



November 13-19, 2020

STRATEGIES

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The Baltimore Station keeps veterans engaged, sheltered in a pandemic



John Friedel is the executive director of the Baltimore Station, a nonprofit substance abuse treatment program and shelter for homeless veterans. He has been the shelter's director for five years and has lived in the city for 39 years.

What was the biggest challenge your shelter confronted during the spring?

We are a very volunteer-driven organization. The nature of our work comes from people in the community reaching out to the homeless, predominantly veterans who are homeless. In normal times we would have all those people coming and going, preparing meals, doing workgroups and things like that with our residents. But it became apparent in the first week of March that that would not be a good thing to do, so we closed our operations



John Friedel

except for staff at that time. The men actually sheltered in place... and what we discovered was even while we had closed the doors to the outside, we did have a couple people test positive for the virus.

We worked very closely with the Baltimore City Health Department and other providers and had the whole facility tested and we went into quarantine mode. I think for us, what became really clear is that a high number of people are asymptomatic-positive. We got through that and none of the residents were seriously ill and none of them died, and I think we were very lucky.

I think that reshaped the way we had to do business. We had to move clinical work to telehealth and we had to get more creative in how we kept the population engaged. Beyond being a homeless shelter, we are a substance abuse treatment clinic, so basically working with people with substance abuse disorder and mental health issues. I think for the men, isolation is one of the hardest things.

The Baltimore Station, a nonprofit substance abuse treatment program and shelter for homeless veterans, is located at 140 West St. in Sharp-Leadenhall.



THE BALTIMORE STATION

To keep raising money this year, how did you and your team decide which new tools to try out?

When this all hit, we were really heavy in planning for our biggest fundraiser, which is Homerun for Recovery. That event raises quite a bit of our operational funding for the year. We knew at that point that we were gonna have to cancel it. That scared everyone.

We really rallied the core supporters, and I think we began to realize that people were starved for an experience. As we put together things like the drive-in movie night, the virtual chili tasting, we said, what is the value proposition to our audience to give them an experience that ties to and relates to the mission that we serve? Part of it was, how do we safely deliver an experience for them that keeps them engaged and also allows them to contribute at whatever level they can afford to? Our lowest contribution this year was \$2, and I think that's heartfelt. It comes from someone where

that's what they could give, and we appreciate it. It goes a long way.

How has The Baltimore Station prepared the veterans it serves for the second wave of Covid-19, as it's been called?

We had opened up, had a little more leeway in terms of curfew, but we're going back to a reduced curfew. We're also adding more to what we're offering, more internal activities. We had a crab feast on [Oct. 31] in the facility; we're doing movie nights, providing coffee 24/7, more snacks and meals, things to ensure folks who are in residence are engaged and they don't need to leave the facility as much. If they do leave, really it's for a justified cause like work, interviews, medical appointments, obviously. We're also doing chaperoned trips to Walmart for shopping, things like that, so they don't have to rely on public transportation as much.

What goals are you setting for next year?

We recognize the need for our service array is going to be even greater. More people are going to fall into homelessness and struggle with substance abuse. We have to look forward at ways to expand and serve other populations. It might be partnerships with hotels. It might be opportunities to acquire property so that we can do more social distancing.

On the finance side, we are as elastic as can be. I think if anyone says they have a firm and fast plan for 2021, they're kind of a fool because they're going to have to make revisions on the fly.

Adaptation – it's a single word, but I think everyone needs to adapt. It's going to be a very fluid year.

Coping is a weekly Baltimore Business Journal Q&A featuring stories of business and organizational survival in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Know of someone we should talk to? Contact baltimore@bizjournals.com.