

## MHA's COVID-19 Response

MHA has been continually operational for 66 years surviving and thriving through decades of change and multiple catastrophic events. What enables the organization to continue its history of education, advocacy and service for behavioral health clients, their families and the professionals that serve them? MHA has leadership that is both resilient and focused on results and impact. MHA's successful leadership in the behavioral health field resulted in the organization being named as the statewide Mental Health America affiliate.

MHA's programmatic approach is as varied as our audience. Having a multitude of regional and statewide programs promotes a multi-prong response to emergencies such as the COVID-19 crisis. MHA is not offering counseling but the organization is on the front line supporting and training behavioral health professionals including the emerging peer support specialists. MHA continues to have frequent conversations with the Office of Behavioral Health and other behavioral health organizations to assess the needs in our community and statewide. MHA is also closely monitoring federal and state policy relating to behavioral health issues and the COVID-19 response.

1. **Virtual Conference, April 6-7, 2020** – MHA was scheduled to hold the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual conference on April 4, 6-7, 2020 in Baton Rouge. It was evident at the beginning of March that this event would likely need to be cancelled or postponed. Behavioral Health professionals required to have continuing education credits rely on the MHA conference. The MHA conference has also become known as a source of information about innovative programs and therapeutic approaches. Staff quickly began to explore the possibility of hosting the conference virtually. Through the support of TPN network, MHA hosted the first virtual conference on April 6-7, 2020 with over 200 attendees. The conference provided information needed to help with the current crisis – trauma therapy, ethics of telemedicine, scientific facts on COVID-19 and anxiety. These topics were balanced by information that can be used in daily practice – suicide, understanding LGBTQ+ clients, ethics and role of peer support specialists and vaping. The conference provided 10 CEU credits for LPCs, Social Workers, Peer Support Specialists and Addiction counselors at the reduced rate of \$55. Many behavioral health professionals were asking about the Paycheck Protection Program during the conference so MHA will be co-hosting an hour webinar with 2 bankers on April 10, 2020 to answer questions and direct behavioral health professionals to resources.
2. **Peer Support Specialists COVID-19 Training** – Peer Support Specialists are the new front line of behavioral health care. Louisiana has pending legislation to make their services reimbursable by Medicare following the example of other states. Over the past year, MHA has partnered with the peer support specialists leaders, the managed care organizations, who employ them, and the Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) to establish a professional organization focused on this emerging profession. MHA helped facilitate meetings across the state held by and for peer support specialists. OBH approached MHA at the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantine and asked for MHA to develop a series of trainings for peer support specialists. These trained peers will be deployed virtually, as needed, to the isolation camps, the pop-up hospitals, nursing homes and other settings where people are suffering with or quarantined for COVID-19. Using their unique combination of training and lived experience, the trained peers will listen, dispense information and be a source for referrals when necessary. Working with Louisiana Healthcare Connections, MHA will be launching the trainings the week of April 13, 2020. The trainings are done in 10 modules and address empathetic listening, cultural competency, crisis intervention, COVID-19 facts and more.
3. **Alliance House Drop-In Center** - MHA opted to close the doors of the Drop-in Center for the chronically mentally ill because of the health risk to this extremely vulnerable and medically fragile population. Staff was able to immediately move to virtual wellness checks and even provide limited programming. This approach has been so successful Capital Area Human Services has asked MHA to take on more clients during this crisis.
4. **Bielkiewicz House** – LA Rehabilitation Services has frozen funding due to reassignment of their staff. MHA has opted to continue to operate this program as the residents would otherwise be homeless or in jail. Most of the residents are not able to work and MHA has been creative in programming using the Drop-in Center as a base for workshops and computer skills enhancement.