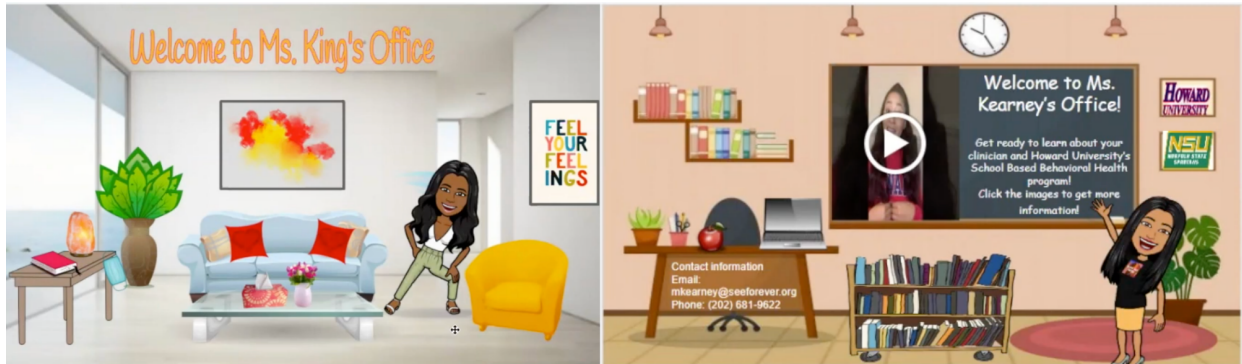


Virtual Offices Offer Effective Ways to Connect with Students, Families, and School Staff



When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools in the District of Columbia, members of the DC School Behavioral Health Community of Practice had to move quickly to ensure vital behavioral health services were still being delivered to students and their caregivers. As the Howard University School-Based Behavioral Health Program (HU-SBBHP) worked on ways to effectively connect virtually with families in the schools they serve, one clinician decided to create a virtual office space for students and their caregivers.

When clinician Megan Kearney, LGSW, debuted her virtual office to the HU-SBBHP team, Director Dr. Tyish Hall Brown made the immediate decision that creating virtual office spaces would be a great core project for the team. “We had been really racking our brains on different ways to connect with families and with our schools virtually,” said Dr. Hall Brown. “So, after Megan showed us her virtual space, my goal was to have everybody on our team create their own space. I did not want to put too many parameters around it. I wanted their personalities to shine through and to have their spaces reflect their perspectives on mental health. This individuality was important to me because the parents, families, and staff of each school will be interacting with our clinicians, and they should see who they're going to get.”

In our pre-COVID world, Dr. Hall Brown pointed out that students, teachers, staff, and family members could just pop into a clinician's office and have a conversation. With that ability temporarily gone, Dr. Hall Brown believed the next best thing was to create virtual offices that would allow connections to continue. She said virtual offices have allowed teachers, students, and parents to get to know the clinicians and to connect and find resources as they are needed, at their own pace.





“Our vision after the pandemic hit was to answer the question: how can we ensure that students can still get the services that they need? We also wanted to prioritize providing Tier 1 services that are critical to educating people around mental health topics central to teens and providing coping skills to the broader community.”

It was during a staff meeting where the HU-SBBHP team was reviewing the four virtual offices that HU-SBBHP Co-Director Davene White, RN, NNP, MPH, suggested that they share what they had come up with among the larger school community in DC. They started by sharing it with staff at the DC Department of Behavioral Health who immediately wanted to pass on the idea to as many clinicians and school personnel as possible. In turn, Dr. Hall Brown offered to put together a “how-to” video featuring each of her four clinicians.

In the video, they share how to create a virtual office as well as how to link resources and videos and include a Bitmoji and even a Google Form so users can ask questions and make suggestions anonymously. The clinicians also share why they chose to include certain objects in their virtual offices. This includes Arissha (Ari) King’s, LGSW, Bitmoji in her iconic “one-leg bent” standing posture; Megan Kearney’s stress-management presentation for teens and an emergency food resource guide; Monti Bush’s, LGSW, LSMW, beloved miniature schnauzers (Hannah and Hazel) who will soon become registered therapy dogs; and Kevon Harris’, LGSW, LSMW, MPH, time-management tips for teens and a video of King T’Challa (Wakanda Forever!) doing an exercise routine to encourage teens to move more.

Ms. Harris also offers helpful lessons learned from her experience building her virtual office, including: 1) know your audience (hers was her 6th graders at Brookland Middle School); 2) include your office hours so students, parents and school staff know when your virtual office is open; and 3) consistently check to ensure embedded website links are operational and relevant.

Dr. Hall Brown believes virtual offices will still have utility even after in-person school resumes. She says virtual offices are an effective way to introduce a new clinician to the school community, introduce what a therapy session may look like for students (especially younger ones) and provide resources in one place for students and caregivers.

Check out their how-to video on YouTube and you won’t want to miss their educational Instagram feeds: @HUSBBHP and @teenschoose2snooze