RECOMMENDATIONS FOR VSPS TO MITIGATE FUTURE SERVICE DISRUPTION

RTI INTERNATIONAL

Prepared by:
Hannah Feeney, PhD
Rebecca Pfeffer, PhD
Leanne McCallum Desselle
Lauren Vollinger, PhD
Ruthie Grossman

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STUDY OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted victims of crime and community-based victim service provider (VSP) agencies were tasked with maintaining accessibility to their critical services. This research study explored (1) the challenges posed by the pandemic—including related societal changes; (2) how agencies pivoted to address these challenges; and (3) which innovations were successful in ways that warranted lasting changes in practice.

This study's sample included eight county-level project sites that vary in geography, urbanicity, and the presence of VSPs serving victims of gender-based violence (i.e., sexual assault, intimate partner violence, human trafficking, and/or stalking). To answer the study's research questions, we conducted (1) state and local policy assessments, (2) a web-based survey of all VSPs in each project county, and (3) eight in-depth agency case studies to explore more deeply the impacts of COVID-19 on individual agencies.

Findings revealed that, nationally, victim service providers adapted their services to federal, state, and local mandates and as well as critical infrastructure closures. In general, agency capacity was stretched to its limit, with organizations being asked to serve more clients, in greater distress, and with limited additional support. To continue to support survivors throughout the pandemic, victim service providers adjusted their service delivery models, sometimes in significant ways. Findings provide tangible strategies to support victim service providers as they continue to improve services for victims of crime.

Lessons learned from COVID-19 related service disruptions can help victim service providers better prepare for future unprecedented events. This brief provides an overview of key study findings and recommendations for victim service provider leadership, funders, and policymakers preparing for service disruptions.

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WHAT IS SERVICE DISRUPTION?

Service disruptions include any events that prevent an organization from offering their services. These can be big problems such as natural disasters, a pandemic, or a cyber-attack. However, these can also be smaller challenges, such as the retirement of a key staff member, a parade that blocks clients from reaching your building, or an internet outage that disrupts virtual appointments. Victim service providers play a critical role in their communities and thus must prepare to work around service disruptions.

MITIGATING SERVICE DISRUPTION

While it's not possible to predict the future or prevent every service disruption, there are steps that agency leadership, funders, and policymakers can take to mitigate or lessen the impacts of service disruptions.

EXAMPLES OF SERVICE DISRUPTION

Natural and manufactured disasters

Mold, health hazards, or building damage

Pandemic or epidemic

Cyberattack or data breach

Key staff turnover

This resource offers key findings and recommendations based on the findings from RTI International's "Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on Victim Service Provision: Challenges, Innovations, and Lessons Learned" study.

Click here to read the full report.

Nearly all agencies that participated in this research study adapted their service delivery to include new technology. Many perceived these changes to be for the better, as they believed services became more accessible to clients. Survivors experience victimization in diverse ways, and it is unlikely one model will work for all individuals. Through this study, the following patterns for optimal service delivery were observed.

OPTIMAL SERVICE MODALITY FOR CLIENT TYPES

Clients who benefited from remote services included:
- clients with disabilities
- clients requiring childcare
- clients with inflexible work schedules
- clients with transportation barriers
- clients outside of an agency's immediate area

Clients who did not benefit from remote services included:
- clients without consistent access to technology
- clients without access to a private space
- young children
- older clients who are less familiar with technology

OPTIMAL SERVICE MODALITY FOR SERVICE TYPES

Services best suited for in-person models:
- shelter
- accompaniment (legal, medical)
- resource provision (food, gift cards, hygiene)
- training with children and youth (in schools or detention settings)
- support groups or group counseling

Services best suited for remote models:
- hotlines
- information and referrals in crisis scenarios

Services best suited for hybrid models where clients can choose the approach that works best for them:
- intake
- counseling
- case management
- training with adults
- community engagement

DECIDING BETWEEN REMOTE AND IN-PERSON SERVICE PROVISION

Expanding remote service provision is a way for agencies to adapt during service disruptions. The chart below explores which types of services were most successful when adapted from in-person to remote services, and which were better suited for in-person models.

CLIENT ACCESS TO FACILITIES		**Are the things your client relies on to attend in-person services still active during this service disruption? This might include childcare, transportation, or a consistent work schedule.** IF NOT: **Remote services** may be most helpful to your client.
CLIENT PRIVACY AND SAFETY		**Is your client able to access a safe and private place to receive services remotely?** IF NOT: **In-person services** may be most helpful to your client.
CLIENT ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY		**Does your client have consistent internet service that can be used in a safe and private place? Do they have a general familiarity with technology or ability to follow instructions on how to use the technology that your agency has chosen?** IF NOT: **In-person** services may be most helpful to your client.
CLIENT ACCESS TO SERVICES THEY USUALLY RECIEVE FROM YOU		**Can the services your client receives be replicated in a virtual environment? For example, if your client and their child are used to eating lunch at your agency, are they able to replace that food at home?** IF NOT: **Remote and in-person** services may be helpful for your client. For example, remotely, clients may receive an emailed restaurant gift card. In person, clients may schedule physical office time to "shop" for donated food at your agency.

CAN YOU USE BOTH SERVICE MODELS?

Hybrid models, where clients can choose between remote or in-person service options, are particularly well-suited to the following activities:

- Client intake
- Individual counseling or therapy
- Case management
- Trainings for adults (children are easier to engage in person)
- Community engagement (such as planning a food drive or fundraising)

Service provider leaders can take a variety of steps to mitigate service disruption.

1 **Provide flexible options for staff.**

It helps everyone when building access, working guidelines, and client services are adaptable to changing situations. Ensure that your staff members are well supported through these changes by offering hazard pay, self-care time, and extra flexibility as needed.

2 **Provide flexible options for clients.**

Hybrid options may increase client access to services, regardless of circumstances, but are particularly important in the event of service disruptions. For organizations serving individuals who have experienced violence, autonomy to choose between in-person or remote services may be especially important.

3 **Stay updated on tech options for services.**

For those using remote or hybrid services, provide staff with consistent WiFi access, work laptops, and confidential case management systems. Engage a tech expert before you need one, especially if your agency still uses paper files or other materials that may be inaccessible if your office closes. Create a guideline video or document for each program your agency uses to help train your staff – for example, a walkthrough video on how to create and send a Zoom meeting.

4 **Remove service barriers for clients.**

Consider external barriers to access services at your organization. If your client cannot access services due to something outside your agency, such as loss of transportation or childcare, consider reallocating funds to address that condition. Staff drivers, rideshare or bus vouchers, and childcare shares may all be helpful. Additionally, bodily autonomy may be particularly important for clients who have experienced violence. Consider the balance between safety and individual choice (e.g., mask or vaccine requirements).

5 **Maintain your community networks.**

Relationships are especially important during times of turmoil. Keeping in touch with other agencies supporting victims in your area (e.g., shelters, food pantries, or law enforcement), can lessen the burden of services on your agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

Funders can take several steps to support funded programs during times of service disruption and crisis.

1

Provide and maintain flexibility for funded programs.

Develop simple, flexible systems for funded programs to fulfill reporting requirements during service disruptions. Set a system in place for e-signing documents, allowance of late reporting due to service interruption, and grant amendments as needed.

Traditionally, many VSPs have been restricted to service provision in specific geographic areas, but it may be worth considering whether service providers that have established high-quality remote services and offer specialized services (e.g., anti-trafficking case management) or specialize in specific populations (e.g., LBGTA2+ youth) may be more effective if they are able to serve clients from a broader area.

2

If you scale up funding, be prepared to scale down.

Organizations have to increase staff capacity and other resources when they take on new funding and may need support planning for when this funding disappears. Emergency funding during a crisis is helpful but be prepared to help an agency whose monies and responsibilities have ballooned during service interruption to comfortably reduce those services when the situation calms. Consider options like step-down funding to help agencies transition to more sustainable approaches.

Policymakers can take several steps to support service providers during times of service disruption and crisis.

1

Allow service providers to do their work.

Providing services during a crisis is extremely challenging. **Consider how to remove red tape and offer legislative support that allows providers to continue to serve their communities.** For example, consider the following:

- Define the provision of services to individuals in crisis as essential work.
- Build in funding, support, and relief to agencies providing crisis intervention and assisting survivors. For example, consider supporting provision of hazard pay or prioritized access to limited materials (e.g., personal protective equipment).

2

Anticipate underreporting of victimization.

This study found that the official crime statistics during the COVID-19 pandemic did not fully capture what victim service provider staff were observing within their agencies. Agency staff described how some clients were unable to report the crimes committed against them because they were trapped with their abusers, afraid of COVID-19, or experiencing other barriers. **Establish plans to solicit information about on-the-ground experiences of gender-based violence agencies during crises and be prepared to support observed changes in service needs.**