

# FIRST STEPS TOGETHER

FAMILIES IN RECOVERY SUPPORT

# NEWSLETTER



This time of year presents an opportunity to stop and take stock of where we have been, as we look ahead to where we are going. We wanted to focus this quarter's newsletter on sharing the tremendous work of our FIRST Steps Together sites. Our staff members are an amazingly committed group of passionate, knowledgeable and resourceful, yet real and down to earth people. The numbers (over 250 new parents enrolled this year, over 600 parents served to date, over 700 groups held this year with over 2,500 participants!) don't begin to capture and communicate the work that happens across our project every day.

Each day our sites celebrate big accomplishments, such as families re-unifying or moving into stable housing, and shifts in language and perspectives of other providers and systems. We also experience seemingly smaller but equally meaningful moments, such as a parent who is able to ask for help from their trusted FRSS, a feeling of connection between a parent and their child, or an "ah ha!" moment of a staff member in supervision. There have been groups that families have raved about, graduations that have brought tears to our eyes, and immeasurable transformations within the families we serve, and simultaneously within ourselves as we navigate this work.

This newsletter is a compilation of stories gathered from our sites in the past year. But we all know that these examples are just a small fraction of the incredible work that is happening every day.

**To our staff across the project: We want to take this moment to celebrate you and all you have walked through this year, accompanying the families you support, and growing and strengthening your own selves. Thank you for all you do!**



# JEWISH FAMILY & CHILDREN'S SERVICE

JF&CS has many successes to share from the recent months!

Our staff are running a second, virtual **PARENTING JOURNEY IN RECOVERY GROUP**, which has received lots of positive feedback from participants. As noted on their website: (<https://parentingjourney.org/parents/>) "Parenting Journey programs help mothers, fathers, and caregivers increase their confidence, capability, and resiliency – as individuals and as parents. While nurturing oneself and their children, each parent lays the groundwork for strong family relationships." Lucy Fisher, JFCS Clinician, shared, **"Our second Parenting Journey in Recovery group which will be ending after the new year, has been an intentional smaller group of mothers, which made for a more intimate and connected group. This is our first experience opening a group to mothers in our greater community who aren't currently receiving FST services. It's been a powerful experience and one that I'm grateful to be continuing in my learning and growing as a co-facilitator with Julie Brachanow."**

Our FRSS staff are all in the process of becoming **CERTIFIED ADDICTIONS RECOVERY COACHES**. Julie Brachanow and Sarah Fitzgerald have completed all required coursework and supervision and have applied to sit for the certification exam. Connie White and Joelle Dawson are completing the necessary course work and have almost completed supervision hours. Additionally, three of our clinicians have completed the Train the Trainer course for **MOTHERING FROM THE INSIDE OUT** and will be participating in a December training for FIRST Steps Together Staff.

Through our connection to **CRADLES TO CRAYONS** of the greater Boston area, we have been able to supply families with many important items this fall and winter. These include not only baby items such as diapers, wipes, books and toys but also important items for older children and siblings including back-to-school bags, winter clothing, accessories, and coats. We are very thankful for this partnership as well as generous donations to our Waltham office. We are happy to be able to provide our program participants with winter

gear just in time for the weather change that's upon us!

[Find more information about Cradles To Crayons here.](#)



# CAPE COD CHILDREN'S PLACE

Cape Cod Children's Place has a few exciting initiatives in the works!

We recently **PARTNERED WITH LOCAL PHOTOGRAPHER** Steve Koppel to bring Expressive Digital Imagery (EDI) to FIRST Steps Together Families. EDI is an expressive therapeutic practice that allows participants to communicate complex feelings and emotions that might otherwise be hard to capture in words by changing existing images with their own visual effects through a mobile device. In this way participants can pick and choose an image to express an idea, individualize the image to more precisely match the feeling the idea evokes for them, and caption the image to communicate their feelings with others. As explained on their website, <https://ediinstitute.org/> "EDI programs promote healing, connection, and self-expression through imagery created on mobile devices."

For more information on how this practice works there's a great Ted Talk that you can check out here: <https://ediinstitute.org/tedx-talk/>

Here are some examples of photos from members of Cape Cod Children's Place:



Find the Light Through the Darkness

Adam



Perseverance

We've also had some recent **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES** that have been a huge hit and connected families together, including an ice cream social and an event where **we created "vision boards" for Recovery Month**. After the vision board activity we created a slide show of the vision boards and showcased it at a Zoom group. We have a few new FRSS staff who joined our

team the same week we were creating vision boards, and they got to express their own personal and professional goals in this way, and get to know their colleagues through this process. It was a really cool way to welcome new staff, remember why we do this work, and re-connect with each other after an extended time of staff being remote and on varied schedules, due to the pandemic.



Manifest your recovery reality

# CAPE COD CHILDREN'S PLACE

Cape Cod Children's Place worked with two different Cape Cod food pantries to put together **GATHERING BASKETS FOR 30 FAMILIES.**

Baskets included turkey or chicken and stuffing, fresh squash and green beans, gravy, cranberry sauce and pineapple. One dad who did not have family around to celebrate the holiday with had first said he did not want a basket, but then decided he would use his basket to **make an amazing Thanksgiving meal for his entire recovery house (pictured).**



We are excited to have a **NEW OFFICE SPACE** that lends itself to more connection among team members and with families directly. It took a lot of planning and preparation to get this space secured and set up and we're very excited to be finally settling in and back together as a team. We're hopeful to safely hold EDI groups in the near future in person, as so much more can be expressed in imagery that cannot be expressed in words, and we're hopeful that this experience will be much more impactful in person. **The plan is to then have a digital slideshow frame on the wall to showcase art created by FIRST Steps Together Families. In this way, we will welcome both staff and program participants into our office with these images of hope, strength and resilience.**

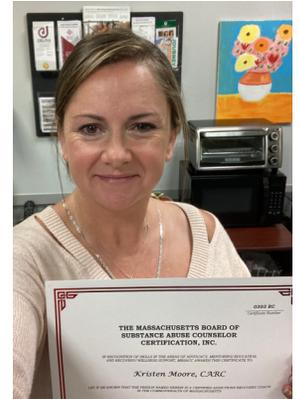
# BAY STATE COMMUNITY SERVICES

To celebrate Recovery Month this year, FRSS Kassi headed a spa day for the moms in our program, **PAMPER MOM DAY!** Kassi and FRSS Casey (who both did hair in prior careers) provided blowouts, guest makeup artists made up our clients, and Program Director Jen did nails. Our administrative assistant Barb created a beautiful and peaceful environment with food, coffee, a photo booth, and raffles, and Clinician Casey and Program Supervisor Maddie provided childcare so our moms could enjoy the day worry free. **We had an amazing turnout, and all our moms left looking beautiful and feeling happy. Staff agreed that gathering in person and making clients feel great about themselves gave us the uplift we needed after a tough year.** We hope to put on this event annually and can't thank Kassi enough for this incredible idea and our team for making it a reality!



# BAY STATE COMMUNITY SERVICES

As of October, Bay State has three staff members who are officially **CERTIFIED ADDICTIONS RECOVERY COACHES** (CARC)! Betty Doherty, Kristen Moore and Meridith Hallisey all completed over 60 hours of education, domain specific supervision, and hundreds of hours of working time to earn their CARC. Casey Economo has also completed all her education and work requirements and is just one test away from certification and Kassi Conroy is more than halfway done with her education. **We anticipate every one of our FRSS staff to have their CARC certification in 2022, and could not be prouder of the hard work they have put in!**



We wanted to share a **CLIENT STORY ABOUT A MOM WHO JUST SUCCESSFULLY GRADUATED FROM OUR PROGRAM**. FRSS Meridith Hallisey graduated her client, Lara (name changed for privacy), this August after almost two years of involvement with FIRST Steps Together. When Lara was first referred to our program in August of 2019, she had just lost her fiancé to an overdose, and subsequently lost custody of her two children. After a couple of sessions, Meridith lost contact with Lara until four months later, when her DCF worker re-referred her to the program. This time, Lara's DCF goal was changed to adoption and she was pregnant with a new baby. Meridith was able to complete a Plan of Safe Care and a Relapse Prevention Plan just in time before Lara's baby was delivered.

Shortly after delivery, Lara was involved in a traumatic domestic violence situation, which led to a 51A that resulted in her new baby being removed from her custody as well. Within a short period of time, her home was foreclosed on and the pandemic began, forcing Lara to live alone in a hotel room having lost her job due to COVID layoffs. Meridith was able to continue to work with Lara through everything, and neither of them gave up hope.



Lara became very motivated to make change with Meridith coming alongside her. Lara got a new job at a medical office, and quickly rose through the ranks, from working at the front desk to being qualified to assist with medical procedures. She was able to get a new apartment and engaged in therapy and domestic violence services. Lara's parents, whom her three children were placed with, and her DCF worker witnessed and commended the immense effort Lara put in. Lara was reunified with her 3 children and worked through the transition with Meredith. **Today, Lara is a FIRST Steps Together graduate, with full custody of all of her children, and is a medical assistant. She plans to continue to grow in her career and stays in touch with Meridith, hoping to help other moms in the future.**

# SQUARE ONE

We wanted to share some of the work that Brenda, one of our Family Recovery Support Specialists (FRSS), has been doing to **SUPPORT A MOM THROUGH HER REUNIFICATION** with her children. Brenda started working with Sarah (name changed for privacy), over the summer after a DCF removal, due to exposure to domestic violence in the home. **Sarah joined our program with the goal of being reunified with her three children. She felt ready to leave the relationship that had led to her children's removal, and do whatever was necessary to get her children back.** Sarah was committed to meeting all of the expectations outlined by DCF, including parenting classes three times a week, therapy for herself and all of her kids, and services from other agencies. Sarah worked hard to meet all of her action plan goals, and participated regularly in our services. Sarah's two oldest children were returned to her right before school started and she was so excited but also overwhelmed. Brenda helped Sarah get new school clothes for her kids by connecting her with community services who were able to help.

Brenda continues to support Sarah and shares that she has been working hard on strengthening her recovery and parenting and is doing well. Brenda shared "we do a little bit of everything – I try to let her lead the way because she has had so many services, I don't want her to feel overwhelmed. So I let her lead the conversation." It has been about two months since her older children were returned, and the plan is for her youngest child to be returned to her custody this February. Brenda shared that Sarah is juggling a lot, but she is doing an amazing job. **Brenda continues to offer Sarah support, reassurance and resources. She is excited to get to continue to meet this mom where she is at, encourage her as she sees her achieve her goals and celebrate her as she creates and meets new ones.**

We've been excited to share some **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CRAFT KITS** that we have dropped off with families to encourage parent child interaction. In November, we gave families a craft kit so kids could make a turkey and a fall pumpkin. We heard from many families how much they liked doing it together. Some parents brought the kits to their visits with their kids. In December we are doing a virtual activity called "Do You Want to Build a Snowman?" for all of the parents enrolled in the Square One Family Services. We dropped off activity kits ahead of time and families will be building a snowman with cotton balls. We also have holiday trivia planned. **We are especially excited to bring people together virtually because everyone has felt really isolated because we can't be together in person.** We are excited to connect the families in the program.



We had an amazing **GRADUATION IN AUGUST** for all the parents involved in Family Services at Square One. We held it at Springfield College in an auditorium and all participants received a cap and gown. The participants invited their kids and families to the ceremony. Their FRSS gave them their certificates on stage and talked about all of their hard work. **The parents walked across the stage and were really excited that they were able to share their accomplishments with their kids and families.** After the ceremony we had lunch and set up tables and balloons. It was a really special afternoon.

# MAKING OPPORTUNITY COUNT

MOC is excited to welcome **TWO NEW FRSS STAFF MEMBERS** to our site, Justina and Barry, who are both passionate about this work, and enjoy helping people. They will both be completing recovery coach academy and jumping right into the work. We're so excited to have them!

Looking back on this year, we've offered some really amazing groups that have impacted many of our families. Our **MINDFULNESS GROUP** was great, and we hope to repeat this group soon. This was a six week group that offered education about the brain, habit formation, automatic behaviors, and the science of addiction. **One practice we did was ask people to keep a daily binder, and write down 3 things they wanted in their life and 3 ways they would contribute to making that goal a reality. Group members noticed that after the six weeks they were more organized, more goal oriented, and had made more progress towards their goals than they had expected.**

We've had some **IMPACTFUL VIRTUAL GRADUATIONS** this year that were really meaningful, both for the families we work with and for our staff members. We recently



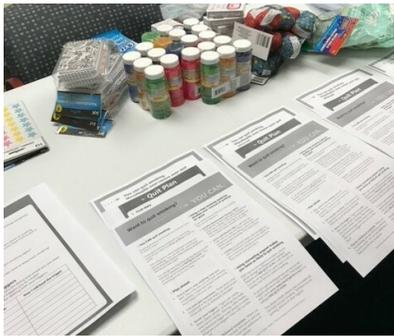
had a graduation where the participant's family logged on by Zoom and thanked us for the impact FIRST Steps Together had on their lives and their extended family. Our graduations typically include all staff who have worked with a family. The whole team logs on, and each share a success or something they've noticed about the participant's progress, summarizes all the work they've done together, and welcomes the participant and their family to share as well. **We record these ceremonies and one mom recently shared that she treasured that experience, particularly as she'd never had the experience of graduating high school or anything else, and that she replays the graduation recording whenever she needs a little "extra pep in her step."** As staff members, we feel the same way, and feel so honored to be a part of these amazing transformations.

We're also doing a holiday group, similar to last year where we planned a group around the children's book *The Snowy Day*. This year we have planned a **HOLIDAY POLAR EXPRESS GROUP**. Before the group we are dropping off a bag to each of the participants containing a box of hot cocoa bombs, a holiday card with a message from the team, a blank mug with an acrylic paint pen so parents can have their child decorate the mug as a keepsake, and a copy of the Polar Express book! We are distributing the bags to all our clients, regardless of if they plan on coming to our group. That way our families who are not yet reunited or maybe just can't attend for whatever reason can still have an opportunity to connect with their child, whatever the setting.



# CENTER FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

This year our highlights have been some of the groups we've run. Probably one of our favorites was an amazing **ZOOM BINGO FAMILY NIGHT** that we hosted for parents and kids. The kids' boards were modes of transportation, like trucks, trains, boats, etc. and somewhat simple. And the parents had more adult typical Bingo boards. **Both the parents and their children, and even our staff got really into the games. And it worked so well virtually! At that time of the year, in the midst of the COVID pandemic, we all really needed a pick-me-up and a renewed sense of connection, and this group really gave everyone that.**



We also had a **SMOKING CESSATION INITIATIVE**, where we provided participants with cessation kits (pictured) including stress balls, gum, mints, information and resources, including how to use [Masshealth](#) to access free services. This was received well by participants, but even more importantly it prompted us as a site and staff team to start having conversations around health and the impact of smoking, and we've continued these conversations with our members since that time.

We've had some **MEANINGFUL GRADUATIONS**. We've had parents who we saw committed to doing everything they needed to do to maintain recovery and strengthen their parenting relationship. They may not have taken a traditional or linear path but they progressed and ultimately reached their goals. We've had some participants who have joined almost every group and activity and even after graduating have returned to attend certain events, even graduates who we've encouraged to consider recovery coaching themselves. One couple, both of whom participated in our program independently, requested a unicorn cake for their graduation! **Although this can be really hard work, we see many families have huge success, and it's important that we make time to recognize and celebrate that!**

We have had a number of parents who have joined our program while pregnant or expecting, worked really hard on their **PLANS OF SAFE CARE**, and were able to **successfully have their baby come home with them after birth**. The parents completed Pregnancy Binders which included relapse prevention plans, lists and releases for all of their providers, wellness plans and Plans of Safe Care. Ingrid Agis, Program Director, shared, "it is really heartwarming, **sometimes in the day to day we lose a bit of track of how we are helping parents and then we have these major events happen like birth and realize this is why we do what we do. We are able to keep families together.** They are so worried going into the hospital and so proud and empowered to be able to leave the hospital with the full family unit."



## CLAS CORNER



This Ted Talk, by Dr. Fayth Parks, focuses on the role culture plays in healing and recovery. **While the focus is on “recovery” in a traditional sense, related to “modern medicine,” this video makes connections with how spirituality and connection to a higher purpose can awaken personal strengths;** how ritual can connect us with community and support; the power of words as sources of hope and wisdom; and how dreams can have a connection to the subconscious and be interpreted through a cultural lens. The speaker shares some thoughts from her studies from culturally based healing beliefs as a “blueprint” for harnessing personal strengths. The video is less than 15 minutes and gives some great food for thought!

[How culture connects to healing and recovery | Fayth Parks | TEDxAugusta - YouTube](#)

***FIRST Steps Together** is a home visiting program that offers community based and/or virtual services, delivered by a parent in recovery with training to support both recovery and parenting journeys. We also offer groups, care coordination, and the option of working with a mental health counselor. FIRST Steps Together is open to any person 18 years old or older, who has used opioids and/or stimulants, and who is pregnant or expecting a child, or has at least one child who is 5 years old or younger. Participants do not have to have custody of their children or be actively parenting.*

*For more information about our program, including contact information for each program site, please visit*

[mass.gov/FIRST-Steps-Together](https://mass.gov/FIRST-Steps-Together)

### **Recent FIRST Steps Together Newsletters:**

[Summer 2021: SAMHSA Recovery Dimensions](#)

[Spring 2021: Groups](#)

[Winter 2021: Goal Setting](#)

[November/December 2020: Holiday Resources](#)

[September/October 2020: Working with Dads](#)

[July/August 2020: Supporting New Parents](#)

[May/June 2020: Forging Partnerships](#)

# FIRST STEPS TOGETHER

FAMILIES IN RECOVERY SUPPORT

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**For more information:**  
**Adrienne Girard at**  
[AGirard@JFCSBoston.org](mailto:AGirard@JFCSBoston.org)

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