Advocacy services for survivors of intimate partner violence: Pivots and lessons learned during the COVID-19 quarantine in Tacoma, Washington

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Abstract
The Crystal Judson Family Justice Center (CJFJC), like many advocacy programs for survivors of intimate partner violence, transformed its structure and operating procedures amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States was in Washington State, where CJFJC is located, and Governor Jay Inslee acted quickly with a strict stay-at-home order. This paper describes the pre-pandemic, in-person service model used at CJFJC and then the transition to a fully online service model utilizing phone, email and online procedures and platforms. The rapid transition posed many opportunities to learn how to provide services during public pandemics, and how to provide services virtually. We conclude with detailed lessons learned from the experiences of filing domestic violence protection orders online, Zoom court hearings, innovation surrounding community partnerships, and information technology development.

Keywords
advocacy services, COVID-19, domestic violence, family justice center, intimate partner violence, protection orders
Key points for the family court community

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, one Family Justice Center quickly pivoted from in-person service delivery to virtual service delivery. Challenges included quickly obtaining laptop computers, necessary software, training staff to provide services virtually, and coordinating with the courts and community partners. These challenges were met through close cooperation with the courts and community partners.

- The experience taught the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center staff that there are advantages to virtual advocacy service delivery: advocates now have the knowledge/hardware/software necessary to work from home when needed; survivors who live in rural areas, who do not have transportation, childcare and/or other limitations to attending in-person service delivery can learn of available advocacy services, obtain orders of protection, and attend court hearings virtually.

- However, there are also disadvantages to virtual advocacy service delivery: some survivors do not have the knowledge necessary to access the Internet, social media, do not have private computers or cell phones to access advocacy or court services. Survivors may need access and assistance to learn to use these electronic platforms.

- Particularly during the pandemic, financial support is essential including providing cell phones and data plans, as these can assist survivors’ access to virtual advocacy services and court hearings. Providing service information in grocery stores and other public places can assist survivors in learning of services in their communities.

- In-person contact for this Family Justice Center remains necessary for those survivors who cannot access virtual services and who need emergency household goods, food, etc. Advocates can also provide in-person, trauma-informed care in assisting survivors in completing paperwork for same day orders of protection, developing safety plans, and providing community outreach and emotional support by attending court hearings with survivors.
INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the SARS-CoV-2/Coronavirus-19/COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022) in 2020 impacted communities worldwide. Vulnerable communities, such as survivors of domestic violence (DV)\(^1\) and intimate partner violence (IPV)\(^2\) were at increased risk due to widespread quarantine measures. The Centers for Disease Control report that 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men are exposed to IPV every year (Boserup, McKenney & Elkbuli, 2020). Adults who experience IPV tend to have more medical visits and health problems (e.g., acute physical injury, mental health diagnoses, and “acute/chronic pathologies”) (Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020). The effects of IPV are not limited to the adults in the intimate relationship; children are also severely impacted by IPV psychologically, emotionally, and sometimes physically (Boserup, McKenney & Elkbuli, 2020).

A consistent finding in research is in times of community distress, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, reports of IPV increase dramatically (Lyons & Brewer, 2021). Early data from China, Europe and the United States indicate that during the COVID-19 quarantine, reports of IPV increased worldwide (Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020). COVID-19 also created unique consequences for vulnerable individuals, which led to a cascade of negative outcomes, including economic, food and housing insecurity, and increases of IPV exposure in children. Workers were laid off, fired, or quit working to reduce risk of exposure to COVID-19, and/or to care for children whose schools/daycare centers were closed or only intermittently open. During a time when medical care was essential, the loss of work also led to loss of benefits (e.g., sick leave and health insurance). Loss of work can also lead to food and housing insecurity (Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020), further increasing risk of health problems and stress on families. As a result, these economic challenges severely limited a survivor’s financial independence and ability to access health, mental health, and advocacy services to assist in leaving a violent relationship (Järnecke & Flanagan, 2020; van Gelder et al., 2020).

To reduce transmission of COVID-19, governments restricted day-to-day activities; these restrictions substantially overlap with, and intensify, the IPV strategies used by perpetrators. For example, forced geographical isolation, forced isolation from co-workers, friends, family, neighbors, and others are common with stay-at-home orders and are also commonly used by perpetrators to isolate and control their partners. Increased isolation also meant greater amounts of time with the perpetrator in the home as employment ceased or moved online, K-12 schools were closed, and if at all, were only intermittently reopened. All of these factors increased the stress on families, compounded the dynamics of IPV in already abusive relationships, and increased children’s exposure to parental IPV (van Gelder et al., 2020).

Advocacy organizations had to quickly adapt to stay-at-home orders, often moving from providing in-person services to providing services through cell phones, email, online platforms (Zoom), and extremely limited in-person contact. Unfortunately, for some survivors, these changes made accessing support services extremely difficult. For example, some survivors have no private access to cell phones, email, or the Internet. In addition, quarantine often requires survivors and children to be isolated with a perpetrator, which severely restricts a survivor’s ability to privately place calls to support lines, access websites for information, send emails, or participate in Zoom meetings with support service agency personnel. These contacts could be overheard or monitored, and/or increase the possibility of escalation of violence as retaliation (Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center’s (CJFJC) model of operation in Pierce County (Tacoma), Washington. In this paper, we first explain the pre-COVID-19 pandemic, in-person service model of CJFJC. In doing so, we describe CJFJC’s policies and procedures prior to the

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\(^1\)For this paper, the term domestic violence (DV) encompasses patterns of abusive behavior (WSCADV, 2022), which can be chargeable violent offenses that are perpetrated by a current or previous intimate partner. A perpetrator of DV can enact violence upon a person who the perpetrator shares a child with, lives or has lived with, or by someone affiliated with the victim (USDOJ, n.d.).

\(^2\)The term intimate partner violence (IPV) will be primarily used in this paper as the term DV reflects acts of physical violence, whereas the term IPV is reflective of not only physical violence, but also other abusive and controlling behaviors perpetrators enact on intimate partners that are also harmful (Breiding et al., 2015). Thus, IPV is defined as a range of violent and abusive behaviors including physical, sexual, psychological, coercive and economic, committed within a current or former intimate relationship (van Gelder et al., 2020).
COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions. We next explain the rapid changes in policy and operating procedures CJFJC adopted to quickly accommodate the changing COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions issued in Washington State. We conclude by discussing the lessons learned from adapting procedures, the changes that positively impacted survivors, and the procedures best provided through an in-person model at CJFJC’s physical location, which will be reinstated when safety permits.

BRIEF HISTORY OF CRYSTAL JUDSON FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER (CJFJC)

In the early 2000s, Pierce County was moving towards a more trauma-informed care model for survivors of IPV, including the development of a local Family Justice Center. The first Family Justice Center in the United States was located in San Diego, California and created best practices for future Family Justice Centers in the United States. The model recognizes the need for a collaboration of support services for DV and IPV survivors (Alliance of Hope International, 2021a). Family Justice Centers provide access to an array of services, including community-based advocacy, referrals to other social service providers, civil legal support, and access to criminal justice services (law enforcement and prosecutors) in one location. The survivors can then work with advocates and are not required to repeatedly tell their stories in order to secure various support services. Family Justice Centers provide the courts, law enforcement, and prosecutors with critical community-based referrals and services for addressing safety of survivors and their families.

The Family Justice Center was opened in Tacoma, Washington in 2005 due in large part to a local murder committed by Tacoma Police Department’s Chief David Brame. His estranged wife, Crystal Judson Brame, was a survivor of IPV and sought help in the community, as she knew that she was in danger of being killed by her estranged husband. The fact that David Brame was the then Chief of Police negatively impacted Crystal’s ability to access the help she desperately needed. Tragically, Chief Brame murdered Crystal inside of her car and in front of their young children. Brame then took his own life. The presence of the two children in the backseat of the car during the murder added to the tragedy.

The murder of Crystal Judson Brame by Chief Brame galvanized local leaders to support a local Family Justice Center. The media attention surrounding the case brought awareness to the dangers of IPV experienced at every socioeconomic income level, and the need to better serve survivors by addressing major gaps in survivor support (LaRosa, 2006; Leung, 2003). With the support from an interlocal agreement between Pierce County and the City of Tacoma, the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center (CJFJC) officially opened its doors in 2005, naming the center in honor of Crystal Judson. In having different organizations working together with local community leaders, CJFJC was created to provide comprehensive support and referral services. Currently, CJFJC supports the work of nine programs and 35 partner organizations, including seven onsite partners and 39 co-located professionals, working together to support survivors (i.e., http://www.aplaceofhelp.com/) (Crystal Judson Family Justice Center, 2021). It is located 30 miles south of Seattle, Washington, and assists survivors of IPV including women, men, and non-binary individuals from all demographics in Pierce County (Tacoma), Washington.

PRE-PANDEMIC, IN-PERSON SERVICE DELIVERY

Pre-pandemic, CJFJC’s service model was an in-person, one-stop-shop providing advocacy and referrals, and police and prosecution services. These services and programs were provided in CJFJC’s central location, and included safety planning, domestic violence education, housing/shelter referrals, chaplain services, access to civil legal aid, assistance with filing orders of protection, follow-up care, connections, and referrals to law enforcement, prosecutors, and other social services within Pierce County.
Survivors who came to the CJFJC could file protection orders and work with advocates one-on-one to receive trauma-informed care along with education and assistance in filing a Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO). Filing of DVPOs could be accomplished on the day of service. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, survivors could also file their protection orders on kiosk computers located in public spaces throughout Pierce County. Independently filing DVPOs at other kiosk locations around the county did not, however, allow for filing same-day protection orders. The CJFJC kiosks were important because in-person support could be provided by trained on-site advocates, which often led to same-day protection orders being obtained for survivors.

Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, CJFJC conducted community outreach for survivors in several ways. An important community service for survivors was that CJFJC advocates were physically present in daily order of protection court proceedings. By being in-person at these hearings, advocates could explain to survivors the services and referrals CJFJC could provide. It was a supportive first step for survivors who might not be aware of advocacy services in the community available to them. Advocates also offered to physically stand in front of the judge with survivors appearing in court, as both an act of moral support and as a physical barrier, so survivors would not have to stand next to, or look directly at, their abuser while appearing in court.

Training for new advocates and interns was provided by shadowing experienced advocates and observing advocates in these court hearings, disseminating outreach materials, and explaining advocacy and support services to survivors appearing in court. New staff also observed experienced advocates through in-person meetings with survivors, learning how to provide trauma-sensitive care and to gently guide survivors through the services offered.

Another way CJFJC reached out to survivors was through more formal incorporation of survivors’ voices into policy and programming. VOICES committees are a part of the Family Justice Center model (Alliance for Hope International, 2021b). CJFJC’s VOICES committee is a group of survivors working to ensure the voices of survivors are being represented in advocacy service programs and operations. Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, staff members provided updates on CJFJC programs and operations, and the VOICES committee provided feedback and recommendations to CJFJC’s staff.

FROM IN-PERSON TO ONLINE SERVICES

On March 16, 2020, Washington State Governor Jay Inslee, used emergency powers under RCW 43.06.220 to issue stay-at-home procedures to address high COVID-19 risk (Inslee, 2020). CJFJC received guidance from the Washington State Department of Health, the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, and the County Executive. As a result, CJFJC immediately began preparation for providing services remotely.

Pierce County, where CJFJC is located, currently has the highest rate of DV civil cases filed in Washington State (Washington Courts, 2020). In order to provide continuing support for survivors in crisis throughout the pandemic, CJFJC needed to pivot operations quickly from a predominately in-person service delivery model to a fully online model. CJFJC staff dedicated themselves to serving as many survivors as possible during the COVID-19 quarantine restrictions that changed rapidly day-to-day. Some of the challenges have been positive, highlighting the power of technology, yet some have needed streamlining in order to fully support survivors long-term.

CJFJC operating procedure pivots

Starting on March 17, 2020, all CJFJC in-person operations ceased, and all CJFJC staff began working virtually from home. The resulting restrictions on employees forced CJFJC to revise old, and develop new, policies and procedures. From March to June 2020, CJFJC’s held weekly Zoom meetings with other local agencies focusing on gender-based violence programs to determine how CJFJC could best collaborate and support survivors. These meetings helped support implementation of new policies and procedures, especially with utilizing new technologies. The collaborative meetings also allowed CJFJC staff to engage with outside agencies and obtain changing resources in the community,
state policy updates, and how to provide care in online settings. These new policies and procedures included: how to create and have survivors sign releases so that CJFJC staff could provide referrals to other agencies, how to store survivor information in online databases, and how to obtain original signatures on necessary court documents.

These meetings were instrumental in gaining access to city, county, and community resources to locate and address how other programs functioned, and how service and agency collaboration could function to support survivors. In essence, these agency meetings provided the necessary information, technology, and program leadership to ensure CJFJC staff could successfully work online from home and include these changes in operating policies and procedures. Eventually, CJFJC staff acclimated to the chaos of continually implementing innovations and policy changes in response to changing state and local quarantine restrictions.

The requirement that all CJFJC staff were to work from home required rapid acquisition of hardware, software, and training for staff. Training included how to access and then use the new hardware, software, internet platforms, how to deliver advocacy services using online platforms, and how to work collaboratively with community agencies and partners, while maintaining survivor confidentiality. CJFJC procedures and policies had to be repeatedly revised to reflect these changes. Those agencies co-housed within CJFJC (i.e., law enforcement, prosecutors) also needed to rapidly change service delivery to accommodate the stay-at-home orders and to interface with CJFJC staff in providing advocacy services. Policy and procedure changes were made to many advocacy services. The CARES Act Grant assisted with financing and implementation of many of these changes, allowing for continued support for survivors in the community.

Financial support: CARES Act Grant

CJFJC applied for and was awarded a CARES Act Grant from Pierce County Human Services to support survivors’ access to technology and funds for services. CJFJC purchased cell phones for survivors, which included a three-month plan of talk, text, and data, allowing survivors to have access to technology that abusers could not monitor. Having cell phones and service plans is vital for survivors under a perpetrator’s control with no private access to the Internet or cell phones. Additionally, Visa gift cards were provided to survivors for flexible spending (e.g., gas, food, clothing, household items, storage units) in the event the survivor needed to quickly re-locate. CJFJC’s CARES Act Grant allowed for 43 cell phones to be provided to survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Information Technology support

Information Technology (IT) support from the Pierce County IT Department was integral to CJFJC’s ability to begin providing services using online platforms, which began within 72-hours of Governor Inslee’s first COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home order. Support from Pierce County IT provided necessary hardware and software for the CJFJC going to all online platforms (cell phones, call forwarding service, and new and used laptops for staff). Strong support from the county IT department, allowed CJFJC’s management to focus on pivoting programs to remote platforms, including updating all policies and procedures, ensuring support in survivor care, and supporting/training advocates about new policies and procedures, especially with utilizing new technologies. The collaborative meetings with community partners also allowed CJFJC staff to engage with outside agencies to obtain updated resources in the community, state policy updates, and instruction on how to provide care in remote settings.

Online staff training

Moving service delivery online rapidly created the need for training of new and experienced CJFJC staff to ensure that the CJFJC could meet survivors’ needs using online platforms. Training new staff in a virtual environment was
particularly challenging. New advocates and interns were unable to shadow experienced advocates in-person, which posed barriers to learning how to provide trauma-sensitive care for survivors. Another obstacle to staff training was that trainees were not able to attend court hearings in-person, as the courts were closed. Instead, court hearings were conducted initially by phone via the CourtCall platform, and then virtually through Zoom interface. Thus, experienced advocates were unable to train new staff on how to conduct community outreach in daily court proceedings through modeling how to communicate directly with survivors.

Until staff are allowed to return to working onsite, CJFJC’s Victim Services Supervisor and Assistant Director are training new staff through individual meetings and mock scenarios on online platforms, as opposed to first-hand observations of experienced advocates in action. This kind of training process is less streamlined and will need improvement to better support long-term outcomes in training new staff.

Further, with increased complexity of providing all services online, finding time and staff to conduct online interviews for new hires was laborious. That said, one positive and unexpected outcome from online interviews was the creation of online interviewer panels. Community partners could participate in the hiring process of new CJFJC staff. This innovation was helpful as input from community partners regarding potential staff is highly valued. Once hired, however, new and existing staff have found it challenging to create meaningful professional connections without any in-person contact. This aspect of on-boarding new employees virtually has highlighted that communicating primarily online poses difficulties in creating a “team environment.” Advocacy service teams conduct emotionally intense work. Not sharing the same physical space delays the process of building team connections and creating a supportive environment for staff.

**ADVOCACY SERVICE ADAPTATIONS**

Several essential advocacy services needed to change and adapt to accommodate moving from in-person to online services. In addition, other services needed to be added to current advocacy services to better encapsulate streamlined services for survivors.

**DV phone helpline and outreach calls**

When survivors call CJFJC’s DV helpline, advocates first establish a safe number for the survivor in order to return phone calls. The advocates next focus on understanding the survivor’s circumstances and any safety issues the survivor faces. The advocates then work with the caller to assess their needs and identify goals to create a care plan and potential connections to other agencies, as needed. In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the volume of survivor calls to the DV Helpline initially decreased and then increased. For example, for the first two quarters of 2020, there was a 16% decrease in the DV Helpline calls as compared to the same quarters of 2019. However, in the fourth quarter of 2020, DV Helpline calls increased to 29%, as compared to the same quarter of 2019. The calls to the DV Helpline from the fourth quarter represents the highest number of DV Helpline calls from any quarter in the last 4 years (Freitas, 2019a).

In addition to the DV helpline, CJFJC staff reach out to survivors through screening 911 calls and reviewing police reports. After survivors call 911 and a police report of IPV is made, CJFJC staff make a follow-up outreach call to discuss the survivors’ safety and community-based services that might be needed. In 2019, before the pandemic, CJFJC made outreach calls to 3839 survivors. In 2020 the number of outreach calls dropped to 3169, representing a 17% decrease. This decrease represents fewer 911 calls and police reports of IPV in Pierce County (Freitas, 2019b).

In September 2020, CJFJC’s Advocacy Team, a team of five advocates and community partners, reached out to every client the CJFJC interacted with from the previous 6 months, in order to determine if the survivor’s circumstances had changed and to assess if the survivor needed any additional support. Over time, outreach calls revealed
three challenges for survivors, which were exacerbated by the pandemic and the rapid “pivots” from the in-person service model to the online service model. First, COVID-19 pandemic restrictions worsened the violence in survivors’ lives and restricted survivors’ ability to access formal and informal services. Second, with the expansion of online service options, including the eventual ability to file DVPOs online and Pierce County Court Zoom hearings, survivors were able to more easily connect with needed support. This was associated with survivors who had separated from their abuser prior to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Third, DV Helpline calls took more time to provide similar levels of care than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because survivors could not physically come into the office, the calls took longer for advocates to provide the trauma-informed care necessary to obtain the information needed to create safety plans and develop orders of protection.

**Working with service partners: police & court systems**

Providing services using online platforms impacted the day-to-day operations of CJFJC, in particular with delivering support services and coordinating with other agencies (e.g., criminal justice services, courts, Zoom hearings, legal aid). The police departments had to consider and prioritize what crimes would result in arrests and if holding the accused in jail was absolutely necessary. DV and IPV cases were determined to be a top priority and arrests continued for these offenses. Pierce County Courts continued to pursue DV and IPV cases and additional prosecutors were assigned to the Pierce County’s DV Unit. While Pierce County, where CJFJC is located, currently reports the highest rate DV civil cases filed in Washington State, some important communities do not report court data, so it is unclear if Pierce County actually has the highest rate of DV civil cases filed. For example, King County, the neighboring county where Seattle is located and Washington’s largest metro area, has not reported any court data (Washington Courts, 2020).

**Assisting DVPO filings remotely**

When the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were issued in March 2020, survivors were no longer able to file protection orders at local area kiosks, because the locations were no longer open to the public. As previously mentioned, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, survivors could file their protection order on kiosk computers located throughout Pierce County (which were located at the Court, the Sheriff’s office, and community advocacy programs including Rebuilding Hope, the YWCA, and at CJFJC’s offices).

Another complication during the pandemic was the Pierce County Courts were temporarily closed for in-person services, which prevented easy access to filing orders of protection at the court. For survivors in life-threatening, emergency situations, this posed significant barriers and the inability for survivors to file of DVPOs. Survivors were required to call the clerk’s office and/or CJFJC to file protection orders. While the courts were closed, CJFJC advocates and court clerks worked tirelessly to manually file protection orders into the appropriate court database systems.

While CJFJC was and is still able to assist callers in filing protection orders, supporting survivors remotely is a more complicated process that takes longer to accomplish. For example, when CJFJC first began providing services remotely, if a caller wanted to file a protection order, staff emailed forms to the caller and then would talk the caller through completing the forms over the phone. Once the forms were completed, the caller would email the completed forms back to the advocate. The advocate would then forward the paperwork to the court. Though closed to in-person interactions, the court was still operating. If someone contacted the court directly to file an order of protection, the clerks would read the caller questions from the forms over the phone and complete the forms based off the caller’s answers.

Another obstacle is that the paper forms used during the pandemic, are more repetitive than the electronic kiosk programs used for filing DVPOs, which automatically populate responses to additional questions once the petitioner
inputs certain information. This cumbersome process of completing paper forms also meant that survivors needed access to the Internet, printers, computers, and scanners to be able to complete the forms, or they would have to be on the phone with the court clerk’s office for an extended period of time with help completing the forms.

The decreased number of DVPOs filed in Pierce County when COVID-19 emerged in 2020, reflects the challenges in filing DVPOs for survivors. In the second quarter of 2020, there were 85 fewer DVPO filings, representing a 73% decrease of DVPOs filed in Pierce County, as compared to the same quarter of 2019 (Freitas, 2019c).

Together, advocacy community partners and agencies, CJFJC staff, and the courts and clerk’s office, convened regularly online to discuss how to make DVPO filings more accessible for survivors. The meetings allowed for restructuring the existing processes and developing new procedures to support DVPO filing access for survivors. Getting survivors access to DVPOs in this way was arduous and complex during an already dangerous time for survivors. There were no protocols or procedures for how to file DVPOs virtually at the start of the pandemic.

Supporting survivors in court hearings by zoom

In this period, the court transitioned from in-person hearings to CourtCall phone hearings, and then to hearings on the Zoom platform, which allowed judges and commissioners to see the parties during hearings. When survivors were granted temporary protection orders, Zoom instructions were also included for the final hearing, scheduled for 2 weeks later. For the final protection order hearing, the judges and commissioners would admit petitioners, respondents, and attorneys into Zoom hearings, and request anyone else waiting for their case to be heard to turn off their cameras and microphones until their case was heard. With Zoom hearings, the judges and commissioners had the ability to mute participants, to create a quieter, calmer atmosphere. After the Zoom hearing, petitioners were given instructions for the different ways they could obtain a copy of the final ruling (e.g., granted protection order, reissuance or dismissal order). CJFJC advocates were not initially able to appear in court hearings via Zoom interface. However, as of June 2021, CJFJC advocates began attending virtual court hearings. At the beginning of the court proceedings, advocates are permitted to give a short explanation of the CJFJC’s confidential services that are available to survivors of IPV and the CJFJC contact information. Advocates also explain that the CJFJC can assist survivors in obtaining access to advocacy services in the community. While advocates are not able to physically stand next to survivors, as was done pre-pandemic, survivor feedback indicates that seeing CJFJC advocates during Zoom court hearings has been emotionally helpful to survivors.

While the Zoom platform for court proceedings was extremely helpful for some parties, it was not as helpful for other parties. Older litigants who were not as comfortable or familiar with computers and litigants of any age without computers or access to high-speed internet experienced greater difficulties navigating Zoom interface. CJFJC did not have staff to help troubleshoot these issues in person, which was sometimes a barrier to survivor support. In addition, for survivors without access to the Internet and computers, participation in hearings continued to be conducted via phone.

Pierce County courts have continued to use Zoom calls for protection orders regardless of quarantine status. As of the date of this writing, Zoom hearings remain and it is unclear when in-person court hearings will be reinstated. Survivors are still able to file protection orders over the phone if they are working with CJFJC or other community programs that assist with remote filings, but now, survivors also have the option of physically filing protection orders at the courts. The current protection order filing numbers are now comparable to the filing numbers from before COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were introduced.

Community outreach

CJFJC, whose community outreach was also impacted by the pandemic, has created new ways to promote support through outreach.
“Parking lot” advocacy

One innovation CJFJC used to support survivors is through “parking lot advocacy.” To address survivors’ needs for access to the essential care items normally available in-person at CJFJC (e.g., food, snacks, menstrual products, toilet paper, diapers, pet food, bus passes, gas cards, toiletries), on an extremely limited basis, the Victim Services Supervisor and/or Assistant Director met with survivors in CJFJC’s parking lot to safely distribute essential items. Staff and survivors took great care to maintain safety standards by adhering to social-distancing and mask protocols. In addition to distributing essential items, CJFJC staff provided cell phones or gift cards to survivors, as recommended by CJFJC’s VOICES committee and funded by the CARES Act Grant. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the VOICES committee provided strong and clear recommendations on how CJFJC should be approaching survivor services during the pandemic. Finally, meeting survivors in the parking lot also presented the opportunity to obtain original signatures from survivors on pertinent documents, such as DVPO paperwork.

Social media outreach

CJFJC also implemented other VOICES committee recommendations on outreach during the pandemic, especially with the lack of community outreach through attending in-person court hearings. The VOICES committee helped CJFJC create advocacy outreach on social media platforms to reach survivors who were more isolated during stay-at-home orders. For instance, though survivors may not be able to call the DV Helpline, they may be able to scroll through Facebook or Instagram accounts seeing the available advocacy agencies and contact information for the organizations. Informational flyers about CJFJC’s services were also put in many grocery stores in Pierce County to communicate to survivors in the community that DV and IPV advocacy and support were available during the pandemic.

Online community outreach presentations

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, CJFJC provided in-person community presentations to educate and inform community partners and the public regarding the prevalence of DV and IPV, in addition to the advocacy services available at CJFJC. As a result of the pandemic and the inability to present in-person, live outreach presentations were canceled until it was deemed safe for staff to do so again. The extensive procedural and policy changes the CJFJC underwent left little time to develop online community presentations, as the CJFJC prioritized remote direct service advocacy. Once CJFJC’s remote services were stabilized, CJFJC began accepting requests for online outreach presentations, which have been increasing and are currently provided via Zoom or other remote platforms. Online presentations, however, are not provided as often as pre-pandemic in-person requests.

Coordination with community partners

Providing services using online platforms also impacted CJFJC’s ability to coordinate with other agencies that provide legal aid, shelter referrals, and mental health support.

Tacoma Pro Bono (TPB) is the largest provider of civil legal services in Pierce County and hold legal clinics to support CJFJC survivors with family law, tenant-landlord, or other civil legal needs. Online referrals to TPB were initially difficult, as rapidly moving to online platforms posed problems with survivors signing releases in order for CJFJC staff to provide survivors with a legal referral. TPB quickly adapted their referral processes developing online
referrals, which led to more survivors accessing civil legal services in Pierce County. With this innovation, CJFJC referrals to TPB have increased.

Day One is an online referral service that connects survivors to shelter availability in Pierce and surrounding counties. In March 2020, accessing emergency shelters was a much slower process, as shelters were rapidly adjusting procedures to ensure a COVID-19 safe environment (e.g., enacting social distancing measures inside the shelters). During this time, it was necessary for some survivors to have emergency hotel stays due to the lack of shelter beds available and limited emergency resources. The CARES Act Grant helped support these hotel stays. After the initial delay, however, shelters now have adjusted and are accepting survivors at a more normal rate.

CJFJC also refers survivors to a wide array of services to support their mental health needs; the Survivor Well-being Program (SWP) pre-pandemic included CJFJC’s support group (Flourish Together), volunteer chaplains, and an art circle program. The SWP initially had to be suspended during the pandemic while the CJFJC focused on prioritizing online crisis intervention and advocacy. Survivors have faced challenges with managing their well-being, which has been apparent with suspending these important social support services during the pandemic. The CJFJC hopes to reinstate in-person counseling sessions as soon as possible. Currently, the SWP support group, Flourish Together, is being held via Zoom. The CJFJC is also currently trying to determine how to provide chaplain services via Zoom. In October 2021, the Family and Friends Series launched, which are presentations focused on supporting loved ones experiencing DV and is facilitated by two chaplains and two CJFJC staff. CJFJC has opened its doors by appointment only, and as COVID-19 cases spike in Pierce County, the CJFJC can quickly shift to a fully virtual model. Thus, the CJFJC now functions as a hybrid model, allowing for supporting survivors no matter if the physical location is open or not.

LESSONS LEARNED: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions further illuminated components of the in-person CJFJC’s survivor advocacy model that worked well and highlighted the areas of remote service where further improvement is necessary. By rapidly changing from providing in-person advocacy services to fully online services, CJFJC’s staff overcame many challenges, developed viable solutions, and learned important lessons about how to respond to a pandemic quarantine. CJFJC’s capacity to conduct services through online technology was a steep learning curve but has proven important to CJFJC’s mission. If the pandemic with accompanying stay-at-home restrictions had not forced CJFJC to rapidly transition to a fully online interface, the innovation to online service delivery would have likely taken years to accomplish. With state and federal COVID-19 restrictions changing rapidly, the online interfaces and staff knowledge will be invaluable in providing ongoing care for survivors.

Online services to remain

Funding for IT support and the CARES Act Grant allowed a formally in-person, centrally located organization to rapidly pivot into a Family Justice Center model that could work remotely better than expected. Having the ability for employees to work virtually, hold court hearings through Zoom, and file DVPOs electronically are lasting changes that will allow the CJFJC to support survivors experiencing divergent circumstances. In a similar way, the ability to conduct community outreach presentations virtually will also be an innovation that the CJFJC will continue. Staff can save travel time and reach more agencies by presenting to community groups and survivor service providers through online platforms. Long after CJFJC is back providing services in-person, these technological innovations will remain an option for survivors who cannot come in and employees who need to work from home.

Utilizing the Internet to reach and educate more individuals in the community allows for better survivor outcomes, which is CJFJC’s mission. CJFJC plans to continue to provide advocacy services using online social media...
platforms to better support underserved populations, rural survivors, and those with physical mobility issues and/or difficulty obtaining transportation. For example, survivors who live in rural areas and have difficulty traveling long distances may have the Internet. Being able to assist in completing and filing protection orders online can positively impact the safety of survivors who do not have access to transportation or childcare.

Challenges for some survivors: digital divide

The use of online platforms and limited in-person contact highlighted a digital divide likely caused by age and socioeconomic status. COVID-19 restrictions severely restricted a survivor's ability to physically come to CJFJC to obtain services, privately place calls to support lines, access websites for information, send emails, participate in Zoom meetings with support services agency personnel, and/or participate in Zoom court proceedings. Some older adults, persons with disabilities, and/or lower socioeconomic status survivors do not have smart cell phones, the Internet, and/or knowledge or support of how to access these services. Although the CARES Act Grant funding assisted in supplying some survivors with the necessary cell phones, data plans, and Visa cards to access services, it is unclear how many survivors in Pierce County were unable to obtain this needed assistance. In addition, CJFJC did not have enough IT staff to assist and troubleshoot for survivors’ access to the Internet and Zoom meetings/hearings, which was likely a barrier in survivor support in accessing protection order proceedings and learning about other survivor support programs. Providing in-person services is essential for some survivors without access and/or knowledge of how to use online platforms.

Staff flexibility must remain

As a result of the technological innovations required to work from home using online platforms during COVID-19, staff are much more flexible in where they work both in providing advocacy services and conducting outreach. Zoom technology has also presented increased flexibility with scheduling meetings, becoming a vital resource for CJFJC, and will remain in use even after pandemic restrictions are suspended. In addition, post-pandemic advocacy services provided using online platforms will remain and be available to better serve survivors. Workstations for staff were transformed through the use of laptops and cell phones at home. Thus, laptops were procured for the CJFJC for staff to increase responsiveness for advocacy, instead of needing to rely on desktop computers located solely in offices. This way, whether advocates are working in CJFJC’s physical location, or remotely, away from their desks or from home, advocates can assist survivors from many locations. Another innovation that CJFJC plans to institute in the next phase of upgrades is internet-based phones that can be used via laptop applications. The power of this technology is that a laptop can handle all survivor interactions, with advocates not needing a cell phone in addition to a laptop; this will also ease transferring phone calls to other CJFJC staff.

Advocates attending court proceedings must return

As previously mentioned, before the County courts went to operating fully through online platforms, the CJFJC advocates would attend court proceedings. This was an important time to share the social services available through community outreach to survivors, in addition to advocates offering to stand with survivors when appearing in front of the judge. With court proceedings being held through Zoom, the CJFJC advocates initially during the pandemic had not been able to attend Zoom hearings due to staffing limitations (advocates retiring, difficulty hiring and training new advocates). While advocates are now appearing in Zoom court hearings, when the Court reopens for in-person hearings, advocates will attend and be able to stand with survivors in court once again.
“Parking lot advocacy” must remain an option

CJFJC’s “parking lot advocacy” was an important form of advocacy for survivors and an example of CJFJC staff striving to fill in the gaps of support that impacted survivors during the pandemic. The lesson from this innovation will be used again particularly if future restrictions are imposed due to COVID-19 variant outbreaks.

Team support must remain

CJFJC sought out and connected staff to training that focused on work-life balance as working from home poses significant challenges in knowing when to stop working. Staff also utilized self-care tools, such as meditation, in addition to candid honesty in sharing how staff members were handling the stress of the pandemic. As the number of DV Helpline calls increased, the CJFJC realized that the advocates needed more assistance. The CJFJC administrators covered the DV Helpline at the end of the day for 3 days a week ensuring advocates had time to document survivor paperwork. This allowed for advocates to not only finish their documentation but also allowed for some closure for the sometimes-challenging survivor calls advocates received.

With the increase of DV Helpline calls, the CJFJC administrators covered the DV Helpline at the end of the day for 3 days a week ensuring advocates had time to document survivor paperwork. This allowed for advocates to not only finish their documentation but also allowed for some closure for the sometimes-challenging survivor calls advocates received.

Staff training has been vital in navigating the ever-changing atmosphere during COVID-19 and having a fully trained staff has allowed CJFJC to better serve survivors. Learning to conduct interviews for hiring and training new staff online has presented challenges, but also provided new modalities for conducting training in the future. For instance, before the pandemic began, CJFJC would invite community partners to staff meetings to provide local resources and more in-depth advocacy training. Since working online with Zoom, the number of attendees and agencies has increased, as it appears to be easier to “pop” into Zoom meetings as opposed to attending a meeting physically (which takes up more time in the day). Collaboration with community partners prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying stay-at-home restrictions also consisted of physical meetings that needed to be scheduled in-person which was often difficult. During the pandemic, Zoom calls have eased the ability for staff to attend meetings, positively resulting in connections with CJFJC staff and partnership-building with other organizations.

During the initial interim of the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration with other organizations was vital in navigating the rapidly changing world. Now, through this collaborative approach, new and stronger partnerships have been built and sustained, positively impacting all parties involved due to the state of uncertainty of COVID-19 restrictions.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine, and stay-at-home restrictions brought much awareness to CJFJC’s strengths and weaknesses. Challenges, responses to challenges, and innovations demonstrated how the CJFJC managed and can continue to adapt and change as circumstances change. Since 2020, there have been widespread changes in how CJFJC employees approached their duties. County IT personnel was instrumental in assisting the CJFJC in the ability to maintain daily work duties and survivor support. The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying restrictions fundamentally altered the way the CJFJC approaches survivor care and how CJFJC staff will conduct their work in the future—online and in-person. Once the COVID-19 pandemic and various levels of stay-at-home restrictions appeared to be longer-term and the “new normal,” the CJFJC began to shift goals for 2021 and beyond, focusing on how to maintain some of these changes long-term. From the initial COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions, as of the date of this writing, providing survivor services has shifted into a more flexible process and the CJFJC is better prepared for future disruptions and emergencies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Co-author Beck has no conflicts of interest with the materials in this manuscript. This work did not receive any grant funding from any agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. Co-authors Van Atter and McLane are
employed at the Crystal Justice Family Justice Center, Van Atter since 2009 and McLane since 2008. Co-author Moyer began working with the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center in the Fall, 2021.

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