

**Notes: Staff Care During COVID-19**

**The Vermont Network seeks a world free of oppression where actions, beliefs and systems support all people to thrive.**

**We believe that (r)evolution inside organizations is the necessary foundation of social change. We recognize our participation is systems designed to oppress and seek to transform from within. We know that if we do this, our work transforms.**

**The emerging energy allows for nothing else.**

The Vermont Network closed its office at the end of the day on March 13, 2020 in response to the spread of COVID-19 and our recognition that through the act of self-isolation, we would be participating in interrupting the spread of disease in Vermont.

**Staff Details**

* Thirteen staff members plus eight contractors impacted.
* Sixteen staff and contractors work at Network offices; three contractors work within the women’s prison; one contractor works remotely from her home.
* At least four staff members are at high risk for serious illness if infected.
* Nine staff members have school aged children.

**Four Tenets of Supporting Staff** (for the purposes of this report, these are described within the context of the COVID emergency, however these are the tenets for our work together every day).

1. **Connection –** from the beginning it was clear that connecting staff and contractors would be important. Beginning on March 16th and continuing through today, we instituted the following:

* Daily morning email from Karen. Between 7 and 8 a.m. each weekday I send an email to our staff. This email contains random reflections on things like the weather, pets, birthday wishes and the like. I always include an inspirational or informational video, poem, essay or song. And then I ask the Question of the Day. At first I used a deck of connection cards put out by the Resonance Network. Questions that I asked included, “if you were a spice, what would it be and why?” Sometimes I mixed in a deep inquiry, “Where do you find joy?” or “Where and what is home to you?” I’ve long run through all the cards and now I find my questions in other places or they come to me. My wife also offers questions to ask. Not everyone answers each question but over time staff member share more and more and the paradox of being physically separated from each other is that we know so much more about each other. Our relationships have deepened.
* Regular staff and contractors check-ins – we all gather for one hour every Tuesday morning. These are just informal, lightly facilitated meetings held by Kelli Risitano, our Director of Advocacy and Healing. We start with heart centering breathing and then follow Kelli’s lead. Usually she’s got a poem for us and a prompt which we respond to in turn. The beauty of these meetings is that we can see and hear how each member of our staff is doing. And we interrupt our habit of focusing only on *what we do*. We are focused on who and how we are during these times. There is a lot of laughter and also some tears. No one misses these meetings.
* Weekly staff meeting – we moved from two staff meetings per month to one per week. I honestly have no idea how or why we did it but suddenly we were scheduled and Anne Smith, our Director of Training and Leadership Development facilitates these meetings. This is a typical staff meeting with exchanges of information, policy adoption, training, and updates. One hour long.

1. **Information** – I am committing to making sure our staff have all the information they and their families need at this time. I provide them with information from the Vermont Department of Health, Governor Scott’s updates, the University of Vermont Medical Center, and other trusted and accurate sources. I want them to feel confident in our financial standing so I am providing them with updates on COVID-related funding, the status of our cash position, and what we anticipate happening in the future. I’ve always shared the budget with our staff. I am doing so with greater frequency now.

Policies - We use a governance model that requires that I write the policies (myself or more likely with a group of staff members). Our board does not approve our personnel policies – we operate within a set of limitations established by our board. So we have very quickly developed a set of temporary policies related specifically to COVID. We were able to write policies on family leave, crisis pay, etc. quickly and disseminate these to our staff for their approval and adoption within just a few days. We continue to reinforce their use.

1. **Trust –** adrienne maree brown on which we base our relationship with our staff: “Trust the people and they will become trustworthy”. This has long been my aspiration, despite all we are told as organizational leaders and our responsibility for traditional (patriarchal) oversight and accountability. Once our schools closed, it was clear that I was going to have to trust that our staff would orient their days around our purpose and their work while also educating their children, managing families and figuring out how to live 24/7 with their partners. I trusted that eventually they would sort things out and that they would figure out how to include their work in their days – work which they love. It took a few weeks but as of now, everyone is doing this really well (there are good and bad days for our parents). We use Skype Office to document when we are working over the course of the day. I am noticing that our staff are breaking for lunch, going for walks or runs, and not only are they doing great work, they are evidencing excitement and creativity for figuring things out. Folks with younger children have work days that might start early in the morning, then there are big breaks throughout the day for lunch and math class and recess. They usually finish up in the evening.

I have always operationalized this organization as if we were hourly employees although we are all salaried. I’m finding that being less “observant” of when it is that our staff are working actually plays to their strengths, allows them to work when they are at their top form, and I have seen no drop in productivity. Our constituents, board and funders expect us to be stewards of their trust and accountable for their funding. I am finding that not only can we do this under these circumstances but that we do it better.

1. **Permission –** We have given ourselves the permission to interrupt our habit of orienting our lives around the guilt of being hyper productive. During this time, that habit is out if full force. There is an expectation that we will all be hyper-productive not only at work but also at home with our children whom we now have to educate; in caring for our families – not only do we have to feed them, but now we have to feed them homemade bread and healthy soups and all the things. Soon we’ll be churning our own butter! We have released and regularly remind our staff that perfection is not the goal; that there will be days when nothing gets down because everyone is crying; that failure is the best way to learn; that nothing is so urgent or important at work that it should supersede what is needed in a crisis even if that crisis involves a four year old having a meltdown. We give our staff permission to love and care for themselves and their families as much as they love and care for their jobs.

**Other supports**

* Roles – we have long ago pivoted from organizing ourselves around job titles to organizing ourselves around roles. In any situation the roles we need change and in this time, we have become adept at lifting up the right person for any given job. Therefore we see that our Training Director facilitates staff meetings not because that is in the Training Director Job description, but because she is really good at it and loves doing it.
* Space for grief – all of us are experiencing grief in these times. We find ways to make space for all the feelings. We are all checking in on each other, doing impromptu calls and support each other on those bad days.
* Financial supports – Our budget for 2020 did not include our usual cost of living increases for our staff. We were not in a position to give raises (for the first time) after our health insurance premium increased by 25%. As a result of cancellations of conferences and other events, and the realization of additional funds, we have been able to give our staff a 6% cost of living increase for the remainder of this year. Our raises are offered based on an equity model. The staff members whose salaries are situated in the lowest tier get the full 6%. The staff members in the middle tier get 4% and the staff members in the top tier get 3%. We also offer crisis pay to our attorneys for every day that have to appear in person in court and for our Finance Director for the days she goes to the office to attend to accounts payable/receivable, donations and other administrative duties which require her to go into public buildings
* Home offices – Our staff are working at all manner of home office set ups, and spending much more time on Zoom calls and sitting in front of tiny lap tops for hours on end. Very quickly the started to develop headaches, body aches, tennis elbow, etc. We have contracted with an office ergonomics consultant who is conducting remote evaluations of everyone’s office set up. She’ll be making recommendations for amendments which will make it possible for our staff to avoid long term damage to their bodies (and costly workers comp claims), and improve their work life immeasurably. We have a budget to support modest purchases of equipment (i.e. monitors, head sets, special seat pads) and will be making these purchases in the coming weeks.

**Return to our office**

We are learning that we may not ever return to our office. For now, it will take several weeks to secure the supplies and equipment required by the State of Vermont for work places to reopen. I believe the earliest some staff members will return to our office is July 1. We are already discussing moving from a big, centralized office to two work spaces – on in Montpelier, our state capitol and one in Burlington where everyone lives.

Karen Tronsgard-Scott