Introducing Connected: The Food and Nutrition Service for Individuals with a Mental Health and/or Substance Use Challenge

By Kate Janeski, Senior Director of Program Services

Last fall, God’s Love launched a new program to serve US Military Veterans diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While God’s Love has long served individuals with a mental health condition as a co-morbidity, in addition to a diagnosis like HIV or cardiovascular disease, this marks the first time a mental health condition is the primary diagnostic focus. Mental health conditions can impact a person’s nourishment as well as food security. Working with US Military Veterans or anyone who has served in the military is especially important as we know this group is particularly challenged by PTSD. It is estimated that 30% of veterans living in NYC are food insecure.

To further serve the US Military Veteran community, our program expanded this spring to include additional mental health diagnoses such as anxiety, major depression, bi-polar disorder, schizoaffective disorder, schizophrenia and/or substance use conditions. This program is called Connected: The Food and Nutrition Service for Individuals with a Mental Health and/or Substance Use Challenge. We hope that clients and the professionals who refer them will be inspired by the term “Connected” which refers to the both the mind-body connection that an individual experiences when supporting their mental health with nutrition, as well as the individual’s connection to God’s Love as a resource in their healthcare.

This service expansion led the Nutrition Services Department to review and enhance our nutrition program to best meet the needs of these new clients. To ensure our menu options are supportive for our clients with these diagnoses, our team completed a menu review for the inclusion of nutrients that are linked to brain health and made suggestions for menu development. The team also prepared a full assessment of commonly prescribed medications to catalog any food and drug interactions, contraindications, or food requirements.

Building upon these activities, our Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) are creating new nutrition education materials specifically for our clients with mental health diagnoses. Reinforcing the telephone counseling provided by our RDNs, these materials include written documents, group education opportunities, and recorded web-based education modules in multiple languages. Future group sessions will include topics like food and mood, nutrition and recovery, and plant-based nutrition. We aim to have our materials available in varying formats to accommodate multiple learning styles.

The Program Services Department, which includes the Client Services, Healthcare Partners, and Nutrition groups, engaged in training throughout the year to prepare our staff to best support individuals with mental health conditions and substance-use challenges.

We offer special thanks to Craig Newmark and the Bob Woodruff Foundation for their partnership launching our initiative for veterans and for their continued support.

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