

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women Services

STAFF EXPERIENCES

RESEARCH
STUDY

WHAT WE DID

We examined the experiences of staff in violence against women (VAW) services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke to 50 people in total, including shelter staff and directors/managers.

WHAT WE FOUND

Staff and leadership faced a number of challenges due to the pandemic, some of which were likely common in other sectors (e.g., difficulties setting up home office), while many were unique to the context of supporting women experiencing violence. The pandemic also exacerbated issues that staff in VAW services already commonly experience, such as burnout and vicarious trauma.

TRAUMA WORK IN THE HOME

"At times, you don't really feel like you can get away from the work when you have those really challenging calls or those really complex cases..."
(staff member)

MISSING CONNECTION

"...we used to hug them all the time, because they would need a hug or the kids would need a hug. You need that human touch..."
(staff member)

SCOPE OF WORK

"... not only are we providing meals every two hours and going around with them, now we're cooking them and we're also answering crisis lines all day... So, it's been crazy."
(staff member)

CHALLENGES WITH SELF-CARE

"...if I took time off it was waiting. There was no one to pick up anything while I was gone and it was so much worse when I got back."
(executive director)

TENSIONS AMONG STAFF

"I was very frustrated... that they got to work from home... So, there is anger, frustration, actually kind of loneliness."
(staff member)

MORAL DISTRESS & GUILT

"I want to help people and I felt that I was letting a lot of people down... it feels hopeless when you're talking with somebody and you have nothing to offer them... because every resource has been exhausted."
(staff member)

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. Be aware that VAW services are part of a highly interconnected system of community services, such as housing, courts, and income support. Slowdowns or closures in these services put additional pressure on staff and limit their capacity to help women. Carefully consider system-wide impacts of service restrictions or closures, especially on those at greatest risk.
2. Recognize that the VAW service sector is fundamental to life and safety for women and children experiencing violence. It took some time for VAW services to be recognized as 'essential' in terms of government funding, and this further demoralized a workforce already undervalued in many ways.
3. Collaborate with the VAW sector during times of crisis to ensure government-mandated changes do not compromise effective service delivery. Provide clear and consistent guidance that is tailored to the VAW context.

For the violence against women services sector, including organizational leaders and staff:

4. Recognize the need for additional communication among EDs, managers and staff to monitor on-site service needs and well-being, temporary changes in roles, and equity in balancing various staff needs and leadership constraints.
5. Share information between sectors/services (e.g., hours and services available) to lessen the burden on staff and women in searching for this information.
6. Dedicate resources to support all staff, including relief workers, including enhanced benefits and/or specified wellness time/sick days, EAP programs, etc.
7. Communicate transparently about job security (when information from funders is available).

For the general public, including the media:

8. Although staff in VAW services were very successful overall in implementing measures to keep women and children safe from COVID-19, the policy response to the pandemic had unique and significant negative impacts on this sector. Already-stretched staff felt that inappropriate and ever-changing requirements compromised their inability to provide the quality of care that women and children deserve.
9. Continue to identify VAW shelter and outreach work as 'essential' to acknowledge and value staff in this sector and the work they do to protect women and children from harm.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Burd, C., MacGregor, J. C. D., Mantler, T., McLean, I., Veenendaal, J., Wathen, C. N. & The Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Research Team. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff in violence against women services. *Violence Against Women*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221117595>