

THE VALUE OF THE TANF CASE MANAGER

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights competencies found in Case Managers who serve individuals receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. TANF Case Managers coordinates services for individuals who are seeking to maximize their well being. This includes collaborating with staff in other organizations and developing a coordinated service plan across agencies and diverse systems. The TANF Case Manager utilizes a core set of competencies to achieve positive outcomes for individuals who they serve.

Keywords: TANF Case Manager, Human Service, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

INTRODUCTION

Case Managers in human service delivery systems serve as the key point of contact for the individuals on their caseload. These Case Managers serve individuals with an array of barriers and challenges in obliging individuals who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency. States receive block grants to design and operate programs that accomplish one of the purposes of the TANF program.

The four purposes of the TANF program are to:

- Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes
- Reduce the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, employment and marriage stability
- Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies

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- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2017)

The roles of Case Managers are multifaceted. Their primary role is assist an individual and/or a family to become self-supporting while evaluating all of the basic needs. This is initially performed through a comprehensive assessment of the individual's needs and development of an individual service plan.

According to the National Association of Social Workers, case management is both macro and micro in nature (NASW, 1992). The Case Manager intervenes on both the customer and system level to determine the best needs for the particular customer and how those needs fit into the state system (NASW, 1992).

The Case Manager coordinates needed services to help an individual obtain services in the service delivery system. The face-to-face evaluation gauges the individual's strengths and weaknesses. It helps the Case Manager to identify and outline goals and maximize the well-being of the individual and in some cases the entire family. Then, the Case Manager coordinates the appropriate state services and benefits.

Benefit delivery is integrated with self-sufficiency-enhancing services. Depending on an individual's needs, the Case Manager may coordinate services and/or benefits to include the following services: housing, childcare, food and nutrition, medical benefits, mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse support, disability (i.e., intellectual and/or developmental and learning) and any other condition that may pose a barrier for an individual.

The Case Manager who serves customers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) has the primary responsibility for determining that an individual may have documented and hidden barriers to employment. The Case Manager conducts a preliminary assessment in order to develop an individual service plan for the customer and identify barriers.

The Case Manager refers an individual to a partner agency for services to address and/or remove a barrier. Case Managers are responsible for helping individuals understand their conditions and recommend actions for barrier removal. The Case Manager develops an individual responsibility plan to outline the goals, interests, strengths and barriers of each customer. Then the Case Manager monitors the individual's compliance with their service plan and progress toward achieving self-sufficiency.

Roles Change: Pre-TANF, Case Managers primarily performed intake and benefits determination. The TANF program approach focuses on case management. The approach focuses on job skills training and employment. The social services program focuses on addressing personal (including medical, childcare, transportation, domestic violence, substance

abuse and employment training.) and family (including childcare, housing, child abuse and housing) issues that interfere with seeking and obtaining employment.

The TANF program provides a different set of regulations for individuals with documented physical and mental health condition and other medical conditions. Individuals who have obtained a medical certification of a mental health condition, are pregnant and/or caring for a family, are removed from a Case Manager's general caseload. The specific state program requirements for this population vary. Individuals who meet the specific program requirements are exempted from employment activities.

Identification of hidden barriers is a new role for many Case Managers. Post TANF, the roles of TANF Case Manager's changed to include the identification and mitigation of personal and employment roadblock to employment.

It is important for a TANF Case Manager to develop, maintain and strengthen partnerships with other agency and service provider staff. These individuals are critical in assisting the Case Manager to obtain the needed services for barrier removal for the customer. Staff in other agencies can provide information, assistance, and support to the customer.

This is especially important for individuals who have a hidden and/or documented barrier. A study found that a TANF Case Manager is the individual who identifies that an individual has a hidden barriers (Thompson, Van Ness and O'Brien, 2001). TANF Case Managers play an integral role in initial barrier identification efforts.

A Case Manager's abilities to fulfill barrier identification responsibilities are affected by their other responsibilities, skills, training and the size of their caseloads. Not every Case Manager is experienced and/or skillfully trained to identify and/or document hidden barriers. The ability to detect an individual's hidden barriers highlights a key competency of a TANF Case Manager. Individuals with hidden barriers tend to remain on an individual's caseload longer and are challenging in every way.

There are key competencies that are valuable when recruiting for a TANF Case Manager. In competency modeling, the intent is not to focus how a role has been performed to date, but rather to identify the behaviors that will be needed to achieve long-term strategic goals. In this sense, competency modeling is forward looking and not rooted in the past (Korn Ferry, 2017).

The advantage of using competencies is that they are measurable skills, attitudes, or attributes that can be closely aligned to organizational strategy. Examples of competencies include business acumen, patience, perspective, and planning (Korn Ferry, 2017).

Key competencies found in TANF Case Managers include accountability, patience, collaboration, patience, flexibility, communication, professional development and training, advocacy, interpersonal skills, communication, empathy and resourceful.

Accountability

There must be an individual TANF Case Manager in place in order for case management to be successful. This individual must maintain oversight of the human services delivery system for the whole care process. This includes the array of services that an individual will access and need to move towards self-sufficiency. There is a risk of fragmentation in the human services delivery system when a Case Manager is not accountable or has not been assigned to an individual.

Patience

The role of a TANF Case Manager is an intensive case management type. It requires the use of patience with individuals who face complex barriers. Patience is needed when serving individuals who face barriers to employment and are seeking to maximize their well-being. Patience is important because individuals may be noncompliant with meeting the goals of their individual service plan.

The Case Manager conducts face-to-face exchanges with individuals and intervenes with individuals who may not be compliant with their service plan. Individuals may have a history of lateness and/or missed appointments. Difficulty with facing other barriers may impact an individual's ability to meet their previously scheduled appointments and/or deadlines with their Case Manager.

Collaboration

Case management is largely shaped by working with other agencies and service providers to coordinate care and share information. Systems and crisis theory awareness allows for decision making that is sufficiently global to protect all entities involved in case management. It is more about the ability to tune in to an organization's informal patterns of collaboration; it will be less about having specific skills and more about having the essential qualities that foster collaboration itself — empathy, emotional intelligence, diplomacy and negotiation.

The outcome of case management is increased individual and family stability and self-sufficiency through individualized case management. Case management requires a team effort. Collaboration is enhanced when the entire team is in harmony.

The team consists of the individual (family), Case Manager and community partners with whom the individual may be working. The individuals served by TANF Case Manager often receive services from multiple agencies and organizations. This requires coordination and collaboration with other agencies between the TANF Case Manager and agency staff.

Multi-agency collaboration is becoming increasingly relevant to policy-makers and practitioners (Rose, 2007). TANF Case Managers develop relationships with staff at other state agencies and community-based organizations to coordinate services for individuals on their caseload. An individual's expertise and attitudes, from previous experiences of multi-agency working, is critical to collaboration with other agencies. (Cameron and Lart, 2003; Sloper, 2004). Working together towards a common goal raises issues for professionals from different agencies backgrounds. Such difficulties stem partially from differing ideologies, working practices and priorities (Rose, 2007).

The coordination and sharing of information among the variety of staff and partners involved in identifying and addressing barriers is complicated and requires a significant investment in communication and collaboration at multiple levels (Thompson, Van Ness and O'Brien. 2001).

Flexibility

Flexibility is an openness to different and new ways of doing things. It is a willingness to modify one's preferred way of doing things (Cripe and Mansfield, 2002). Flexibility means more than adjustments in a Case Manager's schedule. It requires the TANF Case Manager to change their mindset to see the merits of perspectives of others.

The TANF Case Manager must be prepared for any change in the individual's condition at any given. The Case Manager must be ready with a solution or temporary answer. For example, a Case Manager maybe required to search the streets in order to reach them an individual, become displaced and find a new residence within 24 hours. The TANF Case Manager must be able to respond immediately with a resolution no matter their geographic location or time of day.

Managing Change

TANF Case Managers continuously manage change. In response, they help and guide the individuals on their caseload to manage any change that directly affects the individual and/or their family. William Bridges proposes a transition model to guide individuals through change. Under his model, he proposes to focus on transition not change (Bridges, 1991). Bridges maintains that change happens to all people. "Transition is internal. It is what happens in people's minds as they experience change," says Bridges.

There are three stages in the Transition model. The three stages include Ending, Losing and Letting Go, Neutral Zone and A New Beginning. Individuals progress through each stage at their own progress. Case Managers can use the model to understand how an individual is feeling at each stage. Initially, it is important to listen emphatically and communicate openly with individuals.

Communication

Individual Level

Communicating effectively is an important competency for the TANF Case Manager. Individuals may complain about not being able to reach their Case Manager. The TANF Case Manager must develop strong lines of communication with the individuals whom they serve and work. This means the individuals on their caseload as well as team members are able to reach them via mail, telephone and/or face-to-face meetings. Regular communication is the cornerstone to helping an individual to achieve their self-sufficiency goals.

In instances where individuals are transient and/or there is a loss of contact (unreported change of address or interruption in telephone service), the TANF Case Manager must be quick on their feet. The savvy TANF Case Manager will integrate the use of technology as an avenue to communicate with individuals on their caseload. The Case Manager will frequently monitor social media (Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat) to track, communicate and fully engage with individuals.

Agency Level

At an agency level, the TANF Case Manager must be able to communicate with all providers in the human services delivery system that provide services for individuals on their caseload. The range of services received and individual progress must be documented by the Case Manager. This information must also be communicated verbally when soliciting for assistance for an individual.

Education and Professional Development and Training

The right set of skills is just as important as a Case Manager being able to access the appropriate training, support and mentors in place. According to Sharon Mass, current president of the American Case Management Association (ACMA), "formal education (Bachelors and Masters) sets a standard whereby people learn critical thinking skills. One must be a clear communicator and possess an awareness of regulations." She adds that Case Managers are patient advocates that must be aware of the rules and regulations.

Many Case Managers are now required to obtain a mandated reporter training certification and participate in non-crisis violent prevention training. Mandated reporters are individuals who have regular contact with vulnerable people, such as individuals receiving TANF benefits. They are legally required to ensure a report is made when abuse is observed or suspected. Specific details vary across jurisdictions. The abuse that must be reported may include neglect, or financial, physical, sexual or other types of abuse.

Non-crisis violent prevention training emphasizes early intervention techniques for preventing or managing disruptive behavior. Personal safety techniques and restraint and transport techniques

Advocacy/Job Coach (empower)

Moss emphasizes the importance of empowering individuals to prepare for their future needs. A TANF Case Manager is able to empower individuals by recognizing they are capable, have strengths and resources that can help individuals take control of their lives. Case Managers treat individuals respectfully, assisting them in identifying their needs, building on their strengths while supporting them in meeting their goals.

A major component of case management is advocating for individuals. This involves coordinating with various professionals or teams and negotiating with them to secure medication, equipment and support services. It is important for the Case Manager to have some influence over service providers (Webb, 2013).

Interpersonal Skills

In a study conducted with welfare recipients about their Case Manager performance, substantive competence, accessibility and interpersonal skills were noted as three key dimensions (Anderson, 2001). From the perspective of an individual receiving TANF benefits, a Case Manager with strong interpersonal skills makes them feel like someone is “looking out for them.”

Empathy

It is essential that Case Managers are able to develop good relationships and communicate with a range of people. They need to be approachable and able to demonstrate empathy, even when addressing apparently ‘minor concerns’.

Resourceful

A TANF Case Manager is a broker of information. Case Managers often think of themselves as ‘fixers’. They find solutions to problems by drawing on various service providers and informal care networks, if available.

A lack of access to information and resources and a lack of stakeholder support have been identified as barriers to effective case management. It can occasionally fall on case management staff to work autonomously in overcoming these difficulties. In an environment of limited resources. Case Managers find themselves always searching for partners with resources with whom collaborate and/or served their customers.

Being a Case Manager allows an individual the ability to see a bigger picture of the individual and the human services delivery system. There are challenges. According to Christy Whetsell, President-Elect of the American Case Management Association (ACMA), “You will find that no two days are alike. It’s the feeling of doing what’s right for the individual and smile of relief from the individual that keeps you returning back to do it again the next day.

The formal study of TANF Case Management is still in its infancy. Case Managers and their customers learn more new things about case management each and every day. Just like no two days are alike, no two Case Managers are exactly the same. There are Case Managers who are firm and less forgiving while others repeated make requests without consequences. Case Managers wear various hats including being motivational speakers, counselors, confidants and mentors to some extent.

There is much to be examined and learned about the value of a TANF Case Manager. The TANF Case Manager plays substantial roles in improving the well-being of individuals seeking to become self-sufficient. They are living examples and role models to the individuals whom they serve whether they accept this added responsibility or not.

Future efforts should focus on continuous training and support for TANF Case Managers. Training will guide Case Managers in recognizing and documenting the challenges customers face. This includes making referrals to partner agencies and seeking out new resources in a system of limited funds. Furthermore, many states can better support their frontline employees by expanding capacity for TANF Case Managers.

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