

Effective Supervision in Times of Crisis

2020 will be remembered as a year of challenges and adjustments. As COVID-19 became a full-fledged pandemic, we became part of this historic moment that uncovered both the frailty of human existence and the significance of the courts in times of crisis. Fear, uncertainty, and obstacles became commonplace. However, hope flourished as we adapted and accepted a new reality, relying on the use of technology to give continuity to the services we offer.

It is well known that specialized court programs targeting drug use require ongoing follow-up, direct contact with the participant to observe their behavior and physical appearance, and random drug tests to encourage recovery, among other considerations. The main reason for such intense monitoring is that those who participate in the program are usually members of a vulnerable class. Therefore, amid isolating safety measures due to the pandemic, it became necessary to consider the possibility of recurrence, noncompliance, abandonment of treatment, and worst of all, the utter lack of available treatment. Despite the fact that in-person hearings at the court had been suspended, services offered to participants needed to continue.

With this backdrop, we needed to develop a contingency plan for our Drug Courts in Puerto Rico to be able to provide supervision and support for those who have a substance use disorder and are in a situation of vulnerability. The proposals developed resulted in the implementation of an intensive system of communication, that required:

- a) An updated data base with information for each participant, including addresses, phone numbers, persons to contact, location, and form of treatment.
- b) Contacting each participant over the phone to explore their basic needs and those of their family, identifying who had access to the necessary technology.
- c) Encouraging the use of technology as a work tool and developing a culture of issuing official communications via emails, as an integral part of supervision. The Drug Court components assisted participants with opening email accounts.
- d) Creating a network of communication through videoconferences with residential treatment centers to identify the participants' needs.
- e) The use of videoconferences for follow-up and to hold hearings became, after a few months, a recognition of the progress made by each participant, and, in turn, an incentive for recovery.

As these proposals took hold, we realized the importance of communication to develop tools and hone skills to deal with such transformative adversity. Without a doubt, initial communication through virtual means facilitated the interaction between Drug Court components and participants and allowed for identifying their strengths in the interest of encouraging their wellbeing. The use of technology confirmed that, despite the lack of person-to-person contact, it is a viable work tool to follow-up and offer supervision in specialized courts programs.

The experiences of the past months tested the ability of the courts to respond to trying circumstances, and effective work plans were devised to continue to offer services. We must now be mindful of the possible repercussions this crisis may have on individual and collective behavior so we can continue developing service-minded initiatives.

Right now, it would be premature to predict the outcome of this term, but it is evident that we will have to rethink what used to be our day to day processes and expectations. We can be certain, however, that new workplace practices and the fast-paced adoption of technology are, and will be, part of our post pandemic daily experience.