Dear Friend,

At Volunteers of America, we are fulfilled by our mission. Finding families stable housing, serving veterans in need, helping moms overcome substance use disorder and so much more motivates us every day. It gives us a sense of purpose and accomplishment. The work is hard, but we receive so much more than we give.

But suddenly, as it did for everyone, our world changed. Our work became more than hard. It became frightening. Because even though we have taken every precaution from the first day of the COVID-19 crisis, the work we do is one-on-one, in close quarters in residential, around-the-clock facilities with at-risk populations. The danger for our front-line workers, and the people we serve, is real.

In my more than a decade of service to Volunteers of America, I’ve been so blessed to see how this difficult work brings hope. I’ve watched our amazing VOA team members be the engine of change. They are knowledgeable experts who know how to achieve results – and they are also compassionate caregivers who know how to instill hope.

But I’ve never seen anything quite like what I’ve seen from our VOA family during the past two months. At great personal risk, our VOA team has continued to serve - every day - people in need who have nowhere else to turn.

One of our colleagues, who serves our clients with disabilities in Indiana, had a simple response when asked how she continued to go into homes during this dangerous time: “It’s what I do and they need me. If I weren’t here I would worry about them all the time.”

In fact, we have had numerous employees volunteer to work in our residential facilities. Instead of thinking about risk, they thought about the people who count on us.

I know, now more than ever, that sacrifice and commitment is in our DNA. Today, I could not be more grateful to the men and women of VOA, because heroes work here.

Jennifer Hancock
President and CEO

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“Don’t count the days – make the days count.”
Muhammad Ali

Across our social media channels, VOA has been sharing words of hope and encouragement during this difficult time. We’ve thought a lot of the words of Muhammad Ali – and we’ve worked to make every day count for our clients, our amazing supporters and our courageous VOA staff.

We know how to respond to a crisis at VOA. And on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, we’ve worked to keep everyone up to date on how we’re keeping everyone safe and healthy, how we’re managing the tremendous budget challenge of COVID-19 and how you can join our family.

We encourage you to be part of our digital world. It’s where you can learn more about the work we do and the people we serve or how you can help advance our mission.

Or you might just find some inspirational words to help all of us through tough times. Please follow us and join in our daily conversation about how VOA changes lives.
We use lots of words to describe the COVID-19 crisis. Unprecedented. Challenging. Our new reality. But the truth is simple – it’s scary. For months we’ve all been living with a highly contagious and potentially deadly disease. We work to cope – and stay safe – the best we can. From working at home to limiting trips outside to essential needs, we are trying our best to adjust.

But for Volunteers of America’s front-line health care workers and caregivers, simply staying home and isolated is not really an option — because the care we provide is not negotiable. It’s our mission.

Our promise to provide around-the-clock care to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities isn’t put on hold because the work is dangerous. Men and women who have made the courageous choice to come to VOA Recovery to beat substance use disorder can’t be told to wait and start over because of a pandemic. The families who count on Unity House as a safe and stable place to overcome homelessness usually have nowhere else to go.

Every single day of this crisis, VOA frontline workers have reported to our residential facilities to provide care and service. For our adults with disabilities, that support often includes meeting their most basic and personal needs — care provided one-on-one and up close because that’s what they count on. For pregnant and parenting moms overcoming addiction, it means providing hope and comfort during a time made exponentially harder by isolation and loneliness. For families without a home, it means they share our space, every minute of every day, with our staff and 30 other families.

The work is physically hard and emotionally exhausting. The worry for people you care for — people you love — is overwhelming. And even with our diligent safety measures and precautions — the personal risk is very real.

And yet, our front-line workers provide life-changing care for people in need every day.

They are our VOA Heroes.
Jayne Harbin-Pettit has seen a lot during her 26 years serving Volunteers of America, but as she told the Courier-Journal for a front page story this month, she has never seen anything quite like the Covid-19 crisis.

Jayne is on the front-line of serving families. She continues to work every day in a residential setting that presents around-the-clock challenges—and dangers—despite VOA’s dedicated work following health and safety guidelines.

Unity House is one of few places in Kentucky where families facing homelessness can stay together while working to find stable housing and change the direction of their lives. Homelessness doesn’t stop and wait out a pandemic. Today, more than 30 families and 60 children are living at Unity House, leaning on VOA staff and each other to find comfort and hope during these new and often daunting times.

Unity House is filled with families who need each other, and count on the staff. And, of course, children are still children, even when we are all working to confront a pandemic.

“It’s very, very difficult to get children to understand social distancing,” Jayne said.

That’s true, but of course Volunteers of America, and Unity House, have never been about distance, or isolation. VOA is about bringing families together and uniting to overcome challenges. Our goal is harmony and cooperation—the opposite of social distancing. It’s how we achieve results.

But still, leaders like Jayne are adjusting to the new reality, taking every possible step to protect Unity House families and keep them safe while still creating a space that allows them to connect, get help, learn from each other and move forward.

So for Jayne Harbin-Pettit, Covid-19 is just one more hurdle to overcome in VOA’s inherent commitment to change the lives of families in need. And nothing keeps Jayne—and so many VOA heroes like her—from keeping that promise.

To find out more about VOA Home, our comprehensive programs that serve families facing homelessness, go to: https://www.voamid.org/housing
Look, learn and listen.

In her seven years serving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities for Volunteers of America, those are three words that have guided LaTanya Crutcher.

“That’s what people need to know. You need to learn about the individual and listen to them and it all comes naturally,” LaTanya said.

LaTanya has devoted a lifetime to listening and looking. She started caring for her uncle when she was 13, learning about people with disabilities and their needs.

“That was years ago, and back then, people didn’t always accept people with disabilities. But I learned about caring for my Uncle Victor from my grandmother. He needs a little more help and we provide it. I waited for him to get off the bus every day and shared the things he loves with him. He loves gospel music and watching Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy,” LaTanya said.

She has put those skills – and concern for others – to work during one of the most challenging times we have all faced together. Like so many caregivers, LaTanya has been working hard to protect Brandi, Angie and Stacy, the three individuals she supports with VOA in Jeffersonville, Indiana while helping them to understand the dangers of Covid-19 and the restrictions that go along with it.

“I tell Brandi – I talked to your mom tonight and she loves you and misses you,” LaTanya said. Typically, Brandi’s mom visits her two days a week and they attend church together. LaTanya helps to remind Brandi that the people who love her are thinking of her and that we are taking precautions to protect everyone until it’s safe to go back out again.

LaTanya and other VOA staff remind everyone about washing their hands and wearing masks, and that it is to protect them and others from germs and the virus. LaTanya reassures Brandi by holding her hand or rubbing her arm and talking to her calmly.

“I say hello beautiful and tell them I love them. You explain that you just want to help keep them safe. You have to treat people with respect,” LaTanya said.

Stacy faces different challenges. She is in VOA’s Supported Employment Program and works for Washington Bank in New Albany. The Supported Employment Program helps place individuals with disabilities in fulfilling and rewarding jobs in the community.

When Stacy cannot leave the house to go to her job, solitude is hard. With less interaction outside and more interaction with VOA staff and her housemates, she gets restless. LaTanya has been making sure she has paints for pictures, and encouraging her to use bright colors to help keep her spirits up.

She has been talking to Angie’s mother as well, who usually visits several days a week. Part of LaTanya’s work has been establishing trust with family members so they have confidence in the care their loved ones are receiving.

Angie has not been going to her day program and LaTanya is working through her isolation with her.

“This work takes compassion. It takes knowledge and it takes caring. I always say to people: How would you feel if it were your family member being cared for? What would you want for them?” LaTanya

Compassionate Work

LaTanya Crutcher uses her lifetime of caring to manage a crisis

This work takes compassion. It takes knowledge and it takes caring. I always say to people: How would you feel if it were your family member being cared for? What would you want for them?

-LaNanya
Unity House is home to more than 30 families and 60 children.

“I know my day is coming.”
Unity House families find hope during the toughest time

“Mom when are we going back to school?”

That’s a question parents everywhere heard during the past few months, but for Kenisha, a mom living at VOA’s Unity House, it sounds a little different. Kenisha has been with VOA throughout Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear’s “Healthy at Home” policy and one of the most difficult parts of the transition has been the eager inquiries from her three children; eight-year-old Saviya, six-year-old Deomna and four-year-old Kayden.

“Mom when are we moving into our house?” and “Mom let’s go outside,” are among other very natural questions from the kids. The challenges of working to overcome homelessness have only grown with the reality of social distancing and COVID-19.

Kenisha came to Volunteers of America after ending an abusive relationship. She was looking for a place that would care about her family’s safety just as much as she did.

“I was trying to get away, so I came here and they have been nothing but nice to me since I’ve gotten here,” said Kenisha.

Staff at Unity House began working with Kenisha to help her start setting goals and working toward stable housing. While at Unity House, she completed high school courses and received her degree — reaching a long-time goal. She started a new full-time job and with VOA’s help has just received her Section 8 Housing certificate. Kenisha was just about to start the journey toward another dream — attending college. She was set to begin classes April 6 — but that milestone was put on hold by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many of us, Kenisha’s goals and plans for an education, owning a house and starting a career in nursing are now competing with the realities of COVID-19 and caution about keeping herself and her children safe and healthy.

When schools closed, Kenisha was kept busy helping her two older children with their extensive online school work.

“I appreciate teachers so much — it’s hard just with two kids,” Kenisha said. Instead of saying goodbye to her kids when she put them on the bus in the morning, Kenisha has had to balance her job and caring for Saviya, Deomna and Kayden. It requires help of the Unity House staff and a lot of dedication.

Living in a shared space, with the stress that comes from working toward long-term housing, is never easy. Having fewer freedoms to get out make it even tougher. To help, the moms of Unity House have formed a close-knit community that uplifts each other and spreads positivity and hope.

“We call each other friends around here because we’ve all been through so much and we can relate to each other’s situations,” said Kenisha. She recently moved to a larger, two-bedroom apartment for the remainder of her time at Unity House until she and VOA find new housing.

She uses the extra space to bring the other families together for a home cooked meal, a chance for the kids to play and for the mothers to relax. Baked spaghetti is her favorite dish to prepare for everyone.

VOA staff have become tutors, mentors and playmates for Kenisha and her family. The other mothers have become trusted friends to confide in. Together as a community they celebrate birthdays, help with schoolwork, gather for dinner and talk about their future.

Facing so much during this very difficult time might make it easy to lose hope, but with her family and the VOA community by her side, she has confidence in her future.

“I know my day is coming. I just have to be patient,” she said. VOA and Kenisha are now counting the days until Kenisha begins college and moves her children into their very first home.
Surviving Coronavirus

Tennessee DSP learned firsthand about the dangers – and the promise of getting better

James Perkins views the world with a new outlook these days. “I see a different glow – I’m just happy about life. Life is short – now I’m appreciating all of the things in front of me,” James said.

James has a good reason to feel hopeful – he has just returned to work as a Direct Support Professional in VOA’s Alexandra House in Murfreesboro, Tennessee after recovering from being infected with Covid-19.

“It’s scary – you see all this stuff on the news and you don’t know if you are going to wake up the next day. This is serious.”

In addition to his weekend shifts with VOA caring for William, Michael and Helen at Alexandra House in Murfreesboro, James works as a Patient Care Tech at a local hospital. It takes a lot for James to miss time at work.

But about two months ago, he just couldn’t go in. “My whole body was hurting. I felt it deep in my bones,” James said.

The pain would come and go for a few days, sometimes leaving James feeling better and thinking he was over whatever was making him feel sick.

But eventually the ache grew worse, and he developed a fever. He knew it was time to go to the emergency room.

“I explained my symptoms – fever, aches and sore throat – and the doctor said right away it sounds like coronavirus,” James said. In days, he had his test results – positive. His doctor sent him home with medicine for the sore throat but explained he had nothing that would treat the virus. He simply had to quarantine himself from his family, rest, monitor the symptoms and hope for the best. He had strict instructions to return to the emergency room if he experienced chest pains or shortness of breath.

“People just can’t be in the house all of the time. You need variety and air and the chance to do something different. You can see the look on their face when they are outside – a look of happiness,” James said.

For James – the good news was feeling grateful for his recovery and optimistic about the future. He’s planning on becoming an LPN. And he felt excited about his return to work at the end of May to Alexandra House and William, Michael and Helen. When he returned, he received a familiar handshake from William – his sign that he missed him while he was gone.

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Soon, he had retreated to an attic bedroom, separated from his wife and his mother, who also lives with him. His wife would leave bowls of soup at the top of the stairs. They communicated mostly by phone calls and text. He kept in touch with his adult children in North Carolina and New York and hoped for recovery. He didn’t see his dog – Thor – for a month. Mostly, he rested – feeling an overwhelming fatigue. And pain.

“I’ve never felt such pain. Just an overall body ache and the worst sore throat ever – like strep throat but so much worse,” James said. “And it’s true that you lose your sense of taste. I would try a little chicken and it didn’t taste like anything.”

His conditions persisted for nearly a month. He kept looking out for shortness of breath – but thankfully it never came. He was eager to get back to work and to the people he served at VOA, but was still in pain and without energy – and worried about his very serious illness.

Finally, one day he was able to stand to take a shower, giving him some hope for recovery. As his symptoms slowly cleared, he checked back in with VOA, knowing that he would not be allowed to return to work until he was free of symptoms and had tested negative twice to be sure his clients and coworkers were protected. Finally – after nearly five weeks of isolation – James received his second negative test back, just as his energy returned.

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He is looking forward to getting them back to do the things they enjoyed most – a tough challenge during the time of isolation and quarantine. Working the weekend shift, James was accustomed to taking them on outings to the park or the mall – opportunities for recreation that they all enjoyed.

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“It’s an experience I don’t wish on anybody. I tell people, particularly young people, it could happen to anyone. It’s nothing to play with – it’s real,” James said.

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“I have so many masks – I have them everywhere. I’m always using hand sanitizer. I’ve had coronavirus – and I don’t want any part of it again. - James
SAFETY IS A VOA TEAM EFFORT

With personal protection equipment (PPE) in short supply all over the nation, guaranteeing the safety of our community’s most vulnerable became a major challenge to overcome. Program Assistant Anna Giangrande and other VOA clients and staff saw this challenge and instead of waiting and hoping, they took action. Anna stepped in to fill our need for hand sanitizer in Clark and Floyd Counties. Using her recipe – a combination of aloe, alcohol, and xanthan gum — residents and staff members of our programs in Southern Indiana had disinfectant to spare. VOA resident Judy Haag donated materials and worked alongside Margaret Williams and Ann Cornett to make face masks for the senior residents of South Oaks. Their crafty solution kept our most high-risk resident’s safe. The efforts of Anna, Judy, Margaret and Ann sparked inspiration and led the way for more contributions from supporters, staff and volunteers across all of our programs. From face masks to disinfectant, our VOA family has contributed and kept everyone protected.

A JOYFUL CELEBRATION

Easter could have been a particularly lonely day in our new world of isolation and caution – but thanks to amazing volunteers like Dee Dee Williams, VOA was able to spread joy to the children and families we serve at Unity House. Williams was as good as the Easter Bunny as she gathered goodies, toys and books to fill the children’s baskets. Our incredible partners at UPS helped by delivering smiles to quarantined families. Because of their support and generosity during these unprecedented times VOA can continue to serve our community’s most vulnerable without sacrificing our quality of care – or joy when we need it most.

GENEROUS SUPPORTERS SALUTE COURAGEOUS CLIENTS

Imagine the courage it takes to walk through the doors of VOA Recovery and begin the journey to overcoming substance use disorder. Now imagine that brave choice, and hard work, in a world of isolation and social distancing. Daily routines that were set in place for recovery had to be reworked to meet our new reality. We know this caused anxiety and worry and needed a response. Thankfully, our compassionate VOA community stepped in to offer hope. More than 100 hand-made cards flooded our mailbox made out to clients, residents, staff and volunteers all with inspirational, uplifting messages. The cards were delivered across the four states we serve — a beautiful reminder that no matter how isolated we are, we can still be together.
Who are the voices of VOA? They are veterans and adults with developmental disabilities. They are families facing homelessness, moms and dads struggling with addiction, young people who need alternatives to incarceration and friends who need answers about HIV. They are donors and volunteers who lend a helping hand. They are the voices of our community, coming together.

Donna Trabue

Volunteers of America’s Chaplain Donna Trabue has always been a source of hope and compassion to our VOA family. Donna knows that inspiring hope has never been more important than it is now, and that inspiration can come in many forms.

That’s why she brought her husband and guitar and raised her voice to raise the spirits of seniors served by VOA. Donna took her family band on the road to perform uplifting songs for the quarantined seniors at South Oaks. Whether it’s a cheerful performance or motivational phone calls with colleagues, Donna is always looking for ways to boost morale during these unprecedented times.

Her weekly reflection and prayer time Zoom calls bring staff and volunteers together for a safe place to reflect and support each other. Her infectious energy and inspirational words keep VOA striving toward our mission to serve our community’s most vulnerable. “In the nearly 32 years of being an employee of Volunteers of America Mid-States I have witnessed firsthand this organization proactively and calmly responding to so many high-stress situations of uncertainty with grace and tenacity; this is in our organizational DNA and we will persevere through this challenging time together. Of this, I know and am certain,” Donna said.

Indiana Virtual Luncheon
Larry Myers and Brooke Schafer of First Savings Bank

How do you respond when you have hundreds of people headed to a major fundraising luncheon in the middle of a pandemic? At VOA, we decided that restrictions against large gatherings didn’t mean restrictions against coming together and making a difference for the people we serve – we just had to do it virtually.

We are so grateful that almost 250 supporters helped us to make history with our first Virtual Luncheon. Thank you to Amy Kalber and Dr. Eric Yazel for sharing their powerful stories of what VOA means to them, and we are so grateful for the amazing generosity of Larry Myers, Brooke Schafer and First Savings Bank.

Thanks to their generous matching grant, we are very close to reaching our fundraising goal – even though we couldn’t be together in person.

If you would like to help us reach our Indiana Luncheon goal, please join us now: https://www.voamid.org/luncheon
How does VOA manage in an unprecedented public health crisis? By coming together with our friends, supporters and VOA family to respond as one. We’ve been overwhelmed by the support for VOA Together, our friend-to-friend fundraising campaign that has been essential to our COVID-19 response.

Thanks to leaders and partners like Judie Parks, owner of Berkshire-Hathaway Parks&Weisberg Realtors and VOA Board Member, we’ve helped to fill the significant budget gap created by the crisis.

Our COVID-19 financial reality is daunting – our costs are going up while our revenue is going down. As we pay more in overtime costs, cleaning supplies and PPE, our ability to raise funds face-to-face is limited. We are so grateful to all of our friends and supporters who have donated and joined our campaign – and we need your help.

We are so close to our goal, and with one click you can help to make sure we can continue to serve families in need. Whether you want to join VOA Together or make a one-time or long-term gift to VOA, it’s as easy as clicking here:

https://justgiving.com/campaign/voatogether

Thank you for making our work possible during this unprecedented challenge.
CELEBRITY GOLF TOURNAMENT
Monday, July 27
Hermitage Golf Course
6:30 - 8:30 a.m. Registration

INSPIRE CONCERT
Friday, July 24
The Texas Troubadour Theatre
6:30 - 10:00 p.m.

Featuring:
Jonell Mosser
The Springs
Claire McKenzie
And more!

Click HERE to purchase your tickets today

DINNER OF CHAMPIONS
Sunday, July 26
The Inn at Opryland
5 - 5:45 p.m. Celebrity Meet & Greet
6 - 7:30 p.m. Dinner

CELEBRITY GOLF TOURNAMENT
Monday, July 27
Hermitage Golf Course
6:30 - 8:30 a.m. Registration

Contact Randy Brothers at (615) 885-2552
or RandyB@voamid.org

VOA INSPIRE
A concert featuring Nashville’s amazing musicians

Volunteers of America
MID-STATES

Follow our event page at:
https://www.voamid.org/powerof1

POWER OF 1
VIRTUAL BREAKFAST
October 20, 2020

Join some of Nashville’s amazing musicians in a concert to benefit the work of Volunteers of America Mid-States.