

VOA innovates amid COVID-19 Sullivan leads nonprofit through tumultuous times as new president and CEO



Volunteers of America has used its Children's Center creatively while addressing the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

BY VELVET SPICER

Lynn Sullivan likes to joke that she has spent much of her career working Lake Avenue. Early on she spent two decades at Eastman Kodak Co., followed by a 12-year stint at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery & Ascension Garden and now as president and CEO of Volunteers of America Upstate New York, a role she took six months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a nonprofit that offers multiple face-to-face and residential services, the VOA had some difficult decisions to make, and the agency's new leader was prepared for the task.

"We were deemed an essential service from day one because we are the place people go to when they've got no place else to go," Sullivan said of the early days of the pandemic. "It wasn't feasible for us to close shelters or close supportive housing. Those operations have remained operational since the beginning."

In fact, the VOA began taking employee temperatures before it was advised and began watching for signs of illness and quarantining anyone with a hint of an illness in order to protect its workers and clients.

"From an operational standpoint, we have supportive housing, which means we were providing face-to-face services prior to the COVID pandemic. It became clear very early on that that was not feasible over the long term," Sullivan said.

And like many in the community, Sullivan at first thought the shutdown would be short-lived, that the virus would come and go quickly and we would all be back to normal. Still, she had the foresight to apply for grants from the United Way of Greater Rochester Inc. in order to put in wireless networks at the agency's supportive housing buildings, enabling the VOA to deliver the services via tablets.

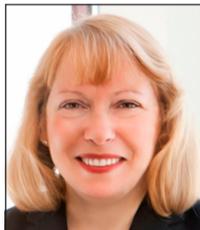
"We installed three decent-sized wireless networks and deployed about 120 tablets within our organization, and we were up and running with the first wireless network probably within two weeks of the COVID pandemic hitting," she recalled. "The fact that United Way responded as quickly as it did with those sets of grants was critical to our organization and it's enabled us to continue to ensure that those supportive services are provided so that individuals stay housed."

The VOA continues to accept new people coming into its programs, whether it be residential re-entry, its homeless shelters or its supportive housing.

"Staff has pitched in wherever necessary. I've been absolutely amazed by the focus of our staff and the compassion that they've shown to individuals, whether it be to their coworkers or the people we serve throughout," Sullivan said. "When you're on the front line like that it takes things to a whole new level."

Sullivan and her staff have moved some staff to remote working, while others have taken on roles at different facilities to try to fill gaps.

"What it's resulted in is a greater use of technology within the organization, and I believe that's going to open up additional doors down the road," Sullivan said of the use of networks and tablets, noting that the agency also recently received a grant from its national headquarters to focus on a more extensive use of remote services



Sullivan

through its Children's Center.

"We did make some operational decisions. We are exiting our administrative offices that we were renting. And we are temporarily moving our administration operations that aren't working from home or are in need of space to come into our Children's Center," Sullivan said. "And we actually are planning to build out space hopefully later this year at the back of our

building. So we're moving into space we own, which will help us from an operational standpoint. There are steps like that that we're taking to make sure that from a cash flow operations standpoint we're as sound as we can possibly be."

125 years in the making

Volunteers of America is a faith-based nonprofit organization founded in 1896. The local chapter, which represents all of Upstate New York from Albany to Buffalo and everything in between, was started a few years after the national organization.

"The focus of the organization has really been on empowering people to rise up out of poverty," Sullivan said. "It was originally formed by two individuals who were part of the Salvation Army and they wanted to do things a little bit differently, in particular some of the prison ministry work we do. As a result, they formed Volunteers of America when their leaders at the time wouldn't let them go into that realm with the Salvation Army."

In Rochester, VOA's focus is on the elimination of poverty and the organization serves individuals from birth to seniors. Some 150 staffers touch more than 6,000 lives annually. With a budget of \$11 million, VOA provides more than 100,000 nights of shelter annually and more than 100,000 meals.

Through the organization's Children's Center, VOA provides child care and early childhood development programs, academically enriched after school programs and Camp HEROES, a program that gives at-risk youth from economically disadvantaged households the chance to learn new skills and participate in the summer camp experience. VOA partners with the Rochester Police Department, Fire Department, American Medical Response and 911 Call Center at the Rochester Rotary Sunshine Camp, where first responders volunteer as the camp counselors to share in the experience and build better relationships with Rochester youths.

This year, 45 kids were signed up for Camp HEROES, with 15 on a waiting list. Due to COVID-19, Sunshine Camp was closed, but Sullivan said VOA is working to find a way to do something remotely to connect the kids with the first responders.

VOA has a relationship with Jordan Health Center that enables kids at the Children's Center to get doctor's and dental visits. With the center closed since March, staff has been working to engage kids online and even held a pre-k virtual prom recently. The organization has had two parades at which parents can drive their kids through the VOA campus to wave to their teachers and pick up learning packets and tiaras and bowties for the prom.

"They've really been working to keep the students engaged, recog-

nizing that it's a different world for them and we want them to be as ready as possible when schools do reopen," Sullivan said.

VOA operates shelters and supportive housing in both Rochester and Binghamton. Locally, seniors are served at Cobblestone in Webster, a senior housing facility for low-income older adults. The seniors receive supportive services that include ensuring that from a health care standpoint the seniors have the funds and incentive to get the right kind of care, Sullivan said.

VOA has a residential re-entry center and community-based residential programs to help adults transition from incarceration and get a fresh start. Services include housing, specialized case management, employment assistance and life skills training to help people develop positive, self-reliant lives.

The organization provides a number of services to help prevent homelessness including emergency family shelters, housing for veterans, permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing, which helps homeless individuals and families access permanent housing through the use of short-term rental subsidies and support services. Those come with wraparound services that help individuals get health care, financial guidance and help in finding jobs.

"Housing being a basic need is key to any chance of getting out of poverty," Sullivan said. "If you think about it, having an address to mail things to, even in this digital age, is really key."

Of late, shelters have fallen on hard times. State funding for shelters was cut last fall and many organizations had to find workarounds. ESL Charitable Foundation stepped in to help, and most recently, VOA received more than \$1 million in state grants and a \$60,000 grant from the Home Depot Foundation that will enable the organization to renovate the first floor of its facility on State Street into seven new supportive housing apartments. The apartments should be ready in 2021.

Working Lake Avenue

Sullivan arrived at VOA last summer by way of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. As CEO of the cemetery, Sullivan was responsible for restoring the chapel and the gatehouses, as well as digitizing and mapping the entire cemetery and more.

Prior to that, Sullivan had served a short stint at Paychex, as well as some time as CFO at ABVI/Goodwill of the Finger Lakes. She spent some 20 years at Kodak before meeting Harris Interactive Inc. Chairman Gordon Black on a plane and being hired a week later to head up the organization's mergers and acquisitions.

"We wanted somebody with very strong financial skills," said VOA Chairwoman Jane Hasselkus of what the board was looking for in its next leader. "There was this unique combination of strong financial skills, but she also had the corporate and nonprofit experience that really made us excited to have her take over the CEO role. Combine that with her energy level and her can-do type of approach to things."

Hasselkus said Sullivan is an individual who loves a challenge and every nonprofit has challenges.

"She's always ready to take something on," Hasselkus said. "And we really wanted somebody who could be very tenacious, very purposeful, help solve some immediate problems, but then also somebody who had the ability to help set a vision for the organization going forward."

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, under Sullivan's leadership the VOA had been working diligently on stabilizing the nonprofit from an organizational and financial standpoint, Hasselkus said. And she also was tasked with working on a three-year strategic plan.

"Even with the COVID-19 situation, obviously there have been more day-to-day things that she's had to tend to make sure that the VOA stayed relevant and instrumental in providing services during this time, but she's not taken her eye off the future, and in fact, I think has wisely been looking at what we've learned from our COVID-19 experience and then being able to play that into future planning," Hasselkus added.

Sullivan said VOA was doing a lot of good things when she arrived, particularly its work at the Children's Center.

"The Children's Center is really what brought me here," she said.

"What keeps me here is everything else that this organization is doing. It's a team of people that care about what they're doing, that care about making a difference in the community, that care about getting others an opportunity for a hand up, not a hand out."

vspicer@bridgetowermedia.com / 585-653-4021 / @Velvet_Spicer