

Supporting the Virtual Workforce

Participant Summary

Participants volunteered strategies during the [Supporting the Virtual Workforce: Virtual Supervision](#) learning exchange to help make the transition to the world of virtual work a little easier. Their ideas and insights center on caring for the workforce, creating balance, finding rhythm to the work, discovering the upside of working from home, managing deliverables, leveraging technology, and supporting workforce development.



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Caring for the Workforce

There are many unknowns right now – staff are concerned about their own safety, the safety of their families, and the safety of the families they serve. How supervisors and managers communicate organizational needs to their teams determines how employees experience their work environment. It is important to acknowledge the fear and uncertainty – support your staff and the work they are doing with your words and actions:

- **Address resiliency, secondary trauma, and post-traumatic stress.** Hold virtual secondary trauma groups for workers; schedule regular or daily meetings/check-ins on self-care; appoint a resiliency coordinator to host virtual resiliency teams and send out a daily staff email with resiliency tips.
- **Lead with empathy and focus on the whole person:** Extend grace to your colleagues; encourage more self-care practices to promote work-life balance; start all conversations with a well-being check; hold “empower hours” to connect with everyone on well-being.
- **Inspire and appreciate:** Send positive daily quotes; send inspirational emails; mail care packages to staff; send a handwritten note or card as a sign of caring and recognition of work; hold an alphabet gratitude roll call through email; hold an email spirit week.
- **Make connections:** Plan virtual coffee, lunch, or happy hours that aren’t work related to foster personal connections; establish virtual office hours when staff can jump into a videoconferencing room at a specific time to connect or get a question answered; organize lunch-time virtual yoga; cultivate a “secret pal” card by mail.
- **Get creative with meetings:** Plan a pet and/or child virtual parade; hold a collaborative coloring session to destress and visit; play a short, time-limited game (e.g., 20 questions, show and tell, Mad Lib, Scattergories); have “hat day.”
- **Encourage self-care.** Send reminders to practice self-care; support taking time off; encourage use of the Employee Assistant Program (EAP); send email reminders during the day to take a break; view self-care as a collective and shared responsibility; adhere to the group’s established norms; send daily self-care tips; organize a “count your steps” group challenge; encourage daily exercise; distribute information on various self-care techniques such as meditation, yoga, and grounding.

Creating Balance

In addition to being full-time employees, many child welfare workers have suddenly become full-time caregivers, teachers, chefs, housekeepers, etc., making it seem impossible to maintain any kind of work-life balance. You may also be spending too much time in front of your computer, working more, and feeling hyperconnected. Offering your staff, and yourself, grace during these times is essential to managing stress. Participants offered these strategies to help you find your equilibrium:

- **Be flexible with work hours.** Support adjustments to traditional work schedules, including working in the evenings or on weekends and allowing for longer breaks during the day for people to focus on family.
- **Be mindful when scheduling.** Create space between meetings to allow time for family responsibilities and self-care and make a calendar that embeds employees' schedules with their families' schedules.
- **Be inclusive.** Invite children and pets to videoconferences to meet co-workers and briefly say hello.
- **Get in a routine.** Find a mantra or activity that helps you get in your work groove in the morning and another that gets you back out of it at the end of the day.
- **Schedule a standard break in your day.** Schedule at least one chunk of time every day when you shut down your electronics and recharge by doing something non-work related, like getting something to eat or drink, reading a book, taking a walk, sitting outside, mowing the lawn, gardening, calling a friend, or connecting with a child.
- **Make the most of those five minutes between meetings.** Do something that recharges your body and mind, like stepping outside for some fresh air, running the stairs in the house, dancing, listening to music, stretching, or meditating.
- **Use technology to disconnect.** Build 10-15 minute breaks into your calendar after each meeting; set a timer to remind you to break; use an activity tracker or other device to encourage bodily movement; turn your computer off and put it away at the end of the day; set limits on technology time.
- **Be a role model.** There may be situations when you respond to emails at irregular times. To encourage everyone to set (and keep!) boundaries and avoid sending mixed message about work hours, use the delayed send feature in outlook to deliver non-urgent messages during office hours.

Finding Your Rhythm

If you have not yet found your teleworking rhythm, you are not alone – transitioning to telework during a pandemic is no easy task. You may be experiencing meeting fatigue and communication overload from responding frequently and promptly to emails and telephone calls while trying to adjust to irregular or additional hours. Here are some strategies from participants that will help you find a teleworking groove:

- **Establish a work schedule that allows for flexibility.** Juggling work and home expectations is challenging, particularly if you have elder and/or child care responsibilities. Establishing a consistent work schedule for both staff and supervisors allows for regular check-in times, team meetings, boundary setting, and space to organize your work so you can be as productive as possible even if your physical space isn't ideal. While many child welfare supervisors tend to make themselves readily available because of the nature of the work, it is critical that you schedule time to complete your work and support others.
- **Create blocks of time for both "deep work," which requires higher cognitive functions, and "shallow work" like responding to emails, which requires less brain power.** By organizing your days into blocks of time, you can increase your productivity.

Discovering the Upside of Working From Home

When asked, "What excites you about working in this new, virtual world?" participants from across the country shared the upside of working from home:

- **Saving time and spending it differently.** With no commute or morning/afternoon traffic to contend with, there is more time to spend with family or doing things you enjoy.
- **Increasing productivity.** A quiet home office has led to fewer unscheduled interruptions or disruptions, more time to focus, and opportunities to be more creative and adaptive in accomplishing work goals.
- **Improving self-care.** The home environment can feel less stressful, especially with pets nearby, and there are more opportunities to take lunch breaks, eat more balanced meals, and exercise.
- **Seeing the future.** Prior to enacting mandatory work from home policies because of COVID-19, the child welfare field had been slow to adopt teleworking. With the transition to a virtual workforce, programs are seeing work efficiencies and benefits of flexible work schedules.

Managing Deliverables

Supervisory Tasks

Supervising a remote workforce can seem overwhelming at first. It may be more challenging to connect with staff remotely, particularly for a workforce that has traditionally relied on human contact, relationship, and connection in an office setting. Not only do supervisors need to adjust how they supervise but also how they supervise workers who are working differently. During the learning exchange, supervisors shared strategies they are using to manage their staff's deliverables:

- **Communication:** To increase the productivity and ease of communications, supervisors focus emails on updates, new processes and procedures, and success stories; they check in more frequently with individual staff members about work tasks and general well-being; they focus on strengths and show gratitude for the work that is accomplished during such stressful times.
- **Clinical supervision and case reviews:** Supervisors are meeting with their staff more frequently, resulting in meaningful and in-depth case consultations; they are using mobile and web-based video conferencing for individual coaching and case consultation; some teams are having weekly group supervision to decrease isolation and seek ideas and input from other team members; supervisors are conducting more thorough case-record reviews and creating feedback loops to improve practice.
- **Team support:** For some teams, losing each other as in-person sounding boards and support has been challenging. As a result, work units and teams are discovering new ways to stay connected and support one another, including daily video team conferencing check-ins regarding work and self-care, virtual morning team “huddles” or “cuddles,” video lunches and team building exercises, and staffing individual cases as a team to seek different perspectives.
- **Oversight and safety first:** Supervisors want to ensure the safety and well-being of their staff and have requested that staff set their schedules in advance and send an alert if there are changes, as well as notify the supervisor when they have scheduled and completed field work. For caseworker safety, staff are required to provide information about the families and homes they are visiting through designated channels. Supervisors suggest allowing flexibility while continuing to stick to policies and timeframes.

Personnel and Performance Issues

Supervisors had suggestions on how to address staff performance issues and tease out whether they are related to current events:

- **Parallel process:** Use appreciative inquiry and solution-focused questions; model how you expect workers to interact with families; leverage your staff’s strengths to identify ways to improve performance.
- **Identify barriers:** Determine the barriers that are impacting performance and productivity and build solutions to mitigate those barriers.
- **Establish clear expectations:** Develop specific workplans with staff that include deadlines for all tasks; conduct supervision on a regular basis (from daily to weekly) to discuss progress and create a culture of mutual accountability; provide clear and concise expectations in writing.
- **Coach:** Assign a mentor; link staff with a lead worker/coach; hold positive performance coaching sessions over videoconference; attend virtual trainings with staff.

Caseworker and Family Contacts—In Person and Virtual

During the COVID-19 crisis, many child welfare agencies have placed restrictions on face-to-face contact with children and families. Even when face-to-face contacts are allowed, precautions are being taken to keep caseworkers, their families, and the families they are visiting as safe as possible. Child welfare staff have gotten creative with face-to-face contacts by:

- Standing outside in the yard or on the porch to conduct face-to-face contacts.
- Standing outside a child’s bedroom window (with the parent’s permission) to interview them alone.
- Asking health questions of all household members before entering the home.
- Limiting face-to-face visits to those cases with extreme safety concerns.
- Allowing only healthy staff and not those with any pre-existing or compromised health conditions to have face-to-face visits.

Addressing Fears

Supervisors must address caseworkers’ fear and anxiety about making face-to-face contacts and conducting visits to assess children and families during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to the precautions listed above, supervisors from across the country offered the following strategies to address these fears:

- **Discuss and validate caseworkers’ fears:** Acknowledge fears and concerns and discuss the possible fears and concerns of the families they will be visiting; make a plan for keeping the caseworker safe.
- **Provide safety equipment:** Provide staff with PPE, masks, and other tools and information to keep them safe; if possible, provide masks to individuals being interviewed, too.
- **Prepare for face-to-face contacts:** Plan with your worker where the contact will occur, what information the caseworker needs to gather during the visit, and how to ask health questions to ensure personal safety (e.g., If anyone is sick, without PPE, the caseworker should not enter the home).

Virtual Contacts

Although face-to-face contacts with children and families are critical to building relationships and communication, safety must be prioritized, so many child welfare agencies are allowing and, in some areas, requiring, virtual visits. Virtual visits involve different types of technology including web and mobile video platforms as well as “old-fashioned phone calls.” According to participants, virtual visits may present challenges, including:

- **Engaging children:** Caseworkers must be creative in engaging virtually with younger children who may not respond well to video conferencing.

- **Insufficient technology:** Families may not have, or may not have sufficient, internet or mobile access, making video conferencing very difficult. In some cases, the caseworker can make contact by telephone, but there is no opportunity to actually see the family.
- **Caseworker privacy:** Caseworkers are using blurred and virtual backgrounds to protect the privacy of their home environment.
- **Difficulty building rapport:** Building rapport with a new family via virtual contact has been difficult for some child welfare staff. Therefore, caseworkers have increased the length and/or frequency of visits to reach the level of engagement needed to begin planning with the family.

Although there are challenges, child welfare professionals are also finding the benefits of working in this new virtual setting, including:

- **Engaging families:** Younger parents are responding better to virtual visits, agencies have found new ways to partner with families through virtual visits, and contacting virtually has increased the number of contacts with families.
- **Increasing Services:** There are new virtual and online services for families served by the child welfare system, addressing gaps in rural service areas, and an increasing number of telehealth sessions. These virtual services are particularly helpful for families with transportation issues.
- **Closing cases:** With the reduction in referrals, agencies have the opportunity to “deep dive” into cases and determine what is needed to safely close cases.

Leveraging Technology

While there are many benefits of technology, it is important to recognize the challenges it can bring, including:

- limited availability/access to technology for the families served.
- struggling to assess tone virtually and in emails.
- variability in staff’s technological skills.
- unrealistic expectations that you are tethered to your technology and should respond instantaneously.
- employers not equipping staff with sufficient infrastructure to work efficiently from home.

In addition, using personal cell phones is discouraged because there is potential for this information to be considered “discovery” and subpoenaed; HIPPA-compliant platforms that protect privacy and confidentiality are encouraged.

Telework is creating the opportunity to expand the use of technology to support innovative ways of accomplishing the work. Here are some platforms that are working for agencies and organizations:

For video conferencing:

- Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Go-To-Meetings
- Skype for Business
- WebEx

...and to stay connected:

- WhatsApp
- Jabber
- Google Meet
- Google Hangout
- GroupMe app
- Slack Channels for Teams
- FaceTime
- KudoBoard
- Marco Polo
- Private Facebook Pages

To coordinate, teams are sharing their calendars to support transparency, accountability, and scheduling ease. And lastly, don't forget about good old phone calls and texts!

Supporting Workforce Development

Because there has been a decrease in the number of child maltreatment reports during the pandemic, this time can be used for training and professional development. Visit the following links for resources on child welfare, child welfare management, and self-care:

- [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Online Learning](#)
- [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute National Webinar Series](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)
- [National Child Abuse Prevention Month](#)
- [National Foster Care Month](#)
- [National Adoption Month](#)
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway Learning Center](#)
- [Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for States](#)
- [Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative CapLEARN](#)
- [Child Welfare Capacity Building Center for Tribes](#)
- [Center for Adoption Support and Education National Training Initiative Web-Based Training](#)
- [Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework Training](#)
- [Center for Advanced Study in Child Welfare Continuing Education](#)
- [TBRI 101: A Self-Guided Course in Trust-Based Relationships](#)
- [The Science of Well-Being](#) - free Yale course on happiness
- [PESI](#) - free or deeply discounted clinical skills training

Participants suggested:

- Having staff complete communication self-assessments or conflict-style self-assessments and sharing them as a team
- Completing online trainings that are relevant to work or career-path goals