Governance practices in Public Attorney's Offices during the Covid-19 crisis: Lessons for resilience and adaptation

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines the governance practices of the Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) in the Philippines during the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized a collective case study design and conducted in-depth interviews with ten personnel from the PAOs of Kabacan and Kidapawan City, Cotabato. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, uncovering several key themes. First, the challenges faced during the pandemic included adapting to virtual work practices, managing an intensified workload, coping with the fear of Covid-19, dealing with restricted in-person client communication, providing frontline legal services, and adhering to minimum health protocols. These obstacles highlighted the strain placed on public legal service delivery during the health crisis. Second, the study identified the procedures implemented by PAO personnel to sustain operations amidst the pandemic. These included the use of online communication platforms, distanced transaction systems, quality management strategies, and the provision of online legal services. These adaptive measures underscored the organization's commitment to ensuring accessibility and efficiency in service delivery. Third, the study highlighted notable best practices during the post-pandemic phase. These included prompt and efficient delivery of legal services, strict adherence to Covid-19 health protocols, and fostering a client-friendly environment.

In conclusion, the study highlights the significant challenges posed by the pandemic to the work life of public service personnel, emphasizing their resilience and dedication to fulfilling their duties despite the inherent risks. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of governance and service delivery during crises, offering valuable insights for enhancing adaptability and resilience across various government sectors. By focusing on strengthening institutional responses and ensuring uninterrupted access to justice and public services during emergencies, the study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, which seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and resilient institutions.

1. Introduction

The Public Attorney's Office (PAO) is an independent and autonomous entity under the Department of Justice, mandated by Republic Act No. 9406 (Arellano Law Foundation, 2007b) to provide free legal assistance to indigent individuals in criminal, civil, labor, administrative, and quasi-judicial cases. It also extends its services to others as directed by proper government authorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed long-standing challenges in the Philippine justice system, including limited access to justice, human rights violations, overcrowded detention centers, weaponization of laws, and lack of accountability. The disruption of court operations during lockdowns exacerbated these issues, leaving many Filipinos - regardless of socioeconomic status - struggling to navigate the formalistic judicial system. Posting bail for detainees became particularly arduous, even for those with financial means (Pago, 2020).

The pandemic further strained the rule of law and human rights protection, complicating the delivery of legal services. According to the 2020 article of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), as affirmed by Nir and Musial (2022), each lawyer at the Public Attorney's Office managed an average of 465 cases before the pandemic. Following the pandemic, public defenders experienced a roughly 30% increase in caseloads, attributed to the suspension of jury trials and challenges linked to remote hearings. Furthermore, the number of pending felony cases surged, reaching approximately 20% higher than the previous year due to persistent disruptions. Despite these adversities, PAO remained steadfast in its mission, assisting indigent litigants under the most challenging circumstances. The Stewardship Theory in public administration suggests that individuals are intrinsically motivated to prioritize organizational and societal goals over self-interest. This theory aptly explains the resilience and dedication of public defenders during the pandemic, as they adapted to rising caseloads and operational disruptions while maintaining their commitment to justice. Although PAO personnel were permitted to work remotely, they continued to provide critical support for urgent matters, such as posting bail and filing motions (Pulta, 2020). Nevertheless, while many hearings transitioned online, in-person trials were limited to involved parties, reducing opportunities for courtroom learning and engagement for legal practitioners.

Based on the researchers' review of existing literature, an empirical gap was identified in understanding governance practices within Public Attorney's Offices, explicating the nexus between law and public administration as most the research focused on individual judicial outcomes and procedural analysis, thereby overlooking the broader governance mechanisms that sustain the operational efficacy of these essential legal institutions. This focus not only limits the understanding of the systemic challenges faced by PAOs but also neglects the vital relationship between administrative governance and the quality of legal representation provided to indigent populations. This study seeks to address these gaps and contribute to the discourse on justice system resilience in times of crisis.

To address the gap in research on governance practices among Public Attorney's Offices during the pandemic, the study aimed to answer the following research question: 1) What were the experiences of participants as public servants during the Covid-19 crisis? 2) What procedures were implemented in the Public Attorney's Office for serving clients or handling cases during the pandemic? 3) What best practices can be identified from the Public Attorney's Offices during the pandemic?

2. Theoretical basis

The governance of the Public Attorney's Office (PAO) during the Covid-19 pandemic aligns with Stewardship Theory, which emphasizes accountability, ethical conduct, and prioritizing public welfare over personal or organizational interests (Davis et al., 1997; Fourie, 2016). As stewards of justice, PAO personnel upheld their mandate to serve indigent clients despite resource limitations and heightened demand for legal services. Their response to the crisis reflected a moral obligation to maintain access to legal representation, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Amid overwhelming workloads and health risks, PAO personnel implemented innovative solutions, such as virtual hearings and remote legal assistance, ensuring the uninterrupted delivery of legal services (Bertot et al., 2010). These measures were not mere crisis responses but deliberate governance strategies that reinforced ethical responsibility and public trust. By leveraging digital tools and e-governance initiatives, PAO's approach exemplified the capacity of modern governance to balance institutional objectives with community well-being (Fukuyama, 2013). Their experience underscores the importance of resilience, accountability, and adaptability in public administration, proving that even in crises, government institutions can uphold their mandates and foster trust in the justice system.

3. Methodology

The study employs qualitative research, following a phenomenological inquiry, to explore governance practices among Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) during the pandemic. Phenomenology is a robust methodology for studying the depth and richness of human experiences. It seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their world, with a focus on uncovering the essence of phenomena through detailed descriptions (Creswell et al., 2007). While it may not aim to generalize findings to larger populations, its strength lies in providing a deep, contextual understanding of individual and collective experiences. By emphasizing lived experiences and bracketing researcher assumptions, phenomenology offers a unique approach to capturing the complexity of human consciousness and behavior (Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

The use of a phenomenological design is particularly well-suited to answer the research questions related to the experiences, procedures, and best practices of Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) during the Covid-19 pandemic. The design is effective for exploring questions that require in-depth, personal insights into how individuals perceive, interpret, and navigate their world, particularly in challenging and unprecedented situations such as the pandemic.

Further, the study involved personnel from the Public Attorney's Offices in Kabacan and Kidapawan City, Cotabato Province. Participants included office staff and attorneys actively assigned to these offices. The research can be used in case-to-case generalization to offer insights into governance practices within Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) during the Covid-19 pandemic (Eisenhardt, 1989). Specifically, the study's findings from the PAOs in Kabacan and Kidapawan City can be applied to other PAOs in similar contexts, particularly those in regions with comparable socio-political and geographical conditions, such as Southern Mindanao or other rural areas in the Philippines. This form of generalization allows for the replication of key governance patterns identified in the two cases to inform practices in other PAOs that faced similar challenges during the pandemic, such as maintaining service delivery under health restrictions or managing increased workloads.

In terms of analytic generalization, the study contributes to theory-building by extending the understanding of how public institutions, especially in the legal sector, adapt during emergencies (Steenhuis & de Bruijn, 2006). By identifying recurring themes in the governance practices during the pandemic, the research enriches theoretical frameworks on public sector resilience, crisis management, and institutional adaptation. These insights may apply to other legal institutions or public offices facing similar crises, not just during the pandemic but also in future emergencies. Although case-to-case generalization is limited, the study still provides an essential foundation for developing broader theoretical insights into governance under stress.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, targeting the most appropriate group while respecting their demanding work schedules and the large volume of clients they serve daily. Furthermore, the researchers made efforts to ensure equitable representation among participants by deliberately selecting an equal number of office staff and attorneys, with five individuals from each group. This approach was intended to capture a diverse range of perspectives from different roles within the Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs), ensuring that both administrative and legal aspects of governance were adequately represented. By including both office staff and attorneys, the study aimed to capture the multifaceted nature of governance within PAOs, where staff members frequently handle crucial administrative and logistical functions that complement the legal expertise provided by attorneys.

Moreover, a semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate face-to-face interviews. Although the guide was prepared in English, questions were translated into Tagalog or Bisaya, depending on participants' preferences. The instrument primarily consisted of probing questions designed to understand governance within PAOs, particularly the experiences, procedures, and best practices during the pandemic. The tool was reviewed and validated by three Assistant Professors from the Department of Social Science and Philosophy at the University of Southern Mindanao.

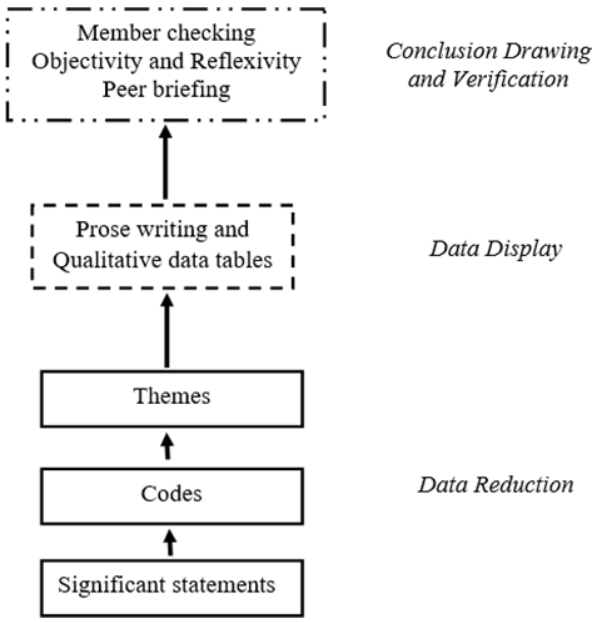
Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with PAO personnel. In line with Creswell and Miller's (2000) guidelines, participants' knowledge, credibility, impartiality, and willingness were carefully considered. Formal consent was obtained from the Chief Resident Attorneys of the PAOs involved, and participants were briefed on the study's objectives and procedures through an informed consent letter.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to express themselves in their preferred dialect. Research ethics were strictly observed, ensuring that participants could withdraw at any point if they felt discomfort. The researchers maintained a respectful and non-coercive environment, thanking all participants for their valuable contributions after the interviews.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Additionally, the researchers adopted Berg's (2004) techniques for condensing qualitative data and Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic analysis procedure. The process included identifying key concepts, reviewing interview transcripts, noting significant quotes, coding data, and developing themes. The resulting themes provided a comprehensive perspective on the governance practices explored in the study.

Figure 1

Flow of Data Analysis



Note. Adapted from *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.), by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, 1994, SAGE Publications.

4. Results and discussion

The Covid-19 crisis has posed a grave threat to human rights and the rule of law, as noted by Wiratraman (2020). Its pervasive impact has significantly disrupted the global legal profession, affecting lawyers in their daily professional activities. The practice of law has become increasingly challenging in recent years due to these unprecedented circumstances. Judicial hearings were postponed, undermining the justice system and creating substantial hurdles in adapting to the post-pandemic era.

4.1. Experiences of personnel in selected Public Attorney's Offices in the Province of Cotabato

Table one outlines the experiences of personnel from selected Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) in the Province of Cotabato during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study highlights several key themes: the adoption of virtual work practices, increased workload, fear of contracting the virus, constrained client communication, frontline service responsibilities, and strict adherence to minimum health protocols.

Virtual work practices. The pandemic necessitated a transition to virtual work practices among PAO personnel. Many participants reported that the majority of client communications were conducted online, utilizing social media platforms to ensure continuity of services while minimizing in-person contact. Public bulletins displaying phone numbers were used to facilitate client inquiries and prevent the transmission of Covid-19. Telecommunication tools such as telephones became integral in delivering legal advice and counseling services. Nonetheless, a report from the Asian Development Bank (2020) highlights that the pandemic has exacerbated digital inequality, with specific areas in the Philippines lacking reliable internet access. This lack of access to digital tools created barriers in communication, making it more difficult for PAO personnel to provide timely legal services, a reality echoed in the Philippines' broader digital divide.

Stewardship Theory offers a valuable lens through which to interpret the responses of PAO personnel to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Despite the barriers created by digital inequality, the adaptive strategies employed by PAO personnel - such as leveraging telecommunication tools, social media, and public bulletins - demonstrate a commitment to their roles as stewards of public trust and legal assistance. This theory underscores the intrinsic motivation of public servants to act in the best interests of their clients and the community, even when faced with resource limitations. By prioritizing client welfare over personal convenience and navigating the constraints of virtual work practices, PAO personnel exemplify the stewardship model, which emphasizes service-oriented leadership and aligns individual and organizational goals. Their efforts to ensure continuity of legal services amidst the pandemic highlight the practical embodiment of stewardship principles in mitigating the effects of systemic inequalities, such as the digital divide, on vulnerable populations.

Work has become more difficult. The research revealed that the office work of personnel in the selected Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) in the province has become increasingly challenging due to the significant health risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the heightened complexity of work procedures resulting from limited face-to-face interactions. Participants expressed feelings of anxiety about contracting the virus, becoming ill, and potentially transmitting it to their families. These fears have led personnel to limit direct communication with clients, resulting in a longer chain of communication and constrained in-person interactions. This work environment has reduced efficiency, causing delays in task completion and contributing to work overload among personnel.

Frontline legal workers, including PAO personnel, faced heightened anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic due to increased exposure risks and heavy workloads (International Labour Organization, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Managing legal services became more challenging as internet-based communication became essential, yet unreliable connectivity and limited client access to mobile data caused delays. Moreover, noncompliance with office protocols and health measures further complicated interactions. Online hearings, hindered by unstable connections, made it challenging to examine cases, assess witness credibility, and verify evidence, adding to the burden on PAO personnel. These challenges not only disrupted legal proceedings but also intensified stress and workload pressures.

Fear of Covid-19. The study revealed that personnel in the selected Public Attorney's Offices experienced fear and anxiety regarding Covid-19. Participants expressed apprehension about contracting the virus through interactions with clients and potentially transmitting it to their families. A particular source of fear stemmed from the possibility of being quarantined, as many reported feeling uneasy about staying in unfamiliar quarantine facilities. They were concerned about the absence of anyone to assist or support them in these facilities, which heightened their sense of isolation and vulnerability. This aligns with findings from Vizheh et al. (2020), who studied the mental health impacts on public service workers globally and found that anxiety about Covid-19 was widespread among those working in critical sectors. This psychological burden, compounded by the risks associated with interacting with clients, created a tense work environment.

Additionally, participants shared their financial anxieties related to the pandemic. They expressed fear of incurring substantial hospital bills if they contracted the virus and required medical treatment. Many worried about their ability to cover these expenses, further exacerbating their stress and concerns about the implications of testing positive for Covid-19.

These concerns about health and financial stability are crucial in understanding the decline in work-life quality during the pandemic. The fear of Covid-19 and the emotional toll it took on the PAO employees is a clear indication that QWL is not merely about job satisfaction or working conditions but also deeply connected to employees' mental, physical, and financial well-being (Nitafan & Idris, 2024; Yap & Nitafan, 2026). In this context, employees' ability to focus on their work and deliver quality services was hindered by the constant mental burden they carried, affecting their overall productivity and engagement.

Constrained client communication. The pandemic disrupted traditional face-to-face client interactions, prompting personnel to adopt alternative communication strategies. These included window transactions, microphone announcements, emails, and virtual platforms like Zoom. Despite these efforts, poor internet connectivity continued to be a recurring challenge, often hindering effective communication during online meetings and judicial proceedings.

Frontline responsibilities. Personnel from PAOs also served as frontliners during the pandemic, fulfilling their duties as mandated under Republic Act No. 6713 (Arellano Law Foundation, 1989). This law emphasizes that public office is a public trust, requiring officials to prioritize the public interest even in perilous conditions. Despite the risks, participants demonstrated dedication by continuing to provide essential legal services to the community, directly contributing to the organizational sustainability of the PAO. While sustainability performance is traditionally assessed in terms of economic, social, and environmental factors (Nitafan et al., 2024), in this context, it extends beyond the PAO's financial health to include its capacity to fulfill its mission and sustain operations in the face of unprecedented challenges.

The sustainability of PAO operations during the pandemic relied heavily on its ability to adapt to the constraints imposed by the health crisis while continuing to serve its clientele. The personnel's resilience, despite the health risks associated with in-person consultations, ensured that the office remained operational. This continuity was critical for the long-term sustainability of the institution, as it highlighted the importance of maintaining service delivery even in times of crisis.

The Stewardship Theory, as a theoretical framework, explains why individuals within an organization act in the best interests of the organization and its stakeholders, rather than prioritizing their personal safety or self-interest. Unlike agency theory, which assumes that individuals primarily act out of self-interest and need to be monitored to align their goals with organizational objectives, stewardship theory suggests that employees, particularly leaders, view themselves as stewards of the organization. By highlighting the personnel's role as stewards, the theory justifies an employee's willingness to prioritize organizational goals and stakeholder well-being over personal considerations. This perspective aligns with a more collaborative, trust-based, and ethical approach to organizational management, fostering an environment where employees feel empowered to act in ways that benefit the collective, rather than focusing on self-preservation or individual gain.

Observance of health protocols. Presidential Proclamation No. 922, s. 2020 (Arellano Law Foundation, 2020a) declared a public health emergency in the Philippines, prompting the enactment of Republic Act No. 11494 (Arellano Law Foundation, 2020b) (Bayanihan to Recover as One Act) to strengthen Covid-19 response efforts. Section 4 mandated preventive measures aligned with WHO and DOH standards. In compliance, PAOs integrated health protocols into legal services, enforcing mask-wearing, sanitation, and online consultations. Legal functions, including hearings and document preparation, shifted to digital platforms,

while regular health monitoring ensured staff safety. These measures underscored PAO's commitment to public health while maintaining essential legal services.

Table 1

Experiences of Personnel in Public Attorney's Offices during the Pandemic

Concept Probed	Core Ideas	Essential Themes
Experiences of PAO Personnel during the Covid-19	• Hearing and trial are done online	Virtual work practices
	• Training and seminars are conducted virtually	
	• We scan pleadings and send them online	
	• Legal advice is given through phone calls	
	• We use social media to communicate with our clients	
	• Work is dependent on computers	
	• We do video conferencing	
	• Personnel cannot communicate and serve the public due to the fear of the virus	Work has become more difficult
	• Work anxiety due to Covid-19	
	• Longer chain of communication	
	• High piles of work due to virtual service delivery	
	• Some clients are not following the minimum Covid- 19 health standards	
	• Conducting a hearing is difficult due to a poor internet connection	
	• Fear of acquiring the virus from clients	Fear of Covid-19
	• Fear of transmitting Covid-19 to the members of the family	
	• Fear of being sent to a quarantine facility.	
	• Fear of hospitalization	
	• The personnel use a microphone to communicate	Constrained in-person client communication
	• Instead of face-to-face communication, clients are given phone numbers to text or call	
	• Emailing clients	
	• Conduct meetings via Zoom	
	• Disconnection during meetings due to a poor internet connection	
	• Provided services through a window transaction	

Concept Probed	Core Ideas	Essential Themes
	• I go to work despite the dangers of the pandemic	Served as a frontliner
	• We have a front desk that caters to clients	
	• Observance of social distancing	
	• Adopting the health and safety protocols implemented by the DOH, such as wearing a face mask and practicing hand sanitation	Observance of minimum Covid-19 health protocols
	• Doing the office work online	
	• Regular monitoring and reporting of the personnel's health status	

Note. The qualitative data presentation was derived from the methodological framework of "Untold stories of teachers with multiple ancillary functions: A phenomenology of fortitude" by C. A. D. Into & G. P. Gempes, 2018, *Journal of Advances in Humanities and Social Sciences, 4*(1), pp. 13-25

4.2. Procedures observed by the selected Public Attorney's Offices in the province of Cotabato during the pandemic

From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Public Attorney's Office (PAO) strictly followed the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) guidelines to ensure the safety of staff and clients. Measures included routine disinfection, physical distancing, mandatory face masks and shields, and the use of no-contact thermometers, along with the provision of hand sanitizers and alcohol dispensers (Tayco et al., 2024). Despite pandemic challenges, PAO continued to deliver critical legal services during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), maintaining a skeletal workforce at the Central Office and implementing on-call operations at regional offices. This allowed PAO to represent clients in urgent cases, facilitate the release of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), and assist with inquest proceedings, bail bond undertakings, and Social Amelioration Program claims, ensuring seamless legal support during the crisis.

Table 2 presents the procedures observed by the selected Public Attorney's Offices in the Province of Cotabato during the pandemic. It was revealed that they observed online communication, conducted distanced transactions, provided online services, and implemented quality management during the pandemic.

Online communication. To mitigate the risk of Covid-19 transmission, PAO personnel adopted online communication methods among themselves and with clients. Participants reported that social media platforms played a crucial role in facilitating public communication, while telephones and mobile numbers were also widely used to provide legal assistance. This shift to digital interaction ensured uninterrupted access to legal services despite the restrictions on face-to-face engagements.

During the pandemic, governments increasingly relied on social media and messaging apps, such as Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp, to maintain public service delivery (El Baradei et al., 2021). These platforms enabled real-time updates, public inquiries, and operational adjustments. Traditional communication tools, such as telephone hotlines, remained crucial for those with limited internet access. This digital shift ensured the continuity of legal services while broadening public engagement and accessibility, reinforcing the role of technology in governance during crises (Fulleros & Nitafan, 2024).

Distanced transactions. The implementation of distanced transactions emerged as a critical strategy for minimizing physical contact while ensuring service delivery. Office personnel used microphones to make announcements during office hours, enabling them to communicate effectively without requiring close interaction. Additionally, window transactions were introduced to serve clients while maintaining a protective barrier, thereby reducing the risk of viral transmission without compromising the quality of legal services provided.

Online legal services. The study revealed that PAOs leveraged online platforms to deliver legal services throughout the pandemic. Facebook was widely used for legal assistance, advice, mediation, and the dissemination of information. Moreover, hearings and trials were conducted through video conferencing platforms, facilitating the judicial process even under restrictive conditions. Legal documents were prepared digitally, and consultations were held via phone calls and online chats to ensure the continued functionality of the criminal justice system.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have emerged as essential tools for disseminating legal information and providing remote assistance (Al-Rawi et al., 2021). This shift not only increased the PAO's reach but also helped maintain public engagement during times of physical distancing (Emodi-Perlman & Eli, 2021; Ibarra et al., 2020). During the pandemic, social media has become a prominent source of health information, enabling legal aid organizations to communicate effectively with their constituents.

Quality management strategies. The PAOs in Cotabato employed various quality management strategies to sustain their legal mandate during the pandemic. Participants detailed the use of queuing machines, strict adherence to time frames for each client, and priority lanes to manage client interactions efficiently while adhering to health protocols. Effective resource management was emphasized, with personnel ensuring that staff members were always available to assist clients, perform tasks efficiently, and comply with central office standards. In addition to these strategies, open communication among personnel played a crucial role in maintaining smooth operations. The voice of staff is essential for ensuring that information is disseminated effectively, addressing concerns, and maintaining alignment with health protocols and operational goals (Nitafan, 2024). This open dialogue helped maintain a high level of collaboration and adaptability, which was vital in meeting the challenges posed by the pandemic.

In line with their commitment to public service, the PAOs also conducted regular jail visitations and monitored custodial facilities operated by the Philippine National Police (PNP) during the pandemic. These efforts not only upheld the rights of PDLs but also demonstrated the office's adaptability and resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges. Through these procedures, the PAO successfully balanced public health imperatives with its duty to provide accessible and effective legal services, underscoring its vital role in maintaining justice during a global health crisis.

The strategies employed by the PAOs in Cotabato during the pandemic exemplify the principles of Stewardship Theory, which emphasizes the alignment of individual and organizational goals toward the greater good. The use of queuing machines, priority lanes, and strict adherence to time frames reflects a stewardship-oriented approach, prioritizing efficient service delivery while ensuring public health safety. The open communication and collaboration among personnel demonstrate the intrinsic motivation of PAO staff to act as stewards of public trust, ensuring that both internal operations and external interactions align with the organization's mission. Additionally, their commitment to conducting jail visitations and monitoring custodial facilities highlights a proactive effort to protect the rights of PDLs,

further embodying the values of stewardship. These efforts underscore the adaptability and resilience of the PAOs, showcasing their dedication to balancing the immediate health and safety concerns of the pandemic with their broader mandate of delivering justice and upholding human rights.

Table 2

Procedures Observed by the Selected Public Attorney's Offices in the Philippines during the Pandemic

Concept Probed	Core Ideas	Essential Themes
Procedures observed by the Public Attorney's Offices during the pandemic	• Using social media in communicating	Online communication
	• Posting of phone numbers on bulletins	
	• Legal advice and counseling are given over the telephone	
	• We use a microphone to communicate	Distanced transaction
	• Transactions are done through Windows	
	• Online hearing and trial	Online legal service
	• Preparation of documents is done online	
	• Giving legal advice is done through phone calls and online chats	
	• Provision of legal assistance, advice, mediation, and information dissemination through Facebook Live	
	• Effective management and resource availability	Quality management strategies
	• Employing a queuing machine	
	• Observance of the quality service priority lane	
	• Conduct regular jail visitation and PNP custodial facility monitoring	
	• Following a time frame for each client	

Note. The qualitative data presentation was derived from the methodological framework of "Untold stories of teachers with multiple ancillary functions: A phenomenology of fortitude" by C. A. D. Into & G. P. Gempes, 2018, *Journal of Advances in Humanities and Social Sciences, 4*(1), pp. 13-25

4.3. Best Practices observed by the personnel of the selected Public Attorney's Offices in the province of Cotabato during the pandemic

The Public Attorney's Office (PAO) is an independent and autonomous office attached to the Department of Justice (DOJ) for policy and program coordination, as per Section 38(3), Chapter 7, Book IV of the Administrative Code (Official Gazette, 1987). As the principal legal office of the government, the PAO is tasked with providing free legal assistance to indigent

individuals in various types of legal cases, including criminal, civil, labor, administrative, and other quasi-judicial matters. Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the PAO was steadfast in its mandate to deliver essential legal services. The personnel adopted various strategies to ensure the continuous provision of legal assistance to the public while safeguarding health and safety. These practices exemplified the resilience and adaptability of the PAO in fulfilling its public service role during a global health crisis.

Table 3 outlines the best practices observed by the personnel of the selected Public Attorney's Offices in the Province of Cotabato during the pandemic. Among the most prominent practices were a commitment to prompt and efficient service delivery, the strict implementation of Covid-19 health protocols, and an emphasis on maintaining a client-friendly environment. These strategies enabled the PAO to balance the need for effective legal representation with the imperative to protect both its personnel and the clients it serves.

Prompt and efficient service delivery. One of the most notable practices observed by the PAO personnel during the pandemic was their commitment to maintaining prompt and efficient service delivery. Despite the limitations imposed by quarantine measures and health protocols, the PAO was able to continue serving clients with minimal disruption. One of the key strategies employed was the implementation of a structured time frame for each transaction, ensuring that clients received timely responses. The establishment of specialized service lanes, including urgent lanes for individuals requiring immediate legal assistance, helped streamline the process and reduce waiting times. In addition, the introduction of a front desk system, where a PAO staff member would assess and interview clients, further expedited the process by quickly identifying the specific needs of each client. This system enabled faster case handling and more efficient resource allocation.

Another strategy that helped manage the large volume of clients was the use of queuing machines. These machines ensured that the first-come, first-served principle was strictly adhered to, which helped prevent overcrowding in the office and maintained order during peak hours. This careful management of client flow allowed for a more efficient use of personnel and office space, which was particularly important during the pandemic when social distancing measures were in place. The efforts to maintain prompt and efficient service delivery during such a challenging time demonstrated the PAO's unwavering commitment to fulfilling its mandate to the Filipino people.

Implementation of Covid-19 health protocols. In response to the ongoing health crisis, the PAO personnel in the selected offices implemented a comprehensive set of health and safety protocols to protect both their staff and clients. These protocols were designed to align with the guidelines issued by the Department of Health (DOH) and the Local Government Units (LGUs), ensuring that the PAO could continue its operations without compromising public health. Among the measures implemented were the mandatory wearing of face masks, the provision of hand sanitizers at various points within the office, and the enforcement of physical distancing rules to reduce the risk of virus transmission. These practices complement the standard health protocols implemented by the Inter-Agency Task Force among government agencies to prevent the spread of the virus (Tayco et al., 2024).

Moreover, in recognition of the need to minimize in-person contact, the PAO offices began transitioning some of their services online. This included offering legal consultations, preparing legal documents and pleadings, and even conducting hearings and meetings through virtual platforms. This shift to online services not only ensured that legal assistance could continue to be provided but also protected the health of both clients and personnel.

The PAO offices also implemented regular monitoring and reporting of personnel health status, which allowed them to quickly detect and respond to any potential Covid-19 cases within their ranks. This proactive approach helped contain the spread of the virus within the workplace, ensuring that operations could continue without significant interruptions. By adhering to strict health protocols and adopting digital solutions, the PAO demonstrated its ability to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic while upholding its commitment to justice.

Client-friendly office environment. Despite the added pressure of the pandemic, the personnel of the selected Public Attorney's Offices in Cotabato made a conscious effort to maintain a client-friendly environment. They recognized that during a time of uncertainty and distress, it was more important than ever to offer legal assistance in a manner that was not only efficient but also compassionate and empathetic. One of the best practices that stood out during the pandemic was the consistently displayed professionalism and courtesy by PAO personnel. They ensured that clients were always treated with respect, often going the extra mile to ensure their comfort and ease during what could be a stressful experience.

In addition to their courteous and respectful demeanor, the PAO personnel also emphasized the importance of delivering services with integrity, sincerity, and a strong sense of duty. They worked diligently to ensure that clients were fully informed of their rights and legal options, taking the time to explain complicated legal matters in a way that was accessible and understandable. The dedication to providing honest, transparent, and thorough legal advice not only helped clients navigate their cases but also fostered trust and confidence in the PAO.

Furthermore, the personnel took pride in delivering legal services with a sense of passion and zeal for justice. They viewed their work as more than just a job; it was a calling to serve the underprivileged and ensure that they had access to the legal representation they deserved. This attitude was reflected in the positive feedback received from clients, many of whom expressed their appreciation for the personalized attention and care they received. The PAO's commitment to maintaining a client-friendly atmosphere, even under the constraints of the pandemic, was a testament to the office's dedication to public service.

The resilience of the selected Public Attorney's Offices in Cotabato during the pandemic is a testament to the adaptability of government institutions in times of crisis. While many sectors struggled to adjust to the new reality, the PAO personnel demonstrated remarkable innovation in continuing to provide essential legal services. They leveraged technology to overcome physical barriers, implemented health protocols to protect the well-being of both staff and clients, and maintained a client-first approach to ensure that their legal needs were met with the utmost care and professionalism. These best practices exemplify the role of public servants as agents of change and stability during times of uncertainty. They highlight how, even in the face of a global health crisis, public institutions can uphold their duties and maintain the trust of the people they serve. The PAO's experience during the pandemic offers valuable lessons in resilience, adaptability, and the importance of prioritizing both service delivery and community well-being.

Table 3

Best Practices Observed by the Personnel of the Selected Public Attorney's Offices during the Pandemic

Concept Probed	Core Ideas	Essential Themes
Best practices observed by the Public Attorney's Offices during the pandemic	• Implementing a time frame for each transaction	Prompt and efficient service delivery
	• Implementing a quality service lane for all clients	
	• There is a front desk, where PAO staff interview and assess the client's needs	
	• Usage of the queuing machine to strictly manage and control the clients on a first-come, first-served basis	
	• Implementation of urgent lanes for inquest duties and other related urgent services that require urgent legal assistance	
	• Observance of the DOH healthcare protocols in compliance with the local and national health regulations	Implementation of Covid-19 health protocols
	• Regular monitoring and reporting of the personnel's health status	
	• Staff are courteous to clients	Client-friendly office
	• Staff always smile	
	• Contented and happy clients	
	• Offices provide service with honesty, integrity, sincerity, zealousness, and passion.	

Note. The qualitative data presentation was derived from the methodological framework of "Untold stories of teachers with multiple ancillary functions: A phenomenology of fortitude" by C. A. D. Into & G. P. Gempes, 2018, *Journal of Advances in Humanities and Social Sciences, 4*(1), pp. 13-25

5. Concluding remarks

Conducting this study was an extraordinary test of determination and resilience for the researchers. Writing a qualitative manuscript proved to be a challenging task, requiring a rigorous and detailed process of data gathering, transcription, analysis, and presentation. The significant expenses involved in conducting and presenting the research, compounded by the dangers and disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, made the successful completion of this study feel nothing short of miraculous.

Despite the numerous obstacles faced, the researchers were fortunate to embark on this phenomenological research. Throughout the journey, they learned valuable lessons, from the

painstaking process of data collection to crafting the long yet meaningful narratives of the public servants in the Philippine justice system. The study deepened their understanding of the difficulties faced by Public Attorney's Office (PAO) personnel as they worked under the constraints of a global health crisis.

The study makes a significant contribution to the broader discourse on governance during crises, particularly in the context of public service delivery amidst a global health emergency. By exploring the lived experiences of Public Attorney's Office (PAO) personnel, the research sheds light on the resilience and adaptability required of public servants when confronted with unprecedented challenges. The findings emphasize the necessity of rapid procedural adjustments, such as the adoption of virtual work practices and innovative client communication strategies, which ensured continuity of service despite the pandemic's restrictions. These practices, rooted in efficiency, flexibility, and a client-centered approach, offer valuable lessons for governance in crises, not only within the Philippine legal system but also in other public service sectors facing similar disruptions.

The study underscores the importance of governance structures that can quickly adapt to changing circumstances, ensuring that essential services remain accessible even in times of extreme uncertainty. The best practices identified - such as strict adherence to health protocols and a proactive, resourceful approach to service delivery - can serve as a model for other institutions, contributing to the ongoing conversation about how public services can be resilient, responsive, and effective during global crises. Ultimately, the study affirms that even in the most challenging times, the dedication of public servants remains a cornerstone of effective governance, and their experiences offer valuable insights for future crisis management and governance strategies.

Finally, the researchers express their deepest gratitude to everyone who supported the successful completion of this academic endeavor, particularly to the respondents who continue to selflessly serve the Filipino people, even at the risk of their health during the pandemic.

6. Implications for practice and future studies

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of how governance within the Public Attorney's Offices (PAOs) in Cotabato Province was shaped during the pandemic, offering a practical model for good governance in times of crisis. The findings demonstrate that PAO personnel, despite significant challenges, successfully adapted to the pandemic by adopting innovative practices, including virtual hearings, socially distanced client interactions, and the use of online tools for service delivery. These strategies ensured the continued delivery of essential legal services while maintaining high standards of integrity and responsibility. These findings have significant implications for improving governance and crisis management in other sectors. Specifically, they suggest that public service institutions must be prepared to pivot quickly in the face of unforeseen disruptions, and that flexibility and innovation in service delivery should be institutionalized as part of crisis preparedness plans.

The study also emphasizes the need for alternative strategies to reach populations with limited internet access, such as utilizing community-based outreach or offline communication methods, including radio broadcasts and mobile legal assistance. These approaches can ensure that even the most vulnerable populations receive critical services during crises. By maintaining and enhancing these practices, government offices can ensure continued efficiency, accessibility, and quality in their service delivery, not just during pandemics but

also in other emergencies. Therefore, these findings provide a practical framework for enhancing governance systems, improving crisis response capacities, and ensuring that essential public services remain responsive, accessible, and valuable, regardless of the challenges ahead.

Moreover, this study has added valuable insights into the experiences, procedures, and best practices within public attorneys' offices during a pandemic. It serves as a useful resource for scholars in the fields of education, social sciences, criminology, and organizational sciences, particularly for those interested in the criminal justice system during periods of crisis. This research substantially contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the resilience and adaptability of public institutions in responding to emergencies.

The study has several limitations. The findings were based on data from only two PAOs with a small sample of personnel, which may not fully represent the diversity of PAOs nationwide. Additionally, the study did not explore client perspectives, which are crucial for understanding the accessibility, effectiveness, and quality of legal services during the pandemic. Future research should expand the sample to include public defenders from diverse regions for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face. Incorporating client feedback would enhance the assessment of service delivery, identifying areas for improvement in accessibility, efficiency, and client-centered practices, which are essential for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of legal aid services.

Future research could investigate the impact of virtual and remote work on legal service quality, examining whether these practices, implemented initially out of necessity, can persist post-pandemic. Quantitative studies could expand on this research by developing reliable scales to assess work-life quality, performance, ethics, and best practices among PAO personnel in various contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies could evaluate the long-term effects of the pandemic on the mental health, job satisfaction, and professional development of PAO staff, offering valuable insights for future policy and workforce management strategies.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

The manuscript clearly identifies a research gap; the manuscript extends or refines existing theories; the manuscript proposes a new theoretical or analytical model; the manuscript provides new datasets or empirical evidence; the manuscript presents statistically and practically significant findings; the manuscript offers policy/managerial/technological implications; the manuscript opens new directions for further research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CRediT: **Haran Sabangan Abdulkarim**: Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization; **Rowell Pagod Nitafan**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Project Administration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the conduct and publication of this research. The study was conducted independently, free from any commercial, financial, or institutional relationships that could be perceived as influencing the outcomes or interpretations presented. No external funding, grants, or financial support were received at any stage of the research process, including its conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. All efforts to ensure the objectivity and integrity of the research were solely the responsibility of the authors.

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