



Legal Systems and Domestic Violence: Changes in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health control measures resulted in both higher rates of intimate partner abuse and violence (IPA/V) and more severe victimization. Domestic violence advocacy programs struggled to maintain organizational capacity to provide survivor-centered services in the face of both increased demand and rapid changes necessary to mitigate disease spread. The current study explores ways that legal advocates and the legal systems responded to the needs of IPA/V survivors.

Methods Leaders of 25 state and territory Coalitions across the U.S. participated in the study. Semi-structured interview questions were based on rapidly emerging areas of concern and drew on possible strengths and weaknesses in direct service provision during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, including questions about public health control measures, service provision, gaps in services, and lessons learned.

Results Interviews with Coalition leaders revealed gaps in legal system responses during the pandemic, but also suggested new directions for service delivery. Four main themes emerged: lack of access to the legal system, limitations of in-person legal system responses, limitations of virtual legal system responses, and changes needed moving forward.

Conclusion Backlogs in case processing communicate to survivors and the larger community that responding to IPA/V is not urgent. Advocates faced difficulty supporting survivors in person while virtual hearings sometimes presented other challenges for advocacy. However, some changes, including innovative online services and broad resolve to center BIPOC survivor voices, have the potential to enhance safety for survivors and push the movement forward.

Keywords Intimate partner abuse · Domestic violence · Legal system · Courts · COVID-19 · Disaster preparedness

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Survivors¹ of intimate partner abuse and violence (IPA/V) experienced severe impacts from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the associated public health control measures that were implemented as part of emergency declarations (Beland et al., 2021; Horney et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2020; Morgan & Boxall, 2020; Roesch et al., 2020; Sacco et al., 2020). The “pandemic within a pandemic” of domestic violence during COVID-19 (Emezue, 2020; Evans et al., 2020) resulted in both increased rates and severity of IPA/V and a higher incidence of IPA/V in households with no prior history of violence (Bhuptani et al., 2023; Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Haynie, 2020; Kinkade, 2020; Peitzmeier et al., 2022; Tolan, 2020). While reports to child protective services (CPS) dropped, the percentage of reports including IPA/V increased (Rebbe et al., 2022).

¹ Throughout, we choose to use the term “survivor” to emphasize their agency and strengths. Direct participant quotes include the terminology – “survivor” or “victim” – that they used.

Simultaneously, survivors' access to community services and advocacy was reduced, due in part to the implementation of public health control measures like stay-at-home orders, physical distancing, and isolation and quarantine, intended to mitigate the spread of disease (John et al., 2020; Muldoon et al., 2021) as well as workforce shortages and the shift to remote service delivery by some service providers (Pfitzner et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2022). For survivors of IPA/V, these challenges included lack of access to the legal system, due to the rapid closures of courthouses and uneven transitions to virtual court proceedings. The current study explores the ways that legal advocates and the police and court systems in the United States responded to the legal needs of IPA/V survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, advocacy programs in the United States were already struggling to achieve the organizational capacity necessary to provide advocacy adequate to meet demand. According to the US-based National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), there were often gaps in organizations' capacity to meet community needs, with more than 11,000 requests for domestic violence related services going unmet each day in 2019 (NNEDV, 2020). Legal advocacy programs also lacked the capacity to fully address survivors' needs pre-pandemic; in 2019 only half of domestic violence programs were able to offer court accompaniment and only five percent were able to offer legal representation (NNEDV, 2020). Although legal advocacy, including facilitating access to an attorney, is known to be key for some survivors' achievement of both physical safety and financial security (e.g., Diller & Savner, 2009; Durfee, 2009; Fleury-Steiner et al., 2017; Hefner et al., 2021), as rates of IPA/V increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the inadequacy of organizations' legal service capacity was further exacerbated (e.g., NNEDV, 2021).

During the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, calls for police assistance for domestic violence in the United States increased as much as 7.5%, with increases of nearly 10% during the first 5 weeks of the initial lockdowns (Leslie & Wilson, 2020), though these increases were not consistent across jurisdictions (Leslie & Wilson, 2020; Morgan et al., 2022; Nix & Richards, 2021). The nature of reports also changed, with police data indicating increases in both first time reporting and reporting related to imminent and severe violence. Even these increased police calls during the beginning of the pandemic likely do not reflect the full extent of increases in violence as only about half of violent intimate partner victimizations are reported to police (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). This underreporting is particularly likely among BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) women, due in part to historical inequities in and mistrust of the legal system, despite experiencing higher rates of IPA/V (e.g., Decker et al., 2019).

While the initial surges in reports of IPA/V and police reporting moderated as the pandemic progressed and restrictions such as physical distancing and social isolation eased, access to criminal and civil court proceedings often continued to be limited. Due to the fragmented nature of state, county, and local court systems, some jurisdictions shifted criminal and/or civil hearings to online platforms and limited building access while others continued some in-person hearings (Lederer, 2021; National Center for State Courts, 2020; Wexler & Chaikovsky, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, survivors were already facing significant challenges within family court. Civil protection orders (CPOs) are unfamiliar to survivors who lack knowledge about the process and related resources (Hefner et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2005). Yet civil protection orders (CPOs) are a commonly used legal option for survivors, though rates have decreased slightly since the pandemic (Moffett et al., 2024; Goldfarb 2007; Jordan, 2004). The lack of knowledge about orders may be particularly problematic for low-income BIPOC women (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2023; Durfee, 2021), who have multiple reasons to distrust formal legal institutions and believe courts reinforce systemic inequality and advantage affluent survivors (Berrey et al., 2012; Galanter, 1974). Survivors in rural areas may have limited knowledge of and access to civil protection orders as well (e.g., Logan & Walker 2011; Sharpe, 2019). Similarly, mother-survivors seeking child custody through the civil court often have their and their children's victimization ignored or minimized; this is particularly true for low-income mothers and BIPOC mothers (Gutowski & Goodman, 2020). Thus, gaps in access to civil courts for survivors likely disproportionately impact the most vulnerable survivors, including BIPOC survivors, those living in poverty, and rural residents. Inequities exposed by the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement for racial justice have intensified these concerns (Collier, 2020).

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. and the resulting public health control measures thus increased the need for police, criminal court, civil court, and legal advocacy, while at the same time decreasing capacity for services to be delivered safely. Domestic violence advocacy programs, including legal advocacy programs, continued to provide services throughout the pandemic while adapting to rapidly changing conditions in police and court systems. The current study explores how domestic violence advocates and police and court systems across the country responded to the legal and safety needs of survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

The current study is part of a larger project examining the impact of COVID-19 on empowerment-based community services to address IPA/V during disasters and

emergencies. Leaders of each of the 56 state and territory domestic violence coalitions were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. Up to five follow-up emails were sent over a five-month period in early 2022. Additionally, snowball sampling was used; when coalition leaders completed an interview, they were asked if they would be willing to reach out to other leaders directly, or if the researchers could use their names when contacting other leaders. The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 requires each state and territory to designate a coalition against domestic violence. The role of the coalitions is to coordinate services across the state or territory, to provide technical assistance and support to direct services organizations, and to enhance both intervention and prevention programs for IPA/V (Administration for Children & Families, 2023). Thus, Coalition leaders are in a unique position to understand the full landscape of IPA/V responses in their state/territory and how each separate piece of the response fits together.

Semi-structured interview questions were developed based on the emerging literature on domestic violence and COVID-19 and on discussion with key informants. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to both provide focus but to also allow for emerging ideas from participants and for interviewer probes. Questions were broad and drew on possible strengths and weaknesses in direct service provision during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, including questions about public health control measures, service provision, gaps in services, and lessons learned. Interviews were conducted via Zoom (San Jose, CA) by two of the investigators, who are current or former board members of their state's Coalition.

Leaders of 25 state and territory Coalitions across the U.S. participated in the study, representing all eight geographic regions as defined by the National Network Against Domestic Violence (NNEDV, 2023). To protect confidentiality of the respondents, individual Coalition leaders are assigned a number from 1 to 25. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Delaware.

Interviews lasted an average of 44 min, though this ranged from 27 to 60 min. Draft transcripts from the interviews were generated via Zoom and were then double-checked against the recorded interview. An immersive review of the data was conducted to gain a thorough understanding of the narratives within and across interviews. The research team noted emergent themes through both inductive and deductive coding. Disagreements in coding were rare and were resolved through discussion. Themes related to the legal system and legal advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic were identified from the transcripts.

Results

Four major themes emerged from the interviews regarding police, the court system, and the provision of legal advocacy services for survivors of IPA/V during the pandemic: lack of access to the legal system, limitations of in-person legal system responses, limitations of virtual legal system responses, and changes needed moving forward.

Lack of Access to the Legal System

Many Coalition leaders described barriers that survivors faced in their attempts to mobilize the law. For instance, they described gaps in policing related to the pandemic, which exposed survivors' vulnerabilities since police are often first responders to IPA/V through emergency calls to 911. One Coalition leader said,

“Particularly for rural communities, earlier on in the pandemic it just felt like there were some hesitations for police officers responding to 911 calls. There were some hesitations on whether or not they would make an arrest, based on their own thoughts of health and well-being and exposure to COVID” (Participant 23).

Another explained,

“They were not arresting when they should because they didn’t want to go to the jails and all of that [because of concern about exposure to COVID-19] so we had to advocate a lot stronger than we had to before for a unified judicial system and criminal justice system... We have been involved with them before, but this was kind of a different level I think” (Participant 25).

The interview data also highlighted gaps in accountability for abusers due to the ways in which some jurisdictions were handling IPA/V in the context of the pandemic. For instance, one Coalition leader explained that building closures of police departments were limiting survivors' options when seeking safety. “Just being able to access services for victims, has really changed a lot, because a lot of those physical offices, you know you can’t go there anymore” (Participant 11).

In addition to gaps in policing, several Coalition leaders described hearings being delayed, or courts being shut down, which led to extensive backlogs, particularly early in the pandemic. As one Coalition leader (Participant 20) put it, “For a while, court proceedings were completely stopped, some of them this summer [2021] and into the early fall is when some just started kind of going

up again.” Another Coalition leader (Participant 6) specifically mentioned the delays in child custody cases and criminal trials, saying “child custody cases were still open – two-year-old cases were open, but jury trials were suspended for a really long time. Courts were closed, but they definitely started doing more things remote.” A different Coalition leader (Participant 22) echoed this sentiment, stating “To be a survivor of a crime right now requires patience that should not be expected.” While the shift to additional remote court services helped some cases get processed without risking in-person COVID-19 transmission, as restrictions eased, the court processing challenges did not end. When courts began to reopen in person one Coalition leader (Participant 11) explained,

“They’re overflowing with cases because they’ve been putting everything on hold so it’s taking longer for those cases to get to court, and we know that increases danger for victims but also just the exhaustion of going to a hearing over and over again.”

Complicating the lack of access to police, criminal and civil courts was also misinformation about the availability of services. As one Coalition director (Participant 4) pointed out, “that was actually one of the gigantic hurdles because... there was word out there that, like, they’re shut down and no services are available, you can’t get a (protection order), which is wrong.” As in other aspects of the pandemic, misinformation was hard for advocates and service providers to counter.

“There was a lot of misinformation that came out early in the pandemic, and the same for law enforcement, that somehow law enforcement isn’t going to come if people needed them, and so we sort of called up our friends in the criminal justice system and said well, we need to get the word out. We even managed to get the governor to mention it in one of [the] COVID addresses” (Participant 17).

However, even with some success stories, these delays and misinformation about the legal system exacerbated safety concerns for survivors and their children. Several Coalition leaders mentioned related concerns about unaddressed child abuse during the pandemic since the pandemic shifted mandated reporters in public settings like schools or aftercare programs away from their access to in-person observations and discussions with youth.

Limitations of In-person Legal System Responses

In the context of public health measures to address COVID-19, and to reduce the risks of disease transmission, Coalition leaders described difficulties in providing adequate in-person legal advocacy, and the fears both survivors and advocates

faced. As one leader pointed out, “Like everybody else, our courthouses are ancient and they don’t have the right ventilation, if any” (Participant 1). The fear of being exposed or infected during court proceedings was “still bringing about another level of anxiety going into those various environments with COVID going on and knowing that you [the advocate] still have to provide the support and resources needed” (Participant 15).

Those barriers that complicated access to courts before the pandemic, like lack of transportation, remained and were magnified as some in-person hearings began again. One Coalition leader described how even as many courthouses remained closed, some began to open up, leaving survivors struggling.

“So, to have to drive 30–40 minutes to get to the courthouse was a barrier. Transportation, a lack of transportation access to the courthouse, if you didn’t have your own vehicle was a barrier, so we were finding that people that were in need in an emergency were not getting there. And for those that did have access to transportation, when they got there, the screening protocols were also keeping them out of going into the courthouse” (Participant 19).

When describing trade-offs between in-person and virtual court proceedings, one leader said, “And once things opened up more, I think still the fear and anxiety increased to keep a clean and safe environment for individuals who were coming in for services, as well as those individuals who were providing the services” (Participant 15). Another Coalition leader explained: “We still have the COVID protocols...it’s hard to be [at] a six-foot distance... you’re in a public setting so your exposure is a lot higher. And so, I know staff have been very anxious about the court setting on an ongoing basis” (Participant 16). Even as court systems decided to remain open or re-open for in-person hearings, concerns remained about COVID-19 transmission risks and physical distancing, thus complicating legal advocacy.

Limitations of Virtual Legal System Responses

While in-person legal advocacy was complicated by the pandemic, many court systems began or expanded online hearings. Coalition leaders also described challenges in those transitions to virtual legal processes, as well as difficulties in providing quality advocacy services in that context. “In the court realm, we have seen just really kind of a detrimental impact there. I mean, courts were closed for a while, or courts were only seeing things remotely, which means people had to go [to court proceedings] without advocates” (Participant 16). Moreover, gaps in courts’ capacity to effectively conduct virtual hearings left survivors in a state of uncertainty. As one Coalition leader put it, “they

kept pushing off the cases so they could do them in person, because a lot of places were not fully prepared to be all virtual" (Participant 25).

Negative impacts of virtual court hearings were also intensified in other ways by the limited ability for advocates to accompany survivors. Many Coalitions reported that because they were not together in the same space, "the advocates who would normally accompany survivors to those hearings, it was difficult, a challenge for them to feel as though they were giving as much support or had as much access to communication with them as much as it would have been in person" (Participant 24).

Privacy issues were also raised when children were in the home and could not escape from hearing conversations taking place on phones and on virtual platforms in the home. Stay-at-home orders also meant that virtual court hearings might be held with abusers and survivors in the same physical locations. As one leader explained,

"When court hearings switched to a virtual platform, that was extremely tricky for survivors who may have been under stay at home orders with their abuser. And so, to have a court hearing with the abuser in the same room or even if they weren't in the same room there was some concern about, will the abuser know by my Zoom picture, where I'm at or who I'm staying with and will they come after me... and then, of course, being at home with them presented a whole host of other issues" (Participant 24).

A second Coalition leader noted the complexity of requiring technology use to access the legal system when technological abuse is one of the tactics the abuser may be using.

"I will say that something that came up, is once we open ourselves up to more use of technology, then there's the always a potential for more abuse through technology, which was already an issue, and I think that the pandemic is also highlighting that... Somebody who's using those dynamics of power and control, they're just going to find whatever ways and whatever means, and so technology is the next natural thing" (Participant 6).

A lack of available culturally competent services and providers further complicated matters for survivors seeking assistance. For example, "There are not sufficient interpreter services, culturally appropriate and relevant interpreter services, and so that system has been extremely frustrating for others and for advocates" (Participant 14). Survivors with disabilities may have been similarly impacted by their loss of access to appropriate or relevant services when utilizing virtual court hearings. As this leader continued on, "all access issues, anything that was an issue before is just amplified and

exacerbated" (Participant 14) due to the transition to virtual court processes.

Changes Needed Moving Forward

Although many Coalition leaders described difficulties with the police and court responses to IPA/V in the context of COVID-19, they also described changes that would be important to maintain moving forward, including increased access to services due to the pivot online. As one Coalition director pointed out, the online court processes,

"offer[ed] access. And in some respects, easier access. You don't have to drive, you don't have to park, you don't have to pay for the parking. You're not physically in the same space as the person who has abused you. So, there were some real significant benefits to that. And I was just recently in a meeting with attorneys and court staff and there were people talking about like, the stuff that works we need to carry forward, like when the pandemic ends. Let's figure that out and carry it forward and not just say okay, back to normal. Because there were true benefits at that level" (Participant 4).

The civil protection order process was a specific area where remote options seem to work well, and where many advocates want to keep virtual or hybrid options available for survivors. As another leader stated,

"The courts' move to a remote option for getting protection orders... it works so well, we want them to keep it. They eliminated the need to have affidavits notarized, which is a major barrier to survivors. We have 24-hour service of our 24-hour application for protection orders, so what was once an in-person encounter to get an [order] at two o'clock in the morning, you know calling people out of bed, now became remote. It was so much more accessible and so we're advocating for the courts to maintain that system, even today" (Participant 1).

Coalition leaders also discussed the interplay of the Black Lives Matter Movement protests against police brutality and the COVID pandemic, and what that may mean for future direction for the movement against gender-based violence with respect to the racism embedded in the legal system. As one leader put it, "we are trying to apply a racial equity lens to everything" (Participant 14). Another leader explained:

"The co-occurrence of these two things [COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter]... It has set the stage for the need for a deep kind of reexamination and resetting of how we do this work."

This leader went on to say:

“Many of our member programs here took a pretty strong Black Lives Matter position publicly. We connected our work to the lives of Black folks. The police were like, we don’t like what you’re doing, we’re not the enemy...and it interfered with cooperation...But we realize now that it was very superficial. As long as we were good girls and stayed in our lane and did what they wanted us to, they were good partners. But as soon as we said Black Lives Matter to us too, that was the end of that” (Participant 13).

Another Coalition leader explained how they were re-thinking the over-reliance on the police and courts, saying “There’s been so much talk about the police and police brutality, and then they think about how much we rely on the courts to provide safety now, and we know that they’re [survivors] dying, they’re still dying, and we know it’s not working” (Participant 19). A third explained “We know that there’s been a reliance on the criminal justice system, you know for 40 plus years and so we’ve done a lot of work with our membership, thinking outside of that box” (Participant 20).

While this support by advocacy programs for the Black Lives Matter social justice movement may have strained some partnerships, particularly with law enforcement, others were strengthened or started, such as with legal aid services, public health departments, and housing programs. “Some surprising allies and partners have emerged, and some surprising disappointments have also emerged, and we have to remember that when the pandemic subsides, and we are able to reopen things. We have to remember” (Participant 13).

Discussion

Decades of research and advocacy have focused on the police and court responses to IPA/V (e.g., Jennings et al., 2021). Despite ongoing efforts to train police and prosecuting attorneys and enact pro-arrest and pro-prosecution policies, only about half of incidents of IPA/V are reported to law enforcement (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). Survivors choose not to call the police for numerous, complex reasons, including because they distrust police, they do not think police will help, and they have had negative interactions in the past (e.g., Decker et al. 2019; Gezinski, 2022; Jennings et al., 2021; Li, et al., 2015; Messing, et al., 2015). For BIPOC survivors, racism within policing presents another reason not to invoke the law (Belknap & Grant, 2021; Durfee, 2021; Richie et al., 2021). For Black women specifically, police contact presents a risk of being criminalized and even incarcerated themselves (Richie & Eife, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic led to documented increases in reporting to law

enforcement, but Coalition leaders also described gaps in the police response resulting from the pandemic.

Moreover, delays in civil and criminal court processing and difficulties in advocacy programs providing legal accompaniment delayed outcomes for survivors and ultimately threatened their safety. This case backlog highlights the complexity of the court system as well; civil matters such as custody or protection orders often do not require a jury, while criminal cases often do; jury trials are far more complicated to facilitate remotely given the number of people involved (Lederer, 2021).

In addition to jeopardizing survivor safety, these gaps and backlogs in police and court responses send the message that abusers can behave with impunity. One strength of the police and court systems in addressing IPA/V is that, theoretically, they can respond rapidly to a 911 call or an application for an emergency protection order. The delays in responding to calls, reluctance to arrest, and backlogs in case processing described by Coalition leaders communicate to survivors and the larger community that responding to IPA/V is not urgent.

At the same time as increased delays, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to rapid changes in court case processing, including increased rapid, online civil case filing and hearings. These new online processes may facilitate access to civil court hearings, particularly for protection orders, for survivors who faced barriers to in-person filing like childcare and transportation. Coalition leaders discussed the importance of keeping these online services in place to increase access, while at the same time acknowledging the limitations of providing advocacy and support in strictly virtual contexts.

A concomitant concern is that technological access and comprehension is not consistent across all groups in the population. Many Coalition leaders commented that internet access was limited or spotty in parts of their states, particularly rural or mountainous areas, or that lower-income survivors may not have technological access. These gaps among survivors reflect the digital divide more broadly; while most adults in the United States say that they use the internet, BIPOC families, rural families, and lower-income families are less likely to have broadband access at home (Pew Research Center, 2024). Moreover, similar gaps in digital literacy persist (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Proactive efforts are crucial to ensure that technology (software, hardware, and internet access) is available so that virtual capacity for all is increased moving forward. In addition to technology access, digital literacy supports, interpretation services, and disability accommodations are essential to making sure all survivors have equitable access. However, future research is needed to better understand how virtual hearings do and do not meet survivors’ needs; emergent research suggests that while there may be some advantages for some survivors,

others may still prefer in-person hearings (e.g., Reeves et al., 2023).

In May of 2020, Minneapolis police officers murdered George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. The murder was caught on video and catalyzed global protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality. Coalition directors discussed how the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly during that first summer, impacted the ways that their organizations functioned, as well as the ways that it impacted their work with law enforcement. These tensions between BIPOC advocates and law enforcement, while not at all new (e.g., Belknap & Grant, 2021; Collier, 2020; Goodmark, 2018), intensified as advocates were forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to rapidly re-think how they provided services. Concerns about the power of the state against marginalized communities have long been recognized by BIPOC advocates and survivors, and it is incumbent upon Coalitions to expand their missions to change their responses to gender-based violence by advancing a more inclusive justice (Richie et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, Coalition leaders' stories documented how crisis management initially trumped survivor safety as states scrambled to build a responsive infrastructure. From years of overreliance on a limited criminal justice system that only marginally responded to decades of police and prosecutorial training, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inertia and injustices preventing the legal system from effectively addressing domestic violence. Coalition leaders emphasized that a massive revisioning of justice must happen, one that creates systemic structural changes to how our country responds to this enduring social problem. This reboot needs to focus on prevention efforts and engage/re-engage other social institutions such as schools, healthcare, and housing, so that advocacy and policy are not siloed or solely focused on crisis responses or aftercare. The pandemic not only highlighted these systemic injustices but also laid bare that the answer goes beyond criminal-legal issues to engage in anti-violence work in other systems where violence, health, and race inequalities flourish.

Limitations and Future Directions

A few limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. Although some of the Coalition leaders mentioned Indigenous populations and the tribal organizations in their states, as the study recruitment focus was on the 56 state and territory coalitions, tribal-focused organizations and coalitions were not included. Given the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indigenous communities (Arrazola et al., 2020; Van Dorn et al., 2020), as well as the higher rates of IPA/V on tribal lands (e.g., Rosay, 2016), the voices of tribal organizations, advocates, and survivors need to be included in future studies.

Several Coalition leaders mentioned the need for additional research focused on the lived experiences of advocates and of survivors themselves. They acknowledged that while as Coalition leaders they had a "big-picture" sense of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on services and, by extension, on advocates and survivors, they were a level removed from direct services. Future studies need to focus on the voices of advocates and survivors who were navigating the legal system during the pandemic to best understand the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on legal advocacy and ways to best prepare for future disasters.

Conclusion

As of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a global health emergency (World Health Organization, 2023). Yet Coalition leaders also expressed concerns that as the immediacy of the pandemic fades, the urgency around needed changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic may also fade. While some of those changes made service provision more challenging, some pandemic changes, including options for innovative online services and broad resolve to center BIPOC survivor voices, if continued, have the potential to enhance safety for survivors and push the movement forward.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval All study materials and procedures were approved by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (IRB 1597257).

Conflicts of Interest The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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