

The Impact of COVID-19 on DOCCR Field Service Operations

December 2020

Executive Summary

The Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCCR) responded to the advent of COVID-19 by instituting changes to standing policies and practices. These changes were based on stay at home orders and CDC guidelines and were made to ensure a continuity of service while protecting the health and safety of staff and clients.

This report looks at the result of those changes in field operations. DOCCR solicited feedback from staff, stakeholders, and clients. Data from the CSTS system was also examined to see the impact of changes on contacts between Adult Probation and clients. These analyses indicate that results of the changes have been mixed, but generally effective as an intermediate term response to extraordinary circumstances. Key findings include:

Modified standards for contacts with adult supervision clients were maintained in the wake of the stay at home order.

Most field staff report that there are both advantages and disadvantages to the remote work model that has developed. Some staff report problems they feel make their work less effective than it was.

A group of clients surveyed on-line gave generally positive comments about their interactions with their supervising officers.

Those who responded to a survey of community and partner organizations indicated that the department had maintained its level of communication and responsivity during the pandemic.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic effected all aspects of DOCCR operations and required a sudden and near-total adjustment to the way work was done. This report focuses on changes in the procedures of the department's field service divisions (Adult and Juvenile Probation, Supervised Release, and other non-institutional operations). The impact of the shutdown on field operations was examined by analyzing contact rates for high-risk adult clients and surveying staff, clients, and community partners.

Client Contacts

In early March of 2020, most staff were sent home to limit virus spread by reducing contact between individuals. This caused a special problem for supervision areas. Probation and Supervised Release are largely based on the level of contact between supervising officers and their clients. The most intensive probation programs call for in-person contacts at least four times a month in normal times.

One-on-one interaction with clients is a key part of field supervision. This is tracked by officers by making chronological notes ("chronos") in the on-line case management system (CSTS).

Officers use chronos to note many things that happen in a supervision case. These includes contacts with the client, collateral contacts, treatment providers, attorneys, and others, as well as drug tests and notifications. These notes provide a rich source of information on individual cases. But they are hard to look at in aggregate because they are largely "free text" entries in CSTS. Individual notes are coded by specific "chrono types." But what is included in each type isn't standardized. So, while officers and supervisors can read through chronos to monitor individual cases and officers, tracking client contact for the organization as a whole is difficult.

When the shutdown began, a special type of "smart chrono" – a template for chrono entries – was developed to track client contacts during the pandemic. Officers were required to use the COVID smart chrono to document all client contact. This method almost certainly underestimates the actual number of client contacts, but it does serve as a useful proxy.

We compared client contacts for the two months before the lockdown (January and February 2020) with the first two full months after it began (April and May 2020). We made this comparison for adult probation

clients on 40:1 caseloads. These clients are usually those assessed as posing the highest risk of re-offense.

This method found an overall average of 3.52 contacts per month in January and February, and 3.77 contacts per month in April and May 2020. This increase in contacts was statistically significant.¹

This increase might be caused by the requirements of the COVID chrono itself – officers were told to use this whenever there was a client contact. This may have led some contacts to be reported that weren't previously noted. But at the least, it implies that the level of contact did not decrease between the two periods.

While information from before the shutdown about the type of client contact is not available, 73.6% of the contacts following the shutdown were by telephone, while 3.0% were face-to-face. Others were made via email (11.5%), text (9.0%), and video conference (2.9%).

Staff Survey

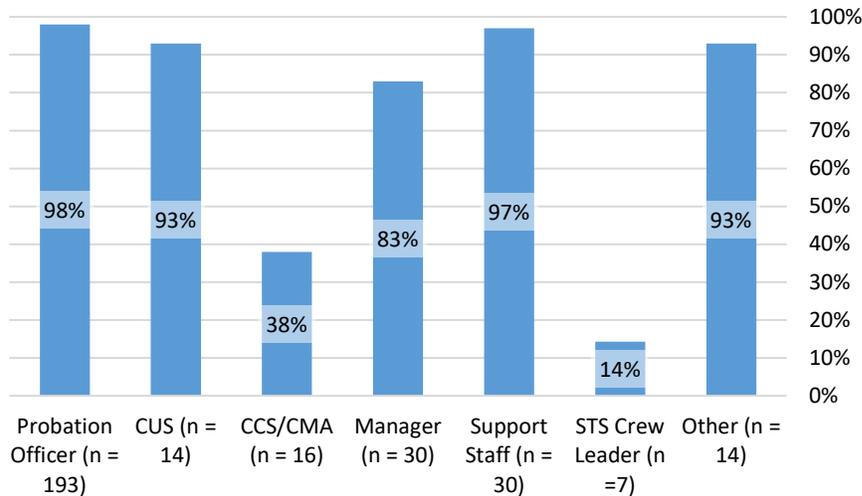
The pandemic response meant DOCCR field staff had to make major adjustments to the way they do their job.

A survey of staff measured their reactions to the changes that have occurred since the shutdown. Surveys were sent via email to all Adult Field Services, Juvenile Probation and Family Court Services staff. Of the 557 staff, 330 responded in whole or part, giving a response rate of 59%. Responses were collected from October 6 through October 28, 2020.

Overall, 92% of staff who responded reported working remotely at any time since the pandemic began. Figure 1 shows that while there was some variation between job classes, almost all staff had some experience of remote working during the shutdown.

¹ P <.01

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents working remotely at any time by job class



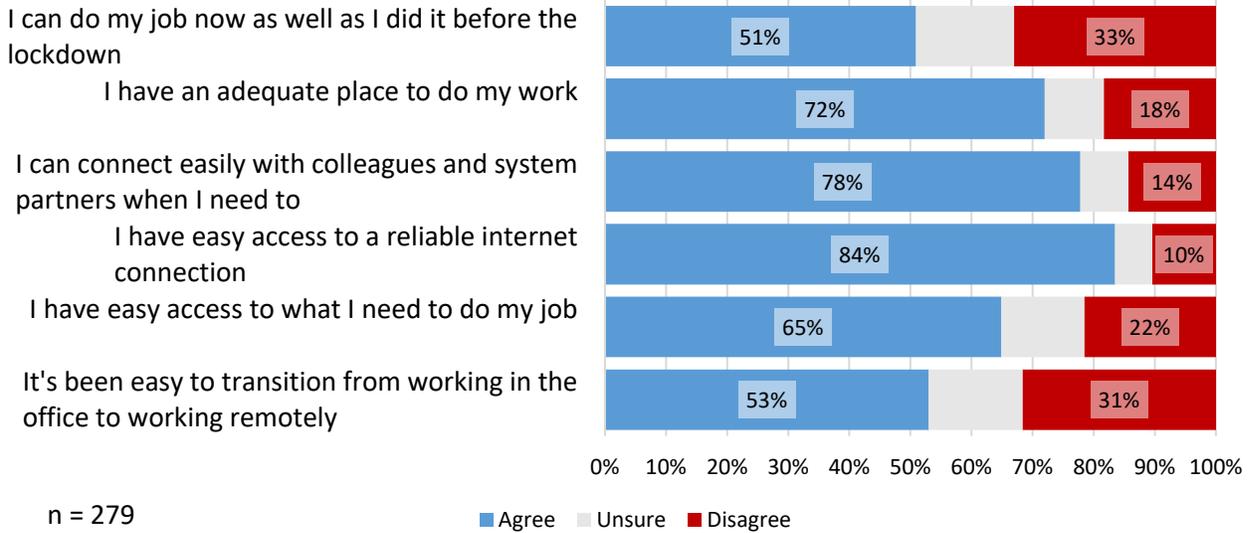
Even for those few staff who have not worked remotely, the changes that have come with COVID have required a great deal of flexibility and creativity.

General Employment Issues

Working conditions have changed for all staff. Figure 2 shows responses by field service staff to a series of questions regarding their working conditions since the lockdown.

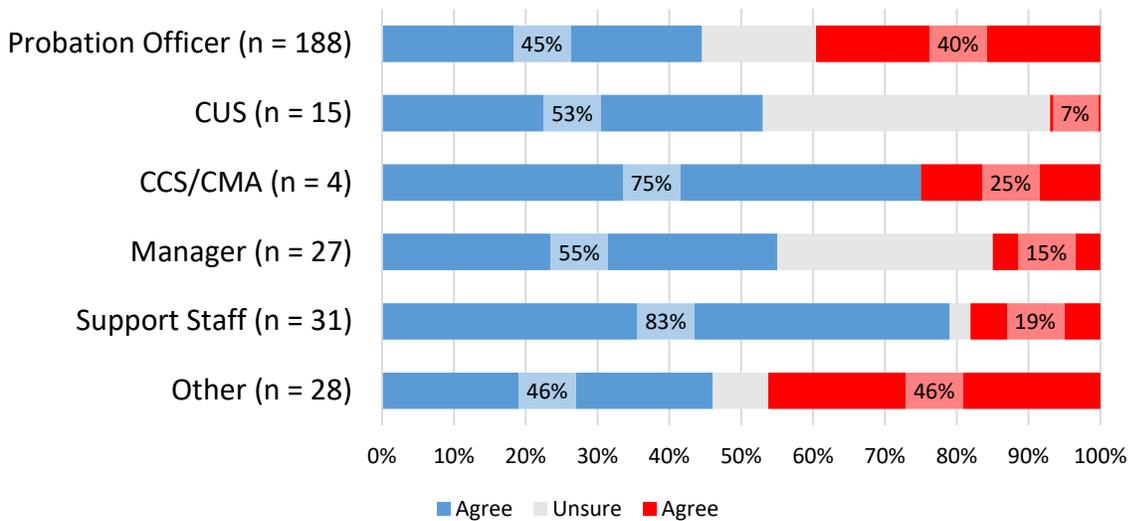
Overall, nearly half of the respondents disagreed or were unsure of the statement that they could do their job under current conditions as well as they did before the shutdown. Responses to other questions show large majorities have an adequate workspace, reliable internet, and the ability to connect with colleagues when they need to. Some staff do face significant challenges with their surroundings and working situation. But much of the differences seems linked to the job people are doing, not the way they have to do it.

Fig. 2: Field Service Staff Responses About Working Conditions During COVID



For example, Probation Officers were significantly less likely to report being able to do their job as well as they did before than other job classes, and support staff were much more likely as shown in Figure 3.²

Figure 3: Responses to the Statement "I Can Do My Job Now As Well As I Did Before the Lockdown" by Job Class



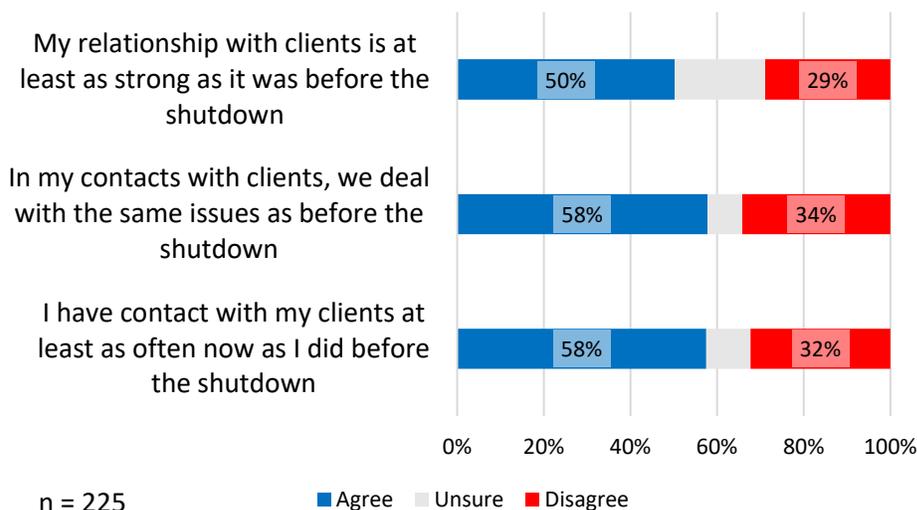
² P = .00

Officers were also less likely than other groups to say they have easy access to what they need to do their job (56% vs 93% of support staff, 93% of Corrections Unit Supervisors , and 92% of managers).³

Staff Interaction With Clients

A large minority of respondents report that aspects of their relations with clients have changed as a result of the pandemic. Around a third report less contact⁴, and that they are dealing with different issues compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Figure 4: Client Relations Statements

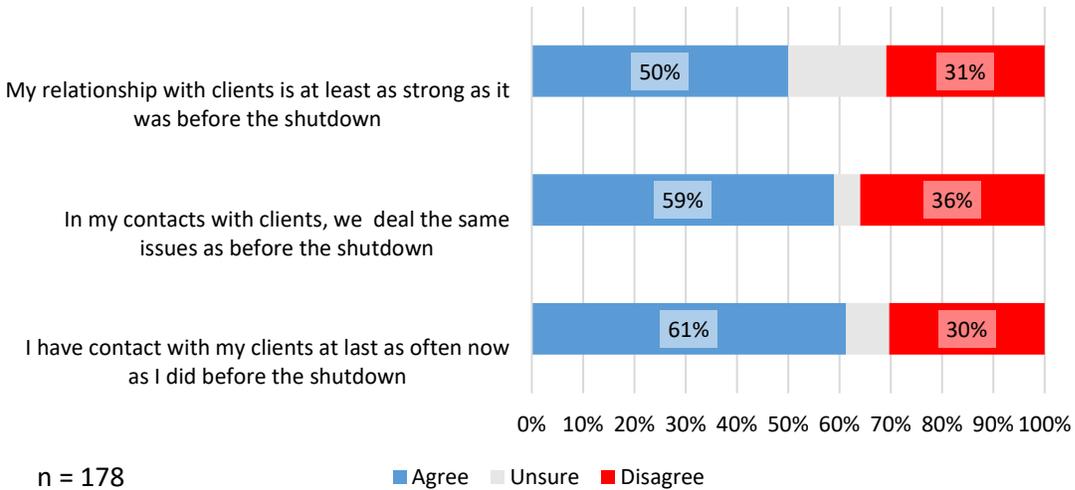


The experience of probation officers was similar to that of all other respondents, as shown in Figure 5.

³ P = .000

⁴ This could seem to contradict the findings of the previous section, However, the survey took place several months into the pandemic, while the analysis looked at the months immediately before and after the lockdown. These answers are from all job classes, not just probation officers. And these responses are qualitative in nature – they report what the respondent’s *feel* happened , not necessarily what occurred.

Figure 5: Probation Officer Responses to Client Relations Statements



Open-Ended Responses to Staff Experience with Remote Work

The experience and perception of remote work varied a great deal among employees, even those in the same division or job class. The survey asked those who had worked remotely open-ended questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the situation.

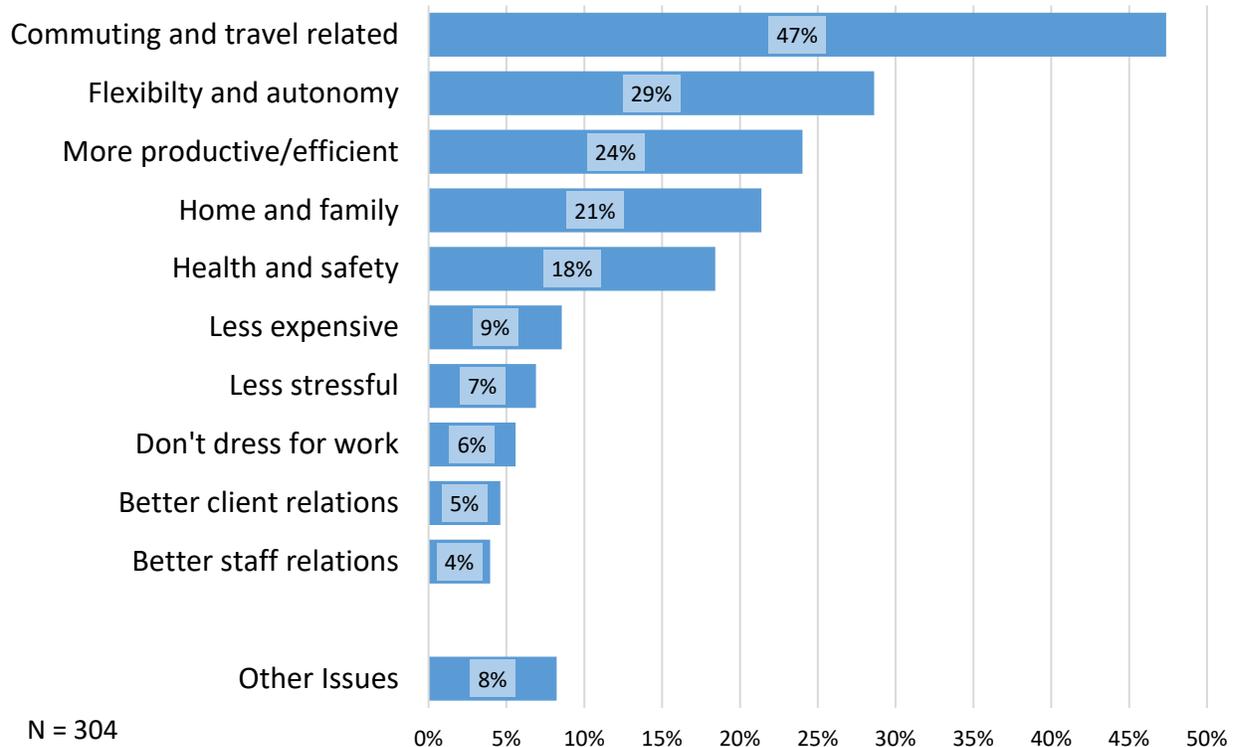
Responses to these questions underscores the wide variety of situations, experiences, and characteristics of DOCCR staff. For example, while some reported that remote work helped them maintain a better balance between work and home, others found it to destructive of the balance they need between their work and personal lives. One size does not fit all, even within the same job class. Most respondents reported both advantages and disadvantages to remote work.

Advantages of Remote Work

Four out of five respondents who worked remotely (243/304, 80%) reported one or more advantages to remote work. Nearly half (47%) cited commuting and lower associated costs like parking and fuel as an advantage to working at home. Flexibility and autonomy associated with remote work – including being able to work non-traditional hours – were also cited by more than a quarter (29%) . This was especially important in maintaining contact with clients who have trouble contacting during

traditional work hours. This flexibility was also cited by many as making them more productive and efficient in their work (24%). A little over 20% of respondents said that remote work helped them balance work and family responsibilities more effectively.

Figure 6: Reported Benefits of Remote Working



There were no significant differences in advantages mentioned by respondents based on their job class with one exception: Probation officers were significantly more likely than other staff to report better client relations a result of remote working (8% vs 1%).⁵

Disadvantages of Remote Work

Three quarters of the respondents who worked from home (75%, 228/304) reported disadvantages. Technology issues – problems with Microsoft Teams, poor internet connections, and others – were reported by 30% of those who worked from home. Several respondents (3%)

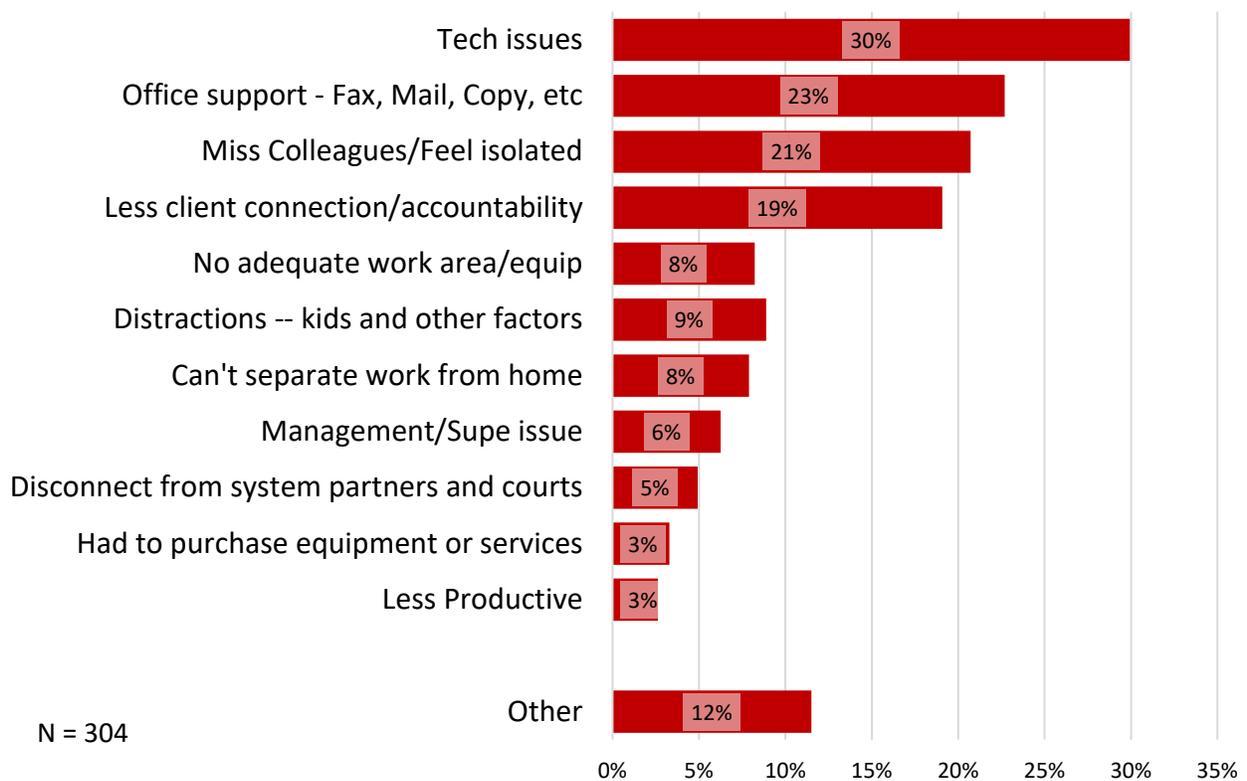
⁵ p = .042

reported having to upgrade equipment or internet connections at their own expense to complete their work.

The traditional supports that come with an office were also a concern for many (23%). Respondents reported that the inaccessibility of printers and unusual barriers to mailing materials caused problems.

Probation officers had some different concerns than members of other job classes. Officers were more likely to report problems with maintaining client connection and accountability (25% vs 6%).⁶ Some of this could be due to changes in court, detention, and charging practices during the pandemic.

Figure 7: Reported Problems of Remote Working



⁶ P = .00 This result may seem to conflict with the finding in the benefits section that some officers reported better client relations as a result of remote work. However, "connection" and "relationships" are two different things. The flexibility allowed by the remote work guidelines may have led to improved relationships with some clients, while the restrictions on face to face contacts and the lack of an office may have led to a difficulty in connecting with others.

The survey and some selected follow-up interviews with staff who indicated a desire to comment further indicates that the experience of DOCCR staff during the lockdown varies greatly. Some of this variation is probably due to the nature of their jobs – whether they are probation officers or not has an impact, as do other professional factors.

Staff Survey Summary

While technology has made remote work possible, it is not always as reliable as it is when working from an office. For example, Microsoft Teams does not always work, and the quality of individual internet connections varies widely.

There are also some things technology cannot do. The criminal justice system still runs on paper: documents need to be printed, mailed, signed, returned, etc. There are basic office supports that have not been successfully re-created in the remote work ecosystem.

The information above shows that staff feel that the pandemic has had an impact on client services. While many officers report that their relationship and interactions with clients is as good or even better than it was before, a significant number report that their connections with clients have suffered because of the pandemic restrictions.

Staff who work a hybrid schedule, splitting their time between home and office, face special issues. In those cases, some materials and equipment must be carried regularly from one place to the other. It's become incumbent upon the employee to ensure that there is adequate space in both areas in which they work.

This highlights other, and perhaps more critical, issues. Staff have brought up many issues and problems that are more closely related to a person's circumstances than to their jobs. This issue includes having adequate space and technology to work at home, distractions, like other people, in the home, and supporting children in distance learning.

None of these issues is related to a person's ability to complete the tasks required of any job if performed in the office. But a person's ability to complete their work remotely seems to hinge at least in part on their individual personal circumstances. This can include economic issues: several respondents reported they had to buy equipment or upgrade their internet service at their own expense.

The switch to remote work meant that things that were once the employer's responsibility have become the employee's: office furniture, internet connections, etc. are now things the employee must provide, as well as the space to do their jobs.

From a field staff standpoint, the department's switch to remote work appears to have worked fairly well as a temporary, crisis-driven response. However, it appears that remote work will continue for at least some staff past the time when the COVID crisis has ended. The Department should plan and implement appropriate employee supports to ensure that after the pandemic eases, the larger number of remote workers that will no longer have a DOCCR office have the support they need to be successful for their clients and themselves.

Client Feedback

In order to understand the impact of the pandemic on those we serve, surveys were sent to a group of adult field clients. About 5,500 clients were under supervision at a 40:1 ratio during⁷ the period before and after the anti-pandemic procedures went into operation. These clients had experience with supervision in both periods. CSTS has email addresses for 3,342 of these clients. Each client in this subset was sent an email invitation to take an anonymous survey about their probation experiences during the pandemic.

There are many challenges to surveying people on probation, especially via email. Some email addresses are invalid or sent directly to junk folders, people may not respond because they think it is spam or a phishing email, and other may not feel comfortable, despite the assurance of anonymity, giving their opinion about their supervision.

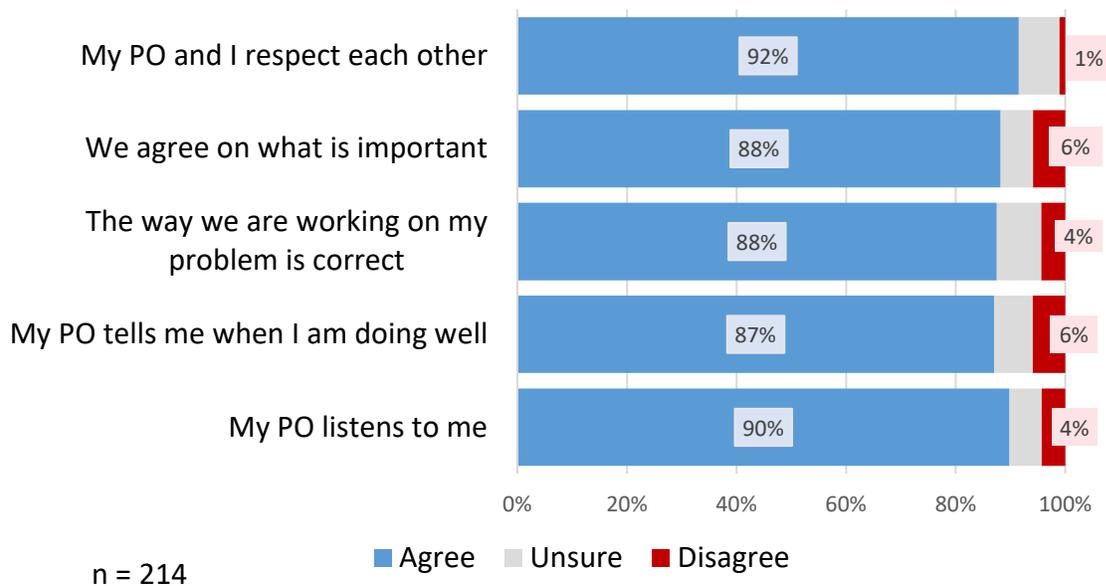
Several attempts were made to reach clients via email and 215 client responses were received. This is a 6.4% response rate. This small a percentage cannot accurately reflect the feelings of all clients on supervision. Nevertheless, 215 clients have given us their opinions about their experience with probation before and after the lockdown. There are some themes, and a consistent pattern of positivity shown in responses.

⁷ SR/ISR clients were also included in the survey
DOCCR COVID Response

Supervision Relationship

Clients were asked about seven aspects of their probation experience by evaluating statements with 'Agree', 'Unsure', or 'Disagree'. Five of these statements, shown in Figure X below, are similar to those found on the Working Alliance Inventory Short Response (WAI-SR) assessment tool,⁸ which measures strength of therapeutic relationships as adapted to DOCCR Adult Probation.

Figure 8: Client Responses Regarding Officer Relationship



For these five statements taken together, 89% of responses were positive, or "Agree". This level of positive evaluation about the probation officer relationship is consistent with the findings of the WAI-SR survey conducted in 2018.⁹

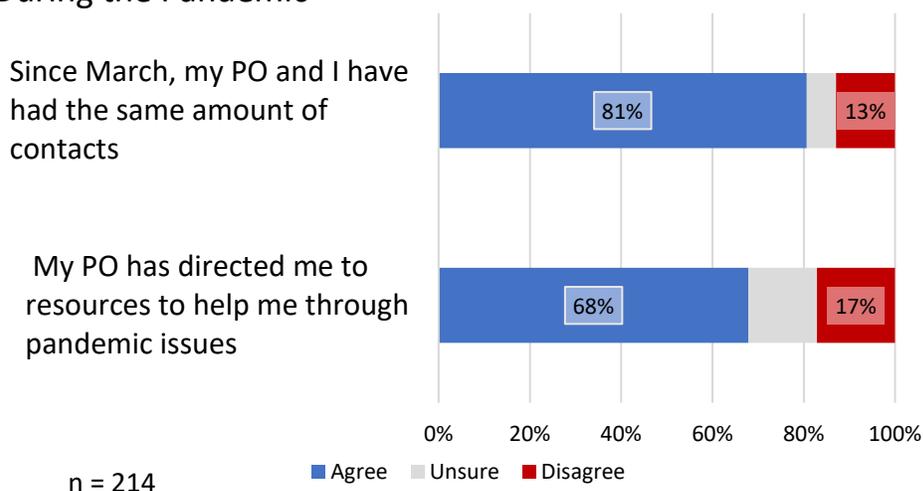
This lends evidence that the anti-pandemic procedural changes haven't changed the generally strong agreement that PO officers are listening, respecting, working collaboratively and practicing positive reinforcement.

⁸ The WAI-SR is a normed and validated tool which the department administered to a group of clients in 2018.

⁹ <https://www.hennepin.us/-/media/hennepinus/your-government/research-data/doccr-reports/wai-sr-report-exec-summary.pdf>

Clients were also asked about two aspects of their probation that relate specifically to the pandemic. Whether the pandemic has impacted frequency of contact with PO officers (81% responded it had not) and whether the PO has helped with resources during the pandemic (68% agree). While still positive, of the aspects questioned, the two statements about the pandemic recorded the lowest levels of agreement from survey respondents.¹⁰

Figure 9: Client Responses Regarding Supervision During the Pandemic



Client Suggestions for Improvement

Clients were asked an open-ended question about how probation could be improved during the pandemic. Most of the respondents did not provide an answer and many took the opportunity to praise the department without a suggestion along the lines of "I can't think of an improvement and my PO is doing a great job". Sixty respondents gave a suggestion for how the department can improve operations during the pandemic. They were paraphrased and grouped into suggestion themes shown in Table 1. To the right of each theme is the frequency of times the suggestion theme was mentioned. Seven suggestion themes were mentioned more than once.

¹⁰ P < .0001

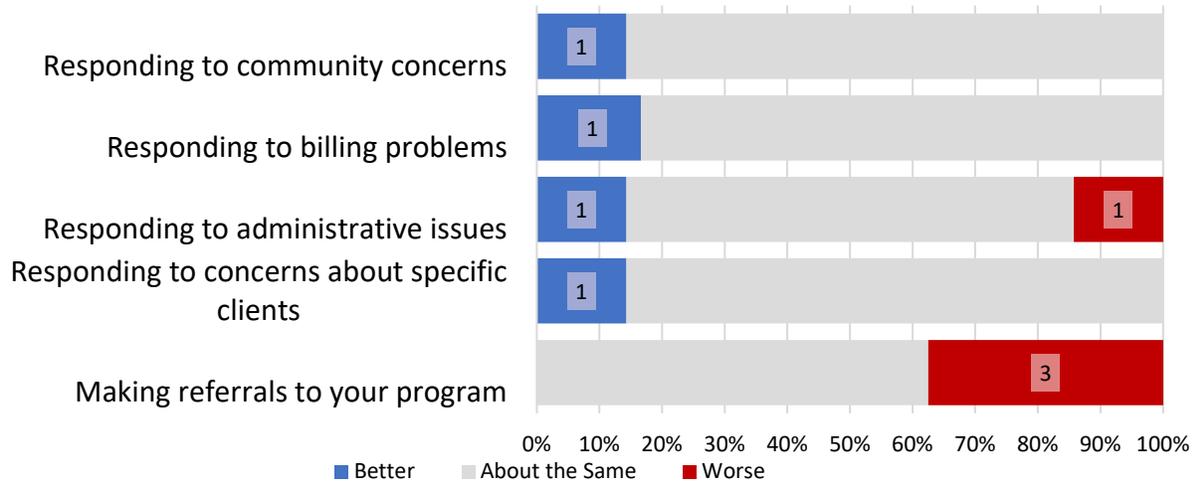
Table 1: Client Suggestions for Operational Improvements During COVID	Responses
Reduce or eliminate face to face meetings	17
Increase communication frequency in general	10
Video conferencing is better than voice only phone	7
Help with resources and information (example: housing support)	5
Increase early release from probation	3
Increase support for mental health	3
The pandemic is stressful and can increase drug and alcohol use. Drug and Alcohol testing frequency should be maintained and support for sobriety should be increased.	2
<p>One Response Each:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow us to cross state lines during any future lock down Encourage clients to increase their connection and communication with their community Facilitate UA appointments Have annual meetings with everyone on my team Implement kiosk meetings Improve Officer of the Day protocol to allow contacts with OD to count as record of proof Increase communication about procedural changes Increase number of face to face communications Provide at home drug monitoring. Increase testing availability Quit changing procedures and expectations constantly. Reduce COVID exposure by reducing need to take public transportation Suspend probation fees Use prudence when referring to George Floyd (as in the introduction to this survey) 	

Community and Partner Feedback

In addition to client feedback, the department also sought input from partners in the community. A list of about 60 contracted vendors and community partners was developed by field services administrative staff. They were invited to take an anonymous survey to help evaluate how DOCCR is operating in the context of the pandemic. Only 14 responses were received. Of those, not all respondents answered every question. This gives an even lower sample size for individual questions. Thus, responses from this survey are not statistically representative but can serve as anecdotal feedback.

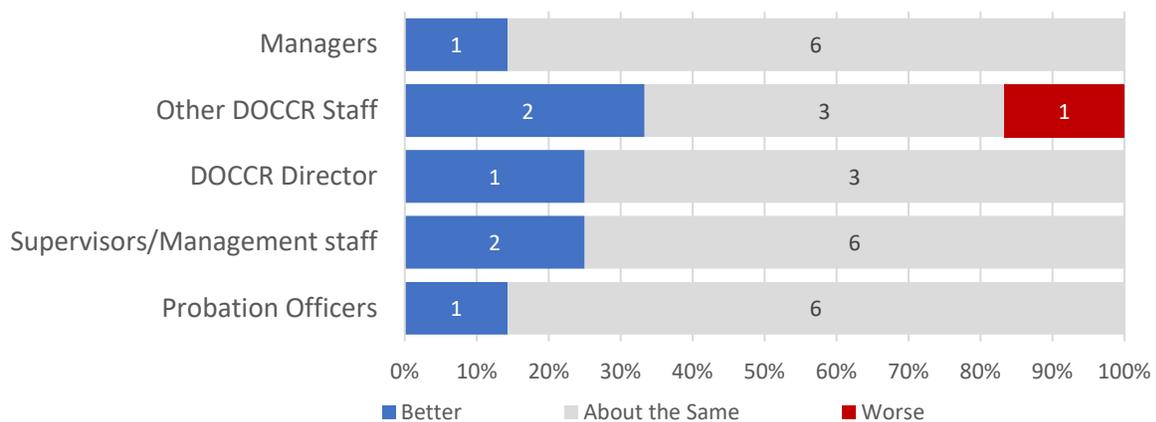
The community partners were asked about the department's responsiveness and communication level since the beginning of the crisis.

Figure 10: Community Partner Comparison of DOCCR Responsiveness Since the Pandemic Began



N = 9 answered out of 14 total

Figure 11: Community Partner Comparison of DOCCR Communication Since the Pandemic Began.



N = 9 answered out of 14 total

These answers indicate that, for these respondents at least, the department has generally maintained the level of responsiveness and

communication that it had before the crisis. Looking at all of the survey responses together, 11 responses indicated DOCCR is doing “better”, and only five responses indicated DOCCR is doing “worse” as compared to before the pandemic.

Community and partner representatives were also given the chance to provide an open ended suggestion to DOCCR for improving operations with their organization in the pandemic environment. Only eight responses were received. They are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: What specific things could we do to improve our services and interactions with your organization?
Fingerprinting procedures are problematic in COVID environment; we'd like accommodations for health of our staff.
Make it easier for DWI clients to pay fines
I can't wait to get back to face to face client interaction
Everything is the same as pre-pandemic
Send PDF templates for referrals to make replying easier
Process invoices quickly for cost reimbursement contracts
We appreciate all your efforts.
Increase referrals