

# Strategies to support the administration of direct service provision 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 administrators and supervisors support front-line staff who work with clients remotely, specifically regarding three key areas where administrators are likely to experience the greatest challenges: logistics, policies and procedures, and communication.

## Logistics

Attending to logistics is key to successfully identifying and monitoring staff needs at all times, but particularly during a crisis. Logistics focus on assessment, coordination, and management of the resources needed to ensure that staff can work with families in a smooth, timely, cost-effective, and reliable manner. Key organizational considerations include the use of technology and resource management.

### Technology and office supplies

Develop a plan to assess the day-to-day resource needs of staff. For example, consider asking staff to complete a survey of the office supplies and technology they need to continue to support clients while working remotely.

- Do staff need access to basic office supplies as well as more expensive equipment and resources (including computers, tablets, chargers, batteries, internet, Wi-Fi, hotspots, printers, faxes, and scanners) to engage effectively with clients? What fiscal resources are available or can be reallocated to meet these needs?
- Discuss staff members' comfort levels with sharing personal contact information with clients and make adjustments as needed, such as using call forwarding and other features typically available on many phone systems. Brainstorm work-around strategies (e.g., using Google Voice or other services) if resources are in limited supply.



One South Ward agency changed to a cloud-based phone system that enables office phone lines to connect to individual mobile phones. Clients are now able to reach agency staff without staff sharing their personal phone numbers.

## Gathering resources

It is important to understand what resources are available to help clients with concerns about COVID-19. It may be overwhelming, however, for staff to review each resource and make decisions about which are appropriate for particular individuals or families—especially when some resources may be in short supply. Promise Neighborhood agency administrators should consider working together to identify available local resources and to evaluate communities' and families' needs to ensure equitable distribution aligned with these needs.



One strategy for gathering resources is to bring together a team to track and monitor responses to COVID-19. In the South Ward, this team has daily virtual check-ins to identify new resources and update information about existing ones. These check-ins ensure that staff have access to the most up-to-date information, saving them the need to make assessments about resource relevance and eligibility on their own.

## Policies and Procedures

Promise Neighborhood agency administrators should review their policies and procedures to ensure they are appropriate for remote working and to allow staff the flexibility to be effective at their jobs.

### Adjusting workplace policies and expectations

- Review your current policies (e.g., sick and personal leave) and staff expectations. If needed, revise existing policies or develop new ones that are appropriate for remote working and that consider guidance from federal or state policies about the pandemic.
- Share any policy revisions or additions with staff verbally and in writing to ensure that everyone is aware of and understands remote work responsibilities.
- Employees who work remotely may currently have additional personal responsibilities, including child care, teaching their children, and caring for loved ones impacted by COVID-19.
  - Regularly assess how work is being assigned; staff and/or client situations may change rapidly. Keep in touch with staff so you can flag when a staff member is particularly burdened with personal responsibilities, and consider reallocating work temporarily if needed.
- Allow staff flexibility to work around their other responsibilities and encourage and support self-care strategies.

## Communication

For agencies whose work primarily consists of face-to-face interactions, it may be challenging to continue working while being physically separated. Communication is the foundation of successful remote work. Partner administrators should communicate early and often with a variety of stakeholders important to their agencies, including the following:

### Staff

- Partner administrators need to identify the best strategies for communicating with their staff. First steps should include asking about staff's specific communication preferences (phone, email, text message, instant message, and videoconferencing) and confirming their working hours.

- In the absence of physical proximity, staff may miss out on crucial opportunities to communicate formally and informally in shared office spaces. To address this, consider establishing new lines of communication and opportunities for both formal and informal connections (e.g., scheduled or ad hoc virtual coffee meetings or lunches, regular access to agency leadership via virtual office hours).
- Staff will rely on technology even more when shifting to fully remote work. Designate someone as the contact person for technology concerns and ensure that staff know when that person is available for support or troubleshooting.
- Administrators will need to communicate that staff self-care is the precursor to good service provision. Regular check-ins with staff can take place via phone calls, instant messaging, text messaging, and videoconferencing. Use technology that allows you to see staff members, which may provide a frame of reference for how they are coping.

## Funders

- In addition to Promise Neighborhood funding, Partner agencies may receive monies from other sources. Communicating about important topics can have immediate and long-term programmatic implications. For example:
  - Are there any anticipated changes to funding (e.g., will you have challenges meeting matching requirements)?
  - Can funds be used differently or repurposed to serve an unanticipated staff or family need during the pandemic?
  - Are there any changes in reporting requirements or timelines
- Consider initiating conversations with your funders about allocating and using resources to support staff or clients in the aftermath of the pandemic.

## Other partners

- In addition to staff and funders, administrators should communicate with other organizations in their networks. For example, connect with other Promise Neighborhood or community-based agency administrators to understand changes in their availability, services, and funding. These types of proactive conversations can ensure that services to families and referrals continue smoothly, and can help avoid duplication and misuse of limited resources.
- If you are currently partnering with a program evaluator, be sure to communicate any operational and programmatic changes. Your external evaluator may be a good resource to help you use data to respond to and anticipate future community needs.



One way Partners are communicating and tracking resources is through the creation of a listserv that allows agencies to share information.

# Conclusion

While remote working may not be the ideal method for service provision within Promise Neighborhoods or other community-based organizations, there are ways to prepare staff for success. Families living in Promise Neighborhoods will need the crucial services offered by Partners now more than ever before. For this reason, administrators should support their staff through this transition to give them the tools to effectively meet the needs of clients, particularly those who are heavily impacted 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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