

Harmonizing Abilities: Implementing Music Therapy for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities at Brian's House

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Abstract

Music therapy is a clinically recognized intervention that enhances emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being, particularly for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This paper focuses on the implementation of a music therapy program delivered by a waiver-certified music therapist at Brian's House Inc., a residential and day service provider in Pennsylvania, and an affiliate of Woods System of Care. The program was developed through staff participation in the Woods System of Care-sponsored Social Innovations Lab, a professional development initiative that supports the development of innovations across Woods System of Care, and teaches participants how to create a business plan for their projects and pitch their ideas to a panel of organizational leaders and the board of trustees of the Woods Services Foundation, which as part of its role as a philanthropic supporting foundation for Woods sets aside funds to support potential seed grants for Lab projects. The music therapy Lab project pitch to the board of trustees coincided with the strong interest on the part of the chair of the board of trustees in cultivating a philanthropic mindset for his son, who raised funds for the project -- a perfect storm of philanthropy meeting a community need. At Brian's House, only 1.86% of residents were engaging in formal music sessions prior to implementing the new program, despite the therapy's proven benefits. The intervention includes structured group and individual sessions, integrated into Individual Support Plans (ISPs). Financial sustainability over time will be ensured through reimbursement through Pennsylvania's Consolidated Waiver, which enables people with disabilities to receive services and supports in the community. The initiative aligns with Brian's House's mission to empower individuals through compassionate care and aims to unlock the potential of the IDD population through music's universal language.

Introduction

In September 2024, Brian's House launched a transformative Music Therapy Program, a vision brought to life by Program Director Elizabeth Brickle and Residential Director Stephanie Farrow. After completing the Social Innovations Lab offered by Woods System of Care, Mrs. Brickle, with the help of the Brian's House team, turned her master's degree passion project into a reality—focusing on the profound benefits of music therapy, especially for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and autism. Mrs. Brickle's research showed that

Music therapy supports emotional well-being, improves communication, and enhances cognitive and motor skills. It helps reduce anxiety, build social connections, and promote self-expression.

For individuals with IDD and autism, this approach offers a personalized and engaging pathway to growth and well-being through the power of sound. Both Mrs. Farrow and Mrs. Brickle were uniquely positioned—at both strategic and operational levels—to effectively develop and implement this therapeutic model.

Organizational Context

Founded in 1976, Brian’s House has been a cornerstone in providing essential services for individuals with disabilities. As the first affiliate of Woods Services in 1996, Brian’s House is now a proud member of the Woods System of Care, which serves over 40,000 individuals annually through more than 14 affiliates and partners.

Today, Brian’s House supports more than 200 adults across the Southeast and Northeast Regions of Pennsylvania through a comprehensive array of residential, vocational, and day programs. The organization operates 80 residential community living arrangements and 23 Lifesharing programs, including specialized services for medically complex children.

Brian’s House is deeply committed to a mission that emphasizes choice, dignity, and community integration—values that align closely with the principles of music therapy, such as inclusivity, emotional expression, and holistic care.

The president of Brian’s House, Lori Plunkett, has led the organization since 1999, fostering a culture of compassion and innovation. The music therapy program supports Brian’s House’s strategic goals and expands its therapeutic offerings.

Therapeutic Rationale

Music therapy offers profound benefits for behavioral health, physical rehabilitation, and emotional well-being (Paul & Ramsey, 2000). At Brian’s House, which serves over 200 adults with intellectual and physical disabilities, music therapy aligns perfectly with its mission of promoting choice, dignity, and community integration.

These are the key benefits of Music Therapy:

- **Cognitive Support:** Enhances memory, focus, and mental clarity—especially helpful for individuals with dementia, Alzheimer’s, or autism.
- **Emotional Expression:** Provides a non-verbal outlet for feelings, improves mood, and promotes resilience during difficult times.
- **Communication:** Strengthens interpersonal connections, especially for those with limited verbal skills.

- **Stress Relief:** Calming music reduces anxiety, lowers blood pressure, and promotes relaxation.
- **Physical Health:** Encourages movement, supports rehabilitation, and aids pain management.

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) often face barriers to full participation in society due to co-occurring mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, communication challenges, and physical mobility limitations. While many individuals with IDD live independently and maintain employment and social relationships, others require structured support to engage meaningfully in community life. These barriers are compounded by limited access to specialized services and systemic ableism, which can hinder emotional and psychological well-being (Emerson, E., Fortune, N., Llewellyn, G., & Stancliffe, R., 2021). Brian's House serves this population, offering residential, vocational, and day programs tailored to adults with intellectual and physical disabilities in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Music therapy has emerged as a promising intervention for individuals with IDD, offering benefits across cognitive, emotional, and physical domains. Research highlights its ability to enhance memory, improve communication, support emotional regulation, and reduce anxiety and depression. Music activates multiple brain regions, facilitating non-verbal expression and social connection, which are particularly valuable for individuals with autism and other communication challenges (Chen, Wen, et al., Sept. 2022). Despite these benefits, access to music therapy remains limited due to a shortage of qualified therapists and financial constraints. Brian's House addressed these challenges by recruiting a certified music therapist and securing reimbursement through Pennsylvania's Medicaid waiver programs, which now recognize music therapy as a billable service for individuals with disabilities receiving home and community-based care.

Program Development and Funding

The Brian's House music therapy project brought together the passion of one of Brian's House's staff and the strong interest in passing on a philanthropic mindset to his son on the part of the chair of the Woods Services Foundation board of trustees. In 2024, Mrs. Brickle participated in the Social Innovations Lab, where she developed comprehensive business models, financial projections, and program frameworks to support the launch of a music therapy initiative at Brian's House. The Social Innovations Lab, a professional development program offered by Woods System of Care to the employees in its network, including Brian's House, leads participants over several months through a business-planning process for innovative projects they want to develop. At the culmination of the program, teams present their business plans in a "pitch event" to a panel of senior staff and the board of trustees of the Woods Services Foundation, which sets aside funding for potential seed grants for many of the projects proposed as part of the Lab. As a result of her efforts, the Woods Services Foundation awarded Brian's House a grant to cover the start-up costs of the program, including funds for a part-time certified music therapist. During this same period, the son of the chair of the board of trustees of the Foundation, a budding musician, became interested in the music therapy project. The efforts of the board chair, a third-generation trustee of Woods, whose strong support and commitment to

using Woods Services Foundation funds to promote innovation, special projects, and growth throughout the organization, have resulted in tangible grants to many projects that emerged from the Social Innovations Lab over the past decade. His strong interest in cultivating a philanthropic mindset in his set resulted in his raising funds for the music therapy project as part of his Bar Mitzvah project. This project brought to fruition the connection between philanthropy, personal interests, and the social good to the benefit of Brian's House clients.

Building on the foundational work developed during the Social Innovations Lab, Mrs. Brickle deepened her expertise in social entrepreneurship, gaining practical tools to lead sustainable, impact-driven initiatives. Through structured workshops, she gained practical skills in developing business models and interpreting financial data—essential tools for designing sustainable, impact-driven ventures that will continue to benefit the organization.

The opportunity to pitch a business idea to the board of trustees of the Foundation was especially transformative. It required Mrs. Brickle to synthesize complex concepts into a clear, compelling narrative and strengthen her ability to communicate strategic vision with confidence. Overall, the Lab fostered a deeper appreciation for innovation as a tool for social change and equipped her with the mindset and skills to lead purpose-driven initiatives.

Program Implementation and Expansion

In the months following the conclusion of the Social Innovations Lab, Mrs. Farrow actively pursued qualifications for Brian's House to become a certified music therapy provider in the Southeast region, further strengthening Brian's House's capacity to deliver specialized therapeutic services.

Since the program was launched, the certified music therapist has completed 90 individual assessments, tailoring sessions to meet each participant's unique needs. Currently, more than 70 individuals receive music therapy at least once a month, with most attending sessions every two weeks. Individuals receive music therapy either one-on-one or alongside their housemates, with sessions tailored to their specific needs and interests. Each session lasts 45 minutes and focuses on personal goals. A few participants have even requested specific instrument lessons, which support learning, cognition, and both fine and gross motor skill development.

In June 2025, Brian's House expanded its commitment by constructing a dedicated music therapy space at its Exton office. This welcoming environment has quickly become a favorite among participants, offering a safe and inspiring place to grow through music.

The program also extends into the Day Program. Each week, 30 individuals in the Community Participation Service (CPS) engage in music therapy sessions—held at a local park in Exton during the summer and at a church in Delaware County during the winter. In small groups of three, participants collaborate with the therapist to address a wide range of goals, including physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development.

Outcomes and Future Directions

Feedback from individuals and families has been overwhelmingly positive, with noticeable improvements in satisfaction and engagement. As an agency, Brian's House is now working to track target behaviors in relation to music therapy participation, to demonstrate measurable reductions and outcomes.

Looking ahead, the goal is to secure approval to bill the Pennsylvania Consolidated Waiver for music therapy services. In late 2024, Brian's House became a qualified provider of music therapy as a discrete service. The agency is now working closely with Pennsylvania Supports Coordinators and medical professionals to include it in individual support plans. This would allow Brian's House to expand the program further, increasing the music therapist to a full-time position, and potentially open the service to individuals referred by other agencies or families, bringing the healing power of music to even more lives.

References

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