

Virtual Learning Together Series Webinar Recap

Reflections and Lessons Learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from the Learning Together Program

November 16, 2021

Takeaways

Organizations adapted to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and supported their clients, staff and leadership in innovative, creative and fun ways. This included recognizing and celebrating staff, offering financial incentives, entrenching in community networks, and leading organizations in a compassionate and culturally safe manner.

Recap

Deborah Gardner is the Executive Director of Street Haven at the Crossroads, a multi-service women's organization that supports marginalized vulnerable women in downtown Toronto. She is a long-time advocate for social justice and has been in leadership roles for the past twenty-five years in the non-profit sector

Heather Johnston is currently the Executive Director of Projets Autochtones du Québec (PAQ), a shelter and transitional housing for homelessness and at-risk Indigenous peoples in Montreal. Heather has over 20 years of experience in delivering effective programs in the areas of health, education, and food security internationally, and with Indigenous organizations and communities in Canada.

Hélène Philbin Wilkinson is a Learning Together Coach with Healthcare Excellence Canada (HEC), providing insights and advice on improvement projects with agencies in the substance use and emergency shelter sector. Hélène currently provides leadership and project and management support to health care organizations, focusing on strategic and community-based system planning, hospital-based operational reviews, and policy analysis and development.

Discussion

Street Haven at the Crossroads

- At the start of COVID-19, Street Haven at the Crossroads concentrated efforts on understanding emerging information to adapt their emergency response and communicating evidence-based information to staff and clients in a timely manner (i.e., daily meetings and emails). Further, they created a COVID-19 service continuity plan, which developed into new organizational policies and procedures.

- COVID-19 led to an intersection of staff's personal and work lives. With an understanding that staff are the organization's most valuable resource, Street Haven at the Crossroads chose to focus their Learning Together coaching sessions on ways to better support their staff and leadership's mental and physical health.
- Street Haven at the Crossroad has a relatively small infrastructure; therefore, the leadership team was responsible for providing a strong structure and framework for staff and clients during COVID-19. As such, the three Learning Together coaching sessions were dedicated to and attended by the organization's leadership team who leveraged the insights gained with their respective teams and individual staff.
- During COVID-19, existing support for staff mental health and wellbeing included an enhanced benefits program, Toronto's virtual support groups for frontline workers and other emerging resource. Through coaching, other innovative, creative and fun interventions were identified. For example, hosting a pyjama day for clients and staff, as well as offering Starbucks gift cards, treats, wellness packages and thank you letters to staff.
- Further, to ensure staff felt safe and supported in their work environment, one-on-one training was provided around IPAC and vaccination.

Projets Autochtones du Québec

- In response to COVID-19, PAQ prioritized accessibility to those most vulnerable, while ensuring the safety of staff and shelter users. This involved leading with compassion and patience (i.e., introducing new IPAC measures gradually) to allow individuals, particularly clients facing mental health and addiction issues, to adapt to the ever-changing environment and increase compliance.
- For PAQ, an important lesson learned from the initial pandemic response was to support and invest in staff. This was highlighted through the commitment and skills required by frontline staff to successfully implement new measures.
- As part of HEC's Learning Together program, PAQ focused their coaching on developing and implementing organizational IPAC policies and procedures in a culturally safe manner. The following were key focus areas:
 - Maintaining a trusting relationship between community members and the intervention staff by recognizing the historical trauma faced by community members.
 - Appropriate timing and ways to appropriately communicate changes.
 - Ensuring staff commitment to IPAC through education and capacity building.

- Leveraging HEC resources, virtual learning series and Indigenous advisors, the Learning Together coaching was adaptable (i.e., resources, delivery model) and allowed PAQ staff who attended to feel listened and understood in its empathetic approach.
- PAQ had various interventions to support staff during COVID-19, including financial support (i.e., complex system of bonuses and overtime pay), leadership presence during night shifts, encouragement for staff to take vacation, and a community network of Indigenous-serving and Indigenous organizations to provide psychological care for staff and intervention services.
- In a time where PAQ was predominantly focused on challenges related to staff recruitment and retention, an added benefit of the Learning Together coaching was to help PAQ dedicate time to address priority areas unrelated to daily COVID-19 operations and pandemic response.

Resources Shared

Listed below are the resources mentioned during the webinar:

- [HEC Learning Together resources](#)

Webinar Recording

- [Watch the full webinar here!](#)

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