



Working Together in the Pandemic: Tips for Juvenile Justice Administrators and Supervisors in Preparing for the Future

The challenges currently facing juvenile justice settings around the U.S. are abundant and the impact of these challenges will have implications for how well youth, families, and staff ultimately respond and recover. Personal loss already is and will continue to be a major theme that many will experience during and after the pandemic. Many have experienced the death of someone close to them due to COVID-19 as well as significant disruptions to their social support. Colleagues and family members may be experiencing lost income and/or employment. Youth in particular, may be experiencing disruptions to important life events (e.g., lack of employment opportunities, graduation, family visits and events).

As a juvenile justice professional, you will be facing a changing workplace landscape. Staffing patterns may be altered during the pandemic for safety reasons and permanently changed due to mandated reductions in workforce because of hiring freezes, furloughs, or layoffs. Staff positions may be repurposed, moving colleagues into different roles and responsibilities in the short-term that end up more or less permanent in the long-term. Community agencies that were once essential partners in providing services to youth and families may no longer be accessible due to the changing economic and financial realities.

Anticipating how youth, their families, and staff will manage the next wave of stress connected to these losses, as well as the potential trauma from this experience, is important to consider now. In many ways, as a juvenile justice professional, you probably have been managing responses to this pandemic as a sprint – asking yourself questions like how do you make quick decisions to get through the immediate crisis of the moment? Like long distance runners, you need to pace yourself, however, and the overall response to it should be viewed as a marathon. The implications of the pandemic could last for some time. Just as a marathon, you need to pace yourself, keep moving, and know that many new stressors may emerge along the overall path to recovery.

Questions to Consider in Preparing Juvenile Justice Programs for the Future

- What resources have been provided to staff focused on responding to the short-term stress associated with the pandemic? Are these resources appropriate and responsive to managing chronic stress?
- Are the mental health resources available to agency staff (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs, mental health coverage via insurance plans) accessible and adequately staffed/trained to respond to stress and current mental health needs related to the pandemic?
- Is the leadership or supervision team within the agency proactively mapping out an agency response plan that takes into account the changing professional landscape? Is this plan being communicated regularly to agency staff?
- Is there outreach to the array of community service providers and/or active collaboration with other cross-discipline stakeholders (e.g., child welfare, education, health) to consider how impacts on one part of the overall system may affect your agency activities in the short-term and long-term?
- What level of communication about specific organizational challenges is occurring with the overall juvenile justice system? For example, as a juvenile detention administrator, are you communicating with the director of community services probation, the court, and law enforcement about the unique challenges and impacts you are facing?
- How have you, as a supervisor, taken extra steps to support your work team in this time of crisis, and how could they do this in other ways that haven't yet occurred?
- How have you, as an administrator, taken extra steps to support all of the center's staff, particularly front-line workers, as they do this in other ways that haven't yet occurred?

Do's and Don'ts for Being Proactive and Preparing for Future Challenges

DO adopt a clear and consistent communication style with your agency staff, taking the time to identify problems and outline the methods to solve those problems.

DON'T issue administrative edicts that lack appropriate context and reasoning. These will exacerbate stress and uncertainty. Just like youth, staff need to have a sense of structure and predictability in the workplace and will look to agency leaders and supervisors as role models in responding to pandemic-related stress.

DO consider both the short-term and long-term impacts of pandemic-related stress on agency staff related to staff loss, burnout, job duty changes, and what resources can be made available for agency staff to adjust and respond.

DON'T assume that your level of coping and/or the coping demonstrated by other administrative/supervisory staff reflects the experiences of all staff across your agency.

DO actively engage in cross-system collaboration recognizing that other partners (e.g., behavioral health, child welfare, education, healthcare) are facing many of the same budgetary and staffing changes as your agency.

Recognize that collaborative engagement and response is needed to ensure some level of consistency and continuity in how all systems are responding to the needs of youth and families they serve.

DON'T operate with an emphasis on “taking care of my own.” Improving the overall functioning of youth and families, by appropriately responding to their needs, is one of the best methods of protecting the public and reducing further system contact. This will require a collaborative effort by all child-serving systems.

DO reach out to youth and families to gauge how well the agency is meeting their needs and responding to ongoing challenges and stressors impacting them.

DON'T assume that as your agency has settled into a new business-as-usual mode the lives of the youth and families you serve have also reached a comparable level of acceptance and functioning.



Suggested Citation

Cruise, K.R., & Pickens, I. (2020). *For juvenile justice administrators and supervisors: Preparing for the future*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.