

The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Service Agencies in Houston, Texas: A Preliminary Assessment and Emerging Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the socio-economic fabric of communities around the world. To determine the emerging needs of human service agencies our research team conducted agency assessments within the greater Houston metropolis. A convenience sample of agencies (n=17) currently providing social work internship placements was surveyed between April 2021 and July 2021. Results revealed emerging needs that schools of social work should consider during the COVID-19 response. Some include the need for interdisciplinary intern teams, technology training for social workers, dual degrees, and macro-level skills. We recommend enhancing university-community partnerships to meet the emerging humanitarian and workforce needs of the community.

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 emerged from Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and spread to more than 170 countries in the first 6 months since it was first detected [1]. As of October 2021, there were more than 235 million confirmed cases and over 4.8 million deaths related to this coronavirus. Currently, the United States has the highest number of confirmed cases with 43 million. More than 704,000 died from complications, but without strict interventions such as travel bans, school closures, and social distancing, the impact would be much worse as experts revealed high case-fatality rates [2]. Public-private partnerships were created to develop and distribute an effective vaccine to slow the pandemic. Clinical trials revealed, "A two-dose regimen of BNT162b2 (30 µg per dose, given 21 days apart) was found to be safe and 95% effective against Covid-19 after a 2-month follow-up" [3]. A study of the effectiveness of the BNT162b2 vaccine in a non-controlled—real-world—setting also determined that the vaccine was safe and effective across a "range of outcomes across diverse populations" [4]. Two doses of the vaccine were effective in decreasing the risk of documented infection, symptomatic COVID-19, hospitalization, and severe COVID-19. Other vaccines were also tested with varying levels of

efficacy [5-7]. Globally, more than 6.26 billion total vaccine doses have been distributed [1].

Hundreds of millions were infected and recovered from the virus, yet the medical community has only begun to understand the short-term health consequences (e.g., heart problems, neurological damage, etc.). Mental health problems, intimate partner violence, and personal traumas have also increased during this time [8-10]. The economic impact was unprecedented as over 22 million Americans filed initial unemployment claims within 30 days of declaration of a national state of emergency. The socio-economic fabric was torn and continues to be repaired.

Millions of patients have recovered as health professionals continue to work on the frontlines. Although the media focuses on stories told by doctors and registered nurses, medical teams are supported by skilled health professionals including medical social workers and certified nursing assistants, who are critical to the mission of decreasing the impact of COVID-19. Social workers specifically are trained to work with families who are coping with loss; help clients navigate service delivery; provide referrals and follow-up; and create health awareness campaigns. Social work may be

the profession that will support communities as we collectively respond to emerging COVID-19 needs that are common during and after disasters, such as accessing health care [11], providing accurate public health information [12], and addressing increases in alcohol and substance use [13]. Researchers have found significant increases in these health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic [14,15]. Fortunately, social work and public health professionals have a long history of responding to communicable diseases (e.g., tuberculosis, syphilis, HIV/AIDS) going back to the early 1900s [16]. The founders of Cambridge Hospital/Mt. Auburn Hospital described the relationship between medical staff and social work:

Sickness is rarely an isolated fact but is related to conditions under which people live. Thus the aim of the department is to find out the social causes of the trouble, to cooperate with the hospital in remedying the case, to prevent its recurrence and by doing so, safeguard the community, as well as aid the individual. By rendering social aid, for which the hospital itself has no time, the hospital is saved much expense and the individual and community are greatly benefited. - Founders of Cambridge Hospital/Mt. Auburn Hospital – 1909.

Research suggests that the dynamics of social work changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown [17]. The changes range from the increasing use of teletherapy to modifying the roles of medical social workers in inter-professional teams [18]. Social work schools and their students were also impacted as administrators and faculty responded to the needs of students [19]. Lacking in the literature is how social work schools are responding to the emerging workforce needs of the health and human service industry. Therefore, the pilot study aimed to explore the changing needs of community health centers, non-profits, and social service agencies that provide internship placements to social work students. This research is important because there are over 500 accredited bachelor's of social work programs and 299 accredited master's of social work programs in the U.S. with a total enrollment of over 125,000 social work students. These programs are responsible for training tomorrow's social workers and partner with thousands of health and human service agencies to provide millions of hours of internship. This study explores the impact of COVID-19 on human service agencies in Houston, Texas that are serving as social work internship sites for a local university.

Context

Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) was founded in 1876 as a land grant institution to serve to educate historically underserved students in Texas <https://www.pvamu.edu/>. The first enrollment was eight students. Today, this Historically Black University enrolls 8,900 and educates students from various ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. PVAMU's Department of Social Work has been a national leader in training social workers for 20 years. It is currently ranked #1 among HBCUs in Texas, and Top 10 among HBCUs offering a social work degree (2021 U.S. News and World Reports).

In 2020, faculty created a Master of Social Work program that

began in Fall 2021 (PVAMU MSW Website). Graduate students specialize in Medical Social Work/Behavioral Health to meet the growing workforce demand to address health disparities. To ensure our program remains relevant to the needs of the communities we support, we conducted an agency needs assessment that was specific to the impact of COVID-19. A patchwork workforce initiative was created to support the health and human service industry by recruiting, educating, and training a pipeline of social workers who specialize in medical social work and behavioral health to help families impacted by COVID-19 and other related issues.

COVID-19 and Harris County (Houston, Texas)

Data was collected between April 2021 and July 2021. During that time confirmed cases in Harris County (greater Houston metropolis) increased by 19%. By April 2021, there had been approximately 351,000 confirmed cases and 51,000 deaths related to the virus. Towards the end of our study, there were 432,800 confirmed cases and 6,700 deaths in the county by July 2021. At the time of the study, Harris County was ranked 5th in the U.S. for confirmed cases and 7th in the number of deaths in the United States.

Methodology Sample

A convenience sample of agencies currently working with the PVAMU Department of Social Work was surveyed between April and July 2021 to determine their COVID-19 related needs. There were 17 agencies that responded. These agencies were in the greater Houston area (n=12) and surrounding cities (n=5). These include human service agencies and community health clinics.

Instrument

Basic demographic information was gathered for the agencies including name, location, populations serviced, and numbers of people served. In addition, researchers asked the types of COVID-19 related services that were offered. Researchers also asked what types of certifications and degrees were needed within the agencies during the COVID-19 response. This question had four domains: Behavioral Health, Medical, Administrative, and Technology Support. A Likert scale asked: "To what extent, do you believe the following dual certifications/degrees would support the mission of your agency? (1 'Strongly Disagree' to 7 'Strongly Agree')."

The final set of questions focused on the areas the university could support the mission of the agency. Specifically, we asked "To what extent, do you agree that PVAMU can support your mission during the COVID-19 response with the following services? (1='Strongly Disagree' to 7='Strongly Agree'). Researchers also asked about expected changes in their agency's funding levels within the next 6 months (1='Decrease', 2='Stable', 3='Increase'). We asked which certifications/education do you think social workers should receive before graduating to better support your agency's mission? (1='Not Important', 2='Moderately Important', 3='Very Important', 4='')

'Unsure'). The last question was open-ended (See Appendix A).

Procedures

The study received approval from PVAMU Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol 2021-043). A list of agencies that currently work with the Department of Social Work was created by the research team. An online survey was emailed to agencies and took 2–3 minutes to complete. The research team followed up with organizations by email and phone calls to increase the response rate. Over sixty percent of organizations submitted a complete survey.

Results

Agencies were surveyed (n=17) between April and July 2021 to determine their COVID-19 related needs. These agencies serve underserved/poor (n=17), teenagers (n=14), children (n=14), and families (n=10). Although 18% of those surveyed offered Immigration Services (n=3), there were no findings indicating that agencies offered services to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients or Temporary Protected Status Holders (TPS). Several types of services are offered including Educational Services, (n=11), Mental Health Counseling (n=10), Mentorship (n=9) Financial Support (n=8), Food Distribution/ Food Pantry (n=8), and Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counseling (n=7). Most of the agencies served 500 or more clients within the past year.

Services Offered	n	%
Education	11	65%
Counseling (Mental Health)	10	59%
Crisis Intervention	9	53%
Mentorship	9	53%
Financial Support	8	47%
Food Distribution/Food Pantry	8	47%
Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counseling	7	41%
Health Care	6	35%
Shelter	5	29%
Telehealth	5	29%
Other	5	29%
Domestic Violence Counseling	3	18%
Immigration Services	3	18%
Policy	3	18%
Rehabilitation	3	18%

Agencies were surveyed about whether they were offering COVID-19 related services. Less than half of the agencies surveyed were offering COVID-19 related services at the time of the survey. Of those that provided COVID-19 related services, they offered Access to Health (n=9), Offering Personal Protective Equipment to the community (n=8), Case Management (n=8), Financial Assistance (n=7), Psychoeducation/Awareness (n=7), and Telehealth (n=7).

COVID-19 Related Services Offered	n	%
Access to Health Care	9	53%
Case Management	8	47%

Personal Protective Equipment	8	47%
Financial Assistance	7	41%
Psychoeducation/Awareness	7	41%
Telehealth	7	41%
Grief Counseling	6	35%
Job Placement	6	35%
COVID-19 Testing	4	24%
COVID-19 Vaccinations	4	24%
Medical Consultations	4	24%

Agencies were asked about the certifications or degrees that were needed during the COVID-19 response. A vast majority indicated that Project Management (n=14), Grant Writing (n=12), IT Support (N=12), Licensed Professional Counselors (n=11), various social work degrees, Masters in Business Administration (n=7), and Audio-Visual Support (n=7) were needed during this time.

Certifications/Degrees Needed During COVID-19 Response	n	%
Project Management	14	82%
Grant Writing	12	71%
IT Support	12	71%
Licensed Professional Counselor	11	65%
Licensed Masters of Social Work	11	65%
Bachelors of Social Work	10	59%
Masters of Social Work	9	53%
Licensed Clinical Social Worker	9	53%
Master's in Business Administration	7	41%
Audio Visual Support	7	41%
Licensed Bachelors of Social Work	6	35%
Certified Nursing Assistant	6	35%
Registered Nurse	6	35%
Licensed Vocational Nurse	5	29%
Nurse Practitioner	5	29%
Phlebotomy	3	18%
Ph.D. in Social Work	2	12%
Physical Therapy Assistant	2	12%

Agencies also responded to whether dual certifications would be beneficial. A Likert scale was used to measure their level of agreement (1='Strongly Disagree' to 7='Strongly Agree'). Most items ranked relatively low in agreement compared to BSW+LVN. We also asked the level of agreement on 'How can PVAMU support your mission during the COVID-19 response with the following services?'. We recoded the answers 6='Agree and 7='Strongly Agree' to reflect agreement. They shared that all areas are needed. This includes Internships (n=12), Community Service (n=12), Partnerships (n=11), Staff Trainings (n=10), Co-written Grants (n=10), New Ideas (n=12), and Partnership Building (n=11).

Agencies did not expect there to be major changes in funding within 6 months of the survey. A vast majority of agencies predicted either stability or an increase in all funding areas. Agencies indicated that it was "very important" for social work students to gain an education in with Fundraising, Marketing, Report Writing/Note Taking, and Telecommunications before they graduate. These skills are needed to support the agencies.

Open-Ended Questions

On the survey, agencies were asked to provide their thoughts on how the Department of Social Work and their agency can partner to support their COVID-19 response. Agencies reported that social work students could provide literature reviews about natural disasters. Additionally, students must become knowledgeable about the effects of natural disasters on individuals or families, such as stressors, increased abuse victimization in adults and children, and decline in mental health. Agencies also shared that the interns could fulfill research, program design, marketing, IT support, fundraising, and grant writing needs. Overall, the partnership and collaboration between the Department of Social Work and agencies continue to be beneficial and resourceful.

Discussion

Our pilot study aimed to explore the changing needs of community health centers, non-profits, and social service agencies that provide internship placements to social work students. Our findings point to several areas that universities may want to explore as they consider ways to remain relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, social work education programs and their internship placements can monitor the changing dynamics and needs within their partner agencies. For example, we found that health and human service agencies may need a workforce that has a complex skill set that goes beyond the current social work education curriculum. In our study, we found that agencies need social work students to graduate with more knowledge in Fundraising, Marketing, Report Writing/Note Taking, Telecommunications, Project Management, Grant Writing, IT Support, and Audio-Visual Support. This is an interesting finding as macro-level social work is often marginalized in social work programs from micro-level or clinical social work although students see them both as important [20]. Administrators and faculty can work to erase the chasm that is often drawn for a student to choose between micro or macro-level social work.

Collectively, the findings point towards the need to embrace an interdisciplinary team approach to internships. We recommend universities and community partners consider moving from a single placement/single-discipline approach to an interdisciplinary intern team approach. That is, an interdisciplinary team of 6-8 interns from across the university are placed at one agency. Interdisciplinary teams involve different disciplines collaborating to blend their ideas into a powerful solution. These teams are beneficial because interdisciplinary collaboration fosters problem-solving, empowerment, effective communication, creative solutions, positive management attributes, and sharing resources and procedures to improve patient care and outcomes [21]. For example, an intern team consisting of students from social work, nursing, public health, project management, technology, and marketing can be placed together for a semester to work on COVID-19 related issues within one agency. This could include creating a COVID-19 vaccination campaign for those characterized as Late Adopters or Laggards in Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations model [22,23]. Their work also might include increasing access to COVID-19 related health care, case management, and referrals for

COVID-19 patients who tested positive at local community health centers.

Our results also showed that Internships, Community Service, Partnerships, Staff/Training, Co-written Grants, New Ideas, and Partnership Building were all needed to support agency missions during the COVID-19 response. Strategies used by one discipline may help the next in support of patient-focused care. For example, social work and marketing interns may learn new strategies from each other when they want to promote a program or product. We recommend universities use an interdisciplinary approach to draw several disciplines together.

Based on the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we expected agencies to experience a decrease in their funding levels. On the contrary, agencies revealed that they did not expect a decrease in fundings from Private Foundations, City Government Funding, State Government Funding, Federal Government Funding, Billing/Insurance, and Client Fees. Future studies should focus on increasing the sample size so that the research team can explore the nuances of the findings. For example, recent research shows that "considerable incongruity in job loss patterns between the pre-and during-COVID timelines in several states and the recreational and philanthropic sectors register high job losses." That is, COVID-19 led to job loss as well as creating new job opportunities. Future studies can increase the sample size so that researchers can investigate the agency variables or conditions that are allowing human service agencies to remain stable or see increases in funding during the pandemic.

Conclusion

University-community partnerships must be strengthened during the COVID-19 response. The mutually beneficial relationship provides an endless transfer of knowledge and skills that is necessary to remain relevant during the COVID-19 global pandemic. These anchor institutions are neither uprooted by economic recessions nor global pandemics [24]. Therefore they provide stability to the communities they serve. Our preliminary findings shed light on the need for schools of social work to remain relevant to the changing needs of agencies during this COVID-19 pandemic. The precedent of social workers working with the medical profession was tested in the early 1900s to combat the rise of communicable diseases and the lingering socio-economic impact of those diseases on families. Today, COVID-19 has opened an opportunity for schools of social work to blend their empirically based interventions and professional values in an interdisciplinary team to help communities.

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Appendix

COVID-19 Agency Needs Assessment

Population and Services

What is the name of your agency?

What city is your agency located?

Which client population(s) does your agency serve? (Select all that apply)

- Children
- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals/Temporary Protected Status holders
- Elderly
- Families
- Men
- Teenagers
- Women
- Underserved/Poor
- Other

What service(s) does your agency offer to the community? (Select all that apply)

- Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counseling
- Counseling (Mental Health)
- Crisis Intervention
- Domestic Violence Counseling
- Education
- Financial Support
- Food Distribution/Food Pantry
- Health Care
- Immigration Services
- Mentorship
- Policy
- Rehabilitation
- Shelter
- Telehealth
- Other

Approximately how many people did your agency serve in 2020?

1. 0-100
2. 101-200
3. 201-300
4. 301-400
5. 401-500
6. 501-600
7. 601-700
8. 701-800
9. 801-900
10. 901-1000
11. More than 1000

What type of COVID-19 related service(s) is your agency offering in 2021?

(Yes, No, or Not Sure)

Access to Health Care

Case Management

COVID-19 Testing

COVID-19 Vaccinations

Financial Assistance

Grief Counseling

Job Placement

Medical Consultations
Personal Protective Equipment
Psychoeducation/Awareness
Telehealth

Education and Certifications

What certifications/degrees are needed within your agency during this COVID-19 response?

(Yes, No, or Not Sure)

Licensed Professional Counselor
B.S.W.
L.B.S.W.
M.S.W.
L.M.S.W.
L.C.S.W.
Ph.D. in Social Work

What certifications/degrees are needed within your agency during this COVID-19 response? *(Yes, No, or Not Sure)*

Masters in Business Administration
Grant Writing
Project Management

What certifications/degrees are needed within your agency during this COVID-19 response?

(Yes, No, or Not Sure)

Phlebotomy
Licensed Vocational Nurse
Certified Nursing Assistant
Physical Therapy Assistant
Registered Nurse
Nurse Practitioner

What certifications/degrees are needed within your agency during this COVID-19 response? *(Yes, No, or Not Sure)*

Audio Visual Support
IT Support

To what extent, do you believe the following dual certifications/degrees would support the mission of your agency?

(1-Strongly Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Somewhat Disagree; 4-Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 5- Somewhat Agree; 6-Agree; 7-Strongly Agree)

BSW + Phlebotomy
BSW + LVN
BSW + CNA
MSW + Phlebotomy
MSW + LVN
MSW + CNA

PVAMU-Community Partnerships

To what extent, do you agree that PVAMU can support your mission during the COVID-19 response with the following services?

(1-Strongly Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Somewhat Disagree; 4-Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 5- Somewhat Agree; 6-Agree; 7-Strongly Agree)

Internships
Community Service
Partnerships/Collaborations
Staff Trainings/ CEUs
Co-Written Grants
New Ideas
External Program Evaluations
Partnership Building

Do you expect any changes in your agency's funding levels within the next 6 months?

(1= 'Decrease', 2= 'Stable', 3= 'Increase')

Private Foundations

City Government Funding

State Government Funding

Federal Government Funding

Billing/Insurance

Client Fees

Which certifications/education do you think social workers should receive before graduating to better support your agency's mission?

(1= 'Not Important', 2= 'Moderately Important', 3= 'Very Important', 4= 'Unsure')

Budgeting/Finance

Fundraising

Human Resource Management

Industrial Sanitization

IT

Legal Interpretation

Marketing

Phlebotomy

Procurement

Report Writing/Note Taking

Supply Chain

Telecommunications

Website Development

Please provide your thoughts on how the Department of Social Work and your agency can partner to support your COVID-19 response.