The Rippling Effects of a Pandemic

on Assessment Centers and Their Communities

The Pandemic

Two years ago, the fear of an unknown virus overtook communities. Schools, recreational centers, mental health services all shut their doors, decreased hours, or went virtual in hopes to stop the spread of Covid-19. The hardships of the pandemic, turned endemic, lingers two years later as we continue to balance public health, public safety, and economic indicators. Assessment Centers and the youth, families, and communities they serve have not been spared from the impact of Covid-19. Increased levels of need for the youth and families served coupled with labor shortages and capacity issues of Centers and local providers, have created what many communities are considering a crisis.

Young people have experienced significant loss. According to Education Week, during Covid at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 schools experienced closure with most remaining closed until the end of the 2019-2020 school year. The closure of schools for many young people meant the loss of community and connection with peers. For caregivers, it was the loss of a support system for their children while they worked and a loss of food security with 21.7 million free or reduced lunches served each day across the US, prior to the pandemic according to the USDA. In addition to the loss of support, community, and connection, youth and caregivers have experienced the loss of loved ones. As of March 28th, 2022, according to the CDC 977,688 people have lost their lives with Covid listed as either the underlying cause of death or a contributing cause of death. These impacts on families are being felt by Assessment Centers and their communities across the United States.

When Covid swept across the nation, Assessment Centers saw a significant decrease in referrals of youth from both schools and law enforcement. For schools, referrals to Assessment Centers were often for disruptive or concerning behavior as well as chronic absenteeism. With youth staying home and participating in virtual learning, teachers and school staff had fewer opportunities and limited methods for identifying the usual indicators of concern.

Similarly, law enforcement officers and court personnel were forced to limit those arrested and detained due to Covid policies by more narrowly defining the behaviors that were a threat to public safety and warranted an arrest. Jim Swordan, Director of the Lucas County Youth Assessment Center, theorizes that

"the pandemic made the officers make the choice on whether they were going to arrest or not…and save it (an arrest) for the situation where they had to arrest."."

This created a silver lining in the pandemic. Detention numbers dropped as communities tried to reduce close proximity of youth and staff due to Covid 19. According to a survey done by Annie E. Casey Foundation, on January 1, 2021, participating detention facilities held about 35% fewer young people in their facilities than they had on March 1, 2020. Communities relied instead on diversion efforts like Assessment Centers or just chose not to respond.

Needs of Youth and Families Rise

As youth transition back into full-time school schedules after a year or more, many schools report more youth emotionally struggling and exhibiting more intense behaviors. School data on behavior incidents is not yet available, but anecdotal evidence published by PEW Research Institute indicates that violence and other behavioral challenges, including truancy, bullying, anxiety, depression, and suicide risks, were up this fall in K-12 schools. While we may not have the data yet, Assessment Centers can corroborate these experiences.

"We are seeing a lot more kids with more severe concerns, more escalated behaviors, and a significant amount of self-harm… so our Assessment time is increasing because we are incorporating more crisis services." - Samantha Day; The Harbor Juvenile Assessment Center

While youth arrest and detainment is trending up with a survey from Annie E. Casey showing October 1, 2021 detention numbers at a 19 month high, most Assessment Centers still are not seeing pre-pandemic arrests. The Lucas County, Ohio Center is “seeing less kids but with higher needs: extensive trauma, extensive mental health issues, and family conflict,” states Swordan. The National Assessment Center Association (NAC) encourages the continued emphasis for law enforcement and courts to use prevention and diversion methods before arresting and detaining youth. “We cannot arrest our way out of mental health needs and trauma” states Molli Cook, Executive Director of the NAC. However, if youth aren’t arrested by law enforcement, how do we ensure they still have access to community supports if there are needs?.

At the 18th Judicial JAC in Colorado, the number of youth that law enforcement transported to the Center has decreased drastically. “Less kids in handcuffs are great” says Sarah Troy, Executive Director, “but that doesn’t mean there is less need out there. We get why you aren’t arresting and encourage it, but don’t pretend the need isn’t there. Don’t keep showing up at homes where parents are calling because a child is out of control and not doing anything.”Troy goes on to encourage law enforcement officers to refer to Assessment Centers preventatively so they can see kids and families before the behavior becomes more acute. This is “much less traumatic for kids,” states Troy, “We don’t need kids to come in handcuffs to get here, but we do need to be able to meet their needs.”

The Staffing Crisis

The encouragement to meet needs of youth and families preventively comes with caution from Assessment Centers. Like many nonprofits and for-profit businesses across the country in the last year, they have been challenged with a myriad of capacity issues. Capacity of not only the Assessment Center, but of their network. Assessment Centers serve as a bridge for youth and families. Their purpose is to better understand what the underlying needs are of youth and families and get them connected to the right services and supports in the community. So what happens when the capacity of service providers is diminished?

Even if Assessment Centers have the capacity to serve more youth preventively and identify needs, they can’t get them into services. “The wait for service providers is sometimes months, especially in high acuity need cases,” states Sarah Troy. The Link, an Assessment Center in Adams County, Colorado, is experiencing wait times of 8-12 weeks to get youth into crisis-type services. Additionally, important mentoring services around the country are struggling to re-engage mentors or recruit new ones because of the pandemic.

Not surprisingly, the labor shortage has not spared Assessment Centers or their referral network. Low pay and high burnout have led to high turnover rates. For one Assessment Center in Colorado, a job announcement sat open for 2 months and only received two applications. “Everyone is in the same boat. Everyone is frustrated. Everyone needs more staff. Needs more funding. There isn’t a lot of good conversation on how to fix it because they are all just trying to keep their head above water and fighting their own battles,” states Troy.

> When Foundations or grant applications ask, "What are your barriers?", "I am going to need more than this little baby textbox to tell you," states Woodmanseee

Because of the lack of availability of supports, “we have seen a shift of youth with higher mental health needs going to ERs and they are also inundated;” says Marissa Woodmansee, Director of the 20th Judicial Intake and Assessment Center in Kansas. “There is a limited amount of mental health residential beds in communities and youth and families are forced to find other avenues which usually means ER.” The Center for Disease Control data corroborates this. It shows that in February and March in 2021, emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher among girls aged 12–17 than during the same period in 2019.

The Call to Action

The not-so-perfect storm of youth and families experiencing higher needs together with Assessment Centers and service providers facing capacity and labor shortages equals a crisis. We are at crisis level for getting young people help and we know the situation would only be worse if we relied on the "justice" system to address their needs.

The news is not all doom and gloom. Some communities and Assessment Centers are putting their best foot forward to address some of these complex problems. Greene County's Youth Assessment and Intervention Center is part of a group of stakeholders developing a community response to school threats, which have increased during COVID. Fairfield County, Ohio's Assessment and Intervention Center is a part of a local mental health services board that was formed to look at the labor shortage, who has what available, and what the needs are. "We are still kind of stuck but at least there are conversations going on," states CJ Roberts, Communications Director.

Assessment Centers and community stakeholders need to be supported to convene and strategically address the complexities of these problems. Collaborative staffing, braided funding models, philanthropic support, employee development and retention programs can serve as a multi-pronged solution. Communities should bring together new funding streams (ARPA) and existing (foundations, state, local and federal government) to address capacity of local service providers as well as Assessment Centers.

Service system mapping is one way Centers and community providers can convene to better understand the landscape of services and supports and how to better coordinate and increase efficiency of use. It requires communities to thoroughly review the available community services and supports and map who they serve, how referrals are made, and what services are provided.

It allows for community consensus on the availability of services and the decision points, or flow, of services offered within a community. This serves as a crucial function of an assessment center not only to match youth and family's needs to available community care and support, but also to allow communities to identify service gaps and advocate for the best use of additional resources.

> **"I don't know the answer, but I am willing to get together…Let's come up with it together," says Woodmansee.**

To learn more about Assessment Centers and ways you can support go to www.nacassociation.org Or email molli@nacassociation.org