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Several lessons were learned through this project that can be implemented in future evaluation projects.

Background

A community-based evaluation of ISANS' response to COVID-19 began in October 2020. A Project Steering Committee, consisting of Senior Leadership, Team Leads, Managers, and a partner from the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration, was formed. The research team met with the Project Steering Committee bi-weekly to update them on the progress of the project, to ask questions, and to receive guidance, input, and feedback. A plan for quantitative and qualitative data collection was determined to include document analysis, the ISANS database, surveys, focus groups, email correspondence with key leaders and managers, and a targeted interview with the CEO of the organization. Data collection was carried out between November 2020 and March 2021.

Benefit from Local Knowledge

Understanding the local community provided context for the research team. Having this pre-existing local knowledge and an understanding of the organization's local culture made the evaluation process go faster. Local knowledge of the following topics is beneficial for an evaluation project:

- ISANS
- Halifax
- Nova Scotia

Collaboration Improves Quality

Insight into the organization's operations was achieved by using an embedded evaluation strategy as one of ISANS' Senior Leaders was part of the research team. Using an embedded strategy also resulted in access to additional data that helped to provide a picture of pandemic operations, and the research team was informed of data collection occurring at ISANS that could benefit the evaluation project. The following instances of collaboration improved the quality of the evaluation:

- Collaboration with ISANS' Evaluation Framework Advisory Group occurred because a member of the advisory group was also a member of the research team
- Access to Connect, ISANS' intranet system which contains data on operations before and during COVID-19, was given to the research team
- Collaboration with the Project Steering Committee enabled the research team to gain access to survey data and photographs that were not directly collected for the evaluation project

Importance of an Iterative Approach

Consultation with the Project Steering Committee during the six-month-long project was constant and possible because of the project's iterative approach. Lessons that were learned from using an iterative approach included:

- Feedback from the Project Steering Committee was continuous, which ensured that the project continued in the right direction and prioritized topics that were important to ISANS
- Products of the evaluation project were shaped by the feedback of stakeholders such as Frontline Staff, Managers, the Senior Leadership Team, ISANS' CEO, and partners. This helped to ensure that products of the project reflected the diverse experiences across ISANS
- Consultations with the Project Steering Committee were as important as the products of the evaluation project because it prompted conversations about best practices during and after the pandemic

Openness to Unplanned Sources

Openness to additional, unplanned sources of data while completing an evaluation project can help to enhance the scope and detail of an evaluation. Some examples of unplanned sources of data include:

- Data collected from surveys that were not conducted for the evaluation project
- Crowdsourcing within ISANS to obtain a specific type of data (e.g., photographs)
- Research that has been published recently

Summary of ISANS' operations during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.

Adaptation

ISANS continuously adapted in response to the changing context of the COVID-19 crisis rather than pivoting. The transitions are best described as adaptations because:

- ISANS was able to continue offering the majority of its services online by using technology that was available to the organization
- ISANS has a culture that prioritizes the well-being of clients and staff, and that continued despite the challenges of the pandemic
- ISANS used Connect, an already established intranet system, to replace the communication and gatherings that staff would have previously participated in on-site

Culture

ISANS' culture helped the organization navigate the pandemic. The following core elements of ISANS' culture played a key role in maintaining smooth operations:

- ISANS has always prioritized people first, which allowed ISANS to meet the needs of staff, clients, and community in the middle of a crisis
- Communication is at the heart of ISANS' culture. During the pandemic ISANS communicated frequently with staff, clients, and the community, which enabled the organization to support clients and staff while operating remotely
- ISANS embraces new technology and providing most staff members with laptops in 2017 allowed the organization to rapidly shift to remote operations when faced with COVID-19

Support for the Health and Social Services Systems

ISANS worked with federal and provincial systems to support the health and social services systems during the pandemic. ISANS did this in the following ways:

- ISANS made messages from the health care system accessible to clients
- ISANS assisted clients when they applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

- ISANS' Communications Team worked with Nova Scotia Public Health to ensure that the province's COVID-19 messaging was accessible for all Nova Scotia residents

ISANS' Unexpected Opportunities

ISANS was able to capitalize on unexpected opportunities during the pandemic by being innovative and nimble. Some of these unexpected opportunities include:

- Staff held digital literacy orientations which helped clients to improve their digital literacy skills and gain access to ISANS' online services
- ISANS offered Online Early Childhood Education to 30 children and it created an opportunity to communicate with the children's families
- Staff from teams that had less work than normal were re-deployed to assist teams that were overwhelmed with work
- ISANS was able to reach a wider geography of clients because of remote and online service delivery

Flexibility

ISANS' staff and clients demonstrated tremendous flexibility and determination to make remote service delivery feasible. The following instances demonstrate the flexibility of ISANS' community:

- Staff met clients where they were at in terms of their digital literacy skills and selected online platforms that their clients could access
- Staff worked hard to provide the majority of ISANS' services online despite having to deal with the uncertainty of the pandemic, stress, and new responsibilities at home
- Clients were resilient and adapted to the changes in service delivery despite the challenges of the pandemic

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

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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

Several lessons were learned during the pandemic which can help to enhance ISANS' operations and service delivery.

Background

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People-Focused Culture

ISANS' people-focused culture was a key factor that allowed ISANS to have smooth operations during the pandemic. Lessons learned from having a people-focused culture include:

- Staff appreciate having flexible working hours as this promotes a work-life balance
- Clients with childcare or transportation issues could benefit from online services
- Staff feedback on plans to return to in-person services can help inform protocols

Communication is Essential

Communication with staff and clients was frequent and essential during the pandemic. Lessons learned from having frequent communication include:

- Calling vulnerable clients in their first language ensures that they receive the message
- Connect, an intranet system, helps staff members to feel connected while working remotely
- Documentation of practices allows for protocols to be enacted quickly in the face of a crisis

Embrace New Technology

ISANS was open to using new technology before and during the pandemic. Lessons learned from embracing new technology include:

- Investments in online and IT support is essential for creating online service platforms
- Staff used a variety of platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Zoom, Moodle) which allowed clients with a range of language and digital literacy skills to access services
- Digital literacy orientations help clients with low digital literacy to embrace technology

Experiences Varied

Staff, clients, and community members all had different pandemic experiences, and it is important to recognize a need for a tailored approach over a one-size-fits-all approach. Lessons learned from having varied experiences include:

- ISANS does not have a single, generalizable pandemic experience
- Staff and clients have different comfort levels, and some prefer online or in-person services, or a mixture of online and in-person services
- Staff from teams with a smaller workload can be re-deployed to support teams that are overrun with work

Support for the Health and Social Services Systems

ISANS plays a major role in supporting the health and social services systems through challenging times.

Lessons learned from supporting the systems include:

- ISANS can make messages from the health care system accessible to clients
- Clients turn to ISANS for assistance applying for benefits such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)
- ISANS' Communications Team can work with Nova Scotia Public Health to ensure that the province's COVID-19 messaging is accessible for all Nova Scotia residents

ISANS' people-focused culture fostered smooth operations during the pandemic.

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Staff had Flexible Hours

ISANS continued to receive support from key federal and provincial funders during the pandemic, which enabled ISANS to support staff by offering flexible working hours. This option was a major support for staff who were balancing work with new responsibilities at home, such as daytime childcare.

Accessibility of Services Increased

ISANS decided to transition most of its services to online platforms during the pandemic. This allowed clients to continue using ISANS' services and allowed clients with childcare or transportation issues to access services from their homes.

Feedback Informed Protocols

ISANS sent a survey to staff to assess their comfort level on returning to the office, and survey feedback informed ISANS' protocols for in-person services. Additionally, staff who were concerned about returning to the office could participate in a workshop to discuss their concerns and potential solutions.

Connect Supported Staff

Connect, ISANS' intranet system, contained work-related resources to support staff during the pandemic. Additionally, digital events on Connect, such as lunch gatherings and cooking competitions, helped staff to stay connected and added a degree of normalcy to individuals' daily routines.

Called Vulnerable Clients

ISANS identified over 800 vulnerable clients at the beginning of the pandemic and proactively called them in their first language to check-in, to update them on the COVID-19 situation, and to ensure that their needs were being met.

Frequent communication benefitted ISANS and the community during the pandemic.

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Staff Called Vulnerable Clients

ISANS identified over 800 vulnerable clients at the beginning of the pandemic and proactively called them to check-in, to update them on the COVID-19 situation, and to ensure that their needs were being met. ISANS called these clients instead of sending a written communication in order to ensure that clients received the message in their first language, and in an accessible manner.

Connect Updated Staff

Connect, ISANS' intranet system, was used to communicate with staff about COVID-19 and the organization's operations. This ensured that staff were always informed about the context of the pandemic and the situation the organization found itself in.

Operations were Documented

ISANS documented detailed protocols for operations that could be relied upon when the context of the pandemic changed. ISANS was able to use documented protocols from the spring to quickly and efficiently transition back to predominately online service delivery in the fall.

Staff Worked with Public Health

ISANS worked with Nova Scotia Public Health throughout the pandemic to ensure that the province's COVID-19 communication and associated signage was accessible to all Nova Scotians. ISANS took on this enhanced role because of the urgent need for clients to understand health care information.

Support for the Health Care System

ISANS made messages from the health care system accessible to clients. This benefitted the health care system because ISANS' help allowed them to communicate with patients, and it helped ISANS' clients because they were able to receive important, health-related messages and services in a timely manner.

Embracing new technology enabled ISANS to rapidly adapt to online service delivery.

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Investments in Online and IT Support

ISANS' prior investments in its Online Team and IT staff were incredibly beneficial when the organization had to transition to online service delivery. Having a strong Online Team and IT staff ensured that ISANS would have the infrastructure, such as online classrooms, and support in place to be able to offer the majority of the organization's services online.

Staff Chose Accessible Platforms

Staff selected platforms for service delivery that their clients could access and were comfortable with. These platforms ranged from WhatsApp to Zoom to Moodle and could vary for each service. This flexibility and openness to new technology ensured that clients could continue to access services.

ISANS Offered Digital Literacy Orientations

ISANS offered digital literacy orientations to clients when in-person services were allowed. These orientations helped clients to improve their digital literacy skills, which enabled them to access online services that they otherwise may not have been able to use.

Staff had Online Supports

Staff had access to online training and supports to assist them while adjusting to using new technology remotely. This helped staff transition to offering online services and allowed ISANS to continue offering the majority of its services to clients.

ISANS' Technology Library

ISANS began creating a technology library in the spring of 2021 from which clients can borrow tablets. The library was created in recognition of the technology gap that some clients faced when accessing services and will increase clients' access to services and other essential resources.

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

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Pandemic Experiences Varied

Staff and clients had unique pandemic experiences, and a single pandemic experience cannot be generalized to ISANS. This demonstrates that there needs to be a tailored approach over a one-size-fits-all approach when supporting individuals during the pandemic.

Workloads Differed

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 less work were re-deployed to assist teams that had increased workloads. This contributed to the diversity of pandemic experiences because some staff were learning new tasks while others were striving to keep up with their increased responsibilities.

Service Delivery Preferences

ISANS' clients have a range of service delivery preferences, ranging from only in-person to a mixture of online and in-person, to only online. How clients accessed services and their service delivery preferences would influence their pandemic experience.

Comfort Levels were Diverse

Staff and clients had different comfort levels about the prospect of returning to in-person services. Some staff members and clients were anxious about returning to in-person services, whereas other staff members and clients were looking forward to it.

Range of Experience with Technology

Staff had varied prior experience with working remotely before the pandemic, and clients had a range of digital literacy skills. This created unique work and service delivery experiences for staff and clients.

ISANS continued to support its clients and the health and social services systems during the pandemic.

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ISANS Aided the Health Care System

ISANS supported the health care system by making health and pandemic related communications more accessible to clients. This benefitted the health care system because ISANS' help improved communication with patients, and it benefitted clients because they received important, health-related messages and services in a timely manner.

Application Assistance

Clients came to ISANS with questions about how to apply for benefits such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and ISANS answered these questions and helped clients apply. This is not a task that is included in ISANS' mandate, but helping clients apply ensured that eligible clients would receive the benefit.

Work with Public Health

ISANS worked with Nova Scotia Public Health to ensure that the province's COVID-19 messaging was accessible for all Nova Scotians. This not only benefitted ISANS' clients and newcomers, but arguably helped the province communicate better with all Nova Scotians.

Vaccine Rollout Support

ISANS also worked to assist Nova Scotia Public Health with the province's COVID-19 vaccine rollout. This collaboration was beneficial for Nova Scotia Public Health and for all Nova Scotia residents.

ISANS was Accessible During the Pandemic

As other organizations were forced to close or reduce services because of the pandemic, ISANS was able to offer the majority of its services remotely, and even offer in-person services in critical situations. This meant that ISANS was accessible throughout the pandemic and was always available to clients.