

Risk, Rights and Resourceful Resilience

Irish Probation Service

In December 2019, I moved into a prison setting, after over 28 years as a community-based probation officer in Northern Ireland. Based in a large open plan office in a custodial setting I had the benefit of being able to access two digital case management systems and was able to work directly with experienced colleagues. I asked questions and learnt from colleagues – working together in close proximity was crucial in adapting to this new role.

Indeed collaborative working in a multi-disciplinary environment is at the heart of what we do. We work closely with prison staff colleagues, psychology, health care and a range of voluntary sector organisations involved in providing programmes. I was just starting to think I was getting the hang of the new role when the Coronavirus pandemic broke out and I suddenly found myself working in a completely different way.

Covid-19 concerns and fears

At the beginning of March, there were growing concerns and fears expressed by staff and service users about how they might be impacted by this disease. Being a 'key worker' in a prison setting brought new problems to be resolved, such as hand washing and accessing hand sanitiser when you have so many gates and biometric palm readers to negotiate in a prison setting. The very person centred greeting of a handshake became a virtual wave.

By 18th March, following the introduction of government guidelines on social distancing, probation officers had to leave the prison setting. Individuals who were progressing towards release on life licence and living in open conditions in the community had to be returned to closed conditions. I spoke to each of those people and their responses covered a range of human responses – from frustration and fear of returning, to resilience in stating that they had coped with closed conditions in the past and could do so again.

Our risk assessment process with individuals now took particular cognisance of mental health concerns, abusive situations, and child protection issues, which we knew would be impacted by these new restrictive conditions and social distancing.

New ways of communicating

Collaboration and communication were now of critical importance. As we were deployed to work from home the importance of embracing new technologies really came to the fore.

Initially we used emails and conference calls to speak to service users and colleagues. Our managers had agreed a Whatsapp group to enable us to communicate with each other and update current work situations. As a team we continue to link in with each other and update information and share information from other organisations.

While technological advances in platforms such as Zoom, Facetime, Skype etc allow communication between staff and some service users, those without the technology on their phones for risk management reasons have to rely on phone calls and texts messages. Indeed, I have continued to use traditional postal services for some clients.

App 'changing lives'

In order to support our service users, from a distance, many colleagues in the community continue to use the PBNI App 'changing lives' – with resources on mental health and addictions and contact numbers available to all. Staff are becoming very creative in how they link in with service users by phone and have been sending links to reading material and resources as well as mindfulness exercises. On a recent call with a service user in the community he talked about his ability to use his coping skills and techniques acquired through mindfulness to appreciate the small things like sunshine and plan for each day at a time. He intends to grow vegetables to share with his neighbour and it is clear that he is making constructive use of his time, getting into the open air and encouraging a sense of social responsibility. This individual, with the right support, has been able to reframe how the Covid 19 situation has impacted upon him and allowed time for change.

Support for service users

Importantly staff have also been providing support to service users linking them into food banks and support services as needed and providing information on groups who can deliver essential items such as food and medication in each locality.

As a registrant with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council I am aware of additional resources that have been shared to help people deal with a sense of loss and in practical advice about talking about death and isolation. For example the "Hope, Hints and "How to" resource which can be found at <https://niscc.info/news/329-new-learning-zone-resource> is particularly useful in helping us all respond to living and dying issues during COVID-19.

During this difficult period, probation staff have been able to use their skills and resources to refocus and reprioritise their work. All probation officers in PBNI are qualified social workers and we have been able to use our skills to adapt our approach and continue to provide an individualised service to all service users. PBNI has come together with a 'can do' attitude and a compassionate approach to deliver essential services, support service users and support one another. This has been an unprecedented time and one which will undoubtedly impact on how we deliver services well into the future.