



Virtual Training in Child Welfare

QIC-TAKE

This is the QIC-WD's take on child welfare workforce issues, based on our experience

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Child welfare offices and training centers *had* to transition their classroom instructor-led training to virtual platforms when the pandemic hit. Some training systems were already using virtual platforms or asynchronous learning tools to deliver training content, but no agency was 100% virtual pre-pandemic. The transition was sudden and there was a steep learning curve for some trainers. Changes made when the pandemic hit may now be the new normal. This QIC-Take highlights what our QIC-WD sites and team members experienced as child welfare agencies shifted to, and are now embracing, virtual training.

What We're Seeing

Finding the Right Tools for a Virtual Environment

Some training teams were using Zoom or other synchronous (interactive/live meeting) tools to deliver portions of the child welfare training program, especially if they had staff in rural jurisdictions which made in-person training costly or challenging to deliver. In one state, asynchronous modules (i.e., self-paced videos or lessons that can be viewed independently) were created pre-pandemic to reduce travel for in-person new staff training. (These tools focused on content related to the history of child welfare, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and other didactic learning areas.) In some localities, trainers had little, if any, experience using a virtual training platform before March 2020 and were unfamiliar with the tools and technology available to support virtual training. All of the trainers in the sites we interviewed were experienced trainers, however, many initially found the transition to the virtual classroom difficult. In the quick transition they had to conduct training virtually and some had to learn to navigate a new (to them) web-based learning platform. Even for those trainers where

One thing about the pandemic, is it forced us to go virtual when we would have never thought of doing the trainings that we're now doing virtually. The trainers had to become competent in delivering virtual training, modifying and creating materials and activities to be done virtually, and engaging groups virtually. It really forced us to move in a direction that we probably would have taken our time to get to...The pandemic just forced us to jump right into it and sink or swim, and we did it. And you know – it's been good!

- Julia Simmons

Policy & Training Program Manager

Maine Department of Health and Human Services

Office of Child and Family Services

some content was available on-line, there was still a transition and learning curve to adapt all aspects of training to a virtual environment.

Trainers realized very quickly they needed to learn as much as possible about the platforms (i.e., Zoom, Adobe Connect, GoToTraining, WebEx, Microsoft Teams) and the tools and resources within the platforms to keep learners engaged in the virtual training. Some training systems were able to select their software whereas others were constrained by jurisdictional contracts or technology restrictions. Regardless of the platform, training leaders emphasized the importance of setting clear, explicit expectations for participation at the beginning of each virtual training sessions. This included the use of a camera during the training and expectations for after the training. In some sites this was reinforced by agency management to build a culture of accountability. To keep participants engaged in the virtual classroom, training leaders included activities that encouraged frequent conversation and interaction among

participants and trainers – preferably something new happening on the screen every few minutes to which the participants would have to respond. Trainers used polls, breakout rooms, white boarding, and paused frequently to ask open-ended questions to gauge participants’ understanding during virtual training. Additional tools for participant engagement included platform chat functions, post-it notes, screen sharing, Linoit boards, Padlet, pop quizzes, and surveys.

When we got the directive that we were going remote... we had never done anything remote or virtually prior to that. So, when that happened, we basically had 2 business days to convert the next week's [pre-service content] to be delivered over Zoom. None of us had ever used Zoom, and some of us had never even Skyped before. So, it was very new trying to figure out how are we going to do this - change our training curriculum, which is designed to be delivered in person, to now be delivered virtually, while also learning the virtual platform.

- Julia Simmons
Policy & Training Program Manager
Maine Department of Health and Human Services

To further engage child welfare professionals during the pandemic, the Colorado Child Welfare Training Center (CWTS) trainers facilitated conversations with veteran staff from across the state on relevant topical areas such as virtually assessing safety and conducting virtual family meetings. These [DCW Virtual Town Hall Meetings](#) allowed child welfare staff from across the state to share experiences and practices. This training enhancement was not part of the pre-COVID training model.

The use of the chat box, breakout room, or whiteboards in different functions within Zoom really helped to pull people into those conversations.

- CeCe Anthony, MHR
Oklahoma Child Welfare Training Managerial Associate

Understanding the Right Set-Up for your Virtual Training Room

Initially some sites believed that they could increase the number of participants for the virtual trainings. However, most sites learned quickly that classes needed to be capped at about 18 participants for optimum engagement and participation. In addition, some sites decided to have a moderator, producer, or virtual training assistant in the training to track attendance and participation and help manage the virtual classroom and

For our virtual learning, we use producers. Producers break participants into small groups - into breakout rooms. They monitor the chat and if participants are paying attention and manage any technical issues. In our Supervisor Core training, if the trainer goes offline or loses power temporarily, the producer has a “producer guide” that includes questions for learners to answer that allow the producer to fill-in until the trainer returns to the classroom.

-Sally Fitch
Ohio State Contract Manager

the classroom activities (e.g., breakout rooms, launching polls and quizzes). This model allowed the trainer to focus on the delivery of training content and engagement of participants. In addition, some sites had an IT person available in case the trainer or participants experienced technological difficulties. Some of the sites continued to have all-day trainings with frequent breaks and activities, while other sites had participants in the virtual classroom for shorter increments, but had them go off-line to complete assignments, then join back in later in the day to discuss the assignments.

...we slowly learned that it takes twice the resources because of learning the platforms and keeping up with the technical stuff, and the chat. We realized that we needed more than just an instructor, we needed a moderator, too.

- Jason Sauls
Unit Administrator/Academy Director
Training and Professional Development
Georgia Division Of Family & Children Services

Considering Content

One of the most difficult and important transitions in many jurisdictions was how to adapt the curriculum to the virtual environment. There was little data available during the pandemic to drive these decisions. In one state, the training unit had to rewrite all of the new worker training to make it more skills based. This was especially challenging in a virtual environment without any hands-on or face-to-face learning opportunities so a program utilizing veteran workers as coaches for new workers was resurrected. Other adaptations made by training systems included:

- The Colorado Child Welfare Training Center (CWTS), part of the Kempe Center at the University of Colorado-Denver, a QIC-WD partner, adjusted their pre-service simulation to include how to engage families and assess child safety in a virtual environment. Using actors as the family members, the new workers practiced how to interact with families virtually.
- The University of Nebraska–Lincoln, [Center on Children, Families, & the Law](#), the lead agency for the QIC-WD, adapted their mock courtroom experience to Zoom. Child welfare trainees learned the facts of a simulated case and were given testifying tips through lecture, discussion, and demonstration, using video clips of the best and worst practices in witness testimony. Trainees experienced questioning by different attorneys, depending on the type of hearing and examination (e.g., direct, cross, re-direct) and received immediate feedback on certain aspects of their testimony. The simulation experience was successfully adapted to Zoom while simulating the concurrent changes in court practices.

For the most part, many people liked the virtual learning, but I think they liked the virtual learning because of the ease in which they can participate. Other people...are relationship hungry - they want the classroom.

-Sally Fitch
Ohio State Training Manager

The Pros and Cons of Virtual Training

The trainers we interviewed reported that access to training was a benefit to the virtual model. They could make trainings more widely available, and participants and trainers did not have to travel to attend trainings. This not only eliminated the stress of traveling for new caseworkers but was more cost effective for states/agencies. They also reported a downside to not convening trainings in person: a lack of building connections. They reported that some participants found it difficult to not have interaction with teams in their office (since more people were working remotely) and to only have virtual contact with other participants. Some trainers noted that the camaraderie built during weeks of in-person pre-service training was also missing when trainings moved to a virtual platform.

An early assessment of the CWTS virtual trainings found that there were no changes to reported learning or satisfaction with facilitators between in-person (Pre-COVID) and virtual contexts ([Schwab-Reese et al., 2020](#)). Although more evaluation is needed to assess the quality and best practices related to virtual trainings, this study is promising and suggests that virtual training can be just as effective as in-person training.

“The shift to an exclusively virtual training catalogue opened opportunities for extending the reach of trainings to learners throughout the state. Because learning over technology became the standard, some aspects of the virtually-focused approach may persist to facilitate the ease of access for rural learners.” (Schwab-Reese et al., 2020)

Looking Ahead

The Future of Child Welfare Training

When asked what training in the future would look like in the various QIC-WD sites, each training manager said it would be blended (a hybrid of virtual and in-person training). They did not see going back to an all-classroom training model after the pandemic ended. Blended

learning is popular because it can easily meet the various needs of learners. For example, if the new caseworker needs foundational information, perhaps about the history of child welfare, agency policies, or how to work within the child welfare information system, they take a self-directed (asynchronous) e-learning course that can be assessed by an online test. To put knowledge into practice, an instructor-led classroom training (virtual or in-person) that includes role play or simulation training may work best. Perhaps to share their experiences on field practice activities, trainers can hold a virtual meeting/debrief with the training class. Blended learning models may also provide an opportunity to increase participation in training, particularly among professionals for whom travel is required to attend trainings ([Schwab-Reese et al., 2020](#)).

Trainers should implement evidence-based training principles, regardless of the modality. The following resources discuss various ways to engage learners in-person or in the virtual classroom:

[Pre-Training Interventions](#)

[Signaling in Training](#)

[Conversational Style in Training](#)

[Video Feedback](#)

It is also necessary that agencies determine what types of trainings work best in the virtual format and how to effectively structure learning environments. To do so will require additional research and evaluation ([Schwab-Reese et al., 2020](#)).

The road of the future is blended learning, where I get to look at content and learning objectives and determine the right delivery methodology for reaching the objective. Some will be in-person, some virtual, and some self-directed. If I need to learn SACWIS and how to fill out forms - I can get the hands-on kind of practice that can be accomplished through a self-directed course. I don't necessarily need an instructor. I can learn it and be accountable for what I learned. My hope and vision are that there will continue to be a variety.

-Sally Fitch