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New Hope Community Staff Sew 10,000 Masks To Protect Co-Workers and Residents from Covid

Loch Sheldrake, NY (December 15, 2020) – When the Covid-19 virus emerged as a serious health threat earlier this year, surprisingly, medical equipment and personal protective equipment became as sought after and elusive as a Willie Wonka golden ticket. At New Hope Community (NHC), a residential human services organization in Sullivan County supporting men and women with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a supply chain solution for much-needed face coverings was quickly put into motion. Within days, protective face masks began to pour in thanks to a handful of energetic employees who volunteered to sew handmade masks for the residents and staff of New Hope Community.

This group, which became known as the Mask Avengers, was started by two members of New Hope's exceptionally caring healthcare team who saw an urgent need. The team of staff volunteers grew quickly and by the time the operation was put on hold in September, the mask-making team had created a supply of 10,000 face coverings for the New Hope family and frontline workers in the community.

Long-Time Staff Show They Care

Each of the 10 staff volunteers will tell you it was a true team effort -- something they felt compelled to do -- to address the emerging pandemic. The group's founders are long-tenured staff members, each with decades of experience at New Hope Community, where they ensure the health and well-being of people with disabilities. Muriel Cypert, a registered nurse and nurse educator at New Hope, and Karen Kerendian, Director of Health Services, devised a plan and wasted no time in enlisting the support of the administration. Soon, they transformed a conference room at New Hope Community's Loch Sheldrake, NY campus into a bustling workshop staffed by employees from throughout the organization. Kerendian and six other NHC colleagues brought in sewing machines from home, including

32 year NHC veteran staff member Alicia Scotland, Pat Lamb, Amy LeRoy, and Sherrie Shaw, while some, like Melissa Martinez, even sewed from home. Everyone rummaged for fabrics and supplies, while Licensed Practical Nurse Pat Lamb, a longtime staff member with 35-years at New Hope Community, teamed up with Kerendian to search online for mask patterns that were used to outfit and protect every person living or working in New Hope's 42 residences.

Over the next few months, staff and administrators helped the cause while sharing laughs, supplies and candy, especially from New Hope Community's Chief Executive Officer Debbie McGinness, who was among the team's greatest supporters. An informal sisterhood of support was formed and each person drew on their strengths. Alicia Scotland, a task-oriented digital document administrator, became known as "the boss" while Robyn Van Lowe, a fun-loving electronic health administrator displayed a knack for cutting fabric. Kerendian, known to the group as the "sewing machine whisperer," was on call as needed and kept the sewing machines running with help from YouTube tutorials.

"Love and concern were the common threads of this project. I am thankful for the hundreds of hours our incredible staff volunteers put in, often working on their own time to help others," said New Hope Community CEO Debbie McGinness. "I want to thank everyone throughout the organization who continues to work tirelessly to keep the hundreds of people of New Hope Community's 42 residences safe and healthy. This remarkable effort is proof that nothing is impossible if you are willing to work at it, together."

A True Community Effort

With fabric and supplies in short supply, the Mask Avengers put their creativity to the test and enlisted donations from friends and family. They collected shoe laces, fitted sheets and shirts, and recycled unused supplies in storage as well as fabric and elastic. "We bought out every headband in every dollar store so we would have elastic for straps," Pat Lamb explained. New Hope's maintenance department also pitched in by making clear plastic templates to help with cutting patterns, which sped up production.

Over several months, the team evolved into a core group of four, who collectively have more than 100 years in longevity at New Hope. Their dedication knows no limits, and it is no surprise that several members of the group have previously been awarded NHC's Deirdre McCoy Award for putting their hearts and souls into everything they do for the men and women in their care. It was only natural that the team of close-knit colleagues rolled up their sleeves to ensure that everyone who needed a mask would have the protection they needed.

By April, more than 500 colorful facemasks were distributed to New Hope individuals and staff and their families as needed, as well as frontline workers in the local community such as the Loch Sheldrake Fire Department and Tractor Supply Store. They also created custom masks, using fabrics people supplied with their orders. Before long, men and women throughout the New Hope Community including its Westchester-based community habilitation division Select Human Services, Inc. proudly showed off their themed masks ranging from superheroes and Harry Potter to glow-in-the-dark styles.

By the time the program wound down in September, the total number of masks produced had soared to tens of thousands. The Mask Avengers had sewn an average of 80 unique face masks per day, serving as a protective barrier against the virus and a fashion statement among the men and women of New Hope Community.

And while only a few on the team knew their way around a sewing machine, it did not deter these seasoned New Hope Community staffers from making life better for others. "Giving back to the community is a way of life here at New Hope Community. And It felt good to be productive and help others," recalled Cypert. The others agreed, noting that if necessary, they are ready to start up again. "We have over 300 masks in reserves and a pile of fabric ready to be cut," said Lamb.

In the meantime, New Hope Community continues to educate the staff, residents and visiting families about Covid safety. As a result, infection rates among the staff and those they serve have been extremely low. "We remain committed to our holistic approach to keeping our community healthy and active, and we are grateful to have incredibly dedicated people on our staff who help us achieve that," says McGinness.

About New Hope Community

New Hope Community is a not-for-profit human services organization providing supports for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Established in 1975 to serve as a nurturing and caring alternative to large institutions which were found to have violated the most basic human rights and conditions, New Hope Community has become recognized as a leading provider in the human services field. In January 2020, New Hope Community merged with Select Human Services, Inc. (SHS) of Pleasantville, NY, a not-for-profit voluntary agency providing services in Westchester, Putnam and Dutchess Counties. New Hope Community's breadth of services includes clinical and nursing care, residential services, day programming, community habilitation, self-direction, support brokers, service navigators, education, recreation and leisure activities, a robust supported employment program, summer programs for youths, and so much more. New Hope Community has always maintained a person-centered approach toward enhancing the lives of people with disabilities and actively advocates for individual choice in a person's efforts to live, work and participate fully in his or her community. New Hope Community and SHS, combined, provide services to over 1,000 people and employ more than 1,200 staff.

Learn more at www.newhopecommunity.org