

Caring Through Crisis

Our impact during
the COVID-19 pandemic.



Dear Friends,

If the past year has proven anything, it's that change is constant.

The COVID-19 pandemic turned our lives upside down. We donned masks and gloves, stayed six feet apart and disinfected everything from deliveries to doorknobs, continually adapting as science taught us how to stay safe. The frontline staff at Volunteers of America-Greater New York **responded like true heroes**, showing up day after day, 24/7. Despite concerns for their health, they kept the doors of our 66 programs open for the 11,000 men, women and children who count on us for housing and supportive services each year.

Change also came to Volunteers of America-Greater New York in the form of new leadership following the planned retirement of Tere Pettitt, who devoted 18 years of service to the organization, her last six as President and CEO. Since then, we have set a new strategic direction as an anti-poverty organization with a vision to end homelessness in Greater New York by 2050.

As summer 2020 arrived, so did a social awakening on race and a call for much-needed change in our cities and institutions. We formed Volunteers of America-Greater New York's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee and began to have important dialogues, listening to and learning from our colleagues, and identifying actions—including mandatory employee training—that will help create a more welcoming and equitable environment for all.

Through all of this change and turmoil, Volunteers of America-Greater New York remains constant.

For 125 years, **Volunteers of America-Greater New York has been a source of strength and support for our neighbors in need**—during the Great Depression, two World Wars, 9/11, the blackout of 2003, Hurricane Sandy and now the pandemic. That is what being *essential* means: we are necessary, needed, a crucial part of the fabric of society; we are what keeps it going strong.

The stories included in this report will give you a glimpse into how Volunteers of America-Greater New York's staff came together to support our neighbors in need, and each other, through this year of turbulence. They remind us that remaining strong, present and responsive in the face of change is the most important response of all.

Sincerely,

Myung & Gerry



Myung J. Lee

President and CEO,
Volunteers of America-
Greater New York



Gerry Cunningham

Chairman of the Board
of Directors, Volunteers
of America-Greater New
York

Fighting Poverty. Preventing Homelessness. Changing Lives.



Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-Greater New York) is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in the metropolitan New York area by 2050 by providing housing, health and wealth-building services to our neighbors who are experiencing, or are at imminent risk of, homelessness.

We are a refuge for **families escaping domestic violence**. We help **people experiencing homelessness** find permanent housing. We keep thousands of the most vulnerable New Yorkers—including **veterans, individuals living with HIV/AIDS, adults with behavioral health issues** or a history of **substance use**, and **older adults** with limited incomes—safe in our supportive housing residences. We prepare **at-risk youth** for the transition out of foster care and into mature, independent adulthood. And our preschool in the Bronx for **children with developmental delays and disabilities** provides the educational and therapeutic services students need for academic success.

The VOA Family

We are a member of the national organization, Volunteers of America Inc., which is one of the oldest and largest faith-based human services nonprofits in the country, founded in New York City in 1896.

At a Glance

- **18,772 MEN, WOMEN, & CHILDREN** relied on our life-changing services this year through 66 programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey and Westchester County.
- **10,558 INDIVIDUALS INCLUDING 8,910 FAMILIES** had a place to sleep in one of our emergency, transitional or permanent supportive housing programs this year.
- **2,110 OLDER ADULTS**, many at high-risk during the pandemic, were given the care and support they need while staying safe in our housing programs, including **East Clarke Place Senior Residence** (pictured) which opened Spring 2021.
- Through our continuum of care, we addressed the housing, employment, health and other reintegration needs of **843 VETERANS**.
- Our staff did everything they could to help the **2,996 SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN** in our programs connect to remote learning and stay on track in school.

We Are **#essential**

VOA-Greater New York staff were on the frontlines throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



- When the pandemic hit in MARCH 2020, our emergency preparedness team sprang into action. Past emergencies like the blackout of 2003 taught us the importance of having a team in place who could act fast to implement safety measures.
- Most of our programs are residential, operating 24/7. Our frontline staff did not have the luxury of working remotely. We needed to continue our work without interruption—and that's exactly what our staff did, keeping the doors of all 66 programs open.
- Staff went above and beyond to do what was needed, even if it was outside the usual scope of their job—like Maintenance staff answering phones at the front desk and Program Directors running errands for clients. Everyone helped each other to ensure no disruption in our vital services.



A HERCULEAN TEAM EFFORT

When COVID-19 first hit New York City in March 2020, the staff at **Schwartz Assessment Shelter (SAS)** on Ward's Island, our dormitory-style shelter for men experiencing homelessness, were suddenly faced with an urgent problem: how to keep 335 men safe in a shelter where beds are only three feet apart.

Alvaro Salas, VOA-Greater New York Sector Director who oversees SAS, began working around the clock with his team to change the configuration of beds, establish isolation rooms, keep the facility disinfected, distribute PPE, and—the biggest task of all—coordinate the relocation of approximately 100 clients to an emergency hotel.

Within just a few days, hundreds of decisions needed to be made. Which clients were independent enough to be placed there and what to do about existing locks on the hotel room doors (a safety hazard as staff needed to be able to access rooms to check on clients). Alvaro set up contracts for food delivery, but had to figure out how to store the food. He had to decide whether metal detectors or additional security cameras were needed.

At the same time, usual operations at SAS had to continue. Suddenly, there were two sites and the same number of staff.

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Although fear was high across the city because nobody yet fully understood the virus, the team at SAS showed up day after day, despite the risks to their health.

New clients would arrive in need of a bed for the night, sometimes by the busload at 2AM, especially after the City instituted a nightly shut down of the subway system for cleaning. Staff attended to their immediate needs—food and a place to sleep—all while managing heightened anxiety and focusing on keeping everyone safe.

At one point, the entire SAS maintenance team became sick and an emergency cleaning company had to be brought in. And when public schools closed, childcare became an issue for many of our staff. But we still needed to keep our doors open around the clock.

At times it felt like the challenges and setbacks during the pandemic were endless. But through it all, the team at SAS is proud to say that there were no deaths and the COVID-19 positivity rate remained very low compared to the city's numbers overall.

This is the true definition of heroism. This is what it means to be “essential.”

And every night, as the city clapped for essential workers at 7PM, our staff knew they weren't in it alone. We were all in it together.



HEROES IN THE HALLWAYS

The work of our maintenance teams—keeping buildings clean and operating smoothly—has always been essential, but during the pandemic, it became a matter of life and death.

There were countless examples of staff stepping up to do whatever was needed, from handing out PPE to accompanying frightened clients to the hospital, so they wouldn't be alone. At **University Family Residence**, one of our family shelters in the Bronx, just two workers, down from the usual six at times, kept residents safe day and night. At **Bushwick Family Residence**, our family shelter in Brooklyn, a long-time maintenance worker who normally loved giving high-fives to children in the hallways, continued to lift the children's spirits with a socially distanced wave or a joke instead!



SUPPORT THROUGH THE STORM

Cindy will never forget the moment Michael asked her to marry him in 2017. Handsome and loving, he was her soulmate.

Cindy, who struggles with mental illness, has been receiving clinical interventions through VOA-Greater New York's **Community Support Services (CSS)** in Middlesex County, New Jersey, since 2004. CSS provides a range of services to individuals with behavioral health issues to help create stability so they can live as independently as possible.

After the engagement, staff helped Cindy and Michael move into a one-bedroom apartment in the community. The pair loved to travel and go to comedy clubs. In 2018, they adopted their cat, Crouton, from a local shelter. Michael was very caring toward Cindy, helping her cope with her psychiatric symptoms and reminding her to take her medication. They were happy.

But when the pandemic struck, Cindy's life was thrown into chaos.

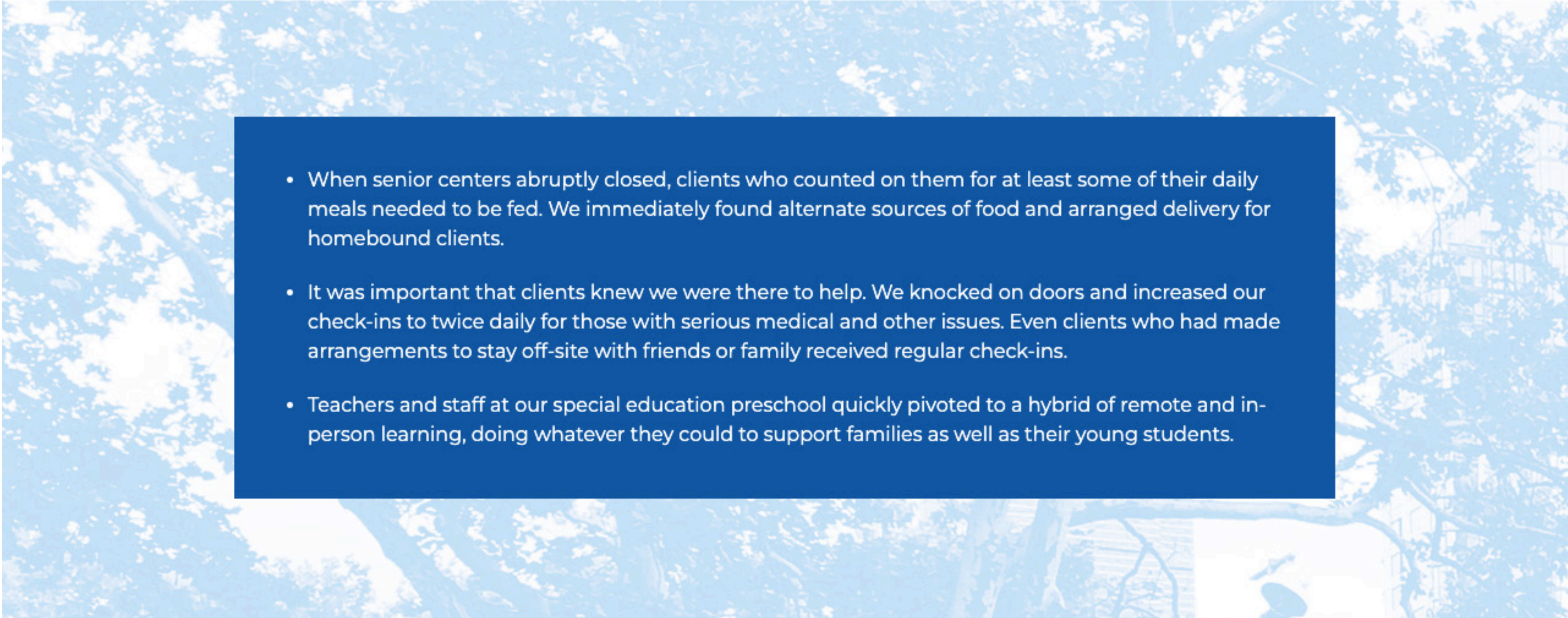
On April 20, Michael, who worked in a nursing home as a Licensed Practical Nurse, tested positive for COVID-19. Two days later, he passed away. Cindy was devastated. She experienced depression, anxiety and thoughts of suicide.

And then, she tested positive for COVID-19.

For 18 days, Cindy had to quarantine inside her apartment, alone and still in mourning. VOA-Greater New York staff were her lifeline during this incredibly difficult time. They spoke to her on the phone every day and visited face-to-face through her apartment window. They shopped for groceries, picked up her prescriptions, and connected her to a grief therapist. The team took Crouton to the vet when Cindy was worried he might be sick.

While Cindy continues to adjust to her new circumstances, staff are there to help her through, encouraging her to keep at her mental health treatment and teaching her to complete the tasks that Michael used to do for her, like cleaning the cat's litter box.

Gradually, Cindy is getting used to life without Michael. It isn't easy but she has learned to take one day at a time. She is grateful for the "VOA family" that has stayed by her side, guiding, encouraging and helping make one of the worst years of her life a little more bearable.

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- When senior centers abruptly closed, clients who counted on them for at least some of their daily meals needed to be fed. We immediately found alternate sources of food and arranged delivery for homebound clients.
 - It was important that clients knew we were there to help. We knocked on doors and increased our check-ins to twice daily for those with serious medical and other issues. Even clients who had made arrangements to stay off-site with friends or family received regular check-ins.
 - Teachers and staff at our special education preschool quickly pivoted to a hybrid of remote and in-person learning, doing whatever they could to support families as well as their young students.



REMOTE BUT NOT ALONE

Stability and consistency are important for children with developmental delays, including those with autism spectrum disorder, like many of the students at the **Bronx Early Learning Center (BELC)**, our special education preschool program. For them, the pandemic was exceptionally disruptive.

But, like the superheroes they are, teachers and staff at the BELC rallied to keep students engaged and their families supported.

A mere week after schools closed, they had adapted all lesson plans and moved classrooms online—ahead of many public schools, despite the learning curve associated with the technology. Teachers prepared at-home activity packages and purchased school supplies with their own money for families who couldn't afford them, hand delivering them during quarantine. The school nurse remembers when the sibling of a student was admitted to the ICU. She spoke to that parent every single day for two weeks, reassuring her.

When the Thanksgiving Feast was cancelled—a beloved annual event that creates connection and celebrates the diversity of the BELC students and staff—everyone at the school was disappointed. To keep the tradition alive and spread a little joy, staff put together a crowd-sourced recipe book, full of all the dishes that families would have otherwise made and shared in-person.



COMFORT AND CHICKEN SOUP

George, 61, has lived at **Rose House**, one of our supportive single-room occupancy (SRO) programs in Manhattan for nearly 30 years. Fiercely independent and proud, he has always kept to himself, never getting too close to neighbors or staff, despite their many attempts to invite him to movie night in the common room, or connect him to community services.

In the early days of the pandemic, George became very sick and was transported back and forth to the emergency room by ambulance several times.

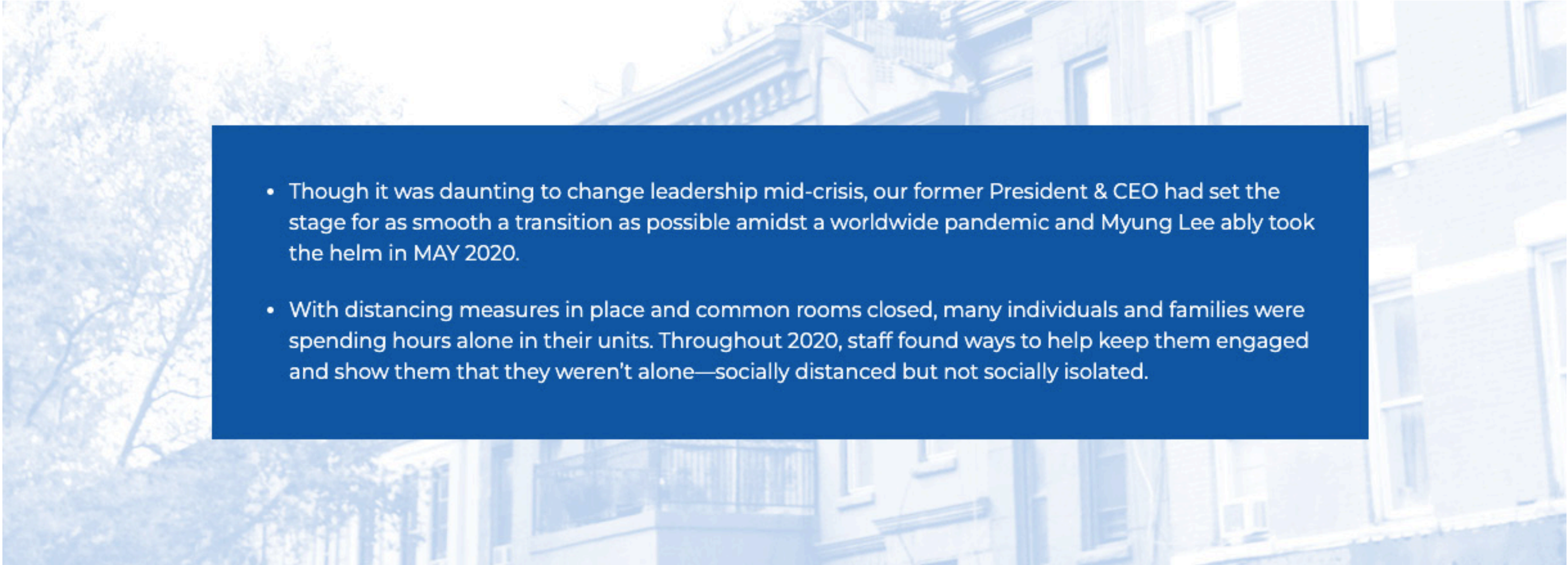
Fearing he had COVID, George was terrified.

With COVID tests still scarce, George was never formally diagnosed, but staff suspected he had the virus as they learned more about its presenting symptoms. Erring on the side of caution, each time he returned to Rose House they asked him to isolate and George complied.

Staff were ready to keep George as comfortable as possible, physically and emotionally. They checked in on him daily and lined up a meal delivery service through the City's emergency food program. They even brought him his favorite homemade chicken soup from a takeout place down the street. They made trips to the pharmacy and ran other errands, whatever he needed.

When George finally recovered, he felt touched that the staff would care for him like they did. It made him realize that he was not alone and that it was ok for him reach out for help, especially in times of crisis.

Today, George is much more engaged with staff and—for the first time since living at Rose House—has expressed how appreciative he is to be there. He is grateful to VOA-Greater New York for supporting him during one of his most vulnerable and difficult times.

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- Though it was daunting to change leadership mid-crisis, our former President & CEO had set the stage for as smooth a transition as possible amidst a worldwide pandemic and Myung Lee ably took the helm in MAY 2020.
 - With distancing measures in place and common rooms closed, many individuals and families were spending hours alone in their units. Throughout 2020, staff found ways to help keep them engaged and show them that they weren't alone—socially distanced but not socially isolated.



A FRESH START

Linda*, 44, never imagined she would one day become homeless. She had worked hard to establish her career in the field of healthcare. She lived in a large house and enjoyed watching her teenage daughter thrive in school.

But life at home was difficult. Over the years, her partner became physically abusive—a situation that grew worse with the onset of the pandemic. Though Linda was an essential worker and never stopped going to work, she was spending more time in close proximity to her partner during evenings and weekends. The uncertainty and stress of the situation caused tensions to rise at home and the abuse intensified.

Linda knew what she had to do but the decision to abandon everything she knew—everything she had worked so hard to achieve—was difficult. Finally, in June 2020, she picked up her daughter from school and went straight to one of VOA-Greater New York's **emergency shelters for families escaping domestic violence**.

At first Linda and her daughter struggled to adjust to life in the shelter where they shared a room with another young woman. "I cried a lot," Linda explained. "It was all so new."

She found it difficult to talk about her experience in the shelter's support group but VOA-Greater New York staff were patient and helped Linda become more comfortable. They also strongly encouraged her to attend therapy. Eventually she agreed.

Little by little, thanks to the tremendous compassion and support shown by VOA-Greater New York staff, Linda began to feel a sense of peace and hope for her future. Staff began to see a positive change in her too.

Linda turned her focus toward obtaining safe, stable housing for herself and her daughter. Although she initially feared she would have to navigate the process alone, Linda's VOA-Greater New York case manager was right by her side every step of the way, willing to do whatever was necessary to help Linda regain her independence.

One day Linda came across a beautiful two-bedroom apartment for rent. It was clean, within budget and a safe distance from her abuser. But the landlord didn't want to rent to Linda. He kept asking for more and more documentation to prove she was trustworthy and could pay rent.

Disheartened, Linda felt ready to give up.

Her case manager dropped everything to help Linda obtain all the documents the landlord asked for, even writing a letter of reference advocating for the family. The requests were relentless, but her case manager persisted.

Eventually, that persistence paid off and Linda and her daughter were approved for the apartment.

Linda still drops by the shelter from time to time to pickup her mail and update VOA-Greater New York staff on their progress. Shortly after moving, Linda sent a thank you card to staff, expressing her gratitude for the care they received. VOA-Greater New York staff gave Linda and her daughter hope when they thought there was none and helped put them on the path to a better future.

**Name and image changed for privacy.*



SERVICE IS OUR LIFE WORK

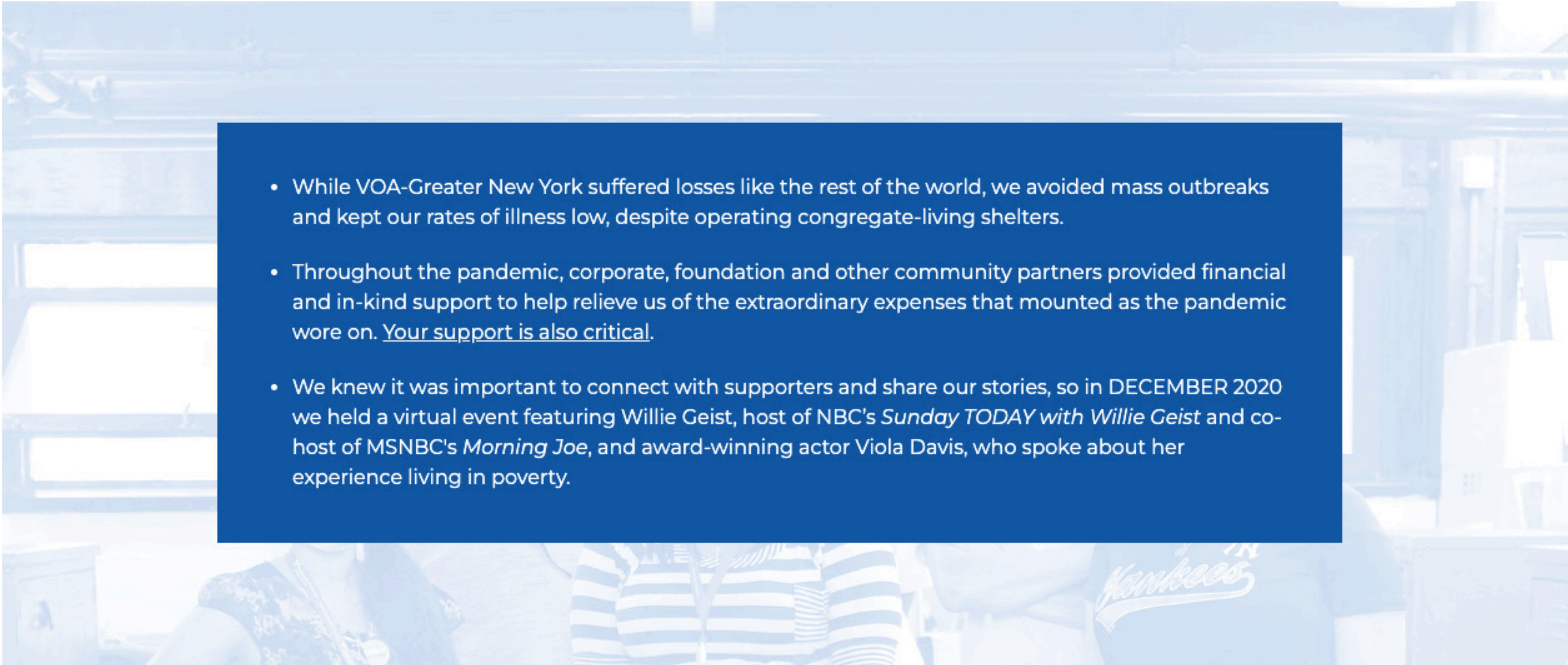
Support comes in all shapes and sizes. Our staff were ready to do whatever they could to keep clients—including Michael—engaged, comfortable, and moving forward.

Matthew, who is in his thirties, lives with autism spectrum disorder and severe anxiety. At the beginning of the pandemic, he was terrified to leave **Grasslands Shelter** in Westchester, the place he called a temporary “home” while issues with his benefits were being resolved. Matthew struggled with life in shelter but enjoyed taking walks outside which helped to calm him. But when the pandemic hit, Matthew became too fearful to venture outdoors. This became a big problem when an important off-site, in-person housing appointment was scheduled and Matthew refused to attend, putting his housing case at risk of being closed. Knowing Matthew would be without a stable, permanent home for even longer if his case was not approved, the entire Grasslands team got to work, patiently convincing Matthew to go with them to the appointment—and he eventually did.

In the months that followed, staff continued to accompany Matthew to future appointments, no matter how busy their own schedules were. Thanks to their support, Matthew was back on track with his housing case and was able to get his benefits reactivated. He even relaxed enough to resume his daily walks outside the shelter.

While Matthew’s needs were more extreme, many VOA-Greater New York staff simply tried to bring a sense of normalcy to clients’ lives. At programs including **Richard F. Salyer House**, one of our affordable, supportive housing programs in Manhattan, Recreation and Front Desk staff brightened common areas with seasonal decorations, and put together activity books with crosswords, sudoku puzzles and coloring pages for residents young and old.

And at **Regent Family Residence**, our transitional homeless shelter in Manhattan, Recreation staff organized a special graduation celebration for students and families via Zoom, complete with awards delivered door-to-door to help make the occasion memorable. They weren’t going to let the pandemic diminish that exciting accomplishment.

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- While VOA-Greater New York suffered losses like the rest of the world, we avoided mass outbreaks and kept our rates of illness low, despite operating congregate-living shelters.
 - Throughout the pandemic, corporate, foundation and other community partners provided financial and in-kind support to help relieve us of the extraordinary expenses that mounted as the pandemic wore on. [Your support is also critical.](#)
 - We knew it was important to connect with supporters and share our stories, so in DECEMBER 2020 we held a virtual event featuring Willie Geist, host of NBC's *Sunday TODAY with Willie Geist* and co-host of MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, and award-winning actor Viola Davis, who spoke about her experience living in poverty.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE CITY

The work of Volunteers of America-Greater New York is essential and we can't do it alone. Our partners, and the community, were there for us.

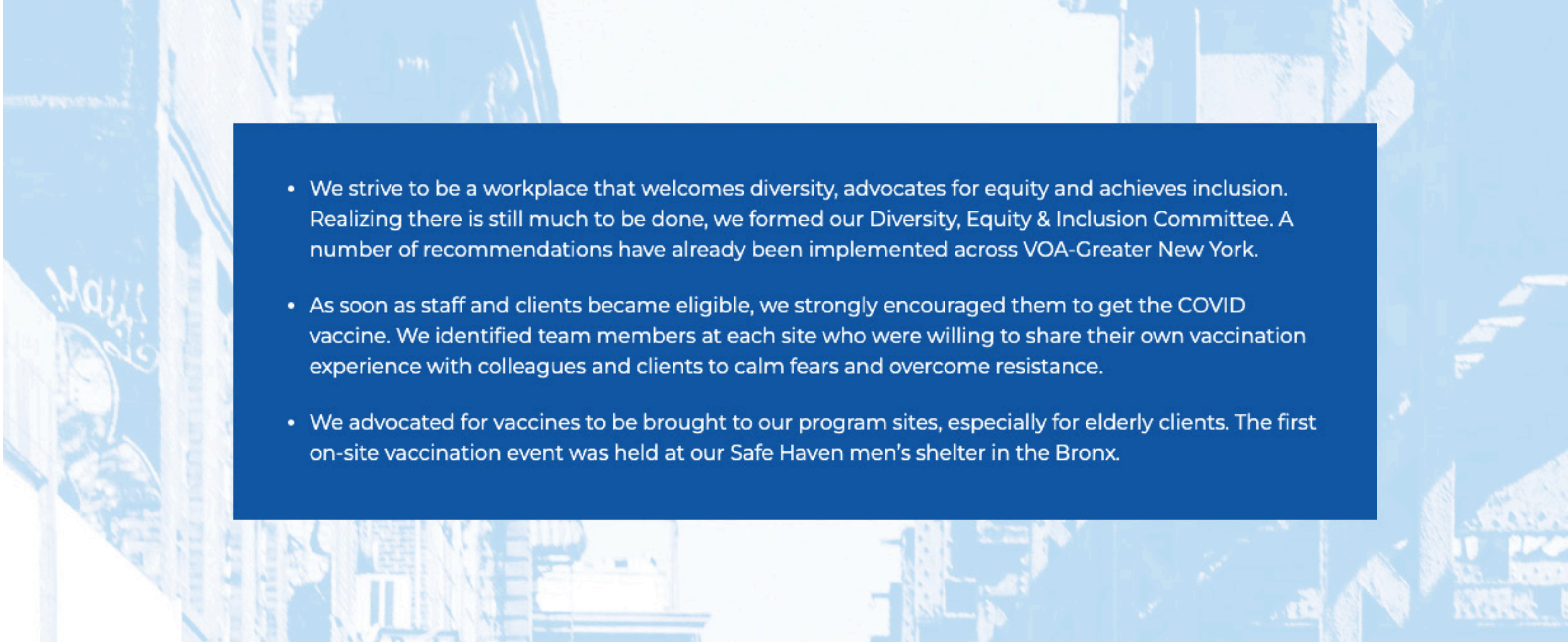
The **Wells Fargo Foundation** made a gift to help with our COVID-related expenses including PPE and temporary staff. **Allen & Overy** ensured the food pantries at our family shelters were stocked for residents who couldn't get to the store or were too fearful to go outside. **Bronx Community Board 9** donated food to residents at Commonwealth Veterans Residence, and thanks to an introduction by RIVER Fund, **Feed the Frontlines NYC** has delivered more than 40,000 nutritious, chef-prepared meals to staff and clients at ten of our programs, relieving them of a worry and showing them the community cares.

New and returning partners pivoted with us as our community service campaign Operation Backpack® was totally upended by the pandemic, forcing us to purchase hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of school supplies normally collected and donated by the community. It would have been easy to say "not this year" but thanks to gifts from **Trinity Church Wall Street** and long-time partners **Murex** and **Select Equity**, as well as **Duane Reade/Walgreens** and their customers, we were able to meet the needs of all 16,000 students who needed a backpack and school supplies. **RXR Realty** once again donated prime warehouse space to use as a sorting space for this campaign.

As students struggled with remote learning, further challenged by the lack of a reliable internet connection, the "digital divide" became even more apparent. Thanks to contributions from the **Arman Roy Foundation**, staff created WiFi-enabled learning pods at our domestic violence shelter in Brooklyn. We're now working with **Concordia Foundation** to set up pods at our domestic violence shelter in Manhattan.

We were also able to purchase assistive learning technology benefiting children with developmental delays at our Bronx Early Learning Center thanks to funding from the **Joseph LeRoy and Ann C. Warner Fund**.

Grants from the **Fan Fox & Leslie R. Samuels Foundation** and the **Mother Cabrini Health Foundation** this year allowed us to hire a Wellness Coordinator and soon we will hire social workers for our newest residential facility for older adults, East Clarke Place Senior Residence. **The New York Community Trust** funded our outcomes evaluation work, made possible in part from a bequest from LuEsther Mertz. And a grant from the **Northfield Bank Foundation** will allow us to purchase much-needed furniture and iPads needed for telehealth appointments for our supportive housing program in East New York.

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- We strive to be a workplace that welcomes diversity, advocates for equity and achieves inclusion. Realizing there is still much to be done, we formed our Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee. A number of recommendations have already been implemented across VOA-Greater New York.
 - As soon as staff and clients became eligible, we strongly encouraged them to get the COVID vaccine. We identified team members at each site who were willing to share their own vaccination experience with colleagues and clients to calm fears and overcome resistance.
 - We advocated for vaccines to be brought to our program sites, especially for elderly clients. The first on-site vaccination event was held at our Safe Haven men's shelter in the Bronx.

Strong, Resilient and Looking Ahead



This year tested and inspired us. Now, under new leadership and with the full commitment of our Board of Directors, we look forward to a new chapter for VOA-Greater New York as we continue the process of refining our strategic vision and focusing our mission on ending homelessness in the Greater New York area by 2050. We are excited to share more about this soon.

In the meantime, we continue to forge ahead, as more people are getting vaccinated and our community is rebounding from a year unlike any other.

We look forward to new beginnings, just like the 122 older adults who will move into **East Clarke Place Senior Residence**, our new affordable housing development in the Bronx for seniors with limited incomes or those who are chronically homeless.

And we count on you to be by our side, to help us continue the life-saving work that was demonstrated throughout this report and that we have continued to do over the last 125 years.

Please [donate](#) to VOA-Greater New York today and make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable in our community.

