

Supporting clients in under-resourced communities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Children, youth, and families living in under-resourced communities nationwide are especially vulnerable to the immediate and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and may need different and/or more robust provision of services. At the same time, community-based direct service providers may struggle to know how best to support families while adhering to social distancing mandates.

This tip sheet, based on promising practices implemented by South Ward Promise Neighborhood Partner agencies, offers strategies to help front-line staff support their clients while working remotely, specifically regarding three key areas where administrators are likely to experience the greatest challenges: supervision and support, client communication and service provision, and community collaboration and resource sharing.

Supervision and Support

Engage with supervisors and peers for assistance and encouragement.

Schedule regular meetings with your supervisor.

Participating in supervision is key to successfully identifying and keeping up with client needs, as well as your own, during crisis situations. These conversations should include a structured agenda to highlight topics of discussion, and keep your meetings focused and on task. Agenda items may include:

- Discussing tools and resources you need to accomplish your day-to-day responsibilities while working remotely. For example:
 - Do you have a computer to do your work?
 - Are you expected to use your personal computer or are there agency-owned laptops available for use? Are there resources available for high-speed internet access?
 - Are you able to use videoconferencing to engage clients? Are there any preferred platforms for videoconferencing, or those that are prohibited?
 - Are there client records or files that need transferring so you can access them while away from the office?
 - What are the expectations for connecting with clients by phone? Should you be using your personal phone, or will an alternative phone be provided?

Child Trends is the external evaluator for the South Ward Promise Neighborhood, which is a U.S. Department of Education funded initiative run by BRICK Education Network.

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- Brainstorming alternative strategies in case equipment is not available or difficult to access (e.g., using cell phone applications that mimic scanners).
- Determining appropriate caseload sizes and how services to clients should be adjusted to meeting changing needs. For example:
 - Individuals or families who were managing successfully pre-COVID-19 may require more support at this time due to job instability or loss, illness, or other challenges.
- Identifying topics that may not have normally been a part of your daily conversations with clients (e.g., questions about how to get groceries delivered, or how to support sick family members), and discussing how this new content can be incorporated into your work.
- Strategizing about how best to anticipate and support clients' needs after the crisis, and how to "go back to normal" while keeping everyone's health and safety in mind.



One agency in the South Ward has found that many of its clients have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 due to risk factors like living in a hot spot and being part of racial/ethnic groups that are disproportionately affected by the virus. Agency staff developed a new service provision guide to support front-line workers who might engage with clients dealing with sickness or who may be experiencing loss and/or grief. Staff were trained on the protocol and use it when needed.

Seek out support and feedback from your peers.

In addition to helping families, you may also be dealing with your own personal and familial challenges. It may be helpful to check in with colleagues or others who understand your professional responsibilities to brainstorm ways to support one another. Caring work is hard at any time, and may be particularly difficult right now. One service provider in the South Ward stated that it is important for staff to "give each other grace."

Furthermore, soliciting multiple perspectives on client support and incorporating peer feedback may be particularly helpful during a time in which everyone is experiencing common challenges. One way to benefit from peer support and expertise is to participate in phone or virtual planning meetings that discuss cases and consider some of the following questions:

- Who has touched base with clients?
- What are their challenges?
- How can staff coordinate and support each other to address clients' needs?

Client Communication and Service Provision

Support clients through consistent, accurate, and supportive communication.

Use multiple strategies and repeated attempts to connect.

Physical distancing does not mean a lack of connection. Find out how families prefer to stay in touch (e.g., phone calls, video calls, text messaging, email) and use their preferred method whenever possible. Social media messages and voice and video recordings have all been successfully employed by Promise Neighborhood agencies in the South Ward. Be persistent and

mindful that you may need to reach out several times to connect with clients and try different methods of communication to ensure contact.

- Consider creating newsletters, emails, text messages, and/or social media or blog post content with supportive and positive messages.
- If clients are having difficulty connecting with staff and need support to find accessible internet or data packages for their cell phones, consider identifying whether federal or community resources exist and help families connect to them, if available.

Provide clarity about your availability and agency procedures.

Be sure that emails and voicemail messages indicate when you are available, and whether agency hours and/or services have changed. If your hours and services have changed, be sure to include information on other options if families still need support.

Be stabilizing and sensitive to your clients' emotions and feelings.

Communities will have varying experiences regarding the pandemic. Some clients may need emotional support. Be proactive about letting them know they are important to you, and that you are concerned about them. Attending to clients' emotional needs can help quell their fears and provide stability in this time of uncertainty.

- Be mindful of different developmental stages for children, which will impact how they experience the pandemic. Children or youth may experience two to six weeks of social isolation and/or quarantine very differently than adults.

Be flexible about service provision.

Clients may be working, providing child care, teaching their children, and/or caring for loved ones impacted by COVID-19. If they need assistance, offer flexibility in scheduling conversations to allow them to work around their other responsibilities. It may be necessary to engage in activities outside of your usual job responsibilities. For example, one agency that typically provides after-school programming to youth has changed its focus to meet the more immediate needs of families by providing meals and groceries.

- Think creatively about work that must be done remotely during the pandemic. For example, if a document requires a signature, consider using software like Adobe or DocuSign to obtain a virtual signature.
- Families are likely sharing the same space and, in many cases, using the same electronic devices. These situations can result in exchanges between providers and clients being overheard or seen (if in writing). Ask in advance when it might be okay to discuss sensitive issues, or whether your client has any concerns about corresponding in writing.



One school in the South Ward has appointed a staff person responsible for initiating fun and engaging posts on Instagram and Twitter, such as hand washing challenges. These posts have the added bonus of reaching and locating youth that more traditional methods like calling did not.



An agency that provides therapeutic services to children and adults in the South Ward noted that utilizing the “break-out” room option on the online platform, Zoom, was particularly helpful for providing opportunities for targeted services based on development (such as holding separate groups for younger children and teens simultaneously).

Community Collaboration and Resource Sharing

Keep up-to-date and knowledgeable about services and changes by connecting with colleagues and peers.

Stay well-informed.

- Collaboration within and across agencies is hallmark of Promise Neighborhoods. Direct service staff must have accurate information to guide their choices about clients' well-being. Engage in efforts that allow you to communicate and share information with staff in other agencies.
 - Be sure to clarify roles, identify any duplication or gaps in services, confirm referral processes, and check in often about these issues. Agency services and/or priorities may change quickly.
- Anticipate needs that families might have after the pandemic is over. In response to potential client concerns about being in large settings when social distancing practices are relaxed, one agency is considering reducing the number of individuals who can attend educational forums, as well as offering more virtual options. In addition, the agency is developing content in areas for which individuals may need navigation support, such as employment, housing, bankruptcy, and education.

Conclusion

Working remotely with clients is generally not the preferred method of service provision for most front-line staff. However, families living in Promise Neighborhoods need the crucial services offered by Partners now more than ever, even if face-to-face contact is not an option. With proper planning and support, staff can work remotely while still serving families effectively. Engaging in professional support, connecting with clients in ways that are appropriate to their contexts, and ensuring referrals and linkages to relevant services can all increase the likelihood that children and families do not fall through the cracks. We hope the strategies provided in this resource are useful for front-line staff assisting families during this challenging period, especially those most affected by the pandemic.

Child Trends collaborated with the South Ward Children's Alliance (SWCA) to develop this two-part resource that shares emerging strategies and recommendations that may be applicable to Promise Neighborhoods and other community-based human service providers. The goal of Promise Neighborhoods is to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in under-resourced communities. In September 2018, the South Ward Children's Alliance (SWCA) was awarded a \$30-million Promise Neighborhood Implementation grant from the U.S. Department of Education. With this funding, the South Ward Promise Neighborhood initiative aims to improve the lives of children and families living in the South Ward by increasing access to high quality education and services that help students successfully transition into college or career.

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