers to ensure it did not go bad and made freezer inventory and rotating much easier!

We got food donations from the Food Bank, Kevin Joseph from Joseph’s Fireside Steakhouse, Lisa’s Restaurant, and Colby College. We were grateful to have so much support from the community during this difficult time.

Wellness During COVID-19

The Wellness Program at High Hopes persevered during the closure of the building due to COVID-19. We made efforts through Zoom to encourage each other to stay active and healthy (mentally and physically) during the time of isolation. Carroll hosted Tai Chi Zoom meetings to share his passion for this form of martial arts that is also known as “walking meditation”. Destiny discussed Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) via Zoom, as these classes were put to a halt by other providers during the pandemic. Darryl did a virtual garden tour and discussed gardening tips. Kristen and members of the food services unit took turns hosting cooking shows. Heather did a tutorial via Zoom to show how she decorates cakes. Patty made her delicious spring rolls on camera. Barbie instructed the Zoom community on how she makes her meatloaf. Elvin commanded the Zoom kitchen for his sausage gravy and biscuits. These cooking groups were popular and a great way to stay connected.

Also while our building was closed, we had to get creative on ways to reach out to our members, including meeting up for wellness walks, doing virtual wellness walks, and meeting up for a physically distanced picnic in the park. We also continued to do wellness meetings on Wednesdays at 2pm.
Clubhouse Moments

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