A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF COVID-19'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL SERVICE DELIVERY & CURRENT IMPLICATIONS

The Qualitative Report Conference February 2023: Jeanette Schmid & Holly Bradley

Our context: Vancouver Island, centre island

- Nanaimo and surrounding areas

- Snuneymuxw territory & home to several other Indigenous nations
  - Acknowledgement of privilege of being able to work and live here

- High representation of older adults

- Significant proportion of people are unhoused
  - Related mental health & substance use issues
  - Overrepresentation of persons identifying as Indigenous

- We are social workers.

Research Purpose

- Informal reports of changes immediately after COVID-19 announcement

- How would service delivery be affected?
  - Short term
  - Medium term
  - Long term

- What would this mean for service users- especially those most vulnerable?

- Local perspective that would have practical value for agencies involved e.g., advocacy & planning

Method

- ~ Hour long interviews on Zoom with representatives of local organizations
- At three 6-monthly points:
  - September 2020
  - March 2021
  - September 2021
- Reflexive, iterative process
  - Two researchers; review of transscripts; interim reports
- 13 participants from 12 organizations (including non-profit agencies & govt)

Findings

A phased response

Barriers/facilitators

Service provider experience

Service user experience

Way forward

Phased Responses

1. Crisis response to immediate full/ partial shutdowns & health directives

2. Adjustment & exploration of alternative forms of service delivery; yoyo
- Online
- Adapted spaces
- Adapted services

3. Routinization of new approaches; optimism & fatigue; while centering relational engagement
- E.g. outdoors

At each phase, different service provider & service user experience

Barriers/Facilitators

- Funding
  - Flexible, sufficient, timely

- Responsive policy environment
  - Responses from relevant policy makers
  - Coordinated responses
  - Flexible & considers all service users
  - Innovative /new understanding of needs

- Partnerships

- Logistics
  - Complex
  - Particular issues around too much or too little space

Service Provider Experience

Willingness to step in & be responsive

•Worries about service user groups w limited/no access

Useful to have meaningful leadership responses i.t.o working hours, workplace, emotional support

Intensity and workload increased

Mental health impacts; Zoom & COVID-fatigue (personal & professional)

Making choices for a balanced, well-renumerated lifestyle
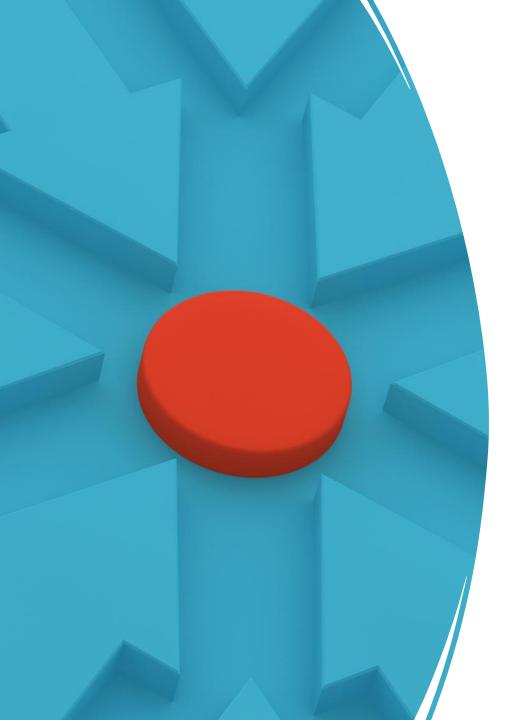
Volunteers: initially stayed away or not used

Students: no placement or online practica; needing to expand service delivery skills; being able to engage w stressed staff & service users

Service User Experience

- Limitation : Inferred such experience

- Compromised access: Most vulnerable shut out of service or shut in

- Several services closed or by appointment only or only online

- Increased stress e.g., immigration processes; domestic violence; isolation; livelihoods: increased loss & grief

- Initial solidarity becomes severely fractured

Vulnerability of those with fewest resources is amplified

Way forward

- Remaking of social work
- Appropriate adaptation & change possible with relevant funding supports & policy environment
- Articulation of the 'we' supports significant change
- Downloading on NGO sector to be avoided
- Recognize immense value of F2F contact for relationship
- Leadership

Implications for a post-COVID context

- Regular assessment & evaluation of service delivery

- Care for service providers

- Ongoing advocacy & relationship building w relevant stakeholders

- Elevate & directly represent voice & experience of service users

- Facilitate social solidarity

- Centre relationality, but expect to change 'immutable' methods; blended service delivery

Observations not unique

- While certain facets (e.g., older volunteers; unhoused population being particularly affected) relate to context, this study echoes trends in Canadian and international research

Questions? … Thank you