

## Lasting Changes from a Sudden Crisis

### A Look at Shifts in Employment Services at Jewish Family Services

March 2021 [Peter Baird](#)



Nonprofit service provider organizations nationwide made abrupt, often improvised adjustments to how they worked with clients when the pandemic swept the country in March 2020. Some shifts, like streamlining communications and utilizing technology to conduct online meetings, will remain part of operations in a postpandemic environment, while other adjustments may no longer be needed. The post looks at how one Ohio-based social service agency is figuring out which new practices will remain when more normal operations resume.

Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Columbus, a multipurpose social service agency, provides counseling services, unemployment aid, senior assistance, adoption guidance, and many other supports to the community. Among the agency's comprehensive set of services is a program called the Journey, which helps people involved with the Franklin County, Ohio, child support agency find new or better jobs, enabling them to meet their support obligations.<sup>[1]</sup>

When the pandemic began in March 2020, JFS had to quickly adapt its service delivery to continue to meet the needs of its clients and participants in the Journey. Their adaptations have proven to be successful, so much so that many of their practices will continue after the pandemic ends.

#### An Agency Scrambles to Adapt During the Pandemic

Fred Points, a career consultant at JFS, explained some of the steps the agency needed to take to sustain effective employment services as the pandemic accelerated. Like many service agencies, JFS staff members scrambled to establish proactive outreach to clients once the pandemic began. They used phone and text messaging whenever possible and provided smart phones for clients who lacked reliable internet to close the technology access gap—a persistent challenge in effective transitions to remote service delivery nationally.<sup>[2]</sup> The agency also encouraged program participants to use public libraries and other facilities with free internet to sustain their communications and employment-related activities with JFS staff.

While clients with existing relationships with JFS were able to rely effectively on using remote service delivery, the agency still held in-person meetings at JFS offices, using social distancing and personal protective equipment such as masks, to bring new clients into the Journey program.

#### Essential Retail Industries Provide Employment Lifeline

The Columbus area is a vital distribution hub for several major online retailers, which helped JFS continue its successful job placement track record during the pandemic. Points said companies such as Target, Sam's Club, Walmart, and Amazon all increased their hiring in the area to meet burgeoning demand from online consumers.<sup>[3]</sup> Through existing relationships with local offices, JFS actively helped clients find jobs at these companies and other essential providers. The program got a critical boost from the city, which made bus transportation free during the start of the pandemic and helped clients get to their jobs.

### Group Employment Services Make Digital Transition

Points said the digital platform transition required some initial experimentation, but JFS eventually devised an effective format for Zoom calls with four to eight clients at a time. He said the size and format worked best for clients to share concerns, offer peer support, and continue their group counseling work. The effectiveness of online group service delivery sustained morale among program staff members and clients, to the extent that Points believes that these types of meetings will remain a regular part of JFS services once the pandemic is over.



“This work we’re doing with remote digital platforms is really effective—I’m excited about it,” Points said. “And it’s going to impact our future work even after the pandemic.”

He said online meetings help address transportation issues and other “hassle factors” that are disproportionately challenging for many parents with low incomes. Typically, they must structure their schedules and make travel arrangements to get these services.

### Successful Adaptations May Become Permanent

Social service agencies nationwide faced unprecedented challenges in their initial struggles to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. In its own response, JFS benefited from adaptable technology and a local labor market with a concentration of essential industries to continue placing clients in jobs. The sudden need for more proactive outreach also pushed JFS to innovate and adopt technology and new forms of engagement as they keep serving clients. Some of these changes, such as increased use of texting and group video calls, will remain a regular part of services after the pandemic is over, Points said. As JFS leaders consider what new procedures and formats to retain in a postpandemic environment, their experience may provide lessons for other agencies, and show ways this crisis has prompted useful and positive changes.

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[1] Franklin County Child Support (Columbus is the county seat), along with nearby Stark County, is conducting a rigorous evaluation of the Journey Program under the Building Evidence on Employment Strategies for Low-Income Families (BEES) project. The BEES project is overseen by the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in coordination with ACF’s

Office of Family Assistance. The BEES project seeks to improve understanding of which interventions are effective in supporting low-income individuals in finding jobs, advancing in the labor market, and improving their economic security.

[2] See, for example, this discussion on how inequities in access to technology have been highlighted by the pandemic. John Allen and Darrell West, "How to Address Inequality Exposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic." *TechCrunch* (October 27, 2020), <https://techcrunch.com/2020/10/27/how-to-address-inequality-exposed-by-t...>

[3] Tristan Navera, "Amazon, FedEx, UPS Launch Holiday Hiring Surge for 3,000 in Columbus," *Columbus Business First* (October 27, 2020), <https://www.bizjournals.com/columbus/news/2020/10/27/amazon-fedex-ups-pl...>



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