"We Couldn't Keep Doing Things the Way We'd Done Them"

University and County Human Service Agency Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Strategies for the Future

Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic challenged universities and county human service agencies in unprecedented ways
  - Magnified existing inequities
  - Concurrent and local and national factors intensified impacts
  - Collective response necessitated rapid pivots and innovation

- CalSWEC and BASSC mission to facilitate county and statewide partnerships and resource sharing
  - CalSWEC COVID 2.0 Ad Hoc Committee
  - BASSC Critical Information Exchange Sessions

Purpose and Methods

- Purpose
  - Chronicle partner experiences
  - Facilitate cross-system learning
  - Highlight potential strategies for the future
  - Explore remaining questions and learning opportunities

- Methods
  - Gathered information through interviews and session materials
  - Coded key themes
  - Reviewed thematic analysis with key respondents

CalSWEC COVID 2.0 Ad Hoc Committee

- Impacts were grouped into four focus areas:

Social Work Education Impacts	Field Placement Impacts
Workforce Impacts	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Social Work Education Impacts

- Impact on Students
  - Ability to participate in remote learning
  - Emotional and physical well-being, particularly for BIPOC students
  - Economic impacts

- Impact on Instruction
  - Uneven resources to support faculty in developing online instruction methods
  - Existing curriculum did not address telehealth services
  - Widespread "Zoom fatigue"
  - Many campuses unprepared for transition to in-person instruction

Field Placement Impacts

- Navigating Agency and University Differences in Remote Policy
  - Wide variation in agency guidelines for remote services created administrative burden
  - Tension related to different timelines in shift to remote services
  - Special exemptions from university-wide policies for agencies that required in-person field placements

- Impact on Student Learning
  - Disproportionate risk of in-person placements for students with disabilities and health conditions
  - Lack of student access to private work areas to provide confidential telehealth services
  - Impact of remote field placements on student preparedness for the field is uncertain

Workforce Impacts

- Impact on Employees
  - Widespread shift to remote work
  - Navigating health and safety concerns
  - Differential opportunities to work remotely
  - Increased stressors for parents and primary caregivers

- Policy Challenges
  - Negotiation of varied agency, university, and county telehealth and telework policies
  - Developing policies and infrastructure in accordance with vaccine mandates

- Changes in state and national labor markets and relationships to work
  - "Great resignation" and widespread staffing shortages
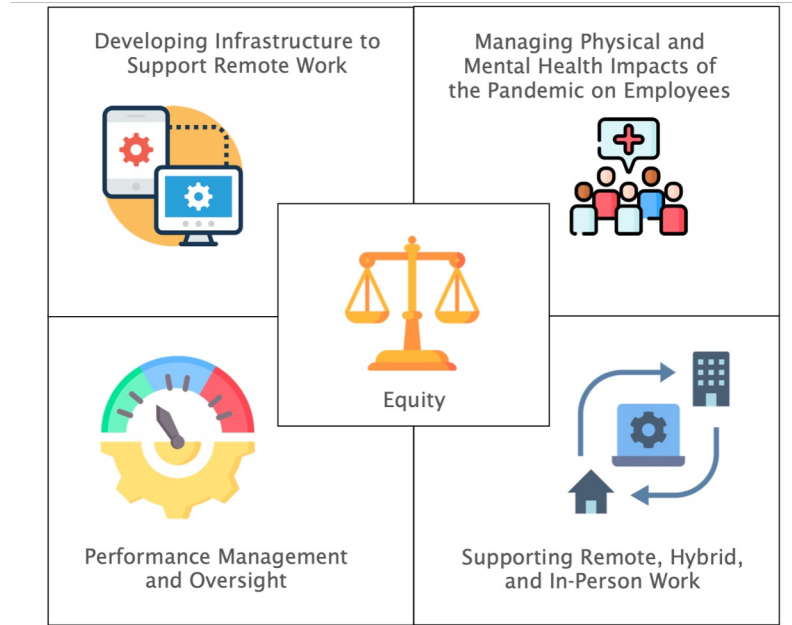 - Increased competition from private sector companies

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Widespread inequities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities related to
  - Vaccine access
  - Disease prevention and care
  - Linguistically and culturally responsive public health information
  - Loss of loved ones and family members

- Disparities in economic impacts on students, employees, and community members including
  - Job loss
  - Food and housing insecurity
  - Access to technology, internet connection, and quiet working spaces to support remote work and instruction

- Disproportionate impacts on
  - Caregivers related to education and work
  - Individuals with disabilities and health conditions related to return-to-work and learning policies

BASSC Critical Information Exchange (CIE) Sessions

- BASSC impacts were grouped into four areas, with an emphasis on equity impacts woven throughout

Developing Infrastructure to Support Remote Work

- Agency Telework Policies
  - Adapting to local and state policies and public health directives
  - Responding to equity concerns

- Information Technology
  - Providing staff with hardware and software in order to conduct remote work
  - Responding to client privacy concerns in a remote environment

- Ergonomic Supports
  - Proactively responding to worker safety risks
  - Developing procedures related to equipment purchase and maintenance and virtual assessments
  - Responding to resource and time constraints

Managing Physical and Mental Health Impacts of the Pandemic on Employees

- Employees continuing to navigate losses, increased caregiving responsibilities, and feelings of overwhelm and burnout

- Agencies worked to support employees by
  - Adjusting leave and sick policies to account for health and mental health impacts
  - Supporting connection through activities such as
    - Increasing formal and informal check-ins and supervision
    - Offering and supporting attendance at Employee Resource or Affinity Groups
    - Developing informal methods of communication through channels such as Zoom, Teams, or Slack

Performance Management and Oversight

- Remote and hybrid work has presented new challenges to performance management and oversight:
  - Challenge to monitor staff productivity while remaining responsive to stressors
  - Resource constraints (including time, staff, and technology)
  - Equity concerns due to disparate impacts of pandemic on employees

- Best practices in performance management offer useful strategies for responding to COVID-19 challenges. For example
  - Set clear goals at an organizational and individual level
  - Designate sufficient time and resources to holistically evaluate performance
  - Enable employees to track and monitor their own data

Supporting Remote, Hybrid, and In-Person Work

- Managing Public Safety
  - Development of policies and procedures in accordance with public health directives and best practices

- Adapting Policies and Practices to a Changing Environment
  - Staffing vacancies and employee burnout in public sector
  - Continuity of business operations and essential services remotely and in person
  - Future opportunities to partner with staff, clients, and the wider community to shape and evaluate policies, programs, and services

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

- Prioritization of immediate safety and material needs

- Clear and consistent communication across all levels in the context of uncertainty and evolving information

- Centering of the perspectives and experiences of individuals and communities most impacted to address inequities

- Increased flexibility around work locations, schedules, and timelines to enable students, staff, and faculty to manage conflicting demands

Questions for Discussion

- As you review the report, what's missing?
  - Additional impacts
  - Key strategies that have worked for your university or agency

- What are your thoughts about disseminating the final report?
  - Important audiences
  - Internal and external use and advocacy

- Further BASSC/CalSWEC work?
  - Topic(s) for future Critical Information Exchange session(s)
  - BASSC research (e.g., survey of current remote work and instruction policies)