Adapting Our Operations During COVID-19 — by Chris Moynihan, LCSW

The past 7 months have challenged our nation as well as the field of child welfare in ways never before imagined. During these unprecedented times, agencies have grappled with how to best deliver vital services to the children in our care. At Omni Visions, we have been forced not only to reimagine many of our operational strategies but to double down on our commitment to our agency’s values and mission.

Trauma competency has never been more important than in our current climate. At Omni Visions, our understanding of the impact of toxic levels of stress and the resulting consequences has been imperative in guiding many of our decisions over the past months. Working from a trauma-competent perspective has allowed us to adjust to the current climate by operationalizing our values in a manner we believe increases our chances to mitigate the challenges caused by the pandemic. This engagement has included emphasizing how to best utilize technology, lean into employee feedback, and employ proactive clinical consultation in a manner consistent with trauma competence.

Video Town Halls
One example of how we have attempted to adjust to the times in a trauma-competent manner is the elevation of our quarterly town hall format communication strategy. By making use of the increased availability of video-conferencing, we have been able to communicate with a large portion of our staff simultaneously across all states via a video town hall. As we worked to adjust our operations in light of COVID-19, we increased these town halls to ensure that employees had the information they needed and the option to ask questions of leadership in real time. We used this format in an effort to allay fears, demonstrate transparency, increase predictability, and enhance feelings of psychological safety.

Employee Feedback
During our town halls, we have highlighted the ways in which employees can provide their feedback to leadership. In addition to asking questions and submitting ideas via town halls, employees are encouraged to complete...
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quarterly employee surveys, submit ideas and concerns through our intranet, and make direct contact with executive leadership. With these efforts, we have aimed to empower our staff by offering multiple avenues for communication to flow from all parts of the organization. We’ve built on the feedback loop—especially during the pandemic—by coming back to the next town hall with the results or next steps taken on employee ideas. The town halls and use of employee feedback to steer decision-making have been very well received by staff.

Technology
In direct correlation to employee feedback from the town halls, it was evident that we needed to assess our current technology needs for our team. Because we had already deployed Office 365, we were able to quickly move to online meetings through Microsoft Teams to communicate with staff, foster parents, and children. The next step, which required more investigation, was to address our reliance on paper documentation. In early May, we launched a “paper light” initiative designed to identify and emphasize documentation that can live and be shared in a digital environment. At about this time, we also adapted our foster parent information sessions and preservice and ongoing trainings to a virtual format to accommodate social distancing and experienced an increase in participation across the board.

We know from established research that participation in a community is a significant protective factor and key contributor to resiliency.
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telehealth sessions, trainings, and other daily practices. This adjustment has allowed us to learn about each other in many new and different ways. Through the laptop camera we have had a glimpse into each other’s lives, at a time when we have desperately needed access to each other’s humanity. We have witnessed the numerous challenges that come from working at home—from dogs barking to loved ones interrupting to the inevitable connectivity issues—and yet where would we be if not for the opportunities that technologies like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have provided us.

Proactive Clinical Consultation

Another important strategy we have implemented throughout the course of the pandemic is an emphasis on proactive clinical case consultation. Since we began tracking in May, we have conducted more than 120 consultations with master’s-level clinicians about our highest-need children. Including foster parents has been vital to this process. In collaboration with our clinicians, foster parents and frontline staff have worked together to identify trauma symptoms in clients that have been exacerbated by the pandemic as well as other emerging treatment needs. Clinicians, foster parents, and our children. For many, the pandemic has brought back family time, with families spending more time together, completing puzzles, taking walks, and riding bikes. Member agencies are providing families with fun ideas for making positive memories during this time. Some agencies are dropping off goody bags for families, and others are conducting telehealth services, Zoom meetings, and FaceTime sessions. Omni Visions has adapted its operations to support children and families through holding virtual town halls, increasing employee feedback, increasing support to staff, and using technology. Our friends at Pressley Ridge walk us through using telehealth as a creative way to meet the needs of families. Last, our very active West Virginia and California Chapters give us a snapshot of their work this year, and our very own Treva Johnson provides an update on public policy efforts under way.

After reading through the articles, I walked away with feelings of hope and solidarity. Our world is ever evolving, and FFTA is so proud of the work that our member agencies offer. We are in this together.

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parents, and staff have also worked to implement sensory regulation strategies that support our children’s social-emotional health.

To supplement our consultative process, we have made easily implemented clinical resources available to our foster parents and frontline staff via our website and videoconferencing platforms. Many of these tools are aimed at empowering foster parents by providing the resources they need to support regulation and mindfulness activities for the children in their homes. As children in foster care continue to endure the ongoing uncertainty created by the pandemic, we have found it imperative to ramp up our clinical support for those who are caring for our most vulnerable children.

This year has required a great deal of flexibility and resilience, and we’re certain that more change will be necessary along the way. At Omni Visions, we have done our best to adapt in the most efficient and effective manner possible, and through it all we have remained steadfast in our dedication to providing for those children and families in our care. By adhering to our trauma-competent values, making the best use of technology, and maintaining our organizational community, we will continue our mission to provide hope and healing in these uniquely challenging times.

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