

Several lessons were learned during the pandemic which can help to enhance ISANS' operations and service delivery.

Background

An evaluation of ISANS' operations during COVID-19 was conducted between November 2020 and March 2021. It involved the consultation of a Project Steering Committee and data was collected through document analysis, the ISANS database, surveys, focus groups, email correspondence, and a targeted interview with the organization's CEO.

People-Focused Culture

ISANS' people-focused culture was a key factor that allowed ISANS to have smooth operations during the pandemic. Lessons learned from having a people-focused culture include:

- Staff appreciate having flexible working hours as this promotes a work-life balance
- Clients with childcare or transportation issues could benefit from online services
- Staff feedback on plans to return to in-person services can help inform protocols

Communication is Essential

Communication with staff and clients was frequent and essential during the pandemic. Lessons learned from having frequent communication include:

- Calling vulnerable clients in their first language ensures that they receive the message
- Connect, an intranet system, helps staff members to feel connected while working remotely
- Documentation of practices allows for protocols to be enacted quickly in the face of a crisis

Embrace New Technology

ISANS was open to using new technology before and during the pandemic. Lessons learned from embracing new technology include:

- Investments in online and IT support is essential for creating online service platforms
- Staff used a variety of platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Zoom, Moodle) which allowed clients with a range of language and digital literacy skills to access services
- Digital literacy orientations help clients with low digital literacy to embrace technology

Experiences Varied

Staff, clients, and community members all had different pandemic experiences, and it is important to recognize a need for a tailored approach over a one-size-fits-all approach. Lessons learned from having varied experiences include:

- ISANS does not have a single, generalizable pandemic experience
- Staff and clients have different comfort levels, and some prefer online or in-person services, or a mixture of online and in-person services
- Staff from teams with a smaller workload can be re-deployed to support teams that are overrun with work

Support for the Health and Social Services Systems

ISANS plays a major role in supporting the health and social services systems through challenging times. Lessons learned from supporting the systems include:

- ISANS can make messages from the health care system accessible to clients
- Clients turn to ISANS for assistance applying for benefits such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)
- ISANS' Communications Team can work with Nova Scotia Public Health to ensure that the province's COVID-19 messaging is accessible for all Nova Scotia residents