

Reflections on the First Week of Running a Residency During a Pandemic

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I thought I'd catalog the lessons I've learned in the first week as a pandemic PD:

1. Advocate for your residents. At baseline, our residents and fellows can feel anxious and disempowered. Now, add the words “pandemic” and “redeployment.” At every meeting we as program directors participate in, we must be the voice of our residents. Program directors are the top (and sometimes only) advocate for their residents.

First, this means safety - ensuring that your residents know your institution's latest rules on protecting themselves, advocating for moving residents out of direct care when telehealth is an alternative, and making sure that our residents have access to adequate PPE for direct care.

Second, this means incorporating considerations about residents, who are a central part of our workforce, into the decision-making of senior leadership. Make sure you have frequent communication with your Chair, who in turn can communicate GME concerns to senior leadership. For example, we have twice daily leadership meetings within the Department, with three educators (CAP PD Brooke Kwiecinski, Psychology internship director, and me) involved.

2. Communicate clearly and regularly. Feeling overwhelmed by the hourly barrage of new instructions about how to respond to COVID-19, and imagining what this might be like for our residents, I started a nightly email summary of updates relevant to the residents. Last night was the 9th edition of the residency COVID-19 update. I think our residents have found these updates helpful and perhaps reassuring. I myself find it a good way to organize the events of the day before I go to bed.

3. Maintain structure. We decided to continue with our didactics, and move them online. Our program coordinator, Carrie Schaub, worked tirelessly to move all our didactics to WebEx (which is what our institution sanctions as our communications platform) and to educate our faculty and residents how to use it. Most didactics took place, as did an all-class meeting with PDs (which will now be weekly) and T-groups. Our faculty, if feeling overwhelmed, can opt out of WebEx didactics, with no shame or judgment. We are also suspending attendance requirements for our residents. Weekly supervision will take place by phone or WebEx.

4. Check on the wellbeing of your residents frequently. Our APDs and I are taking turns reaching out to each resident individually by phone to see how they are doing, at least once a week. Stu Jones, one of our APDs, developed a script for the check-in, based on the idea of Malsow's hierarchy (starting with fundamental concerns about basic safety and physical wellbeing):

Do you have any concerns about practicing safely at this time?

Beyond the risk to our own health, this situation has the potential to impact the important people in our lives. If you're comfortable discussing it, is there anyone in your life you're worried is at higher risk that we should know about as a program?

What questions do you have? How can we support you as a program at this time?

5. Offer alternatives. Many of our residents' clinical experiences are on hold, raising their anxiety about meeting requirements and getting a good education. Our program manager, Martha Reck, has compiled a number of on-line resources our residents can use to maintain at least the didactic component of these experiences. The NNCI and its Quarantine Curriculum, for example, are outstanding resources.

6. Grow as a leader. I'm not very good at delegating. This led me to becoming a bottleneck when needing to make decisions last week, and in turn I became frustrated and irritable. I have had to rethink the level at which I function: not necessarily understanding the ins/outs of every single problem, and instead delegating to colleagues whom I trust to understand the ins/outs of these problems and to propose solutions. Thanks, for example, to APD Laurel Bessey for thinking through how to update our resident call system for next year in response to a new maternity/paternity/adoption/fostering leave policy.

7. Express gratitude. A lot of people - residents, your colleagues, staff, leadership, your family - are working very hard in stressful and uncertain circumstances. Thank each one of them, and do it often. If you have an internal system of kudos or Hi-5s, use it.

8. Take care of yourself. For me, this has meant reading less about COVID-19 in Italy and watching more Golden Girls reruns. I've also reached out to many friends and family this week that I haven't talked to in a while. One of our faculty is starting a yoga group via WebEx. Maybe I'll start using the treadmill.