

Practicum Analysis Project

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Submitted for: Senior Year Practicum

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1, May 2020

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Introduction

This practicum analysis paper will work to analyze and evaluate my practicum agency, which is the Department of Family and Children Services in Catoosa County, in regard to how they have responded and been effected by this COVID-19 pandemic. I will work to do this through the nine (9) different social work competencies. These competencies look at professionalism, diversity, and engaging diversity within practice, advancing human rights, social, environmental, and economic justice, research, policy, assessment, engagement, intervention among individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities, and evaluation. Each competency will be covered in detail.

Not only will the competencies be covered, key terms or concepts such as COVID-19 and theories used throughout the course of this paper will be explained to give the reader greater understanding. I will look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has effected the workers of the Department of Family and Children Services in Catoosa County as well as the people that they serve. I will address the changes in service delivery that have been put in place to keep the workers and community from getting contaminated. Towards the conclusion of this paper, I will look at and analyze how my understandings and beliefs regarding the role of social work and being a professional during a pandemic have been effected or changed through out the course of this project.

Practicum Agency

My field practicum agency is the Department of Family and Children Services in Catoosa County. For the purposes of this paper, the Department of Family and Children Services in Catoosa County will be referred to as DFCS. This agency works with children and families

through providing intervention methods to help children and families. Some of the populations and demographics that DFCS serves and works with are families living in poverty, people and families experiencing homelessness, people addicted to drugs, alcohol, and/or other substances, Individuals who are currently incarcerated or have been incarcerated in the past, and situations of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, serious injury and sometimes even child death. All cases that DFCS gets are in regard to families with children.

The DFCS office in Catoosa County is located at 700 City Hall Dr, Fort Oglethorpe, GA 30742. The building holds many departments other than DFCS such as the Police Department. Within DFCS is the CPS/Investigations unit, Foster Care and Adoptions unit, Family Preservation unit, and OFI unit which works with food stamps, Medicaid, Medicare, TANF, SNAP and other welfare assistance programs.

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 stands for the Corona Virus and is the current pandemic not only in the United States but also in other countries and parts of the world. According to the Tennessee Gov site, the Corona Virus originated in China in December of 2019. While this was not named COVID-19 from the beginning, China noticed a significant rise in the cases that were identified and reporting the same symptoms. This virus then spread to other places such as Italy, Australia, the United States, and other places as well. The virus was officially named COVID-19 standing for Corona Virus that originated in the year 2019.

Since the outbreak and significant rise in cases of COVID-19, many orders have been put into place such as sheltering in place, schools closing, all non-essential businesses closing, wearing masks and gloves, and all non-essential travel being stopped. Some states in the United States have gone so far as to close the borders of their state only allowing individuals who can

provide proof of residence within those states to enter. Other states require masks anytime someone is outside, and those who are out without a mask or do not have an essential reason to be out of their houses are escorted back to their houses.

There are many symptoms to watch for during this time that can help diagnose COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), if a person has the following symptoms, they are encouraged to seek medical help: trouble breathing, pain or pressure in their chest, confusion that is recently onset, and bluish lips or face. Other symptoms for COVID-19 include fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chills, muscle pain, repeated shaking with chills, headache, sore throat and new loss of taste or smell. These symptoms typically appear 2-14 days after being exposed to the virus. The CDC is advising people to stay home, wash your hands often, clean and disinfect everything frequently, avoid touching your face, wear a mask when in public, and cover your mouth with a tissue when you sneeze.

It has been found that this virus thrives in cooler environments and can survive on a surface for approximately 24 hours. Individuals who have underlying health conditions, asthma, lung problems, and heart problems tend to be more vulnerable to this virus. According to the CDC website, currently in the United States, there are 865,585 cases of COVID-19 and there have been 48,816 deaths as a result. Specifically, in the state of Georgia there have been 22,147 confirmed cases of COVID-19. Out of those 22,147 confirmed cases, 46 of those being in Catoosa County. Although there have been many deaths as a result of this virus, the majority of people who contract COVID-19 actually survive. In Georgia, 4.03% of the people who have obtained COVID-19 have actually died, however, none of these deaths have been in Catoosa County.

Competency 1

Throughout the whole COVID-19 pandemic, DFCS in Catoosa County has monitored it closely and put practices and guidelines in place to stop the spread of the virus through their staff to client interactions and also client to client interactions. I believe that they have taken the necessary precautions to keep everyone safe. When COVID-19 first started to be a topic of interest and concern, DFCS started limiting how many workers were working in the office at the same time. They came up with a schedule that showed which employees were working in the office that day and everyone else was advised to work from home. While working from home was not forced at that point, it was encouraged. In addition, employees going out on visits were to contact the clients beforehand to see if they had been sick recently or if anyone in the household had been sick recently.

As COVID-19 progressed more and became more serious in the United States, DFCS enforced that everyone should work from home essentially closing the office. They also enforced that all foster care visits with children and also parents should be done over zoom or some other platform that was supported. If an investigation case came in, CPS workers were required to call before heading out to the home and ask a list of mandated questions regarding sickness and COVID-19. If the family did not want DFCS to enter their home, CPS workers could not enter the home with the exception that they had serious concerns that a child was being hurt, abused or neglected. If this was speculated, CPS workers should communicate with their supervisor to figure out a plan of action.

These actions have helped the community as they have recognized the dignity and worth of people and have worked to do their part to stop the spread of COVID-19. DFCS workers are still being intentional about being professional and maintaining and upholding the values to do

no harm and make sure children are protected and safe. While this has changed the way DFCS workers engage, assess, and intervene with children and families, I believe that they are doing the best that they can in the midst of these unusual situations. Employees being able to work from home is ethically sound because each worker has their own government issued computer that is password protected. This enables DFCS workers to still engage in ethical use of technology and work to combat breaks in confidentiality.

Since so many aspects of DFCS intertwine with the court system and other agencies, these aspects have also been shifted. The court systems have been closed which has most likely put some of the cases at DFCS on hold. While this is unfortunate for the families and children to be able to move forward with their case and case plans, DFCS is still working to put the needs and protection of the children first in whatever ways are possible. Many agencies that DFCS works with to provide services such as drug screens, counseling, transportation services, and evaluations have had to change how they are operating as well to comply with the orders for social distancing and to ensure the safety of themselves and also the community. Though all of this can be seen as a major inconvenience, the staff at DFCS have maintained professionalism, confidentiality, and are continually working to provide the best service possible to their clients and client families.

Competency 2

Within the social work practice, engaging in diversity and difference in practice is an important competency that we strive to embrace and integrate into our practice settings. There is so much diversity around us, some that we may not even recognize. Within DFCS, there is a huge amount of diversity not only within the staff that work at the agency, but also within the clients that DFCS serves and works with. There are many cultural differences which cause

individuals to believe in different values and beliefs. These values and beliefs are based upon the way the individual was socialized and it is important to recognize these differences and work to see them through the individuals' view. Some of the demographics and populations that DFCS is able to work with are poverty, people experiencing homelessness, drug addiction or dependence, alcohol abuse or dependence and any other type of substance abuse or dependence, domestic violence, physical abuse, verbal/emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment, abandonment, serious injury and sadly sometimes child death.

Throughout this whole COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a lot of changes. However, there is one thing that I have seen pretty consistently throughout this pandemic and has seemed to become a trend. The government at the state and federal level has shifted from diversity and democracy more to a monocratic society where the decisions are made on our behalf for our supposed benefit. However, with this shift from democracy to more of a monocratic leadership, many elements of diversity have been oppressed in pursuit of gaining and showing power over the United States. Specifically, within DFCS, many of the practices that had encouraged diversity and difference within the practice setting have now had to be changed or modified in some way. Throughout the whole process of rethinking how to incorporate these practices that encouraged diversity and difference, all of the DFCS workers have had to become more intentional about finding ways to implement diverse practices. They have had to recognize the importance of diversity, culture, equity, and inclusion and still work to maintain those aspects within their work. While this has not been easy since they have been taken out of their normal swing of things, From what I have heard about DFCS, they have been able to do a good job at including clients and families, recognizing diversity, culture, and difference, and have been able to pull together through this unusual and scary time.

Competency 3

Competency 3 is all about advancing human rights, social, economic, and environmental justice. Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to ensure that people are still able to obtain their human rights and that social justice is present. Locally and globally one way this is being done is by providing lunches for school children even though school is not in session right now. They are delivering these meals by bus every day to ensure that all school children have access to food every school day. Another way that is ensuring social justice on a global scale is by the economic stimulus relief. So many people have been laid off or lost their jobs through this COVID-19 pandemic that the government is sending stimulus relief fund to individuals in the United States to help cover costs during this unusual time. This is not only ensuring that human rights are met, but also ensuring that social, economic, and environmental justice is served as we work to combat this COVID-19 pandemic.

However, even in the unusual times that we are living in, there are some strategies that can be taken to help eliminate some of the structural barriers in order to ensure equality. One of the barriers currently is that we are separated by isolation and not able to go and socialize with other people. This can have negative effects on the mental health of many people. One way to remove this barrier of socialization is by offering tele-communication services to all individuals. However, many people may not have a phone or computer that they can use for the tele-communication services. In order to break down this barrier, a subsidy program could be started where people could apply for funds to buy a phone or computer during this time so that they are able to still interact with others from a distance. The last strategy would be to provide customer services as a part of the subsidy program for individuals who are not computer literate or technology literate. This would work to explain and educate people on how to use their

technology to be able to communicate with their friends, community mentors, or counselors while also maintaining social distancing. All of these strategies combined can help ensure equality during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Competency 4

For this competency, I was able to read an article and write about 2 approaches that DFCS and other businesses can use during this time of isolation. The article, entitled “How to heal through COVID-19”. This article talked about “...using calmness, openness, vigilance, intelligence, and dedication.” To help ourselves and those around us heal and care for ourselves during this unusual time. Self-care is something that is so important in social work. Helping professionals pour out of themselves to help others and it can be easy to forget to pour back into ourselves. I chose this article to talk about for this section because I feel that especially in a time like now, it is so important to not only practice self-care ourselves but to encourage our clients and client families to practice self-care. Being confined to isolation and quarantine can really take a toll on mental health.

This article talked about how in the midst of unusual or scary situations, our bodies tend to shut down to protect ourselves. It mentioned how our bodies are designed to grow or guard (Health & Nicole Reed, 28). In a situation such as COVID-19, it is important to focus our minds on the positive rather than the negative. One helpful way to help calm and focus your mind is medication. This form of self-care helps to relax and de-stress and individual. Another approach that can be a helpful self-care approach when working or living in stressful times is checking your emotions and grounding yourself. Some ways that this can be done is by feeling your heartbeat, connecting with the sounds and sensations around you, and talking out loud to

yourself. While these self-care practices may seem silly, these can help, and individual survive and thrive in stressful times.

These approaches can help employees as well as clients. I believe that implementing these approaches into DFCS can help the employees take care of themselves which will improve the ways that they interact with clients. These approaches can also be recommended to clients to help ease some of the stress and confusion during this time. This can not only help improve the professional relationship between employees and clients, but it can also improve mental and physical health of both clients and employees.

Competency 5

Competency 5 is all about policy and engaging in policy practice as a social worker. For this competency, I was able to do some research and look at some changes that have been made to policies in Georgia in response to this COVID-19 pandemic. One of the policy changes that I looked at was executive order 96.67 KB. This executive order mandated that school should stay closed through the end of the 2019-2020 school year for all schools in Georgia. While there had already been other executive orders that suspended Georgia schools for a few weeks, this order specifies that all schools must be closed through the remainder of the year. The executive order explained how this should not prevent or impact online education, but that each local school district should come together to figure out a plan of action for how online school, if any, should be handled and set dates for final school days. This executive order was signed and put into effect on April 1, 2020 to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic that the world is experiencing right now.

The reason that I chose this policy change is because DFCS works closely with the schools on a daily basis. Many of the cases that are called in are from the schools. So, by the

schools closing, this has drastically impacted DFCS as they are no longer getting calls and reports from the schools. This impacts DFCS in a few different ways. One way as stated is that DFCS is receiving fewer reports with schools being closed. However, the other aspect is case managers are no longer able to see children at school or use teachers or guidance counselors as collaterals.

I think it is important to note that while calls and reports have been decreased since the schools shut down, this does not mean that more children are safe, getting enough food, and not being harmed. For some children, school was the only place where they felt safe. Due to the shelter in place orders, families have been ordered to stay home as much as possible which could put some children in a scary situation. While I believe that closing schools for the sake of slowing the spread of COVID-19 and keeping faculty and students safe was necessary and beneficial, I think that it has potentially caused trauma and hardships for many children. Food insecurity has risen due to many people losing their jobs. To combat this, public schools have been delivering food to all of their students via bus stops to ensure that children still are able to get a good meal every weekday. The school systems have done their best to ensure the wellbeing of children during this difficult time.

I also looked at a public health policy that has been put in place to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. I was able to look at executive order 208.09 KB which was put in place on 3.14.2020. This executive order has many policy changes in it regarding the state of Georgia declaring a public health state of emergency and the protocols and policy changes that will come as a result of this state of emergency. One of the policy changes that I found of interest to me when relating it to DFCS was the order for all resources of the state of Georgia to become available to be able to help with combating this pandemic and helping in the recovery of the pandemic.

I found this order interesting because in my understanding this means that Med First, a medical clinic that DFCS uses for drug screens, is currently working to combat COVID-19. This means that drug screens may not be getting done regularly for all the clients and open cases. While this redirection of resources is helpful and in some cases absolutely necessary to work on combating COVID-19, this also has an unintended consequence of potentially keeping many DFCS cases on hold and children and families in limbo. Many case plans require 6 months of clean drug screens. However, with everything being refocused to COVID-19, these families may not be able to get the drug screens regularly inevitably holding up progress on their case plan and providing an opportunity for relapse. These policy changes have been beneficial to combat COVID-19 but have also made things more difficult and challenging for DFCS employees as well as children and families involved with DFCS.

Competency 6

This competency deals with engagement with individuals, families, groups, communities, and organizations. As a part of engaging with different people, it is important to recognize different theories that are applicable to different situations. This can help understand the client/s better and also can help determine which intervention methods might be most beneficial in different situations. One theory that I think applies very well into the COVID-19 pandemic situation is the Psychodynamic Theory. The Psychodynamic Theory was developed by Freud and explains how needs, drives, and emotions motivate human behavior. As a part of this, the theory recognizes that emotions play a huge role in human behavior which can sometimes cause individuals to become overwhelmed by things that are going on within their body as well as things that are going on in the world. This relates to COVID-19 because there is a lot of emotions going around right now. Many people have fear, confusion, concern, a need for

answers, and many other emotions as this world is experiencing some very unusual things. It is important for DFCS employees to recognize this when working with children and families and know intervention methods that they can use to help with these emotions and needs.

Another theory that I believe applies well in this situation is Conflict Theory. This theory, developed by Karl Marx, explores that individuals and groups work to satisfy their own needs above the needs of others. This theory also talks about how social change is enforced through interrupting long periods of stability with change and conflict. I feel that this applies to the COVID-19 situation in a few different ways. Throughout this pandemic, it has been noticed that many people have been striving to satisfy their needs such as buying toilet paper in bulk or buying bulk amounts of food. Another way that Conflict theory has shown itself is that this pandemic has interrupted a fairly long period of stability in this country. Through this interruption, quite a bit of change has happened not only in our personal lives but also in the country. While there are many other theories that could be applied to this situation, these are two that I felt related rather well.

Recognizing how these two theories relate to this COVID-19 pandemic can help individuals change how we approach intervention methods offered at this time. At DFCS, many of the clients are already facing stress. Recognizing the added stress that COVID-19 has put on clients can help employees to better relate with the clients using empathy and other skills to work to alleviate some of the stress of the clients. While employees of DFCS may not be able to relieve all the stress of the clients, they are able to help the client understand the situation that we are in, what precautions are being taken, and let them know how this will effect their case.

Competency 7

There are many theories that can be used in assessment with DFCS and the clients that it serves. One theory that I want to mention is the Social Learning Theory. This theory was developed by Albert Bandura and talks about classical and operant conditioning. A part of Social Learning Theory talks about how behavior issues are often maintained through positive or negative reinforcement. This theory is also the basis for shaping stress management strategies, relaxation techniques and other behaviors as well. This helps assess the needs of the clients that DFCS serves because in this time of isolation, often negative reinforcement takes precedence in different behaviors and issues. It is easier for some people to follow the negative reinforcement and fall back into drug or alcohol addiction as well as other negative reinforcement. By providing some intervention methods to these negative reinforcement pressures, we can help combat the negative reinforcement and work to replace them with positive reinforcement options.

One other theory that can be used to assess the clients that DFCS works with is the Systems theory. This theory was developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy and emphasize how different elements in our environments such as nature, chemistry, social relationships, socialization and human relationships work together to form our complete view. This theory can also be helpful in assessing the needs and strengths of the clients that DFCS serves. Through this theory, we can see that interaction and connection with others is vital in life. Typically, I would say that this can be seen as a strength that clients of DFCS has. For the most part, clients have multiple interactions and connections with others. However, during this COVID-19 pandemic, people are isolating themselves and are subjected to feeling lonely, depressed and fearful. By providing intervention methods such as ensuring that all clients have someone to talk to, this can provide DFCS clients with a sense of stability and knowing that they are not alone in this

unusual time. There have been many times in life that have left me feeling alone in what I was struggling with. Because of this, I am sensitive to this need in others. I strive to do everything that I can to make sure that everyone knows that they are not alone in the struggle. This has an impact on how I assess the clients that DFCS works with because I am automatically drawn to this need in the community during this time.

Competency 8

Based on the analysis that the clients that DFCS works with needs someone to talk to, I would propose that DFCS start a community mentorship program for their clients. This mentorship program would pair new foster parents with seasoned foster parents, recovered drug addicts with clients struggling with drug addiction and provide a sense of relation and connection for the clients. Mentorship programs are used across the United States because of their effectiveness and importance. Connecting people together in difficult times can help individuals work towards goals and have a mentor alongside them each step of the way. To comply with COVID-19 restrictions, all communication with community mentors at this time would be over the phone, text, zoom, or other platform. This would give the clients and foster parents a way to connect with someone who has been in their shoes. Mentorship programs are research-informed and evidence-based interventions.

This intervention could be started by reaching out to clients to see if they would be interested in being paired with someone that has been where they are. Many people have a stigma against counseling services, however, just talking to someone who has been where they are and can help them through the challenges could be less stigmatized. Once this information is gathered, we could reach out to community mentors that would be willing to be paired up with

an individual or family. Rules and guidelines would have to be put in place for this to work effectively and safely, however, I think it is something that could be beneficial to many clients.

Another intervention method that is research-informed and evidence-driven is counseling. While I know DFCS refers to different counselors already, in times like these I feel that counselors are vitally important and should be used and referred to as much as possible. Because of COVID-19, it would be essential that the counseling was via zoom or some other platform to ensure the safety of the counselors and also the clients. I am unsure if the agencies that DFCS works with are offering tele-counseling services at the moment, but if they are not, I believe it is something that could be really useful and beneficial to many clients. DFCS employees would be able to refer clients to these tele-counseling services to help them cope and have someone to talk to through this unusual time. I feel that both of these intervention methods would work to combat the loneliness, depression and other mental health issues and challenges that come with being isolated.

Competency 9

Evaluation is a particularly important aspect of social work. One of the big things about social work is that it works off of evidence-based intervention methods. This being said, when an intervention is put into place, it is important to evaluate it to see how it is affecting the clients. There are many ways that evaluations can be done to get the desired outcomes. One way this evaluation could be done in our situation is by communicating with the clients via phone. Over this phone call, clients could be asked to answer some survey questions to help us know how having a community mentor and/or tele-counseling has effected them. These survey questions would help DFCS to see if the intervention methods that we put in place were benefiting the clients and also help identify any unintended consequences.

Another way that the tele-counseling intervention method could be evaluated is by gathering statistics from the counseling services. These statistics would be based on how many clients are utilizing this service, how many clients have met one or more of their identified goals, and how many clients have shown decreased symptoms of anxiety, depression, or any other mental health challenge. After receiving this data, we could analyze it and change our intervention method based upon the findings. These evaluation methods will help us identify where our intervention methods are working and areas of needed improvement.

Conclusion

Many things have been looked at and evaluated throughout the course of this paper. We have looked at how DFCS has responded to COVID-19 and how areas of diversity and equity have had to be changed as a result of this pandemic. I briefly mentioned the importance of self-care and some strategies that can be helpful in practicing self-care during this pandemic. I have also been able to explain some theories and how they relate to this time we are facing as well as how these theories can be utilized in assessing the needs and strengths of the community and clients that DFCS works with. I was able to suggest two intervention methods of starting a community mentorship program for the clients that DFCS works with as well as ensuring that all clients have access and are referred to tele-counseling. These intervention methods can help combat the negative issues and behaviors that isolation brings. Throughout all of this, I was sure to mention the importance of evaluating these intervention methods to ensure that they are providing the clients with beneficial outcomes as well as see areas that need changed or improved.

As I have been able to go through and really look into how COVID-19 has effected DFCS employees, their policies and procedures as well as the children and families involved

with DFCS, It has given me a chance to reflect on how this has changed my views and understandings of a social work professional role in responding to a pandemic such as COVID-19. This project allowed me to see how important it is to be aware of what is happening within the world and really analyze how it will impact the clients that you are working with. I did not realize how important it would be to evaluate the intervention methods and the way the intervention methods are being carried out to assess the safety of the employees, clients and client families. After looking at some of the procedure changes that DFCS has put into place, I have realized that the unintended consequence of some children possibly slipping through the cracks is unable to be resolved. DFCS employees are working hard and diligently to do what they can to combat the hardships that COVID-19 has placed on them, their clients and many others throughout the world.

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