

ISANS encountered several challenges when dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

Background

An evaluation of ISANS' operations during COVID-19 was conducted between November 2020 and March 2021. It involved the consultation of a Project Steering Committee and data was collected through document analysis, the ISANS database, surveys, focus groups, email correspondence, and a targeted interview with the organization's CEO.

Uncertainty of Pandemic Duration

ISANS could not have predicted how long the pandemic would last. This made it difficult to determine which services should and could be transitioned to an online format.

- ISANS transitioned the majority of its services to an online format which allowed clients to access services remotely during the pandemic

Limitations to Online Services

ISANS transitioned most services to an online format, however, some services simply could not be offered online.

- In-person services were made available to clients in crucial, time-sensitive situations, and this option was only available after a thorough screening process

Vulnerable Clients Faced the Most Barriers

Language and technology difficulties posed barriers to vulnerable clients when accessing online services.

- Staff identified over 800 vulnerable clients and proactively called them to check-in and update them on the COVID-19 situation to ensure that their needs were being met

Clients' Digital Literacy Skills Varied

Clients had different comfort levels with online platforms, and those who did not possess digital literacy skills struggled to access online services.

- Staff selected online platforms that clients would be able to access, and ISANS offered digital literacy orientations when in-person services were allowed. Digital literacy orientations helped clients to improve their digital literacy skills and access online services

Services Returning to In-Person Delivery

Staff and clients had different comfort levels regarding returning to in-person service delivery.

- ISANS developed extensive protocols for in-person service delivery and these protocols were informed by staff's feedback. Additionally, staff completed safety and protocol orientations and could participate in a workshop if they felt uncomfortable about returning to in-person services

Workloads Varied

Staff on some teams were inundated with work whereas staff on other teams had less work than usual due to the ebbs and flows of work.

- Staff with decreased workloads were re-deployed to assist teams that had increased workloads

Stress was Compounding and Cumulative

Stress and fatigue elicited by the pandemic compounded over time for staff and clients. Additionally, staff had new responsibilities at home, such as daytime childcare, that they had to balance with work.

- ISANS continued to receive support from key federal and provincial funders during the pandemic, which enabled ISANS to support its staff and offer some flexibility in hours worked

Outside Events

Tragedies such as the Portapique Murders exacerbated the toll that the pandemic was taking on the mental health of clients and staff and triggered memories of past trauma.

- ISANS ensured that staff and clients felt supported in the face of COVID-19 and other upsetting events. Sessions were held to support staff on the Portapique and George Floyd Murders

Pandemic Experiences Varied

ISANS' staff, clients, and community members all had different pandemic experiences.

- Discussions demonstrated that a single pandemic experience cannot be generalized to the organization, and there are diverse pandemic experiences within ISANS

Contexts Changed

ISANS had to navigate the constantly changing context of the pandemic, even when Federal and Provincial orders contradicted each other at times.

- Staff documented protocols which could be used when the context of the pandemic changed, and communication with staff and clients ensured that individuals were constantly updated

Documentation of Operations

Documentation of operations amid the COVID-19 crisis was challenging.

- ISANS' discussions of pandemic experiences helped individuals to reflect on operations, which assisted with documentation