



Communicating Through Crisis

How East Boston Social Centers leveraged skills-based volunteers from Blue Cross Blue Shield of MA to build a culture of mental wellness in a COVID-19 context

Photo by Tim Mossholder



1 in 3 adults have reported **symptoms of anxiety or depression** during the pandemic. (*Kaiser Family Foundation*)



75% of healthcare workers are **experiencing burnout**. (*Mental Health America*)

Background

As COVID-19 cases continue to climb across the country, many Americans are experiencing a mental health crisis, too. In July, [53% of adults](#) said their mental health had been negatively affected due to worry and stress related to the pandemic, a 21% increase compared to March.

Frontline and healthcare workers have experienced even more significant mental health effects. According to a [Mental Health America screening](#) of healthcare workers (including administrative and janitorial staff), 75% felt overwhelmed, 55% reported an increase in questioning their career path, and 52% noted increased compassion fatigue.

The Challenge

Communities of color have been deeply and disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The neighborhood of East Boston, where over [50% of residents are Latino and 29% of households speak limited English](#), has been hit particularly hard. As of December 2020, the neighborhood had a **coronavirus positivity rate of 15%, the highest amongst all Boston neighborhoods** and more than [double Boston's city-wide rate of 7%](#).

[East Boston Social](#)

[Centers](#) (the Social Centers), a 102-year old nonprofit that provides afterschool programming, childcare, nutrition, and activities for the elderly, has stepped up to meet the growing needs of the East Boston community as it grapples with COVID-19. Their **frontline workers have supported local families** by providing safe community programming and setting up laptops for remote education.



Despite their positive impact, the Social Centers staff are not exempt from the mental health toll of the COVID-19 crisis. Staff are simultaneously responding to community needs and dealing with their own personal and financial stressors at home. Executive Director Justin Pasquariello noticed **early signs of staff burnout, stress, and anxiety**, but the organization did not have the resources or mechanisms in place to address the mental and emotional challenges brought on by the pandemic.

The Approach

The Social Centers leadership turned to two partners for help supporting the mental and emotional needs of their employees: [Common Impact](#), a national organization that builds nonprofit capacity through skills-based volunteering, and [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts \(Blue Cross\)](#), a community-focused health plan that provides high-quality, affordable healthcare to local residents.

In light of unprecedented nonprofit challenges and the virtual environment, **Blue Cross saw the opportunity for skills-based volunteering to support nonprofits.** During their [10th annual Service Week](#), which took place in September 2020, **2,800 Blue Cross volunteers supported 70 nonprofits across Massachusetts.**

In the weeks leading up to Service Week, Common Impact assessed the skills of a pool of Blue Cross volunteers. Six volunteers were hand-picked to lend their communications, strategy, and people management expertise to the Social Centers' challenge during Service Week.

What is skills-based volunteering?

Skills-based volunteering leverages the specialized skills and talents of individuals to strengthen the capacity of nonprofits, enabling them to build and scale proven models of social impact.

VOLUNTEER TEAM PROFILE



**Six
volunteers**



**Strategic
Planning**



**Communications
Strategy**



**People
Management**

The Solution

The Blue Cross volunteer team was tasked with addressing the Social Centers' critical challenge: **how can nonprofit managers support the mental wellness of their teams in moments of crisis?**

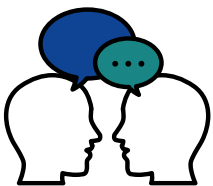
After learning more about the Social Centers' true needs and the unique challenges of their staff, the volunteers developed key strategies to help the organization's leadership support their staff during the pandemic and beyond. Organizations grappling with similar challenges might consider the following approach:



Assess and measure: Create an employee survey to garner feedback, develop a baseline, and identify opportunities for improvement.



Focus on culture and communication: Ensure employees at all levels are heard and recognized. **Create an organizational culture statement** as an org-wide anchor and formalize communication channels.



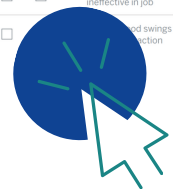
Train and equip leadership: Develop a "manager toolkit" with resources on having difficult conversations, links to assistance programs, and a fatigue assessment for frontline staff.

Compassion fatigue assessment

Instructions If you're **assessing someone else**, answer the questions listed under "Visible signs of compassion fatigue" on this page. Total your "Yes" answers, then refer to the bottom of the page for next steps.

If you're **assessing yourself**, answer the questions listed under "Invisible signs of compassion fatigue." Total your "Yes" answers, then refer to the bottom of the page for next steps.

Visible signs of compassion fatigue		Invisible signs of compassion fatigue			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Shows marked decline in work efficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Feeling a reduced sense of accomplishment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is intent on clinical tasks to the detriment of patient interactions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Being secretly happy when a procedure is canceled	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is more callous toward patients than in the past	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoiding interactions with patients and colleagues when possible	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shows signs of mental or physical breakdown during crisis periods	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Often leaving work feeling ineffective in job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has outbursts of anger or irritability with little provocation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Emotions swing with every interaction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



Check out the Advisory Board's Compassion Fatigue Assessment

What's Next

Equipped with the insights and continued support of the Blue Cross volunteers, **the Social Centers is already putting these recommendations into practice.**

With the new feedback, communication, and training framework in place, East Boston Social Centers employees have the support they need to continue providing critical programming for the East Boston community.

"The East Boston Social Centers is the catalyst for a tight-knit, thriving and joyful community. This project will help us achieve that intended impact by better **supporting our staff--moving us closer to our goal of being a top place to work.**"

- Justin Pasquariello,
Executive Director



About Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts: Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (bluecrossma.org) is a community-focused, tax-paying, not-for-profit health plan headquartered in Boston. We are committed to the relentless pursuit of quality, affordable health care with an unparalleled consumer experience. Consistent with our promise to always put our members first, we are rated among the nation's best health plans for member satisfaction and quality.



About Common Impact: Common Impact is a nationally-recognized nonprofit that designs and scales people-powered social impact and skills-based volunteer programs to build the capacity of organizations fighting inequality. [Learn more.](#)