Program Management During COVID-19

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, day and employment service providers have had to quickly determine how best to provide supports for people they serve. For many this means transitioning to services and supports that can be provided remotely. This brief is one in a series developed to help community providers continue to provide services to those who are currently working, seeking employment, or engaged in community-based day supports.

During this time, we are all learning how to best support the people we serve. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together to provide services that help people to continue to work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

ICI COVID-19 resources: covid19.communityinclusion.org

Employment service providers are navigating unprecedented and rapidly changing circumstances as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. Program managers are being challenged to provide the leadership and tools necessary for staff to deliver employment services remotely while understanding that staff are dealing with concerns regarding their own health, worry for family members, and financial uncertainties. The shift towards working from home and providing services remotely poses a significant departure for a field that has prioritized the importance of physically engaging the community.

To meet the needs of individuals and sustain programs, it is important to avoid going into retreat mode and shutting down most services, assuming the situation is a short-term interruption. This period of uncertainty is likely to be ongoing and recovery will be a gradual process. Program managers need to be creative, innovative, and adaptable to meet the needs of the individuals they serve as well as their staff.

While it is certainly a challenging time, there is also great opportunity for program managers to hone leadership skills and empower staff to provide high-quality services.

Maintain an Employment First focus

The pandemic is having a major impact on the world of work and on the economy. While we are in a time of significant crisis and challenge, it is important for program leaders and managers to send a strong message that individual integrated employment remains a priority, and that the program will continue to:

▶ Support individuals who are working.

▶ Prepare individuals for employment through career planning, exploration, and discovery activities.

▶ Conduct outreach to businesses to identify opportunities, with a clear message more so than ever of "How can we help?"

This is not a time for retreat from employment. While it is important to acknowledge the challenges of finding work in the current environment, we must avoid a mindset that "people with disabilities go to the back of the line" in terms of the opportunities available.

In addition, programs must be clear with staff that individuals' choices and right to self-determination are to be respected. It is not up to the program to decide whether someone can or can't work. If someone chooses to continue working, the program needs to do what is necessary to support the individual in that decision. On the other hand, if an individual chooses not to work, that decision must be respected as well.

As always with informed choice, work with the individual to ensure they are fully aware of the implications of whatever choice they are making. See the publication in this series *Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Guide for Informed Decision Making*, for additional details.

Core issues for overseeing services

In overseeing day and employment services, and maintaining a focus on integrated employment, the following are core issues to be addressed:

▶ Continuing to support individuals who are working.

▶ Continuing to provide services to individuals who are in the process of career exploration and job development.

▶ Supporting individuals who were working, and are now out of work.

▶ Ensuring that staff who are on job sites and in the community are properly supported and taking all necessary precautions.

▶ Supporting staff to work remotely from their homes.

▶ The impact on funding and what can be done do to mitigate that.

▶ Steps to be taken to minimize or avoid furloughing or laying off staff.

▶ The communication plan with individuals, staff, families, guardians, funding agencies, and the general community.

▶ Maintaining and strengthening staff morale and connectedness.

▶ Ensuring ongoing individual and family connectedness with the program.

Program design

Two fundamental questions for program managers are:

▶ "How can we continue to meet our mission and do what we do?"

▶ "How do we demonstrate the ongoing value of our services during this challenging time?"

Work with staff to closely examine the services you currently provide. What are the priorities? What are creative ways for continuing to provide these services? How will you continue to keep individuals engaged and interested in employment?

Other publications in this series provide a variety of ideas and strategies regarding services for individuals in day and employment services. Review these publications for specific ideas on how to continue to provide a full array of day and employment services in the current environment, and use these as the basis for your service modifications.

These publications include:

1. *Providing Employment Services for Job Seekers Remotely*

2. *Supporting Individuals Who Are Working During COVID-19*

3. *Job Development and Business Engagement During Challenging Times*

4. *Providing Community-Based Day Supports During COVID-19*

Create a crisis communication plan

Regular communication is essential during this period of uncertainty. A crisis communication plan includes messaging for staff, individuals, families, guardians, funding partners, and social media followers. Communications should be frequent, calm, factual, transparent, and sensitive. In addition, consider the following:

▶ Create a platform or webpage for ongoing updates. Monitor this information regularly and change as needed. This should include a section to keep staff updated with guidelines for managing in the current environment, as well as information for individuals, families, and the community at large.

▶ Create outlets for staff, individuals, and families to ask questions, share feedback, and voice concerns.

▶ Send updates to staff and others daily or as needed.

▶ Use social media to keep the community and public informed.

> **Leadership and clarity of mission are more important than ever. As a program manager, be clear in your message: despite the challenging times, integrated employment remains a priority, and the program will continue to support individuals who are working, and prepare others for employment. You can continue to provide many of the employment and related services you always have – you just may have to do so in new and creative ways, which may actually have long-term benefit.**

Communicating with funding partners

If regular communication with funding partners is not a current practice, this is a good time to make it one. Keep funding partners updated regularly on the steps your organization is taking to continue service provision and any safety precautions that have been put in place. In addition, flexibility and understanding will be needed as funding partners are navigating and adapting to this crisis as well. Communication with funding partners should be included in your organization's crisis communication plan.

As part of working with funders, you will need to stay up to date on the changing requirements for service delivery during the pandemic. For example, learn which services require in-person contact and which do not, and the parameters around what services provided remotely can be billed for. It may be necessary to negotiate with funders regarding what services are billable, based on how services are now being delivered.

Identify a primary point of contact for funders to direct their questions, concerns, and feedback, and designate a key staff member to maintain up-to-date knowledge on billing, service delivery parameters, and additional funding opportunities. Identify a plan for disseminating this information to staff in a timely and organized fashion.

Security of information

In this digital age, many organizations have policies and procedures to protect safety and security of information, maintain confidentiality, and avoid cyberattacks. With a shift to a whole new level of remote service delivery, it is critical that programs review their current safety and security procedures, ensure that staff are familiar with them, and consider whether additional procedures need to be put in place. During the pandemic, funding agencies have also modified their security and confidentiality requirements, and it is important to be aware of any changes in that regard.

Best practices for remote supervision

Good supervisory practices are more important now than ever before. Supervisors who are comfortable providing supervision in person may find it difficult to transition to remote supervision. Key strategies for remote supervision in the current environment include:

▶ Be flexible. Staff will vary in comfort with technology and working remotely. Many staff may have dependent care responsibilities and may have other household members working and learning from home. As much as possible, allow them to adjust hours as needed.

▶ Set clear expectations with a focus on measurable goals, outcomes, and deadlines. Provide regular feedback.

▶ Develop a plan for communication that outlines expectations and identifies tools for frequent contact. For example, schedule regular meetings to allow opportunities to discuss progress and concerns. Incorporate the use of video communication rather than just telephone. When developing a communication plan, keep in mind accessibility needs of staff.

▶ Create opportunities for staff to provide feedback to supervisors.

▶ Empower staff and teams to make decisions and deliver services. Demonstrate trust and avoid micromanaging staff. If you are not already doing so, consider using program management tools such as Microsoft Teams, Asana, or Basecamp to stay updated on progress.

▶ Staff who are working remotely miss out on the opportunity to interact with colleagues throughout the day. Provide opportunities for them to connect virtually and participate in the workplace community.

▶ Spend time understanding staff needs in the current environment. Learn how staff are motivated, how they best receive feedback, and what supervisory strategies will be most effective.

▶ Keep in mind that everyone is spending extensive time online and communicating remotely. Be available for staff but also keep meetings and conversations as short as possible.

Ensure staff have the tools they need to work remotely

Staff working remotely must be able to access information quickly, easily, and in a format that is digital and accessible. Ensure that staff are able to access and share forms, documents, tools, and spreadsheets online. Use platforms that support collaboration and information-sharing such as Microsoft Teams, Asana, Google Docs, and Google Drive. Ensure such platforms meet any privacy and security requirements.

In addition, arrange for staff to have access to IT

support and training, human resources, onboarding, and Employee Assistance Programs. Staff who use accommodations in the workplace may need to access them when working from home as well, and staff may need additional accommodations for working at home.

It is ideal for the organization to provide all of the necessary equipment for working from home. However, if this is not possible, examine and solidify internal policies regarding staff using personal equipment for work purposes. Considerations include:

▶ What equipment does staff have access to at home?

▶ If staff are using their own equipment, data plans, and cell phones, is the organization able to reimburse for these costs?

▶ Are staff able to access internal servers and databases from home?

▶ Do staff have internet access at home? If not, can the organization assist or are community resources available?

▶ Does the use of personal equipment raise any confidentiality, privacy, or security concerns?

▶ Does the organization have any security requirements for personal equipment that is used for employment purposes?

Set clear guidelines and procedures for working remotely

▶ Set up a standard procedure and protocol for remote service delivery online. This includes working with individuals on the available and preferred modes for remote services, use of video platforms, setting up weekly schedules with individuals, and working with others in the home to provide supports.

▶ Establish clear standards for maintaining professionalism while working from home. This includes maintaining a professional appearance, having a designated workspace that is quiet and a door that closes to prevent interruptions, and having a setting and background on video calls that minimizes distractions.

▶ Establish requirements for maintaining confidentiality and privacy. This includes having a private space to work from at home, and guiding individuals in setting up their own space for private conversations with staff. Procedures for ensuring security and privacy online should also be established.

Staff may not be used to providing services remotely, and may lack familiarity with how to best use technology. Spend time to ensure they understand the expectations and procedures for providing services remotely, and also how to best use technology in providing services and supports.

See the other publications in this series, Providing Quality Services Remotely and Online, and Using Technology to Provide Quality Services Remotely, for further details on specific areas to be addressed in guidelines and procedures.

Allow staff flexibility and provide accommodations

Staff may need flexible schedules due to school, childcare, and program closures or a partner's employment situation. This is a time to be understanding, flexible, and accommodating of staff needs. Be aware of the requirements of the Family Medical Leave Act, and the expanded availability of leave under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which allows for up to two weeks paid leave if an employee or their family member becomes ill with the coronavirus or if the employee has been exposed to the virus. **Visit the Department of Labor's website** for more information.

Additionally, staff may request accommodations due to a disability, either specific to COVID-19 or now that they are teleworking. **See recommendations from the Job Accommodation Network for managing these requests**.

Support staff who are still going to work sites

Staff who are still going to work sites need to know their safety is of top concern to the organization. Implement the most current safety precautions to protect your employees and the individuals your organization supports. Safety guidelines and mitigation recommendations can be found on the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** and **OSHA** websites.

Ensure that staff have protective gear as well as training on how to stay safe and protect the safety of individuals they support. If feasible, during the pandemic, consider providing premium pay to employees who are going to job sites. Also, some staff may be very concerned about being exposed to the virus or exposing others. Be as flexible as possible regarding which staff are going to work sites, and if staff are unwilling to go, do what you can

do to find other duties they can perform. In some cases, it may also be a reasonable accommodation to allow a staff person not to go on to job sites (e.g., a staff person with a compromised immune system).

Some employers may be hesitant to allow job coaches onto work sites. Work with staff on how to negotiate and problem-solve if this is the case. Also, check to see if job coaches are among individuals who have been designated as essential workers in your state.

Maintain staff morale

Maintaining staff morale is especially challenging when staff are displaced and are experiencing high levels of stress. In communications with staff, demonstrate caring and sensitivity. Encourage staff to prioritize self-care. There are numerous no-cost wellness resources available online that can be shared with staff. Provide them with information about resources available through your Employee Assistance Program, if you have one.

Foster community by facilitating opportunities for staff to connect online. Some examples include virtual coffee and lunch breaks, book clubs, games, contests, and watch parties. Be sure to include and invite all staff, but also be clear that participation is optional. Allow opportunities for staff to celebrate successes, share experiences, and support each other. Highlight staff who have risen to the challenge and identified creative ways to provide services. Provide staff with forums to connect with staff from other providers to share resources and support.

Encourage professional development

Allowing staff time to focus on professional development or leadership opportunities may be an additional way to boost morale. Provide the opportunity to continue education, participate in training, and work on projects that match their interests and goals. Alternatively, think about asking staff to identify a need in the community and address it. This allows your organization to build social capital while giving back to the community.

Many organizations are offering free training on effective delivery of employment services and supports. See the resource list from the Institute for Community Inclusion for a list of training options.

Manage staffing shortages

Staffing shortages may be even more challenging during the current crisis. When planning for shortages, consider the following:

▶ Do you have community partners with whom you can collaborate to fill in the gaps and possibly share staff?

▶ Partner with local workforce development programs and **American Job Centers** to identify potential recruits.

▶ Reach out to colleges and universities as many college students are coming back to their home communities and seeking employment.

▶ If you will be providing services remotely on a longer-term basis, hire remote staff from outside of your geographic location. Consider that remote staff require a different skillset than traditional employees.

▶ Consider re-organizing your team to best use staff strengths and talents. If staff are being asked to take on new duties, ensure they receive the necessary training, including training on safety precautions.

▶ Prioritize. It may not be possible to provide all of the services your organization typically offers, but it may be possible to focus resources and staff to continue providing some key services.

▶ Identify which individuals have the greatest need for services as well as those that are able to work more independently. Allocate staffing resources according to need.

▶ Have a plan in place in case staff become ill or need to care for someone who is ill. Have staff share knowledge and cross-train others in case someone needs to fill in for them.

Key strategies for supporting staff:

▶ Ensure they have the tools to work remotely.

▶ Communicate regularly both with individual staff and as a group.

▶ Be flexible, recognizing the challenging circumstances many are dealing with.

▶ Maintain staff morale through health and wellness activities, and fostering a sense of community.

▶ Be sensitive regarding staff furloughs and layoffs.

Dealing with staff cutbacks, furloughs, and layoffs

When facing the prospect of staff cutbacks, furloughs, and layoffs, communication and transparency are important to alleviate staff fears and anxiety. Consider alternatives such as small business loans, pay cuts for leadership, restructuring positions so staff can work remotely, paying staff who are not able to work remotely, reducing staff hours, re-deploying staff to take on different duties, sharing staff with other agencies, and asking for input from staff when identifying potential areas in which to cut costs.

When reducing staff hours, ask if any staff would like to volunteer to have hours reduced, as some staff may benefit from the opportunity to decrease time spent working during this challenging time.

When staff cutbacks, furloughs, or layoffs are unavoidable, treat staff with compassion and understanding. Being laid off or furloughed can be extremely distressing and it may be beneficial to provide mental health and self-care resources. Provide as much advance notice as possible and offer a flexible schedule to allow staff the time seek new employment. Offer assistance in navigating the unemployment process, accessing your local **American Job Center**, and provide staff with a reference and letter of recommendation. If possible, provide severance pay and pay out unused sick or vacation time. Ensure that staff receive information about the availability of COBRA health insurance options.

Work with community partners

Are there are other agencies you can collaborate with to fill in the gaps? Examples of potential collaborations include sharing staff, training staff, and combining technology resources. Beyond disability services, during this time communities and organizations are making available a wide array of resources and assistance. Outreach to community partners in a spirit of providing mutual support.

Consider what your program can do for the community. What ways can individuals and staff contribute? This is a great time to demonstrate the value of your program and agency, and most importantly the individuals it supports, to the community at large—and to maybe shift the perception of your organization from one that asks the community for help to one that helps the community.

Keep an eye on the future

There is a famous quote: "Never waste a good crisis." While this is a challenging time, there are opportunities to strengthen programs and practices. The need for technology, efficiency, adaptability, innovation, and strong communication will continue to be necessary and beneficial moving forward. We are learning quickly about how to operate programs in new, different, and in some cases more efficient and effective ways. As the pandemic evolves and subsides, it makes no sense to go back to the way things were, if we have discovered new and better ways of doing business and supporting individuals with disabilities.

While programs have had to modify the way we provide services and interact with others, an opportunity exists to increase the inclusiveness of programs for individuals and staff. Individuals with disabilities who have required accommodations such as flexible schedules, the option to work from home, technology for accessibility, or extra time for task completion have historically faced barriers accessing programs and employment. As we begin to resume in-person activities, there is potential to incorporate what has been learned to ensure that programs and workplaces are accessible to all.

A time to shine

If programs are well led, with clear communication and strong supports for staff, dedication and loyalty by staff to the organization can be built for the long term. Similarly, if individuals, families, funders, and the larger community perceive the organization as being highly responsive and proactive in dealing with the pandemic, and one that has demonstrated its value, that will have benefits for the long term.

"Sometimes you need a little crisis to get your adrenaline flowing and help you realize your potential."

– Jeannette Walls, American Author and Journalist

RESOURCES

General Resource

▶ Healthier Workforce Center of the Midwest - Has *Employer Guide to COVID-19* and variety of additional resources

Health & Safety

▶ CDC Guidance on Prevention

▶ OSHA Workplace Guidance

▶ Article: 8 Questions Employers Should Ask About Business (Harvard Business Review)

Supporting Remote Staff & Delivery of Online Services

▶ Remote Work (SHRM)

▶ Free LinkedIn courses for managing remotely and working remotely (scroll down page for listing of courses)

▶ Article: Remote Workers and Telecommuting Practices for Nonprofits (National Council of Nonprofits)

▶ Article: How to Manage Remote Teams Effectively (SHRM)

▶ Article: COVID-19 Has My Teams Working Remotely: A Guide for Leaders (Gallup)

Communication Plan

▶ Article: How to Create a Crisis Communications Plan for Your Nonprofit

Staff Accommodations

▶ What You Should Know About COVID-19 and the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and Other EEO Laws (EEOC)

▶ Accommodation and Compliance: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (JAN)

Layoffs and Furloughs

▶ Employee Terminations and Layoffs (SHRM)

▶ Article: The Coronavirus Crisis Doesn't Have to Lead to Layoffs (Harvard Business Review)

▶ Article: How to Manage Coronavirus Layoffs with Compassion (Harvard Business Review

▶ Unemployment benefits information (CareerOneStop)

Wellness

▶ Wellness in the workplace resources (Headspace)

www.communityinclusion.org | www.employmentfirstMA.org | www.employmentfirstMO.org