

Insights

THE INSIDE STORY

West Bergen Mental Healthcare Launches West Bergen Clinical Training & Education Institute

Communities all over the United States are feeling the impact of the mental health and counseling provider shortage. In 2021, over one third of the population lived in an area that lacked an adequate number of mental health professionals, and it's not uncommon for individuals to seek a therapist, only to be turned away or put onto a month's long waiting list.

The pandemic magnified this issue. Millions struggled with forced isolation, and issues of depression and anxiety that had reasonably been kept at bay through outside activities and distractions now reached a crisis point. West Bergen saw this escalation first hand, with calls to our Access Center increasing exponentially, yet the supply of licensed professionals available has simply not kept up with the demand for services.

Why? While there are a number of factors driving this shortage, the mental health and counseling internship crisis is among the most significant. To become a licensed professional, students are required to enter into an internship program during their graduate education. The sad reality is that there are significantly more internship seekers than there are internships. And this is the case for all mental health professions – social work, marriage and family therapy, professional counseling, addictions counseling and more.

Not finding an internship opportunity can stall and sometimes derail a student's trajectory. And, of course, this only exacerbates the mental health crisis.

Enter The West Bergen Clinical Training & Education Institute, the Agency's newly launched training and education center. The goal of this initiative is to enhance our current internship program by increasing internship placements and developing a more comprehensive training environment for the next generation of mental health profession-

als. Under the leadership of a group of highly qualified experts acting as the Institute's Advisory Board, the program provides future therapists and community partners with cutting edge supervision and training.

Phase One is a year-long program, and will be comprised of a group of carefully selected undergraduate and graduate students who will be invited to join the Institute in conjunction with their accredited higher education settings. Students will be overseen by mental health professionals who will provide ongoing consultation, and each student will be assigned a clinical expert to relate to on an ongoing basis.

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West Bergen CEO Michael Tozzoli believes that the Institute will help not only West Bergen serve its clients, but will also benefit the community at large. "No one should have to wait weeks or months to finally see a therapist – and making sure that students who need qualified internship opportunities have access to them is one step in the right direction toward overcoming the mental health provider shortage."

A secondary and equally important mission of the Institute is to enhance and expand the current free community mental health education programs that West Bergen extends to local partners and organizations. In this way, not only will the Institute prepare tomorrow's clinicians to become effective and caring mental health practitioners, but it will also support the parent agency in its quest to lower mental health stigma through education and awareness.

Message from our CEO

2023 was a busy year for West Bergen, and we are grateful to all of you who continue on this journey with us. We've come a long way together.

Some highlights include our Center for Children & Youth Open House last Fall. Thanks to so many who joined us as we welcomed you to our beautiful space of hope and healing. For those who may not have had an opportunity to attend the Open House, please reach out so we can give you a tour. We're very proud of it, and you'll see why.

Thanks to a group of generous donors, we also completed much needed renovations on both buildings in Ridgewood – 120 and 140 Chestnut. Our friends and partners at The Junior League of Northern NJ also played a significant role in this process, donating a beautiful new art therapy room for our Adult Day Treatment clients. Performing all the work themselves over an October weekend, they transformed a tired room into a nurturing space. Our physical footprint is now a welcoming environment for our clients and our amazing team, who work tirelessly on behalf of others.

2023 also saw us add several other school districts, including Ridgewood, to our School Based Therapy program and we now have West Bergen therapists in place in 19 districts! It's important to note, that we have never advertised this program. All districts have come through referrals from Superintendents who have learned from colleagues about the work we are doing with students and staff.

Our Community Outreach program continues to expand and we now offer free, mental health educational programs to a multitude of community organizations throughout Bergen County. It is important to note that these programs are critical in our quest to reduce the stigma of mental health. People should and must ask for help, and we are providing a forum to make it easier to do so.

All of this and more is because of you. Without your support we could not continue our work. We are grateful to every single one of you, and excited to see what 2024 brings.

Michael J. Tozzoli, MSW, LCSW,
Chief Executive Officer

GIVING BACK

West Bergen Board member Louis Gerber and his wife Suzanne have raised their two daughters Julia (10) and Abby (12) with a strong sense of community service. From an early age, both girls have understood the importance of giving back to those less fortunate, and have baked and delivered holiday cookies to West Bergen group homes.

This year, the Ridgewood family along with Grandparents Gerry and Loraine Burstein continued their 3 year tradition of marking the solemn day of Yom Kippur by preparing a special meal of cookies and sandwiches for clients in our residential program. The clients loved the special treat, and the love and kindness it was delivered with!



COMMUNITY CORNER

RIDGEWOOD NEWCOMERS HONOR WEST BERGEN

The Ridgewood Newcomers, a nonprofit founded in 1947, has been an important part of the Village of Ridgewood for decades. Open to those who have chosen to make Ridgewood their home, the club provides a welcoming environment for those who are new to town.

In addition to hosting fun events to meet and greet other Newcomers, the organization's board also supports local nonprofits through select fundraising events. Past support has been directed to the Ridgewood YMCA; Oasis – A Haven for Women and Children; Social Services Association and HealthBarn USA, among others.

This year, the Newcomers chose West Bergen Mental Healthcare as the featured charity for their 77th Annual Charity Gala in February. "We are honored to have been chosen by the Newcomers as their featured charity" said Michael Tozzoli, CEO. "There are a number of extremely worthy nonprofits doing astonishing work in the

Ridgewood community, so to be chosen for this honor is truly extraordinary."

West Bergen recently began working with the Newcomers on several Community Outreach programs for their members. In November, just in time for Thanksgiving, West Bergen staff therapist Barbara Krug and several of her interns ran a Thanksgiving Gratitude program for little Newcomers at the Center for Children & Youth. The kids expressed all the things they are grateful for, including what makes them different and unique, and colored their work on paper turkey feathers. At the end of the program, they all helped pin the feathers on a large Gratitude Turkey. It was memorable for them and for us!

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VOLUNTEER CORNER

As we get ready to begin 2024, we want to take a moment to recognize and applaud all that our volunteers accomplished in 2023. Last year, West Bergen hosted 79 volunteers who logged over 185 hours of their time to improve West Bergen's programs and services.

Our volunteer events included themed lunches, Career days, our Open House at our Children's Center, as well as many appreciation events for our staff members in honor of our 60th Anniversary.

Our largest volunteer project was our Holiday Gift Drive. Volunteers were helped fulfill every gift on our list. Each gift was beautifully wrapped, then sorted and organized for delivery to our group homes. The highlight of this project was a visit from Santa himself! Santa and Mrs. Claus came in to spend time with each and every group home resident and client in our Adult Day Treatment Program.

Volunteers are an integral part of West Bergen. When volunteers are present, it immediately uplifts our clients and boosts their self-esteem, helping them to feel accepted for who they are. It also inspires them to learn new skills and be proud of their accomplishments.

Our volunteer group, the Friends of West Bergen, meets monthly to plan activities and events for West Bergen.

Volunteer opportunities range from preparing and serving meals in our Adult Day Treatment Program, participating in our monthly Career Day or helping at our events.

If you would like more information about the Friends of West Bergen, please contact Chrissie @ clijoi@westbergen.org

The Ridgewood AM Rotary Celebrates Mental Health Month

Join the Ridgewood AM Rotary and West Bergen Mental Healthcare for a fun and festive wine tasting event featuring fine wines from Uncorked Wine Shop & Lounge and food from local Ridgewood restaurants. The event will be held at West Bergen's newly renovated Center for Children & Youth in Ramsey, and the Rotary is generously donating all proceeds to West Bergen Mental Healthcare!

Ticket information will be available soon!

SAVE THE DATE:

Tuesday
May 14,
2024



West Bergen's free "Warmline" provides support to anyone in the community who is experiencing stress and anxiety. Available Monday through Friday from 9am – 5pm, calls will be received by a West Bergen Access Clinician and a trained West Bergen licensed therapist will return your call within 30 minutes. 201-688-7098