

To whom it may concern:

I am writing regarding the issue of compensation among the essential employees of homeless shelters such as South Park Inn, where I work to help the homeless veterans work through their current situations toward permanent housing solutions.

This environment is difficult on a regular day, as staff at all levels work directly with the guests who are in various stages of substance, alcohol, and mental health issues. (Most guests are dealing with at least two of those, several all three.) These guests have historically been unable to make decisions in their best interests but are not eligible for or don't want a conservator, power of attorney, etc. A cynic may look at our clients and determine that they are beyond hope. Our staff believes the exact opposite: that everyone is worth the effort, to see the investments of time and resources pay dividends in the clients' progress toward permanent housing, sobriety, and mental stability. That was why we come to work every day, but that was prior to this pandemic.

We come to work during this pandemic because these clients still need our help. They need to have a place to stay and a structure to build upon toward a more stable state of being. But during this pandemic we have been diligently attempting to maintain basic COVID precautions, we have followed all CDC and Board of Health guidance and recommendations and implemented as many steps as possible on our end to minimize the exposure to the building and all who enter, whether guests or staff.

Our guests are compliant, for the most part, with all that we have done, but not all. We have had to take steps to find alternatives for guests for refuse to comply. We've taken in an entire group of COVID-positive guests from another agency who had an outbreak. We've continued to meet and service our guests in person, during this pandemic, when virtually all other agencies to service this population have worked virtually and with no plan to meet in person over a year into this pandemic. Even the Veterans Administration, with homeless veterans among our sheltered guests, have yet to return to meeting in person, though they are slowly opening up to meeting in person outdoors, socially distanced from the client.

But we continue to show up. We meet in person, because we have to. We ask our clients to comply, but we cannot require compliance to ensure our own safety. During the first six months, when the majority of our clients were housed in hotels to minimize exposure, we covered multiple hotel sites while maintaining our shelter for the guests who were not placed into hotels. We have jumped enormous hurdles to serve the best interests of our clients, often while those very clients act in direct contrast to our efforts.

And we do this with the understanding that our clients could (and have) expose our staff to this virus. We show up, knowing that we could be the reason our family member develops a cough, or has a fever that just won't go down. We do this because this is our job, and all these guests are our responsibility. Society has given us that role, and we step into that role, because someone has to.

Regarding the issue of compensation among the employees doing this work, it is insufficient to the point of embarrassing in normal times. In the era of this pandemic, it is laughable. We truly did appreciate the hazard pay when it was provided, but that has ceased many months ago, while our exposure has only increased. We are anticipating untold challenges when the eviction moratorium expires and hundreds (if not thousands) of tenants are forced out of their apartments, with variants of the virus on the horizon.

I cannot offer a solution to the issue of the compensation any more than I can offer a solution to the pandemic. But the hazards are ever so present and no indication it will let up at this level, the front line, among one of the most vulnerable populations.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my view on this issue.

Respectfully,

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