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# Be MINDFUL. WELL.

## Mental Health Awareness Month

Since 1949, May has been National Mental Health Awareness Month. But perhaps this extraordinary time calls for a Mental Health Awareness Year.

As more people become vaccinated, there is reason to be hopeful, but the worry, the trauma and the loss of living through a pandemic and facing the injustice and violence of systemic racism, has taken its toll on everyone. Over the past year “the number of people looking for help with anxiety and depression has skyrocketed,” according to Mental Health America.

Equinox treats hundreds of individuals with serious mental illness every year through outpatient programs: the Mental Health Clinic, PROS (Personalized Recovery Oriented Services), and the Counseling Center for alcohol and drug addiction; and through four mental health residential programs, each of which is designed for clients with a different set of needs.

Others who rely on Equinox – victims of domestic violence and at-risk and homeless youth – often have lives marked by crisis and instability and struggle with mental health issues.

During May, Equinox has been marking National Mental Health Awareness Month with a campaign called **Be Mindful. Be Well.** The campaign uses social media to share information and resources about pressing mental health issues, as well as to raise funds for our critical, yet underfunded, mental health services.

In addition to information about mental health issues that affect us all, the campaign focuses on:

- The pandemic's disproportionate toll on women's mental health
- The profound mental health-related challenges faced by Black, indigenous and other people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals

## When Will the Mental Health Stigma Stop?

*By Paris Taylor, Resident of the Equinox Cohoes Residence*

I bleed like you, I cry like you.  
I put one leg at a time in my jeans in the morning just like you,  
and I am God's child just like you, so why be so quick to judge?  
We as a mental health community have to stand up and educate anyone who has a misunderstanding of someone like us who has a mental health diagnosis, this disease is not contagious, and I won't stop spreading the word to let people know that we are beautiful as well, and the mental health outpatients who are able to be more of an advocate, please let your voice be heard.

- The effects on youth, who are increasingly under-resourced and overwhelmed

Equinox is committed to strengthening the mental well-being and resiliency of all those we serve, and of the community. Because of our generous supporters, we are optimistic that, together, we will build a healthier, more mindful community that values and uplifts all of its citizens.

Look for our Mental Health Awareness Campaign, **Be Mindful. Be Well.** at [www.equinoxinc.org](http://www.equinoxinc.org) or [www.facebook.com/EquinoxAlbany](https://www.facebook.com/EquinoxAlbany).



## Message From CEO Virginia Golden Coping with Covid-19

During this spring season when we begin to experience new growth and transformation of our physical environment, it's an appropriate time to determine what we need to grow and transform individually – physically, mentally and spiritually.

Our last year – as we know all too well – has been like no other with the pandemic dominating and radically changing our lives – personally and professionally. Equinox and our community partners responded with the resilience, commitment and compassion to continue to meet the needs of those who rely on us for their health and welfare.

**There were no options to work remotely for our staff serving in our six residential programs.** These programs meet the needs of those experiencing domestic violence; the residents of our adult residential programs who struggle with behavioral health diagnoses and homeless youth at our transitional living program. The challenges increased at the residences as programs and community support for our residents were put on “pause” or transitioned to telehealth further exacerbating the demands. Our staff – similar to those in hospitals and nursing homes – needed to be physically present while trying to manage all the personal issues that the pandemic caused in the routine of their lives.

**Overnight, we had to restructure our outpatient services – the mental health clinic, counseling center, PROS, and health home care – along with our domestic violence outreach and advocacy and youth supportive services to continue to serve our clients.** We moved from in-person outpatient services to primarily telehealth and increased outreach to assure we engaged our clients. We also needed to continue some in-person services due to the clients’ needs that could not be delivered remotely or simply weren’t adequate for the client. Looking back it is truly remarkable that our staff continuously redesigned our services, constantly engaging our clients to assure their needs were met. For all those efforts we are deeply grateful.

Despite the increased challenge of workload precipitated by COVID-19, the Equinox staff continued to forge forward with key strategic initiatives. The Swinburne project moved forward and became operational in February of this year. The leasing of 35 South Ferry to Interfaith Partnership to assure the continuation of medical respite homeless services in our community as well as our transitional living program was executed by the end of December. And finally, we continued our discussions with Whitney Young and adjusted our time line for moving forward with our affiliation.

**The pandemic placed unusual stresses and strains on our administrative staff in finance, information technology, human resources, compliance and development as well.**

Redesigning how we utilize COVID-19 billing revisions, recruiting and retaining staff, applying a myriad of different employee restrictions/limitations for work, revising IT infrastructure and practices to support all the remote and telehealth demands; redesigning who and how we connect with our community and redesign of who, what and how we assured compliance with laws, rules and regulations are just a few examples of how the administrative staff needed to respond. There is not a single Equinox staff member who hasn't been profoundly impacted. The result – a total team effort that achieved remarkable outcomes for a “normal” year much less the “COVID-19 infected” year.

The chronic nature of our experience has left each of us changed and depleted. We are all trying to cope with new ways of living in a new normal, which is yet to be fully understood. So the need to replenish our energy and our mental well-being is critical. As a provider of mental health services, Equinox is playing a role in helping our community cope and heal. Our Mental Health Awareness Campaign, **Be Mindful. Be Well.**, will be a source of meaningful information and support as we move forward. And move forward we must.

Thank you for supporting our important work.



Left to right, Cohoes Residence Manager Shalonda Melton, Assistant Manager Michelle McGill, Case Manager Irelynn Sheehan.

## Our Frontline Heroes

We are grateful to our residential staff who have continued to be there around the clock at our adult mental health residences, domestic violence shelter and transitional living program for homeless youth. Pictured are just some of these Equinox heroes! Right is Domestic Violence Shelter staff: Clockwise from top left: Sabrina Brewington, Raymond McGeoch, Nichelle Gourrier, William Morris, Zarah Freeman, Latosha Cox, Dakota Young, and Ken Myer.



Domestic Violence Shelter Staff

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# Even a Pandemic Couldn't Stop Thanksgiving

## GRANTS AWARDED TO EQUINOX

January 2020 – April 2021

During the past year, Equinox received numerous grants to help us meet the community's ongoing need for our services during the pandemic, including a redesigned Thanksgiving Community Dinner, and to help keep important projects moving forward, such as needed renovations to the Domestic Violence Shelter kitchen. Equinox extends its deepest gratitude to these generous foundations:

Community Foundation Impact Grant • \$10,000

Capital Region Community COVID-19 Response Fund\* • \$20,000

Frederick McDonald Trust • \$10,000

Daniel & Susan Pfau Foundation • \$25,000

SEFCU Foundation • \$10,000

SEFCU Foundation • \$25,000

Barry Alan Gold Memorial Fund/CFGCR • \$5,000

John D. Picotte Family Foundation/CFGCR • \$5,000

St. Peter's Foundation • \$5,000

St. Peter's Health Partners • \$10,000 (2 grants of \$5,000 each)

Berkshire Bank Foundation • \$2,500

Arnold Cogswell Health Fund/CFGCR • \$15,000

J.M. McDonald Foundation • \$5,000

CDPHP – Covid Relief Fund • \$18,640

Rubin Community Health Fund/CFGCR • \$40,000

United Way • \$10,000

\*Co-led by the Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region (CFGCR) and the United Way of the Greater Capital Region

The challenge: How to prepare 10,000 Thanksgiving dinners when it wasn't safe to gather crowds of volunteers in close quarters at the Empire State Plaza kitchens. The solution: raise money to purchase specially made Thanksgiving dinners from local restaurants, caterers, grocery stores and other food services who could adhere to strict food-handling requirements. Volunteer drivers would still be enlisted to provide contactless delivery throughout the Capital Region.

"That was our Thanksgiving Redesign," said Christina Buff Rajotte, Equinox Director of Development & Marketing. "In this way, we safely continued our cherished community tradition while also supporting local businesses—so many of which have donated food items to our dinner in the past and have been struggling during the pandemic."

The fundraising campaign, which was led by many of our long-time T-Day volunteers on Facebook, was a huge success. **We surpassed our goal of \$100,000 allowing us to purchase more than 10,000 holiday meals with all the trimmings.**

We are grateful to all the volunteer drivers, T-Day Hotline and other key volunteers, individual donors, and lead corporate and community partners: Price Chopper/Market 32, Hannaford Supermarkets, The Food Pantries of the Capital District, CDPHP, SEFCU, St. Peter's Health Partners, Tri City Rentals, Greenbush Tape & Label, Clear View Bag Co., Hill & Markes Inc. and RBC Wealth Management.

Many thanks also to the restaurants and food services that safely prepared 10,000 Thanksgiving meals this year: Acosta Clifton Park, Albany Country Club, Alexis Diner, Blu Stone Bistro, B-Rads Bistro & Catering, CDPHP/Eurest Food Service Company, Fort Orange Club, Giffy's Bar B-Q, Glenville Queen Diner, Hamilton Street Café, Iron Gate Café, Joey G's Café, Latham '76 Diner, Mazzone Hospitality, New World Bistro, Pepper Jack's, River Stone Manor, and Seasons Catering.



**The show must go on, as they say, especially when it came to our major fundraising event of the year.** With the help of a creative volunteer committee and Zoom, the 6th Annual ThanksGathering Celebration did not disappoint!

Nearly 100 guests joined the virtual event, which featured lots of laughs and good cheer from NYC comedian Erin Jackson, wine expert Joseph Armstrong, and the Melissa Sgambelluri Trio. A special thank you to J. Eric King and the Equinox Companies for again serving as our Presenting Sponsor and to all of our sponsors.



# The King Family Pathways to Success Fund Makes Brighter Futures Possible

## C.C.'s Lessons on Succeeding

C.C.'s story is one of turning challenges and obstacles into a drive to make a positive impact on others. From a very young age, C.C. remembers her mother struggling with drug use. Because her mother could not care for her, C.C. was sent to live with extended family, but as a teenager she was lost, alone and homeless – until she made her way to Equinox's Transitional Living Program for Youth (TLP).

When she first arrived at TLP, C.C. was closed off and hesitant to form relationships with staff and peers; however, the staff worked closely with C.C. helping her to open up and trust those around her. C.C. earned her high school diploma from Albany Leadership Academy and began working full-time in the day care program at the Albany Jewish Community Center. She is also pursuing a Teacher's Assistant Certification at HVCC with plans of continuing on for a degree in Early Childhood Development.

The King Family Fund has provided C.C. with funds for public transportation so she could get to and from work and school reliably every day, as well as assistance that enabled her to move into her own apartment this past December and to furnish it—providing safe and stable housing while she continues on her pathway to success. With support from the King Family Fund she is able to save money to purchase her own car.

C.C. is an amazing young woman who is passionate about her work with children and about turning her life challenges into positive lessons for others. She is grateful for the opportunities the King family has provided and for believing in her.

## On the Road to Success

K.G. came to TLP with no resources except a determination to make a better life for himself. As described in our last newsletter, rent and transportation assistance from the King Family Pathways to Success Fund enabled K.G. to enroll in a program to earn a commercial driver's license. After completing coursework, K.G. was sidelined with a shoulder injury. The King Family continued to offer support, and K.G. is now back in the

driver's seat, completing the final hands-on driving portion of his training. K.G. is grateful for the opportunities created by the King Family Fund and eager to "make everyone proud."

## Taking Steps to Success

With support from the King Family Fund, O.C. completed Equinox's Project Independence (PI) in December 2020 and is living independently in his own apartment. He attends addiction recovery support groups and has enrolled at HVCC to pursue a certificate as a Substance Abuse Counselor. O.C.'s personal struggle, life experience and generous support of others have inspired him to help others on their personal paths to recovery and success.

**To donate to the King Family Pathways to Success Fund, contact Christina Rajotte, Director of Development & Marketing, at [crajotte@equinoxinc.org](mailto:crajotte@equinoxinc.org).**

*"This whole experience has taught me a lot of things, such as patience, respect, and humanity. I'm always able to wait out such a challenging situation and overcome it. Another lesson this has taught me is to respect and treat everyone that surrounds me with kindness because there is more to life than pain. My character has greatly changed for the better. I am forever grateful to the King Family Pathways to Success Fund."*

*–C.C., King Family Fund recipient*

*The King Family Pathways to Success Fund was created by Griffin King and Jane Khoury & J. Eric King and Kathy Thiel to help youth and young adults whose lives have been devastated by a parent or guardian's substance abuse and addiction. Thanks to the generosity and vision of the King Family and the Fund's many supporters, the Pathways to Success Fund is making a lasting impact, by providing meaningful assistance to help under-resourced youth reach their education, career and housing goals.*



## Great Finds Re-Opens

***Excited to welcome you back to our thrift boutique!***

WE ARE OPEN:

### **Monday-Friday**

10 to 11:30 am, **by appointment**, to donate gently used or new women's clothing and accessories.

12 to 5 pm, **by appointment**, to shop

To make an appointment to shop or to donate, please contact Susan Taylor at 518.449.7715 or [staylor@equinoxinc.org](mailto:staylor@equinoxinc.org).

Great Finds is located at 260 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12210.

# Elderly, Vulnerable and No Safe Place to Call Home

By Stephannie Lebrecht, DV Housing Program Manager

On a late Friday afternoon, there was a knock on our office door; standing there in a hospital gown and donated sweatpants was a man in his 70s. We helped him down the stairs, got him comfortable, offered him tea and asked him his name.

We learned that, "John," had just been discharged from the hospital, that he had no safe place to go, and had been sent in a cab to the local Department of Social Services office for homeless sheltering. From there he was sent down the block to the Equinox Domestic Violence Outreach office for an assessment. He was scared, vulnerable in so many ways: no clothes, no family, and no safe place to return to.

Domestic violence is about power and control, and can come from a caregiver when the victim is an elder, which was the case with John. He had been renting a room from someone who had gained his trust, and had taken control over his medical appointments, transportation, medication, the roof over his head and even access to food. All of which she used to control and abuse John. He was completely dependent on her and his physical and mental health was deteriorating.

That night, and over the next three months, Equinox provided John with emergency shelter in our Domestic Violence Shelter. In the first few days, we got him a cane, clean clothes, hygiene items, sneakers, and all his medications. While at our Shelter we provided him with case management, and our advocates worked with him and the police to retrieve his belongings. Through our housing program, he was able to leave the Shelter and moved into subsidized senior housing, which Equinox furnished for him.

Through our Elder Abuse program, Equinox helped John obtain services from Visiting Nurses and home health aides, and food stamps. We continue to assist him with living independently and safely by providing him with transportation to the pharmacy, medical appointments and the grocery store when his aides don't show up. He attends our Elder Abuse Support Group, and a few months ago we accompanied him to adopt a cat from the local animal shelter. Her name is Ms. J, and she sleeps next to John's head every night. John's physical and mental health has improved, he is safe and most importantly he is happy.

*If you or an older individual you know is experiencing abuse or neglect, whether from a family member or a caretaker, please call our 24-hour DV hotline (518) 432-7865. Equinox has staff dedicated to the special needs of victims of elder abuse.*



*"Stephanie and Jayne saved me from a very uncertain future. Thank God they were there. They provided me with shelter and guidance in my worst of times."*

—John

## Housing for Domestic Violence Survivors

The Equinox Domestic Violence Shelter offers emergency shelter, along with meals and support services to DV victims and their children for up to 90 days. But what happens to survivors who are "homeless due to domestic violence" and need longer term housing?

Equinox has two ways to help. Project Break Free (PBF) provides a rental subsidy and support services for up to one year to help survivors transition into a new life and home. Participants find a rental in the community, but pay no more than 30% of their income toward rent. Equinox, with the assistance of a federal grant, pays the balance.

"Our clients have had to leave their homes and leave all their belongings behind," said Stephannie Lebrecht, Equinox DV Housing Program Manager. "Project Break Free provides case management and counseling, as well as other supportive services. Our ongoing assistance helps former victims sustain independent and violence-free living."

With the recent opening of the Swinburne Building and a grant from New York State, Equinox has been able to offer **new** permanent supported housing to 15 homeless survivors.

"The Swinburne apartments are beautiful and modern. Residents can have pets, there is good parking, a nice community room and a playground," added Ms. Lebrecht. Residents, who must meet low-income requirements, have access to DV staff who work in another part of the building.

"We filled those apartments within months. There is such a need in the community for more programs like this, especially because of Covid-19. People can't focus on working or finding a job or getting their children in daycare, if they don't have a stable place to live first."



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Equinox YSS Coordinator Anthony Jackson works with youth at the Albany Boys and Girls Club.

**Equinox @ the Boys & Girls Club.** Equinox's Youth Supportive Services (YSS) has moved into the Albany Boys & Girls Club at 21 Delaware Ave. YSS offers youth one-to-one help obtaining services, connecting to resources, problem-solving and more. Youth can also enjoy all the recreational activities, homework help, and meals and snacks offered by the Boys & Girls Club. YSS is open M-F, noon to 8 pm.

## Partnering to Serve the Community

**The Swinburne Building is open, and we've moved in!** Just a half block from Equinox's main location, the multi-use Swinburne Building at 526 Central Avenue is now home to Equinox's Domestic Violence Outreach Services, Health Home Care, Development & Marketing, and HR Departments. The apartments available for domestic violence and mental health clients are all occupied. A Whitney Young primary health care center will be opening soon on the first floor to serve Equinox clients and the community.

**Working together to serve the homeless.** Equinox's Transitional Living Program (TLP) is the only program of its kind within 80 miles of Albany, offering stable housing and wraparound supports to homeless youth. To make TLP more affordable to operate, Equinox is leasing one of the TLP

buildings to Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, with a goal of transferring ownership. IPH will use the space for a medical respite program for homeless adults. Equinox and IPH have a history of working together to serve homeless members of the community.



The Swinburne Building