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Coronavirus impact in Massachusetts: Free virtual workouts for those in recovery

Boston's mayor has praised The Phoenix program



BOSTON, MA: April 14, 2020: Dana Gonsalves poses outside of the Phoenix in Boston, Massachusetts. (Staff photo by Nicolaus Czarnecki/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald)

By **RICK SOBEY** | rick.sobey@bostonherald.com | Boston Herald

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With the coronavirus shutdown especially tough on people recovering from substance use disorder, a local sober active community has gone virtual to keep people connected during these isolating times.

The Phoenix — with locations in Boston, Lowell and other spots in New England — is offering free online fitness classes during the coronavirus pandemic. The effort is less about the workout these days and more about seeing each other and feeling that togetherness, instructors and participants told the Herald.

“Being isolated is really hard for people in recovery, and some people are having setbacks,” said Jon Moreno, program manager for The Phoenix in Lowell. “So while we can’t have that human connection that we’re big on, it’s really important to virtually engage our members through this difficult time.”

The classes include CrossFit, yoga, meditation, recovery meetings, and social coffee hours. The nonprofit is offering eight classes each day.

“We’re physically distancing but staying connected socially,” Moreno said. “We’re going to keep supporting our team members the best we can. We keep telling them, ‘We’re in this together.’ ”

About 10,000 people each year participate in The Phoenix’s programs around the country, and about 2,500 people have worked out at the Boston location in the last three years, said Phoenix founder Scott Strobe.

“Social isolation is a real concern for mental health and for the risk of relapse,” Strobe said. “So it was important to quickly pivot to virtual.”

The digital program allows them to reach more people in rural communities, other cities and around the world, said Kelly Cave, instructor at the Boston location and now for virtual programming.

“One class had people from Tampa to Denver to Boston to everywhere in between,” Cave said.

But a new challenge is that everyone doesn’t have access to the internet.

“We’re trying to stay in touch with as many members as we can,” Cave said, adding they frequently call members. “We keep checking in to make sure they still feel connected.”

Dina Gonsalves, a participant at the Boston location, called this period a “different chapter in the book.”

“We miss being together, but it’s great to see their faces and work out with them,” Gonsalves said. “I’m still getting my physical in. I’m still getting in my recovery meetings.

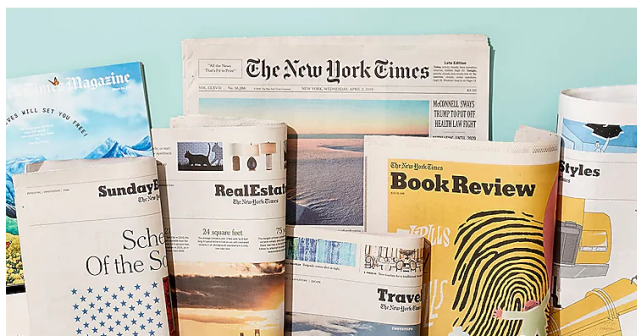
“Even though we’re apart, we’re still unified together in the heart and the spirit,” she said.

Boston Mayor Martin Walsh, who has been open about participating in virtual AA meetings, has touted The Phoenix.

“The Phoenix not only helps people in recovery with their fitness goals, they help them fully address their overall wellness,” Walsh said in a statement. “Since their earliest days of coming to Boston, the City of Boston has supported their incredibly important mission. The Phoenix is an exceptional community partner, especially now as we face the COVID-19 pandemic, because people in recovery need as many virtual supports as possible.”

To check out the virtual workouts, visit www.thephoenix.org/virtual. To donate to the nonprofit, visit www.thephoenix.org.

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