

Social Workers' Roles, Challenges, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Albay, Bicol

Angelo C. Uclaray
Jescel B. Benitez
Charisse A. Llantino
Erika Mae E. Nayra

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely changed people's lives on a global scale. Each government has implemented protocols to prevent and contain the transmission of the virus resulting in the limited movement of people and stoppage of many activities. Consequently, the restrictions caused by the pandemic have affected the lives of people not only in the economic sphere but in the physical, psychological, and social aspects as well. Social workers are at the frontline in combating the negative impacts of this crisis. This qualitative research explored the roles, challenges, and lessons learned by social workers in the Province of Albay, Bicol, as they responded to the client's needs and problems during the pandemic. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected social workers employed in different settings. Through the case studies and thematic analysis, this study revealed that social workers in Albay performed diverse roles, namely: resource provider, facilitator, social broker, coordinator, and educator. The challenges were categorized into physical, psychological, and social aspects. Despite the challenges, social workers acquired significant learnings and insights in their personal and professional development, which include a stronger commitment to the profession's principles and ethical values, the development of social work competencies, and the strengthening of self-care management.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, social work practice, reflection, lessons learned, competencies, professional development, self-care management

Introduction

The onslaught of the *novel coronavirus*, also known as COVID-19, has radically changed millions of lives across the globe. Compared to other diseases, COVID-19 is more transmissible, prone to mutations, and causes a 1 to 9% mortality rate (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Thus, a strategy used by many countries to contain the virus' transmission was to impose lockdowns and community quarantines resulting in the stoppage of various economic activities and the limited movement of people and goods. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economy of nations (OECD Interim Economic Assessment, 2020), including the Philippines.

In the Bicol Region, the first three cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Province of Albay (Department of Health, 2020). Moreover, Albay was identified as one of the provinces in the region with the highest number of confirmed cases. Therefore, it was placed under a

strict community quarantine in March 2020, prohibiting people from going outside their homes and forcing the province to close its borders. The lockdown resulted in the closure of various business establishments, schools, and markets, affecting the living conditions of Albayanos. In such times of social, economic, and health crisis, social workers are at the forefront.

The Social Amelioration Program (SAP) implemented by the National Government through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) was one of the major interventions to address the needs and problems of the most affected individuals in areas under community quarantine, which included the Province of Albay. This program called upon the competencies of social workers, particularly in assessing the well-being of people. Furthermore, social workers were involved in facilitating and monitoring the distribution of assistance to the vulnerable sectors, including solo parents, the elderly, persons with disabilities, distressed overseas Filipinos, homeless families, pregnant and lactating women, and indigenous peoples (DSWD, 2020). In its implementation, practitioners coordinated with the Local Government Units to ensure an effective and efficient process. Social workers employed in the different local social welfare and development offices participated in its delivery. Some of them shared that they facilitated meetings with partner stakeholders to discuss strategies and interventions as part of the planning process. As they facilitated, they tackled relevant issues with local executives, community leaders, and partner non-government organization personnel on how they could expedite the provision of services and support to people. Aside from material resources, some Albayano social workers provided psychosocial interventions for those individuals who experienced stress, depression, and anxiety due to COVID-19. They conducted psychological first aid and other psychosocial support mechanisms through phone calls and the use of Messenger, Google Meet and Zoom Videoconferencing platforms, among others. Furthermore, social workers in hospitals performed a crucial role in helping medical practitioners educate the public regarding relevant pandemic-related information and health protocols.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2020) asserted that a well-supported, equipped, protected, and empowered social service workforce is essential in mitigating the damaging effects of the pandemic. The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic and complex needs of all people, particularly those who are the vulnerable, oppressed, and disadvantaged (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). They are trained in serving various clients and sectors and are employed in different settings, including but not limited to public offices, private organizations, academic institutions, mental health institutions, and hospitals. Social workers perform different functions considering that social realities are complex and multidimensional. Their actions focus on responding to economic fallout, social problems, and social change, which require extensive rehabilitation, restoration, prevention, and developmental interventions.

Roles of Social Workers amidst Public Emergencies and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social workers perform fundamental roles in disaster rescue, recovery, and prevention. Despite the presence of various health professionals, social workers provide a unique service to people in times of public emergency (Cooper & Biggs, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2014 as cited in Okafor, 2021). These pieces of literature recognize the crucial roles of social workers in responding to the impact of a disaster, such as the current health crisis that is present on a global scale. Social workers deliver interventions that can address the biological, psychological, and social needs and concerns of the population. Park and Lee (2015) articulated that the role of social work in

public emergencies appears complex and highly dependent on the preparedness and capacity of the practitioners to perform the tasks and functions effectively amidst an unpredictable and infectious environment. Therefore, their commitment to protecting human rights and welfare is profound as they aim to respond and provide appropriate actions to the multilayered challenges caused by the pandemic. Petruzzi et al. (2019) highlight that social workers are at the forefront of crisis intervention, offering social support through crisis resolution. They do not only respond to health concerns but also utilize their skills and resources to help restore an individual's functioning. Specifically, they respond to people's financial and food provision needs. Moreover, they promote disease prevention and educate the population regarding crisis-related information.

These roles became far more complex with the emergence of COVID-19. The British Association of Social Workers (2020) affirmed that social workers filled a unique position during this public health emergency, such as offering psychosocial health support and educating the larger community. Significantly, they formed the core structure of the service system that maintained the well-being of a population by providing support and assistance during a crisis (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020; Dauti et al., 2020; Okafor, 2021; Petruzzi et al., 2020; Sukmana & Abidin, 2020; Walter-McCabe, 2020). Social workers played a critical role, and despite the newness of this virus, the profession was highly adept at managing it (Bright, 2020). They ensured that the vulnerable sectors such as children, the elderly, and persons-with-disabilities were safeguarded from harm. Furthermore, social workers served as guides and advocates by connecting clients with a wide range of health and social services to address the devastating impacts of COVID-19. They disseminated accurate information from trusted sources and helped address anxiety and other concerns resulting from the public health crisis (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

Social Workers' Challenges during COVID-19

Like all other professionals, social workers were greatly affected by the pandemic. As social workers interacted with their social environment in the course of performing different roles and functions in addressing the pandemic's impact, they unavoidably experienced different physical, social, and psychological challenges. As frontline practitioners, they put their safety at risk to ensure that service delivery was fulfilled while adapting to substantially challenging working conditions (Abbas et al., 2020; Amadasun, 2020; Ashcroft et al., 2020; Banks et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Holliday et al., 2020; Murenje & Porter, 2020). Social workers had to adapt to the new circumstances and respond to difficulties caused by a deadly biological phenomenon that was invisible yet affected the daily functioning of society (Domenilli, 2020). As a result, they experienced the impact of the pandemic in their own lives, homes, and workplaces while helping clients and communities.

Furthermore, technology emerged as a vital tool among social workers and welfare agencies to deliver services and perform their expected roles and functions. The COVID-19 situation forced several organizations to shift from in-person to distant and online services as part of the nation's effort to reduce the spread of the virus. This has resulted in additional challenges faced by social workers, particularly online coordination with large interdisciplinary teams and a lack of protocols to guide their work (Barsky, 2020). In addition, Dauti et al. (2020) asserted that social workers struggled with addressing the ethical provision of online services. Although social workers did resort to different telehealth services to provide intervention and

support individuals in managing their psychosocial needs, these did not hinder them from offering in-person provision of food, shelter, and general health care (Reitmeier, 2020). These realities, as presented in the above cited literature, pointed out the need to further explore the different challenges of social workers regarding service provision amidst COVID-19.

The Need to Explore Social Work Experiences during COVID-19

The rapid changes in society brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for the critically reflective practice among social workers due to far more complex problems, needs, and issues affecting individuals, families, groups, and communities. Some people and sectors cannot cope or adapt to the changing social, economic, and political landscapes, which can lead to problems in social functioning. As the environment changes, the social work profession has to evolve to remain relevant and responsive to the needs and problems of its clients. In a major crisis such as this global pandemic, social workers have to reflect on their experiences in practice to contribute evidence for policy enhancements, develop innovative ways of helping, and assert the integral role of the profession during emergencies and crises and towards social development.

The qualitative study of Redondo-Sama et al. (2020) explored the immediate responses of social workers among vulnerable groups in the first 15 days of the pandemic in Barcelona, Spain. Their study presented the interventions done with an improved communication channel that enabled a better understanding of the situation of individuals and families and addressed the most urgent social needs with particular attention to vulnerable sectors. Additionally, Kamrujjaman et al. (2018) used a qualitative approach to analyze the roles of social workers during disaster management in Indonesia. It revealed that the social workers' roles during the disaster phase included advocates, catalysts, volunteers, coordinators, and supervisors. As highlighted, practitioners encountered challenges such as the limited number of workers for a large population and a lack of practice experience.

Moreover, the study of Park and Lee (2015) focused on the experiences of foreign residents during the MERS outbreak in South Korea and presented the implications of such experiences to social work practice. The findings revealed that social workers played an integral role in society's response to the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) health threat, mainly assisting those needing social support and care. While it is crucial to investigate the roles of social workers, ethical challenges remain an area of concern. Banks et al. (2020), in collaboration with the International Federation of Social Workers, gained qualitative insights related to practice ethics. The study concludes that COVID-19 and measures to control its spread have restricted the services and responsibilities carried out by social workers while generating new needs and demands. As a result, social workers have struggled, but have also worked creatively, to respond to people's needs and respect their rights to privacy and participation.

The previously stated studies analyzed the roles and challenges of social workers during disasters and crises using the qualitative approach (De Vicente et al., 2020; Kamrujjaman et al., 2018; Park & Lee, 2015; Banks et al., 2020), which served as a guide as to how this study was designed and structured. This study differs in terms of scope and setting. Nevertheless, based on the materials found, the evolving roles and challenges of social workers and the lessons they gained from their experiences can be ascertained.

Although social workers are duty bound to fulfill several roles before, during, and after a health emergency (Gwynedd Mercy University, 2020), their roles are often overlooked and misinterpreted. Existing research has been focused on health professionals, and less is known about social workers on the frontline (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). In addition, Collins (2007) argued that less attention had been placed in exploring how social workers deal with greater demands and find satisfaction and rewards at work. These situations resulted in this fundamental question that this study aimed to answer: “What are the roles, challenges, and lessons learned of social workers as they respond to the needs and problems of their client sectors during the COVID – 19 crisis?”

This study describes the significant roles of frontline social workers in this crisis, their challenges, and the lessons learned while performing these roles. The results of this study provide a better understanding of the social workers’ experiences during the pandemic. No similar study has yet been conducted in the province of Albay to explore this topic. Thus, this study sought to contribute research-based findings about transformative social work practice by discussing the social workers’ involvement and situations in responding to the pandemic. Transformative social work emphasizes how the present context can affect the way practitioners deal with the clients’ needs and problems, and the insights and realizations they can draw from those experiences as a result of critical reflection. This work can serve as a basis for identifying appropriate services and developing approaches to address social workers’ needs and concerns during a crisis.

Methods

This study used the qualitative approach through a case study method to systematically describe and interpret the responses gathered, which paved the way for generating diverse insights and experiences from the respondents. According to Crossman (2021), a qualitative study involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data from the respondents to understand their roles, experiences, and other essential concepts.

The purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of the social worker respondents based on the following criteria: 1) employed in either a government office or non-government organization in Albay, Bicol Region; 2) in direct practice; 3) working during the COVID-19 pandemic; and 4) willing to participate in the study. Through this, 20 respondents were selected, 14 or 70% of whom were female, and 6 or 30% of whom were male. The respondents’ ages range from 21 to 60 years. They work in various settings, including medical, child welfare, and government services. Regarding years of service, 12 have been working for at least 1 year and 5 months to 3 years, 5 have been working for 4 to 8 years, and 3 have been working for 20 years or more.

The pertinent data were collected through in-depth interviews, which were conducted online due to the limitations brought about by the pandemic. The researchers designed a semi-structured interview guide to obtain relevant data and information on the respondents’ roles, challenges, and lessons learned during the pandemic. Open-ended questions allowed the respondents to express their ideas and suggestions. Such an interview was necessary to capture a rich and comprehensive narration, descriptions, and insights. In addition, it was helpful for further clarification and explanations regarding their responses. To obtain informed consent, the researchers discussed with the respondents the ethical considerations prior to the interview,

such as the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, integrity and transparency, and confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data, thereby identifying common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns that repeatedly emerged from the responses. Smith and Firth (2011) defined thematic analysis as a method for analyzing qualitative data processes to identify patterns in information, such as commonalities and contrasts. The results of the analysis were shared with the respondents for validation.

Findings of the Study

Roles of Albayano Social Workers during COVID-19

Based on the conducted analysis, the following significant themes emerged as the roles of the study's respondents during the pandemic.

Theme 1: Resource Provider

The first key role refers to the direct provision of material assistance and resources to target clients, whether individuals or families, to reduce situational deficiencies and struggles caused by the pandemic. Such provision is based on carefully assessing the client's eligibility and situation.

The respondents' role as resource providers was highlighted during the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), which was one of the primary government responses to help the most affected and underprivileged during the lockdown. The SAP had essentially become the main resource for the beneficiaries to sustain their needs during the pandemic. In addition, the social workers took part in the provision of cash subsidies to low-income families who were negatively impacted by the effects and repercussions of the pandemic.

As resource providers, the respondents carefully assessed the clients' needs to arrive at the most appropriate ways by which these needs could be met as part of the direct provision of assistance. Before providing the aid, the respondents conducted interviews to determine the individual's eligibility. Furthermore, some respondents identified themselves as paymasters of the program who took part in releasing cash aid to the beneficiaries. The respondents gathered the target beneficiaries in a designated place, facilitated the cash distribution process, and ensured that people lined up properly while observing and following the precautionary health measures.

In response to COVID-19, we served at the frontline as resource providers by distributing relief packages and financial assistance to those affected by the lockdown or enhanced community quarantine. In addition, we assisted in delivering food packs to almost all of the municipalities in Albay. I consider it as one of our core functions.

Mendoza (2008) pointed out that resource provision is not limited to money or goods but includes other concrete services necessary to achieve the helping goals of the clients; hence, the administration of such programs is an essential and legitimate professional responsibility

of the social workers. It can be analyzed from the findings of this study that being a resource provider was one of the significant roles performed by Albayano social workers since clients needed urgent assistance during the pandemic. Furthermore, social workers' responsibilities were not limited to fighting against the spread of COVID-19 but also to ensuring the provision of essential items like basic needs.

Theme 2: Facilitator

The role of a facilitator denotes mobilizing a group of people and conducting meetings and activities. The respondents had to fulfill extensive duties to facilitate and deliver the services amidst the limitations caused by the public health crisis. Additionally, some respondents revealed that they facilitated the gathering of practitioners from their partner agencies through conducting meetings, activities, and other group sessions to discuss programs and services for their clientele sectors and formulate interventions to address their needs. During the pandemic, they had to find new strategies to meet the clients' needs. As mentioned by one respondent:

As a facilitator, my role focuses on gathering support from our partners in the private and public sectors to expedite the program implementation. For example, meetings with partners, such as Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office, Local Executive, and Barangay Heads on Social Service.

Furthermore, some respondents assisted persons considered under monitoring and investigation for COVID-19. Additionally, for those who were stranded due to the lockdowns, they facilitated the Balik-Probinsya Program. They assisted clients during the quarantine period until they reached the quarantine facility and facilitated the provision of their physiological needs.

Social workers, being at the forefront in responding to the challenges of the pandemic, needed to perform the role of a facilitator through mobilizing communities, organizations, and groups and establishing connections between different systems of care set up by the government, non-government, and other stakeholders present in the community (Okafor, 2021). Based on the findings, respondents performed the said role by mobilizing groups of people and facilitating the process while complying with the health precautionary measures and restrictions. Furthermore, communications and collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines were adapted and sustained throughout the pandemic to ensure that the people benefitted from coordinated, holistic, and personalized support as much as possible (British Association of Social Workers, 2020).

Theme 3: Social Broker

Another critical role is that of the social broker, which highlights the respondents' involvement in making referrals to link clients or their families with additional resources and assistance, primarily to support their socioeconomic needs. In performing this task, they addressed the need for information related to the available resources, eligibility requirements, fees, and location of services. They did not simply provide information, however, but worked with partner agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office, and the Office of the Vice President. Respondents who

were assigned in public and private hospitals worked directly with these agencies on the clients' behalf and assisted the clients to submit the requirements and documents needed for financial assistance. A respondent shared:

We refer our clients to partner agencies to provide necessary interventions for them and their families. In addition, we link them to appropriate agencies that could greatly help address their needs. Aside from referring them, it is also important to monitor if the assistance provided was effective.

To perform the social broker role, the respondents assessed clients' needs and examined their capacities to access the most appropriate resources and services. Due to pandemic restrictions, they sent formal letters and necessary documents to partner agencies through email. Having no face-to-face contact with clients and partner agencies, some processes were conducted online or remotely using information technology and social media. Indeed, social workers worked with various individuals and stakeholders, driven by a deep commitment to social justice and human rights (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020), to connect the clients to available services and resources that can address their needs and problems amidst the pandemic.

Theme 4: Coordinator

The key role of coordinator pertains to the respondents' task of communicating with partner stakeholders. During the pandemic period, coordination with the national government and the local government units was strengthened. The respondents were able to make a concerted effort to address issues related to the pandemic's impact, such as the lack of financial resources and limited access to food. It was found that coordinating with different local government units and partner agencies became one of their essential roles during the pandemic, considering that needs, issues, and problems should be dealt with collaboratively. As stated by one respondent,

We coordinate with government agencies and municipalities, especially with the delivery of food packs. We should be well-coordinated with these municipalities so they can be prepared. The social workers from municipalities, we coordinate with them in case there is medical assistance or any kind of assistance that can be given to the affected population.

The respondents coordinated with partner agencies and municipalities for additional support to assist them in extending the needed services to individuals and families. Unlike in the social broker role, respondents did not work directly with the clients; no referrals occurred. Instead, they often worked with government agencies and local government units by recruiting social volunteers to deliver and provide aid to the people. The study affirmed that social workers served as a cornerstone in supporting community sustainability together with a multidisciplinary team and concerned organizations in addressing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 5: Educator

The respondents took part in educating the people about the effects of COVID-19. As educators, they shared relevant information to help clients secure their health and safety against the threat of the virus. In addition, they helped in promoting disease prevention and providing pandemic-related information through sharing and posting on their social media accounts. Through their actions, individuals, groups, and communities in Albay were able to acquire information about COVID - 19 and gain ideas about healthy ways of living in a timely, accurate, and efficient manner. Aside from disseminating factual information and measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, some respondents taught the clients how to access services during the pandemic. As one respondent said:

We always perform the role of being an educator to our partner beneficiaries, so we conduct lectures and share relevant materials related to COVID-19 prevention and safety.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) emphasized that social workers have a unique position to advocate disease prevention efforts, including disseminating accurate information from trusted sources and helping address other concerns arising from this public health crisis. The respondents pointed out this critical role in raising awareness about the emerging crisis. Their role in educating the community was crucial as it helped minimize the spread of the virus through proper health measures.

Challenges Faced by Albayano Social Workers during COVID – 19

The respondents mentioned various difficulties in their work during the COVID-19 crisis. The challenges were presented in three identified themes, namely: physical, psychological and social aspects. The physical aspect pertains to the bodily challenges of social workers; the psychological aspect refers to the mental and emotional challenges, and the social aspect pertains to the interactional and relational issues encountered by the social workers.

Theme 1: Physical Challenges

Most respondents claimed that, during the pandemic, they performed additional duties because of the sudden shift in the work set-up. This resulted in the following physical challenges: 1) body strain; 2) physical fatigue and exhaustion; and 3) sickness such as migraine attacks, colds, cough, and allergies.

The respondents who worked during the pandemic experienced body strain. This was due to the shift in their work arrangements, particularly the implementation of a skeletal workforce and work-from-home scheme, insufficient human resources, and increased workloads and paperwork. As stated by one respondent:

The physicality is straining as we sometimes carry heavy loads of boxes when distributing relief assistance since we lack workforce.

The respondents also had more extended working hours than before, especially during the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program. Even when they were scheduled to

rest at home, they still tended to work to meet the expected tasks. They expressed that the reduced time to rest caused them to often feel tired.

You must wake up early and go home late, especially when we were still preparing documents needed for SAP. Yes, we must beat the deadline to help the people, to provide financial aid. We were still working in the office even beyond the curfew hours.

Additionally, the respondents experienced fatigue and exhaustion. They felt extreme tiredness and loss of strength due to a lack of rest and sleep, overwork, and stress. This jeopardized their health and safety, causing them to develop work-related muscle injuries and feel burned out, which impacted their work productivity.

Most respondents suffered from colds, cough, migraine attacks, and allergies while working during the pandemic. Trying to work with such ailments affected their focus as they could not effectively fulfill their tasks and functions. Becoming ill was inevitable because of the altered environmental conditions and increased work demands. A respondent mentioned:

When you have a sore throat and colds, it seems like you cannot sleep. It happened to me when I came home, and I have a sore throat and cold. I did not enter our room because I still have a 2-year-old child.

Theme 2: Psychological Challenges

Based on the findings, the psychological challenges experienced by the respondents fell within two subthemes: anxiety and mental exhaustion.

Most respondents found themselves experiencing anxiety during the pandemic. They felt anxious about their safety and the demands of additional work-related tasks. Being on the frontline meant they had to serve a wide range of people and be exposed to the threat of COVID-19, particularly during service delivery. It caused them to worry excessively about their health as they were at heightened risk of acquiring the virus and unknowingly transmitting it to their families and others. As some respondents stated:

The fear was extreme, and I could not sleep. It took me until 3 a.m. thinking that the virus might infect me, and my family would be infected.

If you have COVID-19, you will experience anxiety, thinking you are a carrier and can infect other people, especially your family. We do not know what will happen because it is unseen. The paranoia that everything you touch could bring you the virus. No matter how much we take precautions, there will always be a possibility to get infected.

Mental exhaustion was another major psychological challenge among the respondents. They claimed that the additional workloads apart from their main assigned tasks did not only

affect them physically but took a toll on their mental health as well. The unfinished workloads and long-term stress made them feel overwhelmed and mentally exhausted. For instance, a respondent said:

On my part, even when I am about to sleep, I carry mental baggage due to having unfinished workloads. Therefore, you must wake up early to finish your work the following day. The mental exhaustion is brought about by the frustration of being helpless. You want to impart a change, but you are not allowed to or do not have the drive to do the tasks because of the pandemic. Moreover, you do not know when it will be over.

Theme 3: Social Challenges

In the social aspect, the following subthemes were identified as major challenges: (1) limited interaction and contact with friends; (2) doubt and grievances from the clients; and (3) discrimination.

The respondents stated that, due to the health protocols that were implemented, their face-to-face interactions with clients, family, and friends became limited—driven by the fear of contracting and spreading the virus to their loved ones. Hence, they merely engaged with them online. As mentioned,

Communication with other people became limited. It is difficult, especially since we are social workers. We had to lessen our time interacting with our workmates and colleagues as we were protecting ourselves against COVID-19. With our family, whenever we arrive home, we need to limit our contact with them. It is difficult. You cannot talk with them because you are afraid that maybe you are a carrier.

Another social challenge was dealing with clients' doubts and grievances. Since the respondents were involved in facilitating the distribution of cash assistance, they encountered some undesirable reactions from others. They received numerous complaints from those who were not qualified as beneficiaries. They heard negative feedback against them, and unsolicited comments accusing them of favoring some beneficiaries with connections. Worst of all, some questioned the respondents' credibility as social workers and blamed them for their ineligibility for financial assistance. As mentioned,

Not all people can appreciate our service. It is difficult to provide service because of the doubt of people and the community.

I was dealing with people with diverse attitudes and aggressive clients. They were more intense because, number one, people are hungry as they do not have the chance to go to work. They were confused. There were aggressive because they wanted the assistance, yet they were disqualified based on the criteria.

Furthermore, the respondents experienced discrimination and stigma. As mentioned by respondents employed in a hospital:

I experienced intimidation and discrimination during this pandemic since we are on the front line. The people were rude. There is a stigma that we are virus carriers, even if it is untrue. I observed that our family is being affected. They are being intimidated and humiliated.

I sometimes experience discrimination, especially in our community. They would say I have COVID. I would disregard them. It was a waste of time to put up a fight.

Discriminatory treatment towards the respondents included refusal to talk with them, neighbors expressing anger, gossiping, and spreading false information, causing other people to stay away from them.

Lessons Learned by Albayano Social Workers during COVID - 19

Given all these findings, social workers remained essential service providers in the pandemic. Although they stated that they faced numerous challenges, these did not discourage them; rather, the respondents revealed that they learned significant insights and lessons based on their experiences. Hence, these have strengthened their will to become more competent and responsive.

Lesson 1: Social workers must always have a strong commitment to the profession's principles and ethical values.

A strong commitment to the profession's values and principles guides the respondents in their professional actions and service provision. During the pandemic, they faced various obstacles and challenges that tested their steadfastness to work. A respondent said:

When we facilitate the Social Amelioration Program, people raised different concerns and complaints. No matter how aggressive and mad the beneficiaries were, we must maintain the ethical standards of social work. We should remind ourselves of the social work principles like acceptance and non-judgmental attitude. Indeed, values are important. Those were the experiences I have learned deeper.

Always hold on to social work principles and life principles.

The respondents reported that they managed to serve the people no matter how challenging it was to work with a large population amidst a risky situation. As one respondent mentioned:

I am still dedicated to working because this is my passion. Some people are working for the salary. It happens. If you are dedicated

to your work, regardless of any pandemic and challenge, work from your heart.

Lesson 2: Continuous development of social work knowledge, skills, and attitudes is imperative amidst a crisis.

The respondents realized the importance of developing additional knowledge regarding program administration and policy guidelines, as in the case of the Social Amelioration Program. For instance, based on the responses to this study, some aggressive clients attacked workers verbally for telling them that they were unqualified to receive cash grants.

It is important because there are programs from the national government implemented in local government units. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the guidelines so we can explain them to clients.

In terms of skills, the respondents shared insights regarding innovation, time management, and interviewing. The respondents emphasized the importance of innovation to ensure that all services and programs are still delivered, using alternative techniques as needed. As stated by the respondents:

Whatever difficulties we may experience in the field, we must improve and strengthen our skills to make innovative strategies since we handle people in crisis and difficult situations. We must know and think of alternative solutions in response to difficulties in our environment. It might not be easy to address and manage concerns and challenges if we are not good at thinking of strategies or alternatives. There should always be a plan A, B, and C until the right and accurate decision is reached.

Another vital skill that the respondents learned was time management. As mentioned,

I learned to set priorities, so I can avoid cramming.

There were many clients, so you must manage your time properly to address the needs.

Moreover, the respondents revealed the need to practice quality interviewing skills when interacting with a client, even on a virtual platform. Complete and accurate information had to be gathered so that the client's needs could be defined and addressed effectively.

In terms of attitude, the respondents learned to enhance and exercise patience, understanding, respect, and optimism. Patience and deep understanding were commonly practiced toward clients with uncontrollable behavior. Despite adverse criticism from the public, excessive workload, tiredness, and other obstacles, the respondents were able to remain calm and manage their emotions appropriately. They shared:

Unfathomable patience is needed in the type of work we are doing. Although we felt exhausted and drowsy sometimes, we still bear beautiful smiles when dealing with people.

During our SAP days, we had aggressive clients who shouted at us in front of other people and my coworkers. The lesson for me is patience because, in this profession, you are defeated if you have no patience. Social workers are the first to adjust. If you are not used to understanding people, you are not used to making adjustments. We should always put the welfare of people first.

Additionally, being respectful was another attitude manifested because the respondents were working with diverse groups of people. Such respect entails accepting someone for who they are, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender. Respect promotes trust and a sense of safety, which is significant in building helping relationships with clients.

Another attitude that respondents practiced during the pandemic was optimism. It served as their strength to cope with the difficulties they faced. As they said:

What I do is to think positively. I think this is not forever; everything happening now is not for a lifetime. Time will come, these challenges will end soon.

One learning I hold on to until now is to always be positive. As social workers, our work is not ordinary. We are dealing with different kinds of people with different behaviors. We are implementing different programs and services and coordinating with different agencies. These tasks are not ordinary and cannot be done by other professionals. We are trained. If you get easily affected, and you easily question negative circumstances, chances are, it may bring you down. Nevertheless, always be positive because if you are embracing positivity, your passion will spark. You will work harder to help people in need. It will start your motivation every day to work.

Moreover, adaptability and flexibility were important qualities during the pandemic and in all similar crisis situations. These are what enable the respondents to address and deal with changes that may arise in the course of their work. Being prepared to deal with such unforeseen circumstances is essential. As a respondent stated:

As professionals and individuals, we should always be flexible because we do not know what might happen next. We cannot foresee possible changes. We do not know how abrupt they are. Therefore, we should be flexible about possible changes. It will be hard for us to adjust if we are inflexible.

Lesson 3: Strengthening self-care management is vital.

While working during the pandemic, the respondents experienced excessive worry, anxiety, over fatigue, and body exhaustion. Therefore, they learned to prioritize their health and safety. Most respondents claimed that self-care management must be practiced to maintain a healthy well-being. As a respondent stressed:

Self-care, because there were times we cried out from multilayered stress. I realized that it did not always work. So, I made ways to divert my attention, like cycling, going out with friends, and disconnecting from work on Saturday and Sunday. I rest during the weekend. Indeed, more on self-care, unwinding, and emotional stability.

Respondents realized that they must always uphold the value of practicing self-care. They should observe proper care and rest to prevent burnout. Making self-care a priority can help social work practitioners attain a healthy balance in their career and personal lives. Another respondent shared:

I realized that self-care is essential. Being tired and feeling drained is already part of our work. With this, you should learn to give importance to self-care, especially these days. Working is not easy, especially when you are on the frontline. We should take care of ourselves, not just our clients.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social workers played a vital role in the COVID-19 pandemic response by providing direct assistance to individuals and collaborating with multi-professionals in an attempt to decrease the risks and related harms of the virus outbreak. The crisis, as globally recognized, was not only a medical catastrophe but also a significant social issue that impacted many aspects of people's lives and that of their communities. In Albay, social work served as an essential discipline, in which the practitioners served multiple roles as resource provider, facilitator, broker, coordinator, and educator. These roles were multidimensional, addressing the micro, mezzo, and macro problems and needs of individuals and communities. They revolved around response interventions and the provision of immediate community-based assistance through coordination, linkage, and support across various organizations and systems to address the needs and problems caused by the pandemic.

The roles identified by the respondents in this study were already performed by social workers even before the pandemic. However, these roles as practiced amidst the health crisis asserted the professional services of social workers which had been previously unappreciated. The practitioners ensured that essential items such as food, water, and financial aid were provided to the most affected population. Moreover, they collaborated with professionals from other disciplines and organizations to formulate interventions to efficiently carry out the programs and services considering the various limitations and restrictions.

The pandemic likewise allowed the social work profession to be more widely known because of its significant contribution to mitigating the impact of the crisis. As a result, the social work community is finally gaining the recognition it deserves from the public because of its unparalleled service during this crisis. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for the nation to reconsider what sort of society we want to be and brought to the fore critical aspects to be addressed to effect long-term and sustainable change. This may in turn provide opportunities for social workers to take a leading role in the development and enhancement of interventions and strategies to address the needs and problems of victims and survivors of emergencies (Okafor, 2021) that are geared towards social transformation and development. As social workers performed their roles and functions during the pandemic, they encountered physical, social, and psychological challenges due to increased workloads, longer working hours, and other changes that emerged. Wherever one is, the COVID-19 pandemic affects clients and social work professionals (Blackmon & Hardy, 2020). Notably, the responsibilities and services in which they operate were subjected to higher demands. Thus, it can be surmised that increased challenges on a particular aspect may impact another aspect due to their interconnection. When a social worker is physically exhausted, for example, experiencing body strain, fatigue, and illness, this may impair his or her psychological well-being, and vice versa.

The pandemic, as found in this study, brought to light another critical subject in the field of social work. This relates to the engagement of social workers across all practice settings to professional and personal self-care. The new update of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, effective last June 1, 2021, includes explicit attention to self-care. It is an undeniable truth among social workers that promoting and practicing self-care is an ethical imperative. The changes in the NASW Code of Ethics (CoE) strengthen the legitimacy of self-care within the profession through a global lens. One modification is a call for macro-systems to “promote policies, procedures, and tools to assist social workers’ self-care.” Although the NASW CoE intends self-care language to be supportive and aspirational rather than mandatory, it encourages social workers to see it as a goal they should attain.

More significantly, this study highlights the lessons that social workers acquired during the pandemic. In social work, reflective practice is an essential skill for gaining, validating, and developing knowledge based on one’s experience. The context of COVID-19 poses great challenges and opportunities for social workers to critically examine their growth and development as persons and as practitioners. This study produced evidence-based insights and findings that support why the social work profession is essential in responding to the impact of a pandemic. It provided perspectives on the social workers’ condition of being at the forefront during such a crisis. Significantly, the pandemic tested and strengthened social work’s ethical principles of service, social justice, human relationship, inherent worth and dignity, integrity, and competence.

The results signify that the social workers developed and practiced their knowledge, skills, and values to support the individuals’ well-being and address their challenges during the pandemic. The risks and threats of the virus did not hinder them from prioritizing delivering services to communities and people in need. Furthermore, the lessons learned have implications on how they uphold the value of social justice. Social workers in Albay displayed patience, respect, optimism, and understanding, which are manifestations of culturally sensitive practice. Their roles challenged poverty, hunger, social oppression, and economic inequalities. Furthermore, their lessons highlight the values of integrity and competence, in which social

workers act based on the profession's purpose, values, and ethical standards. They realized the essence of practicing self-care for personal and professional development, which can likewise contribute to developing and strengthening a strong sense of self-awareness. Furthermore, the lessons learned among social workers reflect the Bicolano spirit of "oragon" or being resilient and determined amidst life's challenges and crises.

This study does have its limitations. The experiences of social workers during the pandemic would unavoidably differ among provinces, countries, and other geographical areas. Furthermore, social workers' experiences are not homogeneous because they operate in various settings, practices, and organizational mandates. The study did, however, note that the social workers' roles, challenges, and lessons underwent an evolution as the pandemic progressed, which is critical and essential in the development of the social work profession.

While social workers in Albay faced increasingly complex demands due to COVID-19, it is vital that they also came to recognize their own needs. At the same time, evaluating their professional principles, values, and competencies is just as critical as monitoring their personal well-being. Thus, by placing equal importance on these components, they may be better able to ensure their effectiveness as practitioners. Moreover, this study affirmed that social workers in Albay had undergone transformational shifts when they were prompted to adopt remote mechanisms through online transactions into their practice in order to guarantee continuity of client care. As a topic for future research, it is significant to assess the gaps that emerged as a result of technological integration and social workers' remote and limited face-to-face interactions with clients and other practitioners brought on by the pandemic. This could lead to determining possible areas for training, education, and policy enhancement that would benefit clients, social workers, organizations, and communities in the event that similar major crises were to arise.

References

- Abbas, K., UlHaq, M. I., Zaidi, W. A., Kaleem, A., Sohail, H., & Ahmed, M. (2020). The response of Pakistani social workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative analysis of the main challenges. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.10.18.20214601>
- Amadasun, S. (2020). Social work and COVID-19 pandemic: An action call. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 753-756.
- Ashcroft, R., Sur, D., Greenblatt, A., & Donahue, P. (2021). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Workers at the Frontline: A Survey of Canadian Social Workers. *British Journal of Social Work*.
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2020). The role of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.aasw.asn.au/news-media/2020-2/the-role-of-social-workers-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- Banks, S., Cai, T., de Jonge, E., Shears, J., Shum, M., Sobočan, A. ... & Weinberg, M. (2020). Ethical challenges for social workers during Covid-19: A global perspective. The International Federation of Social Workers. <https://www.ifsw.org/ethical-challenges-for-social-workers-during-covid-19-a-global-perspective/>
- Barsky, A. (2020). Ethical exceptions for social workers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing. *The New Social Worker*, 27(2), 4.
- Blackmon, A., & Hardy, T. (2020). The art of self-care for social workers. Social work blog. National Association of Social Workers. <http://www.socialworkblog.org/>

- practice-and-professional-development/2020/04/the-art-of-self-care-for-social-workers/
- Bright, C. L. (2020). Social work in the age of a global pandemic. *Social Work Research*, 44(2), 83-86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svaa006>
- British Association of Social Workers. (2020, May 28). The role of social workers in a pandemic and its aftermath: Learning from Covid-19. <https://www.basw.co.uk/role-social-workers-pandemic-and-its-aftermath-learning-covid-19>
- Chan, S. (2020). Coronavirus challenges for family social workers in Hong Kong. *Child & Youth Services*, 41(3), 237-239.
- Collins, S. (2007). Social workers, resilience, positive emotions, and optimism. *Practice*, 19(4), 255-269.
- Crossman, J. (2021). Qualitative research writing: Surveying the vista. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methodologies in Workplace Contexts*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Dauti, M., Dhëmbo, E., Bejko, E., & Allmuça, M. (2020). Rethinking the transformative role of the social work profession in Albania: Some lessons learned from the response to COVID-19. *International Social Work*, 63(5), 640-645.
- Department of Health. (2020). Website: <https://ro5.doh.gov.ph/>
- Department of Social Welfare and Development. (2020). Memorandum circular no. 4 series of 2020: *Special guidelines on the provision of social amelioration measures by the Department of Social Welfare and Development to the most affected residents of the areas under community quarantine and continuation of the implementation of the social pension for indigent senior citizens and the supplementary feeding programs*. https://www.dswd.gov.ph/issuances/MCs/MC_2020-004.pdf
- Dominelli, L. (2020). A green social work perspective on social work during the time of COVID-19. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 30(1), 7-16.
- Gwynedd Mercy University (2020). The need for social workers during and after the COVID – 19 pandemic. <https://www.gmercyu.edu/news-and-events/news/need-social-workers-during-and-after-covid-19-pandemic>
- Holliday, S. B., Hunter, S. B., Dopp, A. R., Chamberlin, M., & Iguchi, M. Y. (2020). Exploring the Impact of COVID-19 on Social Services for Vulnerable Populations in Los Angeles. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA431-1.html
- International Federation of Social Work. (2020). Updated Information on IFSW And COVID -19. 2020. <https://www.ifsw.org/updated-information-on-ifsw-and-the-covid-19-virus/>
- Johns Hopkins University & Medicine. (2020). Mortality analyses. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>
- Kamrujjaman, M. D., Rusyidi, B., Adbdoella, O. S., & Nurwati, N. (2018). The roles of social worker during flood disaster management in Dayeuhkolot District Bandung Indonesia. *Journal of Social Work Education and Practice*, 3(3), 31-45.
- Lee-Mendoza, T. (2008). *Social welfare and social work*. Central Book Supply.
- Murenje, M., & Porter, S. K. (2020). Covid-19: Challenges and prospects for the social work profession. International Federation of Social Workers Press. https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Murenje-Porter_ChallengesAndProspects.pdf
- National Association of Social Workers. (2020). Types of social work. <https://www.socialworkers.org/News/Facts/Types-of-Social-Work>
- National Association of Social Workers. (1996). National Association of Social Workers Code of

- Ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=YkFrOi8Vu-0%3d&portalid=0>
- Coronavirus, O. I. E. A. (2020). The world economy at risk, 2 March 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/berlin/publikationen/Interim-Economic-Assessment-2-March-2020.pdf>.
- Okafor, A. (2021). Role of the social worker in the outbreak of pandemics (A case of COVID-19). *Cogent Psychology*, 8(1), 1939537.
- Park, H. J., & Lee, B. J. (2016). The role of social work for foreign residents in an epidemic: The MERS crisis in the Republic of Korea. *Social Work in Public Health*, 31(7), 656-664.
- Petruzzi, L., Milano, N., Zeng, W., & Chen, Q. (2020). Lessons from Wuhan: The role of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Work Today*, 11.
- Redondo-Sama, G., Matulic, V., Munté-Pascual, A., & de Vicente, I. (2020). Social work during the COVID-19 crisis: Responding to urgent social needs. *Sustainability*, 12(20), 8595.
- Reitmeier, M. (2020). Covid-19 impact: Social service providers have to work around social distancing. University of South Carolina. https://www.sc.edu/uofsc/posts/2020/04/social_work_professor_discusses_how_covid_19_affects_social_services_delivery.php#.Yu9c4XZBy5c.
- Smith, J., & Firth, J. (2011). Qualitative data analysis: The framework approach. *Nurse Researcher*, 18(2), 52-62.
- Sukmana, O., & Abidin, Z. (2020). The role of social workers in social work practices by using information technology during the Covid-19 pandemic: Study in East Java Province, Indonesia. *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*, 29(8), 1316-1325.
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund. (2020). Social service workforce safety and well-being during the COVID-19 response. <https://www.unicef.org/media/68501/file/Social-Service-Workforce-Safety-and-Wellbeing-during-COVID19-Response.pdf>
- Walter-McCabe, H. A. (2020). Coronavirus pandemic calls for an immediate social work response. *Social Work in Public Health*, 35(3), 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2020.1751533>