

The Impact of Group Therapy for Caregivers of Children with Special Needs

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“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.”

- Luke 10:33-34 NIV



Figure 1 Mural by Annabelle Wombacher, Jared Mar, Sierra Ratcliff and Benjamin Cahoon.

Walking on Water (WOW) Christian Church serves people with autism spectrum disorders, behavioral, and developmental disabilities and their families. Since the Coronavirus outbreak, children’s special education and social services in schools have not been carried out smoothly. Caring for special needs children has become solely the responsibility of the family, and without the assistance of schools and social workers, the mothers’ parenting stress is being escalated

every day. Furthermore, the life of social-distancing due to the pandemic has isolated the families of people with disabilities more than ever before.

As a church, we applied for a [COVID-19 NBA Response Grant](#) so that we could strengthen our efforts to connect with church members and help them feel that they are not alone. Food delivery and counseling services became the main medium to show our support. Most of the children and young adults at WOW Church have severe behavioral issues, often including self-harm, so their mothers have to supervise them all day, every day, causing caregivers to become exhausted and isolated. The stories of the WOW members tell us how much people with disabilities are struggling day by day in places where they’re not seen. While we know one meal a week cannot fix everything, we do know these families were touched by the fact that there were people who remembered them.. Members said these meals helped them shake off the thought that they were the only ones living a hard, lonely life. To them, a meal was a sign of prayer and encouragement. One mother stated that she knew this

food wasn't just for her physical being; she was sincerely grateful for God and the wider church for bringing her family food.

After church members received the meals, our community members could visit together. Caregivers were able to share their deep feelings and begin to open up about their need for more mental health services. Some members even participated in psychological counseling services as a follow-up.

In addition to delivering meals and individual counseling, our church offered group counseling, under the name of "Communication for Resolving Parenting Stress." In this group session, members revealed their current state of severe stress and struggles at home due to family members consistently clashing with one another. Caregivers described the challenges that come with explaining a child's behavior to family members who are not used to witnessing the behavior of children with behavioral disabilities. The mothers of the group cried a lot and said the fact that there was no place to speak of this pain was especially hard for them. In these intimate group sessions, mothers with similar experiences were able to listen to each other with deep compassion. With this emotional support, they were able to share the unspoken stories of their hearts and relish the feeling of being connected and included. It seems that the hearts of participants who are willing to listen and empathize together offers healing power to live again. By gathering and forming one body of Christ, we all are creating a field of life that enables us to connect, communicate, and be reminded that we are not alone.

As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at www.nbacares.org.