COVID-19 IMPACT

Final Report Summary
Department of Community Justice, Multnomah County, Oregon

Research & Planning
Community Justice

WHAT

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the restrictions put in place by the Oregon Governor's Office beginning in March of 2020, the Department of Community Justice (DCJ) made a number of changes to community corrections operations in an attempt to protect the health and well-being of DCJ staff and the people they serve. DCJ leadership wanted to understand and document the impacts it had on all parts of DCJ's ecosystem. DCJ's Research and Planning (RAP) unit developed a multi-faceted evaluation methodology to capture the experiences with COVID-19 across all the groups of interest. The full report can be seen by clicking the link above. The following is a summary of that report.

WHO

DCJ staff across the Adult Services Division (ASD), Juvenile Services Division (JSD), and Director's Office; justice-involved individuals (JIIs); survivors of violence and victims of crime, and external providers.

WHEN

The data collection period for this evaluation spanned from April 2020 through February 2021.

HOW

DCJ Staff: Team meeting interviews, key informant interviews, and an all staff online survey.
DCJ JIIs: Online survey
DCJ Survivors of Violence/Victims of Crime: Online survey
External Providers: Interviews of providers who work with JIIs, and providers who work with survivors of violence/victims of crime

WHY

The intent of this evaluation was to engage as many people in the feedback process as possible in order to represent a broad range of experiences. We hoped to learn both the challenges and benefits resulting from having to adjust to a global pandemic.

🧭 Purpose

This document, along with the full report, should be viewed as a conversation starter, something that instigates innovative thinking, and a guide to how we want to shape DCJ "post-COVID."

As members of DCJ and advocates for both JIIs and survivors of violence, it is our duty to ensure that we learn from this and actively use the information gathered to address the identified barriers and promote change wherever and whenever possible.

The following is a brief summary of shared themes among all of the groups interviewed. If you would like to see a deeper dive into findings broken down by group, please see pages 3-5.

Shared Themes - Challenges

Emotional
Well-being

- Balancing work/supervision expectations with family responsibilities (especially childcare) was difficult.
- JIIs had difficulty focusing on treatment with many other stressors.
- Survivors were more challenged to leave abusive partners (more stressors and less available services.
- Advocates suffered more vicarious trauma/burnout.
- PPOs/Providers had difficulty establishing some relationships.

"DCJ needs to focus on morale. Right now it feels like you need to work from home a full 40 hours, juggle your children who are home and demanding help with school, don't let your clients go by the wayside, reach out to community partners who are also not operating by their usual practices, oh and by the way we are cutting the budget so hopefully that goes well for you and your resources." - DCJ Staff Member

JII *Accountability*

- Working remote limits PPO ability to hold JIIs accountable.
- No in-person check-ins let JIIs know consequences were limited, possibly increasing criminal behavior.
- Less in-person services can unfairly harm victims/survivors.

I think my effectiveness has been affected in that I have limited options when I don't want to jail sanction. I [usually would have] used community service and that is not currently available. So often violations that, in the past, would be given 1 or 2 days of community service are now being given a verbal warning. - DCJ Staff Member

Technology *& Virtual Services*

- It was hard to quickly increase technology skills and literacy, and/or equipment to immediately go remote.
- Some JIIs did not have technology resources needed and/or staff had to be technology support.
- It was challenging to maintain confidentiality virtually.

"The JIIs you work with are a self selected group. If a JII chooses not to engage or does not have the resources to engage (homeless, no phone, etc.) it is very difficult to maintain consistent contact." - DCJ Staff Member

Most Vulnerable - *Most harmed by COVID*

- Houseless clients were not able to access many in-person services.
- Victim Advocates said the most vulnerable clients were least able to access COVID resources/funding.

"I have my perpetrator in my ear telling me 'see I told you. I told you no one is gonna come out and arrest me. I told you my violation wasn't gonna go through and court was never gonna happen.'"
- DCJ Survivor

Shared Themes - Benefits

Flexibility
Through Remote Services

- Telework flexibility can support positive mental health, better work-life balance, and more equity.
- There was increased access to services for some JIIs due to not having to find childcare or leave work.
- More online treatment and court services could increase JII engagement.
- Decreasing stress of in-person office visits could increase JII productivity.

"[...] in-person visits are not necessary for most people. Going into a negative atmosphere that is highly controlled serves to increase a person's identification with their stigma." - DCJ JII

Relationships

- Relationships with coworkers improved due to a shared attitude of "doing whatever it takes."
- Providers established stronger connections with other organizations to ensure client needs were met.
- Most JIIs reported positive experiences with PPOs and providers.

"Most JIIs are more communicative and rapport building has been easier. I think telephone and/or video meetings have been an easier means of check-ins for JIIs."
-DCJ Staff Member

Resilience

- Providers were proud of their ability to adjust quickly to the shift from in-person services to telehealth
- DCJ staff were pleased that ideas were considered and enacted, acknowledging their ability to adjust

"Protective orders can be applied for at home now, which I think is amazing. Like, make a note for the transcript, I am smiling ear to ear. Being able, as a survivor, to apply for and petition the court for a protective order from home, or from a location that is safe for them, I think is a huge triumph."
- DCJ Survivor

More Detailed Findings Within Each Group

DCJ Staff

Challenges for staff were related to increased work stress associated with:
- Confusion around constantly changing policies and procedures
- Increased workload associated with new duties, new ways to accomplish tasks, and some staff being reassigned
- Competing priorities at home and challenges in transitioning work from the office to home
- Decline in emotional well-being from fatigue, non-work time being less restorative, and missing in-person contact

Benefits for staff were related to teleworking and other unexpected effects of the pandemic, including:
- Flexibility of schedules
- Elimination of commute time
- Reduced stress due to the relaxed nature of working from home
- Allows more focus without the competing distractions from the office environment
- More accessible for employees with disabilities
- Innovative ideas from line staff were heard and considered by management
- More amicable and collaborative engagement with coworkers

Issues associated with in-person services and resources included:
- Initial difficulty accessing personal protective equipment (PPE) and concerns about COVID exposure
- Frustration around coworkers and managers refusing to follow safety guidelines
- Staff wanting more access to COVID testing and increased symptom monitoring
- Lack of transparency about COVID outbreaks or coworkers testing positive

COVID-19 impacts on JII contact included:
- Most PPOs reported being in contact with JIIs the same or more often, but some reported less frequent contact
- Less than one-third of staff reported frustration being able to reach clients
- The majority of staff reported that their effectiveness working with clients was "good," "very good," or "excellent," but over one-third reported that their effectiveness had decreased relative to before the pandemic.
- Reasons for the change in quality of contact with JIIs included:
  - rapport building and JII engagement
  - JII accountability and consequences
  - ability to provide resources for JIIs

Personal well-being has been affected by the pandemic, including:
- Isolation from loved ones
- Deteriorating mental health
- Worries about physical health
- Parenting/childcare burden
- Limited technology prowess
- Inaccessible goods or services
- Political climate surrounding COVID

Staff recommendations for the future:
- Continued remote work options
- Recognize struggles of staff who are unable to telework
- Open up more in-person services
- Keep up or increase communication and transparency

👪 DCJ JIIs ⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯

- Although most JIIs had monthly or more frequent contact with their PPOs, some JIIs desired more contact.
- JIIs reported high quality contact with their PPOs.
- JIIs experienced challenges moving through their supervision requirements.
- Generally positive feedback about contact with treatment providers.
- Mixed experiences with the courts, with many JIIs feeling frustrated.

Access to supplies and resources was generally good for JIIs:
- Most JIIs had access to supplies they needed to stay safe from the virus.
- The majority of JIIs had access to medical care.
- Most JIIs had access to a phone and housing, but fewer had access to food.

Personal impacts of COVID-19 included:
- Over one-third of the JIIs knew someone who had been diagnosed with COVID-19.
- Nearly half of the JIIs were taking care of someone at home.
- The majority of JIIs reported that the pandemic was stressful to them.
- Many of the JIIs experienced employment issues due to the pandemic.
- Many JIIs reported difficulty paying for their expenses during the pandemic.
- Almost half of the JIIs reported being impacted differently by the pandemic due to certain characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity/color, age, disability status, sexual orientation or gender identity, religion, immigration status).

Staff observations included:
- Staff reflected positively on their ability to provide resources to most JIIs.
- Concerns about challenges providing resources to the most vulnerable members of the community (e.g., JIIs experiencing houselessness, JIIs with mental illness, and youth in detention).
- With the shift to more virtual services, staff noted increased flexibility and convenience for many JIIs.
- The reliance on technology put some JIIs at a disadvantage, along with the challenges of buildings being closed.
- Reduced stress from not having to meet staff in offices where there is a strong sense of law enforcement.
- Concerns about reduced confidentiality connecting with staff by phone, often in public places.

👪 Survivors of Violence ⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯

Survivors of violence are more likely to have multiple oppressed identities, resulting in missing:
- Financial security
- Safe housing
- Childcare
- Safety

Challenges navigating the legal system, including:
- Law enforcement
- Court
- Community supervision
- Some groups of survivors were disproportionately affected, including:
  - Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)
  - Survivors of elder abuse
  - Undocumented or immigrant survivors

Benefits to survivors included:
- Increased accessibility through remote services, (court proceedings and therapy or counseling services)
- The ability to request restraining orders by phone was viewed as a tremendous win for survivors.
- Increased funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and through local initiatives allowed advocacy organizations to help survivors seek safety during the pandemic.

👥 External Providers

Challenges for external providers included:
- Complicated logistics of connecting clients to technology, especially for marginalized client groups.
- Challenges implementing COVID-specific protocols for in-person services, especially in-patient settings.
- Virtual treatment impeded the establishment and support of strong relationship building.
- Financial challenges included:
  - reduced number of clients who can be served in-person due to physical distancing requirements
  - reduced staff time due to illness, quarantining, and personal reasons preventing in-person work
  - decreased referrals from the court, criminal justice, and school systems
  - individuals and families disconnecting from services due to being overwhelmed by other priorities
  - increased purchases to support teleworking
- Workload challenges included:
  - additional tasks necessary for virtual programming
  - additional tasks associated with COVID-19 safeguards
  - reduced staffing required those remaining to take on more tasks
- Challenges related to employee well-being:
  - provider staff felt powerless to help their clients
  - reduced coworker support
  - increased work hours and stress resulted in exhaustion
  - increased trauma from working during the pandemic
- DCJ-specific challenges included:
  - closure of the Mead building, which helped providers to provide wraparound services to their clients
  - significant slow-down in the contracting process
  - limiting in-person supervision negatively affected provider operations due to reduced accountability

Benefits for providers included:
- Pride in the work accomplished during the pandemic, especially the proactive response of staff
- Increased connection with other service providers
- Greater accessibility through virtual services for some clients, which increased engagement
- Increased funding from internal adjustments and aid from county, state, and federal sources
- Policy changes implemented that improved staff morale:
  - cutting hours while still paying for 8-hour shifts
  - additional hazard pay for staff continuing in-person work
  - extra vacation days available to staff
  - ensuring daily breaks and ending work on time
  - providing home office equipment and wifi