

Virtual Engagement Strategies for Vulnerable Populations

Summary Report: Follow-Up Interviews January 2022

Background

Throughout the spring of 2020, The Public Outreach and Engagement Team at the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University (Rutgers-POET) completed a series of 19 interviews with staff at social service agencies and community organizations. The goal was to better understand how virtual and other remote methods helped them continue to engage with vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to build on the knowledge gained through this effort and leverage the relationships established with organization staff, Rutgers-POET conducted follow up interviews with six of the organizations during the summer and fall of 2021. The purpose of these follow-up interviews was to understand how the virtual practices developed on an emergency basis early in the pandemic evolved, what new practices emerged, and how vulnerable populations adapted to or were still challenged by the virtual environment.

Approach

Rutgers-POET sought interviews with key staff from a representative sample of organizations interviewed in the first round that serve one or more of the following populations: individuals with disabilities; seniors; individuals with low incomes; at-risk youth; and immigrants or those with limited-English proficiency. The focus on these groups was determined by the NJTPA's engagement priorities for Plan 2050. To plan the first round of interviews, Rutgers-POET completed an online scan of organizations that work with these groups and specifically pursued interviews with staff at organizations that used virtual methods to continue their work during the pandemic. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted via an online meeting platform.

Organizations Interviewed for Follow Up

- Bergen Family Center
- Monmouth Cares
- United Way Caregivers Coalition
- Women's Rights Information Center
- Workforce Advantage
- Youth Advocate Programs

Key Takeaways

Benefits of virtual engagement

- Virtual tools have enabled organizations to expand their client base. Prior to the pandemic, organizations served clients near their offices. With tools such as virtual meetings and targeted online advertising, organizations can reach many more people.
- The expanded reach created by virtual modes has improved information sharing. For example, the United Way Caregivers Coalition used to hold five separate meetings based on geographic regions. During the pandemic, the regions have held combined meetings and caregivers are exposed to a wider range of service providers and information resources.
- Virtual modes remove barriers to participation like lack of access to transportation and social anxiety. They make participation more convenient and can reduce attrition.

Drawbacks of virtual interactions

- Virtual meeting attendees miss meeting in-person. While virtual meetings are more efficient, there is very limited opportunity for networking and socializing.
- In some instances, virtual format has negatively impacted the quality of conversations. Some interviewees shared that fostering in-depth conversations with clients can be difficult during virtual meetings. Those conversations are important for getting at “the need under the need,” or any issues underlying a client’s stated problem.
- Some interviewees noted that over time people have stopped turning on their video cameras during virtual meetings which makes genuine connection more challenging.

Overcoming the digital divide

- Early in the pandemic, organizations quickly developed technical assistance resources for both staff and clients. As the pandemic has continued, organizations are receiving fewer requests for assistance because clients have generally become more accustomed to using technology. Some organizations, such as Workforce Advantage, have integrated lessons on digital literacy into their ESL and skill-building programs.
- New policies that require schools to ensure access to a digital device and internet connection for students have made a positive difference for both students and their families.
- Despite the new resources and programs available, many people continue to experience the digital divide and poor digital literacy.
- People who participate in virtual meetings with small screens (phones), slow internet connections, and lower quality devices are not having the same experience as people who are better equipped.
- Interviewees frequently identified Zoom as the virtual meeting platform that most clients are comfortable using.

Virtual engagement strategies related to specific demographics

- As the pandemic continued, organizations developed creative and activity-based strategies to reconnect with teenage clients and create opportunities for youth and teenagers to interact with each other in fun and safe ways, such as hosting a weekly online cooking show and setting up an outdoor community center in the summer.
- Noticing that teenagers preferred to keep their cameras off during virtual programs, staff talked with them to understand this preference and over time the teenagers turned their cameras on. Interviewees noted that teenage clients were willing to use the chat to disclose personal experiences that they may not have otherwise disclosed.
- It is difficult to use virtual platforms to recreate a social environment where youth freely interact with each other. It is also difficult to keep a young person engaged on a virtual platform for a long period of time. To avoid fatigue, Youth Advocate Programs changed its programming schedule to hold shorter, more frequent virtual programs.
- Many seniors are eager to return to in-person programming, and in-person programming for seniors can provide much-needed respite for their caregivers. Visually impaired seniors continue to be difficult to engage virtually.

Thoughts on virtual engagement moving forward

- All interviewees foresee their organizations continuing to offer virtual and hybrid meeting options post-pandemic.
- A potential issue with hybrid meetings is whether regular meeting venues have the technology and robust internet connection needed to support virtual components.
- Knowing that their organizations were able to overcome the challenges of the pandemic, interviewees said they are more prepared to handle potential future issues. Staff and clients are also better able to use technology as a tool.

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations

Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: Bergen Family Center

Interviewee: Liz Corsini

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: August 26, 2021

Summary

Bergen Family Center (BFC) provides services to individuals, families and children that enhance their ability to function independently, manage challenges and improve their quality of life. BFC provides programs for all ages, from infants to the elderly, and has a staff of more than 130 people. BFC has five different service branches: counseling, community programs, children's services, adolescent services, and older adult services. The interview focused on BFC's work with at-risk teenagers and older adults.

At the outset of the pandemic, teenage clients were among the most difficult clients for BFC staff to engage through virtual programs. As the pandemic continued, staff employed creative and insight-based strategies to reconnect with teenage clients and help them stay in touch with each other. Staff created activity-based programs that enabled teenagers to interact with each other in a fun and safe way, such as holding a weekly online cooking show and setting up an outdoor community center in the summer. Noticing that these clients preferred to keep their cameras off during virtual programs, staff talked with them to understand this preference and over time the teenagers turned their cameras on.

BFC staff continue to see technology challenges among the families they serve. New policies that require schools to ensure access to a digital device and internet connection for their students have made a positive difference. However, the roll out of these policies has been slow and the benefits do not necessarily extend beyond school-age children to parents, siblings, and other family members.

The interviewee noted that, at the pandemic's outset, she did not think that the organization would be able to serve vulnerable clients using virtual modes, but she now knows it is possible. BFC will likely continue to offer virtual and hybrid programs because some teenagers prefer virtual counseling, and bedbound or housebound seniors can participate from home. At the same time, many of the seniors are eager to return to in-person programming, and in-person programming for seniors can provide much-needed respite for their caregivers.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- BFC staff were most concerned about how to engage teenage clients virtually. At the outset of the pandemic, they immediately moved to virtual programs and encountered issues with access to technology and technology literacy among teenagers and seniors.

- At first, teenage clients preferred not to have their video cameras on, but this has changed over time as they realized that video was the only way they could see their friends. Staff would talk with clients to understand the reasons why they kept their cameras off.
- Teenage clients were willing to use the chat to disclose personal experiences that they may not have otherwise disclosed. Noticing this, staff realized they could use virtual platforms in creative ways to engage teenagers. Staff developed a virtual, weekly cooking show for teenagers that was popular and successful enough to be featured on a daytime talk show. Teenage clients were learning to cook, connecting with the staff, and connecting with each other. If someone did not show up for the weekly cooking show, staff would call them to follow up.
- They ran summer programs for youth during the pandemic by setting up an outdoor community center in the BFC parking lot.
- During the pandemic, BFC started using the mobile app Brightwheel to communicate with parents and they are starting to use it with youth.
- They continue to use Instagram to communicate with middle schoolers, and middle-school age clients run the BFC Instagram account.
- They continue to stay in touch via phone with the seniors that have chosen not to use the tablets or get internet access.
- They have created a lot of programs, such as guest lectures and virtual trips. They would drop off activity materials to seniors on a weekly basis.

Changes in Client Demographics

- All their programs have exceeded their level of service—counseling, food access, and access to basic personal items
- They have seen a change in the socioeconomic status of their students. They have seen their clients' parents lose their jobs. They have targeted their programs to address issues of hunger for these families. They would drop off food for people who were sick. They saw an uptick in requests for personal care items like diapers, feminine hygiene, adult diapers, deodorant, shampoo, and other items. Despite all of this, their people were resilient
- Their cooking programs attracted people from different states because of the television coverage. Their youth programs have expanded to different towns. Their family success centers are also serving more people because they do not need to get in the car. They will continue virtual programs just for this purpose.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- They do not market their services well to reach new clients. However, the management team is very connected to the community and to other organizations. They have long waitlists for some of their youth and childcare programs. They are now focusing on enrolling more seniors in their programs by sharing flyers about their programs to other organizations and state/local government human services workers.

- They have switched their enrollment system away from paper forms to Google Docs because it is much easier to manage. Some programs are still paper-based depending on the funding source.
- BFC staff are doing tabling events again, but attendees tend to not pick up flyers.
- They gave away over 100,000 dollars of personal hygiene products during grab-and-go events.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- There is still a digital divide. School-aged youth are better off because there are school-based requirements for access to the internet and devices. The implementation of this improved access was slow and BFC has continued to give out hot spot devices to students. While students may have better access, families overall are not necessarily better connected.
- BFC received CARES Act funding to hire a technical support person and purchase tablets for senior clients. Before receiving this funding, they borrowed devices from another organization.
- They serve many visually impaired seniors who continue to be difficult to engage virtually.
- They experienced steep challenges to equipping staff to work from home. Some staff did not have at-home devices and the equipment was expensive to purchase. Older staff had a very hard time adjusting to new virtual platforms.

Future Plans

- The senior program is still virtual because the space is shared with youth who are not all vaccinated.
- The younger, active senior program is partly in person.
- The childcare program is in person.
- She thinks they will always have a virtual option even once the pandemic recedes. Some people do not want to do therapy in person, particularly teens. She thinks virtual therapy will continue. For senior programming, if a senior is sick or ill/bed-bound, they can still participate virtually.
- The seniors want to be in person. Also, the caregivers do not receive respite if the senior is still at home rather than attending an in-person program.

Overall Outlook

- Virtual engagement with vulnerable populations is possible. At the beginning, she did not think it would be possible, but now points out, "If you build it, they will come."

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: MonmouthCares

Interviewee: Chad Majczan

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: October 13, 2021

Summary

MonmouthCares is a non-profit Care Management Organization that manages the provision of services to children and young adults up to age 21 who have physical or intellectual disabilities or behavioral and substance abuse challenges. It facilitates the progress of a plan of care for each client, coordinating with the family and many other organizations within New Jersey's statewide children's services system.

The organization has a formal process for following up with families who are referred for services. They initially responded to the pandemic by allowing staff and families to communicate via the family's preferred online platform, with WhatsApp and FaceTime being popular choices. As the pandemic progressed, MonmouthCares switched to exclusively using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, with the latter typically reserved for internal meetings. Families are able to choose whether they want to meet with staff virtually or in person, and staff are encouraged not to influence this decision either way. The interviewee stated that during the summer of 2021, approximately 30% of meetings occurred in-person, which does not represent a huge shift back to in-person meetings.

While the organization has become accustomed to working in the virtual environment, the interviewee emphasized the limitations of this format. When meeting virtually with clients, it is challenging for staff to foster in-depth conversations that get at "the need under the need," or any issues underlying a client's stated problem. Staff were conscious of the need to build trust and foster meaningful conversation when meeting with clients virtually. Relatedly, the interviewee described how the virtual format has negatively impacted the quality of conversation during regular monthly meetings among partner organizations. These meetings have many attendees and took place in-person before the pandemic. Networking before and after the meetings was common when they were in-person, but now there is limited opportunity for conversation between attendees, many of whom keep their cameras off.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- They initially responded to the pandemic by allowing staff and clients to communicate via the client's preferred virtual platform, such as WhatsApp or FaceTime. They have since switched to exclusively using Zoom and Microsoft Teams, with the latter platform

primarily used for internal staff meetings. As part of the regular new client screening process, they ask families what the best way is to communicate (calling, emailing, texting).

- MonmouthCares is required to offer face-to-face meetings as an option for families alongside virtual meetings. Of all the meetings staff held with clients this past summer, 30% occurred in-person. For the agency, this does not represent a huge shift back to in-person meetings. The interviewee attributes the slow shift to the COVID-19 Delta variant.
- The type of work MonmouthCares does with clients and their families is very tough to do virtually and is less effective. Working with clients remotely is very different from working with them in person. While it is easy for staff to discuss resources available to the client to address a particular problem, it is difficult to have an in-depth conversation that illuminates the “need under the need” that the client may be experiencing. Staff are also better able to understand the client’s family dynamics by meeting with the family in person.
- MonmouthCares participates in large monthly meetings with partner agencies. These meetings moved to Zoom during the pandemic. The quality of the conversation has diminished over Zoom because attendees engage much less and most keep their cameras off. In the past, there would be time before or after the meeting for people to network and follow up on topics discussed during the meeting. Currently, there is no opportunity for these side conversations, though the partnership is exploring setting up a networking association.
- The care managers are trained to offer families the option of virtual and in-person

Changes in Client Demographics

- The demographics of the clients they serve have not changed much during the pandemic. There was a decrease in the number of families enrolled in their services from approximately 900-950 to 860. The interviewee partly attributed this to children not being in school, which is an important source of referrals for MonmouthCares.
- There is a small Portuguese community in Long Branch, and awareness of MonmouthCares’ services has spread among these family by word-of-mouth. However, this is unrelated to the pandemic.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- MonmouthCares primarily promotes their services to schools and pediatricians. Overall, promotion occurs by word of mouth between families or between families and schools. Clients must have a referral to receive services.
- MonmouthCares has transitioned away from using print materials. They do not currently mail out flyers. They have replaced paper postcard surveys with online SurveyMonkey surveys.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- Although schools are responsible for ensuring students have access to the internet and digital devices, there is still a digital divide. There is a significant difference between participating in a meeting via a smartphone with a small screen versus a desktop or laptop with a large screen, or between using an older, lower quality device and a new device. People who are participating in virtual meetings with small screens, slower internet connections, and lower quality devices are not having the same experience as people who are better equipped.

Future Plans

- MonmouthCares will continue to offer a virtual option for family meetings. Families decide whether they want to meet in person or virtually. Staff are trained not to steer the family in one direction or another. The agency recognizes that there are benefits to virtual meetings for both staff and families, but it is important for families to feel empowered to request an in-person meeting if that is their preference.

Overall Outlook

- Among partnering agencies, there has been effort to identify and organize which agencies are offering different services, such as housing or food assistance, to make better use of resources.
- The dynamics of a conversation about intimate family matters are better in-person.
- There will be a spot for telehealth in the future because it can be easier and safer for both staff and families.

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: Caregivers Coalition of United Way of Northern NJ

Interviewee: Robin Ennic and Deb Day

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: October 4, 2021

Summary

The United Way Caregivers Coalition (UWCC) provides those who care for a sick or disabled loved one with support services and programs, including support group meetings, educational events, social gatherings, and informational resources. UWCC serves five regions in northern New Jersey. Prior to the pandemic, each region held a monthly, in-person meeting. In response to the pandemic UWCC replaced these meetings with two monthly virtual meetings combining all five regions.

UWCC uses Zoom for all virtual meetings, and one interviewee encourages other organizations to use Zoom. Caregivers are familiar with the platform, and it provides security and privacy. They have tried using Go-to-Meeting but experienced a lot of issues. Early in the pandemic, UWCC responded to many requests for technical assistance from caregivers. However, they now receive very few requests because people have generally become more accustomed to using technology. The interviewees observed that there is a digital divide among people who live in rural Sussex and Warren counties. Some areas have limited internet and cell service and people have limited knowledge or familiarity with technology.

UWCC meetings continue to be virtual, while the interviewees expect that future meetings will be in-person with a virtual option. The interviewees noted that while the virtual meetings are more efficient, there is no opportunity for networking. Networking was an important part of in-person meetings, where caregivers and service providers could share valuable information. On the other hand, because the virtual meetings combine participants from all five regions, caregivers are exposed to a wider range of service providers and information resources. The interviewees foresee that caregiver will enjoy returning to local in-person meetings.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- United Way Caregivers Coalition staff continue to work remotely and all meetings are virtual.
- Prior to the pandemic, UWCC held a monthly in-person meeting for each of the five regions it serves. During the pandemic, these five monthly in-person meetings were streamlined to two monthly Zoom meetings. The coalition offers several other monthly

virtual programs for caregivers that are informational or social and records its programs to post in a video library.

- At the end of each Zoom meeting, they conduct a short attendee poll to collect feedback about the content of the meeting.
- While people are still participating in the monthly coalition meetings, over time people have stopped turning on their video cameras.
- Prior to the pandemic there was interest in holding online meetings, but staff were concerned about security and the privacy of attendees who often share personal stories. Despite these initial concerns they are happy with the security and privacy that Zoom provides.
- The clients they serve are also much more comfortable using Zoom than any other platform. UWCC has also tried Go-to-Meeting but encountered a lot of issues. One interviewee has encouraged other organizations that use Go-to-Meeting to switch to Zoom.
- In addition to the monthly meetings, they continue to communicate with caregivers via emails and phone calls. They also send a monthly informational newsletter.

Changes in Client Demographics

- The UWCC audience includes unpaid family caregivers and the service providers that support them. There is frequent turnover among caregiver members, but the overall demographics of the coalition remain the same.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- UWCC started sending out meeting invitations one week in advance rather than earlier because the early invitations would get lost among other meeting invitations.
- They continue to send materials via mail by request, but this is rarely requested. Sending materials by mail was very common for UWCC prior to the pandemic, but the interviewee does not foresee them returning to print materials.
- The interviewee does not think that the online platform has drawn more people from a wider geographic area to their meetings. Participation has been maintained more or less the same. This is because caregivers primarily learn about UWCC through referrals from other organizations.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- There are areas that have limited internet connectivity in rural Sussex and Warren counties. Some areas have limited cell service as well. In addition to lack of connectivity, there is also a lack of knowledge about how to access and use technology.
- UWCC received many requests for technical assistance at the beginning of the pandemic, but there are very few requests now. The interviewee believes that people have gotten accustomed to using technology.

- While they were able to help some caregivers learn how to use technology, UUWCC did not have the capacity to acquire devices or pay for internet service for caregivers. The interviewee hopes that in the future UWCC will be able to refer caregivers to another organization for assistance with technology.
- When sending out a Zoom meeting invitation, UWCC always includes a Zoom “cheat-sheet” and a link to a Zoom how-to video. They instruct participants on how to register and to expect to be in a waiting room prior to the meeting.

Future Plans

- UWCC may return to the office in early 2022.
- Caregivers miss attending the local, in-person meetings. Once it is safer to meet in person, they hope to have hybrid local meetings. Rather than holding two virtual meetings per month that combine all five of their service regions, they would like to have in-person meetings in all five regions that include a virtual option. They will likely continue to have one virtual informational meeting per month.
- A potential issue with hybrid meetings is whether their regular meeting venues have the technology and robust internet connection needed to support hybrid meetings.

Overall Outlook

- The main thing they have learned over the course of the pandemic is how to facilitate and manage an online meeting. They needed to learn how to create professional presentations via Zoom that were valuable for caregivers.
- During in-person local meetings prior to the pandemic, the networking period before each meeting was very important and rewarding for caregivers and service providers. The virtual meetings have not included a networking period. While the virtual meetings are more efficient, attendees will enjoy having the opportunity to network again at in-person meetings.
- By combining meetings for all five regions, UWCC staff are collaborating more and are able to learn from each other better. There is more opportunity for teamwork and a wider set of resources for caregivers.

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations

Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: Women's Rights Information Center

Interviewee: Lisa Maurer

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: September 7, 2021

Summary

Women's Rights Information Center (WRIC) provides services to domestic abuse survivors, displaced homemakers, veterans, members of the LGBT community, and others. Services offered include providing clients with funds for training programs, legal consultations, advocacy and victim services for people suffering from domestic abuse. WRIC's programs seek to help clients learn and develop the skills they need to become financially self-sufficient and to provide for themselves and their family. Their clientele is approximately 80% women and 20% men.

WRIC transitioned from providing majority in-person services prior to the pandemic, to offering almost exclusively virtual programs during the pandemic. The organization continues to operate virtually, however staff may begin returning this fall. Several in-person services and activities have resumed in the past few months, including a shared housing program, the Career Closet program, and tabling to promote services at local events.

The interviewee emphasized the importance of WRIC's physical location for promoting awareness of and access to their services. Prior to the pandemic, they received many walk-in clients who did not necessarily know exactly what type of help they needed. While the virtual environment precludes walk-in clients, it has enabled WRIC to draw clients from a much wider geographic area, and people without a car can more easily access services. Once their offices reopen, they will continue to offer hybrid programs.

Many WRIC clients have limited-English proficiency and/or are non-citizens. Outreach strategies for these hard-to-reach populations include word-of-mouth, hiring Spanish-speaking staff, and partnering with other organizations that specifically work with these populations. The interviewee stated that building trust with non-citizens is key, and the process occurs little-by-little. She also noted that simply making people aware of their organization and the services it provides is important. Notably, while WRIC's ESL classes lost many students early in the pandemic when they became virtual, they have recently expanded their virtual ESL classes to accommodate an increase in students.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- WRIC is still fully virtual and staff have not yet returned to the building. They continue to operate virtually due to the rise of the new COVID-19 variant, as well as major maintenance issues with their office space.

- They are currently partnering and sharing resources with many other community organizations, which is a new strategy. For example, they have expanded virtual health and wellness programming in partnership with a hospital system and partnered with Bergen Family Center to distribute meals.
- The pandemic has motivated many more people to volunteer to lead training programs through WRIC. For example, a doctor volunteered to teach childcare classes, and a financial professional offered to teach personal finance classes. They are also offering more levels of ESL classes due to student demand and the availability of volunteer teachers. These classes are run in groups as well as one-on-one.
- They are offering many more evening classes and services for clients who work.
- WRIC initially used Webex to offer virtual programs but switched to Zoom because most people were comfortable with it.
- Calling clients directly continues to be an important communication method for WRIC. Periodic calls to clients are required as part of the grant funding they receive to support displaced homemakers.
- Several of their in-person programs that were paused during the pandemic have resumed. A shared housing program that matches clients with shared housing opportunities returned in August. Their Career Closet program moved to a new location with a larger space because of its popularity.

Changes in Client Demographics

- Their clientele has expanded and changed somewhat because they are helping more people who newly qualify for social service programs. They are helping people who are newly in need of assistance due to the pandemic. They are also seeing a lot of seniors who need assistance with technology.
- Clients now also come from a much wider geographic area because WRIC services are virtual, and people without access to a car can use their services. They do continue to be limited by county boundaries for connecting people to social services.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- Word of mouth and physical location are very important for promoting their services. WRIC aids more than 1,000 clients per year, so word of mouth about their services spreads very quickly. People who pass WRIC's physical location know where they are located and the services they provide. Before the pandemic, they often received walk-in clients who did not necessarily know what type of help to ask for. Staff would help match them to appropriate services and resources.
- Currently, their most successful communications methods are their website, fliers with QR codes, and Constant Contact newsletters. WRIC made a strong effort to update their website during the pandemic.
- The intake process for new clients can now be done directly through the WRIC website. New clients attend a virtual orientation, which is another important method by which

they communicate with potential clients. The orientations are scheduled for 2 pm and 7 pm every other Tuesday, accommodating people who work during the day.

- Clients sometimes drop out of the intake process, which can be rigorous with requirements for volunteer hours, job search hours, etc. Case managers are tasked with ensuring clients do not drop out. The first questions staff ask new clients are when a good time is to call and what phone number/email address to use. Staff never identify the organization over the phone.
- WRIC receives client referrals from many other organizations and NJ-211.
- To reach people who are limited-English proficient, WRIC has 5 Spanish-speaking staff. They receive referrals from organizations that work with non-citizens and domestic violence victims. Non-citizens who are domestic violence victims have a fear of reporting incidents. Helping non-citizens to feel comfortable sharing information requires a process of building trust that occurs little-by-little. Sometimes it is most important for people to simply be aware that their organization exists. When people become aware that organizations like WRIC are out there to help them, they feel more hopeful and supported.
- WRIC staff frequently table at local events. Opportunities for tabling are returning and WRIC is scheduled to attend several events.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- Technology use during the pandemic was especially a challenge for LEP and senior clients.
- They successfully applied for a grant from the Russell Berrie Foundation to provide WiFi hotspots, one year of internet service, and laptops for people in need.
- They have expanded computer literacy classes. In addition to existing classes on Microsoft Word and Excel, they have added basic skills classes about how to use a computer and specifically how to use Zoom. These classes are important because some clients do not even have an email address. These classes help clients to face their fears and give them confidence about using technology. In addition to classes, they offer one-on-one sessions for clients who need help with specific computer skills.
- WRIC is seeing rising demand for assistance with online employment applications.

Future Plans

- WRIC is planning to reopen to the public in September. They will continue to offer virtual programs in addition to in-person programs.
- Staff will likely continue to have a hybrid work model because WRIC invested in work-from-home technology.

Overall Outlook

- One downside of working from home is the lack of human connection among staff members. The teamwork and inspiration of being in the building is lost. For some staff, separating work from home is a challenge, especially for staff with children in remote schooling.

- The pandemic gave the agency time to step back and realize what their priorities should be.

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: Workforce Advantage

Interviewee: Gilberto Romero

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: August 23, 2021

Summary

Workforce Advantage is a non-profit organization that helps clients overcome employment barriers and build skills in computer literacy, English, and job readiness. Clients are predominantly immigrants from Central and South America who are heads of households or part of multi-generational households. The organization has three branches located in Elizabeth, Paterson, and Union City.

Prior to the pandemic, Workforce Advantage services and interactions with clients occurred in-person and through print media and telephone calls. During the pandemic, nearly all services, including classes and registration, became virtual in a very short time period. In order to deal with widespread lack of familiarity with technology among students, Workforce Advantage developed a technology support team and informational resources that they continue to use. They have also integrated basic computer literacy lessons into ESL classes, and another organization called Computers for People provides devices to students who need them. Because of these efforts, students are much more confident and better equipped to use technology and there are many resources available to assist new students.

Early in the pandemic, the organization experienced a high turnover of students due to changing schedules and lack of technology. They were very successful in recruiting new students by using targeted Facebook advertising to promote a video about their classes. They now have students from all over the state and have no trouble filling classes.

Romero expressed that, after successfully transitioning to digital classes, the organization is much more prepared to handle future challenges and plans to continue to offer hybrid classes when they eventually return to physical classrooms.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- Prior to the pandemic, Workforce Advantage provided all services on-site and promoted services through print materials and in-person interactions. When the pandemic began and they could no longer meet in-person, they quickly moved all classes and services online. Nearly all classes and services continue to be virtual, with the exception of the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program which is required to take place in person.
- Student registration also used to occur in person, however this is now entirely virtual. At the beginning, students felt fearful and resisted submitting personal documents online.

However, now students are familiar with and trust the organization with their information.

- At the beginning of the pandemic, classes had a 35% drop-out rate due to chaos in students' schedules. For example, a student might have enrolled in classes after being laid off from a job, but then the student was recalled and no longer had time for classes. Classes now have a 1% drop-out rate.

Changes in Client Demographics

- Prior to the pandemic, Workforce Advantage had three physical campus locations throughout northern New Jersey. Now, all the program offerings from these different campuses are offered in one virtual place online. In the past, each campus mainly served students living nearby, but now students can take classes virtually from all over the state and several come from different states and countries.
- Beyond an increase in students who come from a wider geographic area, there has not been a change in student demographics during the pandemic.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- During the pandemic, Workforce Advantage expanded their use of Facebook to promote their programs. They used targeted Facebook advertisements to circulate a video promoting their classes statewide. The use of targeted ads exponentially increased the number of students enrolled in their programs. Currently, they are less focused on advertising because there is now widespread awareness of their programs, and they have no problem attracting students.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- During the transition to online learning, they lost some students who did not have the necessary technology to participate in online classes or did not know how to use technology. It has taken time for the organization to learn how to deal with these issues, but once resolved the issues do not reoccur.
- Protocols to join virtual classes are enforced. Some students might only have a mobile phone to connect to the internet, but students are not allowed to participate in classes via phone. They are also required to not have any distractions or be doing anything else. In the beginning this was a big problem, but it has been largely resolved.
- In response to student technology issues, Workforce Advantage created a support team by training employees to help students. At first, creating the support team was a challenge because employees were also not familiar with technology. They developed many resources at the beginning of the pandemic which they continue to update and use. The organization is now in a better position with technology because they have all these resources on-hand, and overall students feel more confident using technology.
- The organization Computers for People provides devices to students who need them.
- LEP students continue to have issues with technology, so their ESL classes now include a computer literacy component. The computer literacy program helps students beyond the classroom, enabling them to help family members with technology.

Future Plans

- Workforce Advantage is considering returning to in-person classes in November 2021, however even if they do return the classes will continue to be hybrid.

Overall Outlook

- The organization is more prepared and has the resources to do online learning and provide clients with all they need to participate. They feel prepared and ready to handle situations like this in the future and to use technology as a tool in classes. Students are more prepared and better equipped to use technology as well.
- The pandemic forced the organization out of its comfort zone, because if they had not moved to remote learning they would have had to shut down. The organization is more confident that they can handle future challenges.
- They learned a lot about life, teaching, people, technology, health. It was like a long professional development session, but now they are ready for the future. And now they are in the best shape because they can serve people both online and face-to-face.

Virtual Engagement with Vulnerable Populations Follow-Up Interview Summary Report

Organization: Youth Advocate Programs

Interviewee: Fred Fogg

Interviewers: Nieves Pimienta, Sarah Tomasello

Date: September 14, 2021

Summary

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) is a non-profit organization that serves youth ages 4-21 involved with the juvenile justice or child welfare systems and youth who have behavioral health issues or developmental disabilities. YAP provides and advocates for community-based alternatives to care for these youth within a home, school, and community setting rather than an institutional setting. The organization operates more than 100 programs in 29 states. Staff work with children and families to develop a service plan that balances the requirements of the juvenile justice or child welfare system with the family's goals and priorities. YAP assistance typically includes case management, crisis intervention services, skill development programs, and educational and vocational training.

The interviewee stressed the importance of in-person interactions and activities with the at-risk youth they serve. Over a virtual platform, it is difficult for staff to build relationships with youth or foster social interactions among youth. It is also difficult to keep a young person engaged on a virtual platform for a long period of time, especially if they have been in virtual school all day. YAP changed their programming schedule so that virtual programs are shorter but occur more frequently.

In-person programming is also a matter of safety for these young people. The more time youth spend with YAP (typically about 10 hours per week), the less likely they are to be victims or perpetrators of violence. Youth themselves say that every opportunity to be away from the negative influences in their neighborhoods is important.

In-person outreach is also key for interacting with the families of clients. YAP prefers to promote their programs in person because this fosters better connections between staff and families. At in-person events, families not only have better opportunities to ask questions, but staff are able to help them ask the right questions.

Interview Notes

Changes in Engagement Strategies

- During the pandemic, YAP transitioned all in-person services to virtual platforms. Recently, they returned to offering in-person services. Virtual meetings are still available if clients are not comfortable meeting in-person, there is not space for social distancing

in the client's home, or the client and/or family members do not wear masks. Families also have the option of placing their children in group programs or one-on-one programs.

- Keeping a young person engaged through a virtual platform for a long period of time is very difficult, especially if they are logging on after being in virtual school. In response, YAP has adjusted their program scheduling to include shorter meetings that occur more often. For example, rather than meet three times per week for three hours, staff might meet with clients for one hour each day.
- It is difficult for staff to use virtual platforms to recreate a social environment where youth freely interact with each other. Having an engaging social environment is very important because staff monitor clients while they are socializing to identify and correct any negative behaviors.

Changes in Client Demographics

- YAP referrals have decreased. They receive many referrals from schools for cases of abuse and neglect, and these referrals decreased during the pandemic because children were not in school buildings where staff could observe signs of abuse. Referrals have also decreased because caseworkers made fewer home visits during the pandemic.
- YAP experienced significant budget cuts during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, they were able to serve all 21 New Jersey counties. They are still positioned to do this if the funding returns.

Changes in Promotional Strategies

- YAP receives client referrals from other organizations, agencies, and family court. Depending on the program, the qualifications for referral may be very broad.
- YAP sends out mailers and participates in community events to promote their services. They prefer promoting their programs in-person because families have better opportunities to ask questions and staff can connect better with families to figure out what support they need. YAP staff might know what types of questions the families should be asking. Face-to-face contact also helps reduce stigma about accessing mental health services.
- They have increased social media communications through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter because that is how more people are communicating now and young people use these platforms.

Changes in the Digital Divide

- During the pandemic, YAP conducted an assessment of whether their families had access to the necessary resources to facilitate virtual school and other virtual programming. Overall, there was a lack of devices and internet connectivity. Some families might have had devices, but this might be a work laptop not available for youth to use. YAP received grant funding to purchase tablets and Chromebooks for families.

- The parents they work with need basic training in how to use technology. Parents may receive help from their children to get online. YAP has assisted parents on a case-by-case basis but they do not have a formal technology training program.

Future Plans

- When safety is no longer an issue, families will want to return to in-person services. The quality of in-person programs is much better than virtual programs, and in-person programs for youth give respite for their families.

Overall Outlook

- The interviewee stressed the importance and positive impact of face-to-face, physical contact, stating “Our work is relationship based.” Good relationships are necessary to encourage young people to engage.
- In-person programming is also a matter of safety for the youth they serve. The more time youth spend with YAP (typically about 10 hours per week), the less likely they are to be victims or perpetrators of violence. Youth themselves say that every opportunity to be away from the negative influences in their neighborhoods is important.
- The lack of in-person contact was especially difficult for providing re-entry services to youth in juvenile detention. Prior to the pandemic, YAP would meet with the young person and their family months prior to their release to develop a plan and identify needed resources. During the pandemic, they were not able to establish a relationship with youth while in juvenile detention, making it much harder to engage and build a relationship with them once they were released.