



Client Support Services Program: Work from Home Best Practices during COVID-19 Pandemic

**Coordinated by:
YMCA of Greater Toronto**



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Purpose of this Document

On March 11, 2020 The World Health Organization confirmed Coronavirus as a pandemic indicating that it is a disease that is spreading in multiple countries around the world at the same time. The use of the word “pandemic” highlighted the importance of countries around the world to take urgent action to respond to their own outbreaks because now it is every country’s responsibility to tackle the virus on its own.

Following WHO’s declaration, On March 17, Ontario announced a state of emergency and ordered many businesses, including bars, cinemas, public and private schools to shut down leaving many employees either redundant or required to work from home. This posed a huge challenge for organizations that were providing services to clients in person.

Client Support Services (CSS) National GAR Case Management Program provides newly arrived GARs with the support, tools and services to successfully integrate into the Canadian society so that they are able to navigate through the community independently. Following are some of the foundational features of the program that have led to its success:

- Frequent **one-on-one interaction** between CSS Staff and clients throughout the duration of the program
- **Case management activities** are provided to the client in the **community** and in clients **natural environment** where they are most comfortable and the focus is on building community connections
- **Assessing needs** of the clients at regular intervals

Home visits and community accompaniments are an integral part of the CSS program and both these activities require meeting CSS clients in person. As a result of the closure of all non-essential businesses, CSS Sites were forced to adapt to a new style of working i.e. providing services to their clients remotely.

On the other hand, RAP was deemed essential business therefore, GARs who had newly arrived in Canada were being served and lodged in temporary accommodations. The Canadian government suspended refugee resettlement on March 17 until further notice.

Working from home for the past few months has posed challenges for staff and managers while delivering services to clients however, it is not without benefits. In this document, we will be highlighting the benefits and challenges of working from home during COVID along with successful tips and strategies to overcome those challenges. This document is prepared in collaboration with all CSS Sites.

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Benefits of Working from Home

Reduce the spread of COVID-19

Whether we like it or not, by working from home during the contagion, we are reducing the spread of the disease and keeping ourselves, our colleagues and loved ones safe.

Zero commuting

According to multiple studies, employees regard their commute as a waste of time, loss of wages, an expense and an exhausting aspect of their work¹. Now that employees are not commuting to work every day, they have a lot of free time to focus on other activities that matter to them such as taking short walks around the neighborhood, walking the dog and exercising. These activities contribute to overall happiness- did you know that commuting is associated with an increased risk of obesity, insomnia, stress, neck and back pain, high blood pressure, and other stress-related ills such as heart attacks and depression, and even divorce?²

Less distractions

The expectation that the best work happens in an office space between 9am to 5pm is an idea of the past. Employees believe that open work spaces can in fact be very distracting especially if that space is shared with multiple programs/agencies. There is absolutely no noise control which can make it difficult to focus and meet deadlines. Therefore, the concept of working from home simply allows employees to focus much better than they can in the office.

More time with family

Working from home allows employees to spend more time with family and if need be, tend to sick children or family members who need attention.

Flexibility of choosing work location

Working remotely allows you to choose where you want to work based on your interests, relations and values. Employees no longer need to live close to work. Remote work allows you to live where you feel your best. That may include living at your parents' house, sharing a cottage next to a lake/hill with your family etc.

Embracing technology

Working from home made staff who were not comfortable with technology, slowly embrace it. They learnt new ways to communicate and stay connected through video conferences, team chats and calls, zoom meetings etc. These practices will remain relevant and useful even when the lockdown is lifted and staff return to the office.

¹ Janine Thomas, *How to make home office work for you* (website), <https://www.welcometothejungle.com/en/articles/home-office-ergonomics> (accessed 23 July)

² Ibid

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Challenges of Working from Home

Exposure to negativity

During the lockdown, it was very tempting to get trapped in a spiral of negative news and misinformation available on social media. Due to amount of negativity around, staff often complained of feeling anxious and uncertain about the future. It was the topic of discussion in every meeting as everyone was trying to figure out how to navigate the new normal together and learn from each other.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Set up a specific time when you are allowed to check the news and do not allocate more than 30 minutes to it.

Adapting to the “new normal”

Most of us had never worked from home therefore, it was challenging to make that shift in mindset. It was difficult at first to stay away from house chores like laundry and cooking while working from home- with a lot of us trying to squeeze in some personal tasks alongside work.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Working from home may give staff the flexibility to run a quick errand, receive deliveries or tend to home repairs. However, it is best to reduce optional distractions that don't require immediate attention. Organize the day – create daily routines and schedules, similar to when at the office to help stay focused and improve productivity. Remind yourself that this is still a real job that you get paid for, despite it not feeling like one.

Poor ergonomics

Most of us were not ready/prepared to work from home. Our houses were not equipped with furniture that could support the work that we were required to do which is why many of us created makeshift offices in our bedrooms, living rooms, garages and even garden shed. A day or two slouched on your sofa in front of a laptop isn't going to hurt, but when the days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months, it can cause long-term damage.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Some organizations have a budget to provide IT and office equipment to improve the home-office set-up. This however, might not be possible for all organizations due to budgetary restraints and the temporary nature of the lockdown/work from home situation. Borrowing equipment from the office can also be an option. Example: In order to make work from home comfortable, laptops were provided to all staff members at Global Gathering Place, Saskatoon.

Move frequently - try and get up and move each hour, whether you walk around the block or just around your home or perhaps try some seated or standing stretches, it will help to release the stress and tension from being in a seated position for extended periods of time, and help you regain your focus and feel refreshed.

Increased screen time

For employees working from home, there has been pandemic-induced explosion in screen time, whether it is to obtain information of the unknown or to connect with clients/colleagues/agencies.

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CSS staff who were spending time visiting their clients in person are now glued to their computer or phone screens all day making sure that their clients feel supported. Team meetings are also taking place virtually. After an average work day, their virtual life continues in the evening with online fitness classes, connecting with friends and family over social media or binge watching Netflix. With more than usual screen time, staff complain about sore and dry eyes especially after back-to-back Zoom calls. It is also exhausting to keep up with video calls, whether it is for work or their personal lives – the pressure of being on all the time brings about a lot of anxiety.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Be honest and upfront with your colleagues if your eyes cannot handle back to back Zoom calls. Try the 20-20-20 rule to avoid eye strain. Try an eye exercise to reduce the strain on your eyes- every 20 minutes, look up for 20 seconds and focus on an object at least 20ft away. Take regular breaks from your screen.

Work-life balance

It is difficult to concentrate when other family members and children are at home while you are working. Productivity may suffer when children who are not used to being at home for extended periods of time and not used to seeing their parents work from home assume that they are available and can tend to all their needs.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Set ground rules with other people in your home, if you have a meeting, request your spouse to block that time off in his calendar and take care of the children and vice versa. If you have children who are older, set clear rules about what they can and cannot do during that time. To keep everyone working, be creative about ways to accommodate employees who typically haven't been able to work from home e.g. flexible work hours.

It may also be helpful for employees to inform their employer of their family situation specifically working from home with children around. In this case, it is best for the employee to let his/her employer and colleagues know what hours they will be available- who will be more understanding about flexible work hours and family interruptions if they know about the situation ahead of time.

Examples:

- At CCI Ottawa, staff created schedules that worked for them and their families and shared with the team which was helpful
- Other CSS sites like Calgary and Halifax offered flexible hours of work to their employees during the lockdown for ease of work.

Isolation

Employees living by themselves expressed feeling isolated while working from home due to lack of daily interaction/chit chat/hang time with colleagues.

Tips to overcome this challenge: set time aside to talk about non-work related things during meetings/calls. Get together for coffee breaks or happy hours where staff can provide a short update on

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their plans for the weekend and their lives in general. Example: In Calgary, having virtual meet-ups using applications like House Party were deemed successful.

Boundaries

When your home becomes your work space, it is very easy to continue working past work hours. This is especially true if employees are using your personal laptop as their work laptop (or vice versa). In that case, their personal laptop remains in use after work hours and they are tempted to check work emails and respond to them. After 5pm, it becomes challenging for them to switch from work brain to social brain and then to relaxing brain.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Establish a work routine early on and stick to it. Quit Microsoft Outlook and Teams when your workday is complete. Schedule an activity at the end of your work day that will help you commit to ending your day at an appropriate time.

On boarding new staff

Some of our CSS sites continued hiring new staff during the lockdown however, the process was not without its challenges. Managers and team leads had to get accustomed to a new way of interviewing and assessing if a person is the right fit for a job over a virtual call/meeting.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Despite it being a challenge, according to Calgary site, it was definitely a new experience and learning process. Taking a less formal approach was found to be beneficial – it was tough to get to know the person as well as you would through an in-person meeting therefore, a significant amount of time was spent assessing soft skills in addition to getting to know the candidate without shifting focus from the planned set of questions and experience. Once new staff members are on board, best practice is to:

- Provide them with reading and training materials
- Frequent virtual check-ins with new staff to engage in discussion about reading materials and address questions/concerns they may have
- Virtual orientation webinars and explaining their role

It is a challenge for new staff to join a new workplace without fully being able to meet their new colleagues in person. Therefore, it is best to introduce them during virtual meetings and use effective ice-breakers so staff gets the opportunity to get to know each other better, build rapport and a level of comfort. This also leads to improved engagement during trainings and meetings.

Challenges in dealing with clients while working from home

Before listing the challenges for staff in dealing with clients while working from home, it is important to understand that refugees in Canada are dealing with additional stresses and anxiety as a result of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic including loss of jobs, housing etc. For many, the lockdown is bringing back memories of the war-torn countries they once fled in search for a better life.

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Increase in phone interactions

Lockdown caused an increase in the number of calls received from single clients who were struggling with loneliness and lack of social contact. Moreover, clients who arrived shortly before the Canadian border closed to non-essential travel were also complaining of feeling lost and isolated without any in-person support. Some were reaching out to their caseworkers almost every day, after work hours and even on weekends, resulting in staff feeling overwhelmed.

Tips to overcome this challenge: Getting in touch/checking up with high need clients on a regular basis so they feel supported.

Examples:

- In order to bring back a sense of normalcy and help employees feel encouraged, staff at Global Gathering Place, Saskatoon have initiated celebrating virtual birthdays for colleagues along with organizing other fun activities. For clients who feel isolated, face-to-face interaction through video calls help.
- There is a farmland called the *Land of Dreams* that has been donated to Calgary Catholic Immigrant Society. This is a plot that is mainly used by staff and clients for farming purposes. During the lockdown, when clients and staff were feeling isolated, they were allowed to visit the farmland while taking all the necessary precautions laid out by the Public Health Agency Canada. Being out and close to nature helped them feel less lonely and created a positive impact on their mental health.

Understanding safety

In the absence of face-to-face interaction, it was challenging for staff to explain to clients the importance of social distancing, use of masks, gloves and washing hands. Like most people, they could not comprehend what was happening and the importance of self-isolating.

Tips to overcome this challenge: to help clients understand COVID-19, share resources in multiple languages through WhatsApp and agency's website. Most sites used factsheets, videos, recordings and infographics in order to inform clients about keeping distance, wearing a mask, washing hands, proper sneezing and coughing etiquette and avoiding social gatherings.

Unfamiliarity with technology

Most clients that land in Canada have received little to no education and therefore, a lot of them are not familiar with technology. Following the lockdown, there was a push towards technological advancement and therefore a risk that clients with digital literacy issues would be left behind/excluded from remote service delivery. For clients who were new to cell phones and tablets, it was particularly difficult and time consuming for staff to teach them how to use these devices to communicate virtually.

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Staff spent a great amount of time walking clients through downloading applications, using video calls and assisting them with accessing virtual resources (LINC classes, therapy, school classes etc.).

Tips to overcome this challenge:

Examples:

- At Global Gathering Place, Saskatoon, the most vulnerable clients received tablets so they could continue their English language classes, attend other online programs and stay connected to family and friends.
- In order to facilitate staff in Calgary, management bought laptops and cellphones in March to meet the needs of staff who were previously only working with desktops and office landlines.

High work load

Phone calls: When the lockdown started, staff got very busy answering questions over the phone about the spread of COVID-19, financial barriers, income support, employment insurance and child care benefit. There was a heightened need for continuously sharing updated and translated health information with clients and warning of inaccurate information on social media which became tedious for staff.

Delivery of essential items: Many sites took the initiative of volunteering to deliver essential items like groceries and medications to the most vulnerable clients including elderly, sick, disabled and single parents with children while taking necessary precautions.

Tips to overcome this challenge: staff can help clients understand what financial assistance may be available to them by referring to information from Employment and Social Development Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency, some of which is now available in multiple languages. This includes details about the Canada Child Benefit and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit.

Examples:

- In Calgary, office landline calls were automatically forwarded to staff's cell phones and in Halifax, work cell-phones were provided, helping staff maintain boundaries with their clients.
- In Halifax, due to high work load, non-CSS staff were assigned to share some of the case burden. Their skill set, experience and language abilities were taken into consideration when assigning clients which proved to be a highly effective strategy.

Switching to remote service delivery:

Tax clinics: Many sites host tax clinics for clients every year however, this year due to unforeseen circumstances, they had to make arrangements to host virtual tax clinics which was challenging to set up. However, once they were set-up, they believe that this might be the way forward post-COVID as well.

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Other than tax clinics, sites have had a hard time switching other services that they delivered in person to virtual and remote services. This includes language classes, orientation sessions etc. With time and dedication of staff and the management team, they were able to move most if not all services to virtual.

Tips to overcome this challenge: It may be challenging for sites to switch from in-person service delivery to remote service delivery however, once they have all the systems in place, this might be the way forward for many of them especially those who have to commute long distances in order to meet their clients in-person.

Printing, documentation and signatures

A lot of government related documents accepted only wet signatures rather than e-signatures. Therefore, staff had to make exceptions and either request clients to drop off the signed documents to the Office or make a home visit to collect the documents. These documents included RAP agreements, declaration of funds and assets, income support initial cheque acknowledgement, loan forms and application for child care benefits.

Tips to overcome this challenge: In Calgary, staff on rotation at the reception center assisted with printing and collecting documentation from clients who needed urgent services – this was done through a quick drop-in outside the reception area with social distancing protocols in place.

Maintaining privacy

Most agencies had never provided remote services therefore they did not have systems in place for protecting clients' information virtually and had to work on them from scratch.

Tips to overcome this challenge: According to Kitchener site, using headphones and encouraging clients to talk in a separate room, and have clients' verbal consents has helped. Staff need to take extra security measures to protect their clients' personal information while working from home and make sure that there is a uniform implementation of reasonable security practices.

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