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## Supervising Child Welfare Professionals Virtually during a Pandemic (Blog Post)

Posted on April 16, 2020

We are in the midst of a pandemic and many child welfare professionals across the country are working from home. Not only are staff having to become accustomed to this new “normal,” but are having to do so while educating their own children, caring for elderly parents, and determining how to meet the needs of the families and children they serve. During the COVID 19 crisis, supervisors must consistently engage their employees, while assessing the needs of their employees and the needs of the families served by the child welfare system.

The QIC-WD wants to bring the available evidence to child welfare workforce leaders as they navigate these rapidly changing times. As part of our work we have explored the literature around alternative work arrangements and documented [Virginia’s](#) mobile solution and [Washington’s](#) telework initiative.

All of these activities provide lessons for the broader field during this time. The strategies below are intended to help supervisors support their staff, encourage team cohesion, and ensure the work will continue in these trying times.

- **Set the tone.** Approach supervision with the highest degree of empathy and by giving your staff the latitude and flexibility to organize their personal and professional lives in the ways that work for them. With this degree of trust and honoring of our collective situation will come productivity.
- **Name it to normalize it.** First, remember that while child welfare staff work “on the go, and out of their cars,” many are now being required to work from their homes—we call it telework. Second, recognize that not everyone will have an optimal home work space, and may have more distractions than would be preferred. Third, recognize that the pandemic is bringing additional personal and professional stress to an already stressful job. Lastly, recognize that we are all struggling.
- **Recognize that “working virtually” is different for those who have requirements to be “in the community.”** Child welfare professionals who provide direct service to children and families still have child safety as the first priority. However, assessing for safety looks different during the COVID 19 crisis. Staff may experience a range of feelings



including fear and anxiety about needing to interface and have legitimate concerns for their and their family's health. Listen with compassion and leverage agency protocols and resources to support them in practicing social distancing, whenever possible.

- **Encourage staff to do a telework self-assessment.** Telework is not the optimal way of working for everyone. Some staff are teleworking involuntarily, for the first time, and may prefer working from an office. This [self-assessment](#) will help the supervisor determine how to tailor their supervision to the teleworking employee.
- **Assume positive intent and good will.** Outside of the child welfare sector, there is some telework research that shows that teleworkers are more productive than those who work from an office environment. Teleworkers also report high degrees of satisfaction, autonomy, trust between themselves and their organization, and work-life balance. When agencies message that they expect everyone to succeed in the virtual workspace, most will rise to the occasion.
- **Provide teleworking tips to increase effectiveness and comfort with working virtually.** This includes: establishing a routine; dressing as if you are going to the office; structuring your day as much as possible; getting up and walking around, either in your home environment or outside—enjoying some sunshine is an extra bonus; setting boundaries between “home” and your “work”; setting goals for yourself; taking regular breaks and enjoy a lunch activity (a walk, call family); and creating a distinct and productive workspace, if possible.
- **Define expectations and set realistic goals, with a posture of adjusting work as necessary.** Supervisors need to have conversations and agreements about working virtually. This would include but not be limited to: establishing “office” hours; communicating schedule changes; receiving regular updates; performing the work while adhering to policy, standards, and timeframes; returning calls within a specified amount of time, texting for urgent matters, and establishing appropriate times to call; and developing a process for child welfare staff to document their whereabouts when it is necessary to have face-to-face visits with children and families.



- **Blocking of time.** Encourage staff to organize their days in blocks of time (deep work and shallow work) to increase their achievement of their goals. Deep work requires concentration focused cognitive energy, whereas shallow work—responding to emails—doesn't require the same level of thinking.



- **Communicate regularly with your staff.** Be available for impromptu conversations on case-related matters, as well as for supportive supervision. Let staff know when you will not be available and who to contact in your absence.
- **Establish regular, consistent check-ins with each individual you supervise.** During this time of social isolation you may want to increase the amount and the length of check-ins.
  - Build trust and rapport and create psychological safety: Remind your staff that you are there to support them and assist them. Ask how they are managing working from home. Ask about their family. Share something about yourself – a funny story or a challenge. Find commonalities.
  - Provide clinical supervision related to cases and discuss other work-related issues, including determining priorities and managing the current workload.
  - Focus on what is being accomplished vs micromanaging, using your previously established, agreed upon goals.
  - This is difficult time for everyone – be as flexible as possible.
  - Offer encouragement and emotional support.
  - Make sure staff feel valued and appreciated. Acknowledge the work they are doing and the stressful times we are experiencing.
  - Emphasize work-life balance and ask what they are doing to take care of themselves at this time.



- **Utilize an online/virtual meeting platform.** Ensure staff have access to the necessary tools and equipment, and that they feel comfortable using the various forms of technology. When you use an online meeting platform use video (when possible) so staff can interact face-to-face. It will reduce multi-tasking and increase connections during this period of social isolation. An agenda can keep everyone on track to make sure time is used wisely. Other tips include: encourage information sharing and frank discussions; and dedicate the first five minutes of all meetings for small talk.

- **Encourage staff to connect outside of online meetings.** Suggest staff check in regularly with each other via chat features, text messages, or video call such as FaceTime. You may also want to provide opportunities for social interaction (e.g. virtual synchronous coffee/lunch/happy hour, impromptu conversations).

**Additional resources:**

- [Children's Bureau COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Virtual Workforce Supports](#)
- [Washington State is Using Telework to Strengthen the Child Welfare Workforce](#)
- [Washington Progress Update – Telework in Action](#)