

Child helplines during COVID-19

Jordan River Foundation, Jordan

Introduction

Established in 1995 by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah, Jordan River Foundation's (JRF) overall aim is to promote child safety and empower communities. It strives to strengthen positive healthy interactions between family members, improve child protection, lower the rates of violence, secure comprehensive rehabilitation services for child victims of violence and raise the capacity of other child rights and protection organisations nationally through exchange of experiences, education and training.

JRF first set up a helpline in 2007 to provide a support service for children and families in need. Initially the focus was on addressing child protection issues and helping children to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as providing advice on parenting or other family issues to parents.

In March 2020 lockdown restrictions came into force in Jordan as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They lasted for two months, until the end of May. The restrictions meant that JRF had to make significant changes to its services. Its whole programme of work was replanned and staff were deployed across different projects. Focus was maintained on the helpline and on making it available to anyone in need.

The programme

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the JRF helpline was operated by four specialist staff alongside a team of 20 volunteers who were trained to receive and manage calls. However, during lockdown the helpline was run remotely as staff were working from home, therefore volunteers were unable to provide support as they required supervision. As a result, JRF redirected staff from other projects to support the helpline. The helpline number was redirected to staff cell phones rather than the central database.

The size of the team increased during lockdown and involved 21 staff, including five specialists, working in 3.5 hour shifts between 9am and 8pm, five days a week. The helpline received around 50 new calls every day during lockdown. In an average year the helpline will receive 5,000 calls, yet during the two months of lockdown, 1,200 calls were received.

Implementation

During the lockdown, many of the calls to the helpline were from people asking for help with basic needs, such as food and health care; this was the case particularly during the first two weeks of the pandemic, as many people had lost their jobs. In addition, there were calls from people experiencing problems due to families being in confinement together, children struggling with the lockdown situation or academic difficulties and an increase in cases of domestic violence.

JRF helpline staff provide a case management as well as a counselling service and the way that calls are responded to depends on each individual case. Under normal circumstances, the first point of contact with JRF is an interview with the parent and child to identify their needs and to assess whether support can be provided internally or through an external referral. This face-to-face assessment usually takes one hour. However, a one-hour interview over the phone was rarely possible so the time slots were reduced and JRF recognised that the accuracy of the assessment would be lower than usual.

Referral pathways were also different. Many providers were not continuing their services during lockdown so there were fewer specialist organisations to refer to. Counsellors also had to rethink their treatment plans as providing remote services was not always enough. Therefore, they had to focus on things that could be done immediately, such as helping with parenting skills or conflict management. Cases of domestic violence were referred to the police family protection department.



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In normal times, JRF promotes the helpline through talks, field work and school visits, as well as on social media. During lockdown it needed to rely solely on social media. JRF continued to promote the helpline to make people aware that it was still available during COVID-19, even though other service providers had closed.

Outcomes

- As a result of the lockdown, donors became more aware of the importance of remote services, especially for those who are unable to access face-to-face services due to mobility reasons or caring responsibilities.
- JRF learned that some cases can be dealt with remotely, for example some counselling sessions. Sometimes people are unable to access services in person and their needs can in fact be met over the phone.
- JRF realised that a flexible helpline system is necessary, so it is now rebuilding the database to make it easier to operate the helpline remotely. It is also now running its reduced weekend helpline service from home, which means that staff who are parents no longer have to come into the office.



Challenges faced

- Operating the helpline from home for the first time was challenging, but IT colleagues provided very good support.
- Sourcing funding to provide staff with work phones to use at home for the helpline presented difficulties.
- Many foundations/service providers were closed during COVID-19, which delayed referrals for cases such as those requiring financial support for basic food or medical needs, or psycho-social support needs that required deeper psychological interventions. As a result, many needs could not be met and JRF had a lot of pending cases during lockdown.
- Women experiencing domestic violence were unable to express themselves fully while at home. JRF put in extra effort to establish the best time to speak with these women.
- Conducting all of their work over the phone was difficult for staff (especially conversations with young children), as staff are accustomed to using other forms of visual cues and body language to facilitate communication.
- Working from home meant staff didn't have access to JRF's database so everything had to be written by hand: weekly/monthly reports; classifying cases by gender/topic etc.

Resources required

- Separate phones for staff so they do not need to use personal phones.
- A database to record calls and monitor follow up.
- A checklist to assess cases; this is submitted to the supervisor at the end of each day and used to compile reports.
- A flexible IT infrastructure and back up team.
- Mapping of service providers still operating during COVID-19 to give accurate referrals.

Top tips

1

Establish a solid promotional plan.

2

Create support materials for your team to refer to when working from home. This helps to fill the gap left by not having colleagues around to share advice and supervision.

3

It is important to support helpline staff with their own emotional needs.

4

Work closely with other partners to adapt ways of working to the COVID-19 situation; this is important to ensure that service provision continues during lockdown to prevent the lack of service availability that was experienced by JRF.

CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about Jordan River Foundation at www.familyforeverychild.org/jordan-river-foundation or contact Iman Alaqrabawi i.alaqrabawi@jrf.org.jo



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