

## **Delivering for School District Customers during COVID-19**

### ***The Quick Pivot to Teletherapy for Special Education Services***

**Executive Summary:** Across the country, in mid-March, the Federal, state, and local governments began grasping the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Federal government began passing legislation to buffer the coming economic calamity, governors issued stay-at-home advisories and local governments shuttered public schools. The Stepping Stones Group (SSG), a provider of special education solutions to over 450 school districts in more than 30 states, experienced the initial shock of its students no longer receiving services in the traditional school setting. In response, SSG developed an immediate action plan to help its school district partners continue to deliver legally mandated special education services to its students. A key part of its approach was the rapid introduction of a teletherapy solution for many therapeutic and behavioral services to ensure that students had the best opportunities to stay on track during this period of disruption. Now one month into the school closures, approximately 80% of SSG's services are now being provided through some type of virtual therapy platform.

### **COVID-19: The Challenge for School Districts and SSG to Deliver Special Education Programming**

As a result of emergency home sheltering orders imposed by state and local governments, public and private schools across the country were closed, preventing millions of special education students from accessing the traditional in-person therapy on which they rely. However, government authorities, including the U.S. Department of Education and state license boards, rapidly took action to provide guidance on teletherapy as an alternative service modality and to relax the enforcement of HIPAA guidelines. The state license boards further relaxed rules during COVID-19 and provided emergency guidance to school districts regarding teletherapy. Once this guidance had been released, The Stepping Stones Group began to work closely with its school district customers to implement teletherapy solutions.

Prior to COVID-19, The Stepping Stones Group utilized teletherapy sparsely as a “last resort” substitution when in-person therapy could not be delivered. While the clinical efficacy for most special education therapies delivered via teletherapy is generally consistent with in-person delivery, there is a clear preference by school districts and parents for the latter. With COVID-19 all but eliminating in-person therapeutic and behavioral services, the “last resort” teletherapy option became the essential tool to continue care for all affected children. The SSG team believed that a virtual service delivery model could be implemented quickly with limited interruption in services.

### **The Pivot to Teletherapy Services**

The Stepping Stones Group developed a teletherapy solution that allows the provision of therapy services to continue to students and families in their homes using a secure video-conferencing platform. SSG adopted Google Meet as a HIPAA- and FERPA-compliant software solution. SSG's employees already had familiarity with the Google platform, smoothing the transition for both children and clinicians. Google Meet was also included on a recommended list of platforms provided by the Department of Education.



Every SSG department mobilized rapidly to support teletherapy, implementing several training and staff development initiatives to prepare clinical staff for the effective use of the teletherapy platform. The SSG Clinical Leadership team established practice standards, protocols, and guidelines for the use of teletherapy. Certain SSG clinical team members with teletherapy experience were designated as subject matter experts to assist with answering clinical teletherapy questions.

The Stepping Stones Group's operations team also ensured that tele-therapists had access to all other appropriate technology tools, including email accounts, training and resources, and parent consent forms, and developed training guides and videos for therapists, clients, parents, and guardians to cover the basics of teletherapy, best practices, and frequently asked questions, for using the teletherapy platform. Quality and Corporate Development teams scheduled daily technical and clinical training for therapists.

### **Maintaining Quality Services and Customer Service During COVID-19**

Leveraging The Stepping Stones Group's teletherapy solution allows school districts and their students to maintain pre-existing IEP procedures and therapy goals. The required documentation can be entered directly into the district's online IEP system via remote access, with procedures in place for the coordination of scheduling and consent forms directly with parents. With these tools, and The Stepping Stones Group's operational infrastructure and support, students can continue to progress as expected despite the closure of physical school locations.

The Stepping Stones Group is able to offer these teletherapy services at no additional cost to the school district. SSG also offered district employees and non-SSG contract staff access to its teletherapy solution for a small fee and provided clinical and technical training to those district employees. SSG's teletherapy services are also available to other non-contracting school districts.

SSG is committed to providing teletherapy technical training, clinical training, resources and ongoing support to its school district partners as the company continues to pursue its mission of positively impacting the lives of children and the communities it serves during this unprecedented time.