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Webinar: Creating High-Quality Case Management Documentation

March 27, 2025, 2:00 – 3:00 PM ET

Transcript

Introduction

Jasmine Griffin: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for joining our webinar today, which is part two of our Throwback Thursday series. If you missed our first webinar, the link to the recording will be available in the resources sent out in tomorrow's email. Today we will be focused on creating high-quality case management documentation.

Today's Speakers

JG: I'm delighted to introduce our speakers today. My name is Jasmine Griffin, and I am a Switchboard training officer with over a decade of experience in mental health, program management, and trauma-informed care. I previously worked with IRC Dallas as Health and Wellness Senior Program Manager and Interim Deputy Director. I hold a Master of Professional Counseling from Grand Canyon University.

JG: I am joined by Zainab Ahmadi. She is a Master of Social Work first-year intern joining Switchboard's training team from Binghamton University. For the past four years, she has worked as a case manager for Women for Afghan Women, [where] she has placed hundreds of vulnerable families in temporary housing. Zainab previously worked with children in school settings supporting disadvantaged students facing personal hardship.

Switchboard Throwback Thursdays

JG: Just in case you've missed the Switchboard webinar, I want to let you know that our Throwback Thursday series brings back our most requested webinars, giving you a second chance to catch the insights you need. While recordings are always available, joining live offers a unique opportunity to ask questions and engage with fellow service providers. As with all of our sessions, this webinar is open to all refugee service providers across state agencies, resettlement organizations, and partner groups. Please share this opportunity with your colleagues.

Learning Objectives

JG: All right, so let's go ahead and get into our learning objectives. First, by the end of the session, you will be able to, one, explain the importance of documentation within the case management cycle; two, describe different elements of the case file, including case notes, service plans, and critical incident reports that adhere to most program guidelines; three, apply new tools and techniques to improve the quality and efficiency of case management documentation. With that, I'm going to go ahead and hand it over to Zainab, who's going to get us started with our first objective.

1. The Case Management Cycle: Recognizing the Importance of Documentation

Zainab Ahmadi: Thank you, Jasmine. We're going to start our presentation today by discussing how documentation fits into the typical case management cycle. We will start by going over the steps and components of case management.

ZA: What does it mean to be a case manager? You are supporting the client in their goals, you know their case well, and you have the sense of the general and desired trajectory. Case management is not doing everything for your case members, but rather supporting them and knowing what their role is and when to refer out or set boundaries as well.

Case Management Facilitates Client Wellness and Autonomy

ZA: The first step is advocacy. This is the ability to support clients to get what they need. Of course, our responsibility as case managers is to teach them how to advocate for themselves. Next is the assessment. This is the process of evaluating a client's needs, strengths, and challenges to create an effective plan for support. We then go into planning, which is the act of organizing and outlining strategies to meet a client's goals and needs. Then comes communication, as we exchange information with clients, team members, and others to ensure clear understanding and effective support.

ZA: This follows up with coordination as the process of organizing services, resources, and people to ensure that a client receives comprehensive and timely support. Next comes monitoring, which is the ongoing tracking and reviewing of a client's progress to ensure goals are being met and adjust support if necessary. Lastly is service facilitation and helping clients access and navigate services to meet their needs and remove barriers to support.

Case Management Approach

ZA: Through all aspects of case management, the most important thing to keep in mind is that our clients are the drivers of their case planning, and we should be here to guide them and help them navigate these services. A way to do that is by approaching case management from a client-centered, strengths-based, and trauma-informed way using cultural context. These approaches are deeply interconnected, working together to create holistic support to empower, but also play a vital role in their own way.

ZA: Client-centered means clients are at the heart of our services. Whether you are working on the ground at a community center or virtually, connecting with clients on a one-on-one basis creates meaningful relationships, builds trust, and ensures that their unique needs and voices guide the support that they receive.

ZA: Next comes acknowledging cultural context, which means understanding how the client's culture affects and shapes them and thus our services with them. Boundaries should also take into account specifics of norms and what is appropriate versus not appropriate, as well as what kind of customs may need more boundaries than others. This includes being mindful of communication styles, family dynamics, traditions, and values that influence how clients engage with support services.

ZA: With trauma-informed care, imagine the client has had so much agency taken away from them that they've been fighting really hard just to get here. Recognizing how hard they have worked and helping restore some of that agency can be healing. This means offering choice whenever possible, validating their experiences, and creating a space for how they can honor their pace, which can be a big difference in rebuilding trust and promoting growth.

ZA: Lastly, a strengths-based approach can help with case management, as it focuses on recognizing and building upon the client's existing skills, resilience, and resources, empowering them to take an active role in their own progress and healing. It shifts the focus from what's wrong to what's strong, fostering a sense of hope, capability, and self-determination.

Phases of Case Management

ZA: Now that we have a solid foundation of case management, we will spend some time talking about the process of case management. Initial engagement starts with the intake, assessment, and rapport building. This is your opportunity to introduce the idea of case management, your role, the client's role, and what they can expect from you and the process. It's the time when you get to know the client and the client gets to know you, and you begin to identify strengths, resources, barriers, and needs that are present for the client.

ZA: Next comes goal setting, where we complete our assessment and figure out our goals and service provision, including referrals. This is where the bulk of case management happens, though it cannot happen without the initial engagement and assessment. This is where you develop, update, and execute plans towards meeting the client's goals.

ZA: Finally, termination and discharge are the last step in case management, as we plan for and execute a positive ending. Termination starts from day one, knowing that the goal of case management is for the client to learn to navigate systems, access services, and build skills to meet their needs without the support of a case manager. Our goal as case managers is to make ourselves obsolete and redundant because there is nothing that we can do with or for our clients that they cannot do for themselves.

Discussion Question

ZA: Now we will be moving on to our first Slido. You can join us at slido.com with the number 1266 145, or you can scan the QR code with your phones. We will be asking today,

Why are case notes and other types of documentation important?

ZA: Please feel free to go ahead and join us, and we will be using Slido a few times throughout our webinar today, so you can keep the tab open throughout the hour. We have our first message, funder requirements, as well as telling our youth stories, tracking progress, monitoring progress. These are all wonderful answers, and please send in as many as you want. You'll be able to see everyone else's response on the website as well. Tracking goals is a very big and popular one, as well as record of services, and you can put more than one answer if you would like.

ZA: Consistency. I see a lot of similarities between our answers, which is wonderful. For follow-up, for auditing purposes—these are all very necessary in our work and have a lot to do with case notes and what we need case notes for within case management. We do see a lot of popular ones, such as tracking goals, progress, follow-up, records. These are wonderful answers, and please feel free to look at the Slido throughout the session today. We can move on. You all did a great job with the Slido and came up with a lot of reasons why documentation is important.

Documentation Throughout the Three Phases of Case Management

ZA: Each phase of the case management cycle has different types of documentation that you will be using. For the initial engagement and intake, much of the documentation you complete during an earlier phase will be used in a later phase. For example, you may use some sort of assessment tool during the initial engagement phase where you learn more about your client's needs. What I find is that when I start off with a positive and strong initial meeting and screening, my client and I can work more productively together to find pathways to success and self-sufficiency more easily.

ZA: With goal setting, you can use that assessment to help you and your client determine their services. You can use the SMART framework to define your goals, which Jasmine will discuss in the next section. You can also break up the goals into smaller and more manageable steps by prioritizing what is needed to be done first and creating a service plan timeline for each step from there. When working with clients, I always prioritize their immediate needs first, whether it's shelter or finding a food bank if they do not have meals. Being able to get these vital needs taken care of first allows us both to focus on the remaining tasks as they come without worry.

ZA: Lastly, your service plan will be used during the termination phase to help you determine if the client has met their goals and is ready for termination. Though we may have a termination date set from the beginning, such as six months or one year from the start date—or if we're working with youth, it may be when they turn 18—it's important to clarify this to clients to give them enough time to prepare and to continue completing regular check-ins where we can review progress and identify goals for completion.

Why Document?

ZA: Now that we have gone over documentation, we can think about why we need to document as case managers. Documentation is one way that we can stay accountable. In the social work field, we have a saying that if you didn't document it, it didn't happen. Writing your case notes and other types of documentation can actually help protect you. If you have ever helped a client with a safety risk or had an incident that needed to be reported, your case notes can prove that you did all the things that you were supposed to do.

ZA: Case management documentation helps you track client progress. Case notes can help the case manager remember the details of each of your meetings with your client and what you are working on. This documentation supports continuity of care, especially when working with clients over long periods and in collaboration with other service providers.

ZA: The types of documentation we are going to talk about today are usually a requirement from your funders. As you said in the Slido, funders often need clear, accurate records to ensure that services are being delivered effectively and that the goals of the program are being met. Your documentation can really help you show your funders all the work that you have been doing. We also have an ethical and professional responsibility to keep an accurate record of our meetings with clients. These standards are in place to protect us and to protect our clients.

ZA: Lastly, case notes are vital to communication and collaboration within your agency. Supervisors and managers can look at case notes as if there are ever any safety concerns with your clients. If you ever get sick or take a vacation and your client shows up to the office, your co-workers will use those case notes to see what you've been working on and how they can help your client while you are away. Now I will hand it over to Jasmine for our second section.

2. The Case File

JG: Awesome, thank you, Zainab. It's so crucial for everyone to understand the "why" behind documentation. It's the foundation of effective case management and accountability.

JG: Let's dive deeper into the types of documentation that will be included in your case files. This will help ensure we all have a clear understanding of what's required and how each piece plays a vital role in supporting our work. We'll look at an example of how a paper case file can be organized. Your agency likely already has its own system in place, or you might be using an electronic recording system with digitized copies of documents. As we go through this section, keep your agency's protocols in mind and ensure that you're aligning with them.

Sample Case File Organization

JG: Organized documentation doesn't just make things look neat; it significantly boosts your efficiency as a case manager. For both paper and electronic files, all documents should be stored chronologically. This means adding the newest paperwork on top of older documents. For digital systems, a good practice is to include the date at the beginning of the document title when saving files.

JG: This graphic that you'll see on the screen shows a sample case file that is divided into four sections. First, we have intake documents. These include everything that the client signs to initiate services. That's client rights and responsibilities forms, consent forms, releases of information, and any other forms that may be required by your program or your agency.

JG: Next, we have case notes. These should be stored chronologically to maintain a clear timeline of your interactions with your clients. Your case notes should make it easy for any reader to know what has been going on with your client. They should tell the story of what you're doing with your client.

JG: Then we have service documents. This section includes service plans, assessments, and periodic updates such as reassessments at the 3-, 6-, or 12-month intervals. It also contains case closure or termination paperwork.

JG: Then lastly, we have case management. This section covers anything related to providing case management services. That's referrals, copies of applications to maybe food benefits or housing assistance programs. This could also include discharge paperwork from hospitalizations, school enrollment documents, screenshots of key text messages, and so much more.

JG: For physical files, remember that different programs and states have specific rules for long-term storage. Physical copies must be kept in a lockable file cabinet within a secure area. For example, in Texas and in

Colorado, completed or terminated case files must be stored for at least seven years. Also, when working with minors, the rules can differ, so be sure to check with your supervisor for your state's specific guidelines to ensure you're always in compliance.

Case Notes

JG: Now we're going to dig a little bit deeper into case notes. This is the piece of documentation many of us are very familiar with and is often where we spend the majority of our time. Case notes serve as a detailed record of the interactions between you and your client. They capture key information from your meetings and are critical for tracking progress, services provided, and client outcomes. To maintain accuracy and consistency, case notes should ideally be completed within 24 to 48 hours of the meeting.

JG: When I was a case worker, I found it helpful to complete my documentation the day after each client meeting. This timing worked well for me because the details were still fresh in my memory. Of course, the key here is to develop a system that works best for you and your agency requirements, whether it's scheduling dedicated time in your day for documentation or setting personal deadlines. Find an approach that ensures that you're staying on top of this critical task.

What to Include in Case Notes: Remember the 6 W's

JG: We're going to walk through what to include in case notes using the 6 W's framework. These six elements help ensure your notes are thorough and effective. We have Who: Identify everyone present in the meeting, including the client, caseworker, interpreter, if applicable, and any additional people like family members or friends. When documenting, you can refer to the client simply as "client," or you can use their initials.

JG: What: Detail what happened during the meeting. Write the events in chronological order to create a clear and cohesive narrative. Your case notes should tell the story.

JG: When: Note the exact date and time that the meeting took place. Include both the start and end times, for example, 11:00 to 11:47 AM. Next, we have Where: Indicate where the meeting occurred. This could be at the office, in the client's home, in the community, at a food bank, or any other community resource. Then we have Why: Explain the purpose of the meeting. Was it a scheduled meeting to discuss the client's employment goals, or was it unscheduled, such as a walk-in visit to address an urgent need, such as rental assistance?

JG: Then lastly, What next? Document the next steps you and the client have agreed on, as well as the timeline for the next meeting. Additionally, it's important to document when a client no-shows for a scheduled appointment or any time you call or talk to them on the phone. These notes can be brief, even if it's just one sentence, but just remember that they're essential. They help you recognize patterns and show the extent of your efforts to your supervisor. For example, even if you haven't seen a client for two months, you can demonstrate that you've been calling them weekly to encourage another meeting. This is crucial, as it highlights your diligence and ensures that there's a clear record of your work.

JG: In my leadership role, I often encountered situations where caseworkers wanted to close out clients but lacked documentation. They'd say, "I've been calling and texting the client every week," but when I checked the electronic health record, there was no documentation. This goes back to that classic saying that Zainab mentioned earlier: "If it's not documented, it did not happen." Just remember your case notes are not just a record; they're a reflection of the work you're doing and the effort that you're putting forth with your clients.

Case Note Example

JG: I'm going to read this case note example, and then we'd love to hear from you all again using Slido on the next screen to identify what's missing. Here's the case note: Client and CM discussed client's difficulty paying her rent this month. CM will look into rental assistance options for this month. Client thanked case manager.

Discussion Question

JG: Now thinking about the six W's we just reviewed—who, what, when, where, why, and what next—reflect on and consider what information is missing. Whenever you're ready, please share your thoughts on Slido.

How would you make this an effective case note?

[silence]

JG: The date is missing. When was the meeting, the time? Absolutely. The location. Those are really great answers. The scheduled follow-up appointment, very important. What is next? A couple of you are mentioning the client's name or the client's initials. Anyone else present? The month for the rent being due, very important. These are good. These are good answers. We're going to go ahead and move on. Thank you all for participating in that Slido. We're going to dive into service plans, which are an essential part of effective case management.

Service Plans

JG: Depending on your program, service plans might go by different names, such as "family self-sufficiency plan." Regardless of the name, most programs require some type of service plan as a guide for your work with clients. Service plans serve as your roadmap. Every service you provide during client meetings should connect back to the plan. This ensures continuity and alignment with the client's goals.

JG: Collaboration is key in developing your service plan. It's critical to prioritize the client's voice and use a client-centered approach. Best practice is to create service plans that are individualized to each client's unique needs. As a case manager, you shouldn't be the only one setting the goals. Work together with the client to identify goals that align with their overall aspirations. Your role is to guide and walk alongside your client's journey.

JG: Service plans should include the following elements: The area or reason for needing case management services. This sets the foundation for why the client is seeking support in the first place. Then we have strengths and support. Document the client's strengths and resources they can use to achieve their goals. Taking a strengths-based approach helps shift focus from deficiencies to opportunities.

JG: Then we have goals. Goals are general statements of what the client wants or needs to accomplish. You can include both short-term and long-term goals. We'll get to this in a little bit. Then we have objective. These are specific action steps that you and the client will take to achieve the goals. Objectives should be more detailed than the goals themselves and outline the "how." Include the frequency of the meetings, whether that's weekly, monthly, or any other schedule that aligns.

JG: Then we have the target end date. Each goal should have a target end date, providing a timeframe for completion. These dates can be adjusted as needed during service plan updates but should reflect a realistic timeline. Any program-specific modifications. Different programs may have additional requirements for service plans, so be sure to go over your program guidelines with your supervisor and make sure that you are operating in line with those for your programming. By following the structure, your service plan will remain comprehensive, client-centered, and program-compliant.

JG: Let's take a closer look at goal setting on the next slides.

Set SMART Goals

JG: When setting goals, you want to ensure they are SMART. This will increase the chances that clients will actually meet their goals and decrease any misunderstanding. To make your goals specific, ensure that a goal is focused and clear enough that everyone can easily understand it. To make your goal measurable, be sure to include information on what success will look like by using numbers or percentages when it makes sense. Goals should be achievable. Be sure to think about whether a goal is too easy or too difficult for clients to achieve in the timeframes you set. Then "relevant" means that you're setting goals that are meaningful. These should be goals that are within your scope that you are helping the clients with. Finally, your goals should be time-bound. There should be a target end date for each goal.

JG: An example of a SMART goal can sound like, "The client will sign up for and attend weekly English classes at the community center within the next three months." An objective for this goal will include ways that the case manager will help the client achieve this goal as we have previously discussed.

Short-Term SMART Goals

JG: When creating goals with clients, focus on a thoughtful and strategic approach. Break long-term goals into smaller, manageable steps to keep clients motivated and working toward the bigger picture. Recognize that clients often have immediate priorities like housing, employment, or education program requirements. Help clients balance them. Focus on what's feasible in a short timeframe, such as 90 days. Review goals regularly to highlight progress. Celebrate those small wins with your clients. Reinforce achievements and outline next steps.

JG: Be flexible, as clients may shift their focus. Update goals as needed while guiding them toward their ultimate end goal and ensuring it remains relevant. Finally, remember that goals are inherently time-bound. This aligns perfectly with the T in SMART goals. Setting a clear timeframe helps provide strong structure and accountability for both the client and the case manager.

Long-Term SMART Goals

JG: Let's talk about long-term goals and how we can support our clients in setting them. Long-term goals are often tied to a client's vision for their ideal future. For many refugees, this ideal future is a significant reason they chose to resettle, often uprooting their entire lives. It represents the hope and opportunity to work toward a life closer to what they've dreamed of achieving. Guide your clients to visualize their ideal future by helping them articulate their aspirations. Then assist them in prioritizing their goals, ensuring each step aligns with their ultimate end goal. Break long-term goals, again, into realistic short-term SMART goals to make progress manageable for your clients.

JG: Discuss how to keep these short-term goals achievable, helping clients stay motivated as they work toward their bigger picture. As the case manager, plan to track progress by reviewing milestones and celebrating those small wins and big achievements along the way. This ensures clients stay focused while reinforcing the steps needed to reach their goal. A couple of things to keep in mind: Avoid discouraging or dismissing their dreams, even if they seem ambitious. Instead, focus on helping them navigate what's feasible right now and what might take longer to achieve.

JG: In my experience, giving space to discuss these bigger reach goals is vital. It allows clients to dream, to feel seen and supported, while also helping you work with them to differentiate between what's required or achievable in the short term and what will take more time to accomplish.

Periodic Updates

JG: Okay, so let's get into periodic updates. Periodic updates are essential for tracking client progress and ensuring services are in line and meet evolving needs. Requirements vary by program. For example, the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors program in Washington may require monthly home visits for health and safety, six-month dependency court reviews of youth goals, and quarterly ORR-funded service plans.

JG: The primary focus and purpose of periodic updates is to evaluate where the client is in their service journey. During these updates, you should review their service plan to assess whether progress is being made toward their goals. If certain goals have been met, you can update the plan to reflect that success or add new goals to address the emerging needs. This process ensures that the support you provide continues to be relevant and effective.

JG: When meeting with clients for these updates, it's important to consider a range of factors that can provide a comprehensive picture of their current situation. Topics to review and consider include employment, education, family dynamics, housing, health, mental health, well-being, and overall functioning. Use this time to assess those stressors, barriers, and strengths while collaborating with clients on the next phase of their goals.

JG: Additionally, periodic updates are a great opportunity to get clients' perspective on the case management services they've been receiving. How do they feel about the support? Do they have any suggestions for improvement? These conversations also allow you to explore why they feel they still need services. Helping you tailor your approach to their needs and identifying those barriers is equally important because it allows you to plan how to address these challenges and help the client continue making progress.

JG: Routine updates may be mandated by your agency or funder, but [as a] best practice [they will] enhance the quality of your services. For example, conducting regular check-ins on clients' health and mental health well-being, even when it's not required, can be incredibly valuable. These check-ins might also present opportunities to reintroduce services the client previously declined, such as counseling. By conducting these timely and thoughtful updates, you keep your clients on track, you adapt to their needs, and you strengthen the impact of your support.

Termination Summaries

JG: All right, termination summaries, which can also be referred to as "case closure summaries." These summarize the services provided and progress towards goals. This varies by agency and program. The summaries can include a case closure letter, which is a formal notification that the case is closed and is also accompanied with a resource or referral list. A closure checklist, which is a thorough supervisor-approved checklist acting as a final audit of the case file, ensuring all required documents are accounted for. Transfer of services, which can be used when a client transitions to another program or case manager documenting the status change for a smooth transition.

JG: You want to be sure to notate the reason for the closure, clearly document why the case is being closed, such as the client met their goals, client is no longer eligible, or the client is no longer engaged. By implementing these practices, you ensure a professional and client-centered approach to termination, meeting program requirements while supporting your clients as they transition to the next stage of their journey.

Specialized Documentation

JG: Okay, this slide covers specialized documentation required in rare but critical circumstances. While these situations don't occur often, it's vital to handle them correctly when they arise. Mandatory reporting in cases of abuse or neglect involving children or vulnerable adults. Document detailed information about the report, such as the incident number and the name of the person, the staff member that reported to you or that you reported to. Check your agency's requirements for specific forms that may also be needed.

JG: Then we have critical incidents: emergencies involving first responders, such as medical emergencies or police intervention. These may require documentation using agency-specific forms like incident reports. Other crises that include safety concerns like suicidal or homicidal ideation or intimate partner violence. Document carefully in case notes. Keep sensitive information separate if there's a risk of access by other family members. Here, I would encourage you to talk to your supervisor about how to capture all relevant information while keeping the client safe.

JG: In all cases, prioritize client safety, inform your supervisor promptly, and document events as soon as possible. If immediate documentation isn't feasible, make sure that you're communicating with your supervisor and following up as quickly as possible. These situations may not be routine, but preparation and attention to detail are crucial for supporting your clients effectively. With that, I'm going to go ahead and hand it back to Zainab to cover our final objective.

3. Tools and Techniques: Improving Quality and Efficiency of Case Management Documentation

ZA: Thank you, Jasmine. Now we're going to move on to the last section where we will discuss tools and techniques that you can use to improve your documentation.

What NOT to Include

ZA: So far, we've talked a lot about what should be included in the different types of case management documentation, but we would also like to quickly talk about what not to include. The first is that it's very important to not include your opinions or commentary in case notes. Instead, we want to stick to the facts. Next, you do not want to include false or unrelated information in your notes. We want to be accurate and concise.

ZA: Lastly, we don't want to include emotional reactions or value judgments. This means refraining from expressing frustrations or assumptions about the client or their situation. It's important to focus on observable behaviors, facts, and actions, rather than opinions, interpretations, or judgments. If you're feeling unsure about whether or not you should write something in a note, a good way to help you decide is as you write your notes, consider how your client would feel if they read your note. Would they agree with what you have said happened or would they feel respected by the way you described them? These are wonderful questions to ask.

Practice

ZA: On the next element, we will be looking at another sample case note and think about any changes we would like to make. This note says, "Client and case manager met for a scheduled appointment to discuss employment. Client doesn't like any jobs I give her and refuses to interview. Client is hard to work with and maybe needs a new case manager."

Discussion Question

ZA: Hold on to your ideas, as we will be jumping into a Slido where you can share them. If you can all log back into the Slido and you can go ahead and draw any ideas that you have about words or thoughts, about what we want to avoid in a situation like this.

What are some words or expressions used in this case note that you would want to avoid?

ZA: We see that people have said personal feelings and frustration. The fact that the case manager said that they may need a new case manager. A lot of people are agreeing that it's not right to mention that the client is hard to work with because this is a thought of the case manager themselves. This is their opinion, which should not be in the case note. I'm seeing a lot of wonderful answers such as judgment, frustration, and you can go ahead and continue to add them, and we will start moving on to the next slide.

Documentation Considerations

ZA: Here we have a brief summary of some important documentation considerations that we've already touched on during this presentation. We want to make sure to include client voice in your notes whenever possible. This can include using direct quotes from clients, which help capture their perspective and ensure accuracy in your documentation.

ZA: Case notes should be comprehensive, covering the 6 W's that Jasmine spoke about earlier, but also concise. You don't need to write a book for each note. Just a few sentences should be enough to cover everything. Make sure to write notes in chronological order, as this will make it easier to remember what happened and ensure the reader can follow the sequence of events. Organizing your notes this way helps highlight any patterns or changes over time, which can be crucial for tracking information.

ZA: Remember to track not only what you did in your case notes, but also what you have left to do. This makes case notes a helpful organizational tool. I find that keeping this in mind when writing case notes allows for a better flow for whoever opens the case file again next time, even if it's just yourself, just as a memory refresher.

ZA: Finally, case notes need to be timely in order to be helpful. In an ideal world, case notes would always be completed by the end of each day before you leave the office. I know that we do not live in an ideal world, and this doesn't always happen. Sometimes your day might end in a home visit, and you're not able to go back to the office, and you don't get a chance to write these. That's okay. You can do your best to get it written over the next 24 hours. That way, you don't forget or miss any key details when you're writing your notes.

Discussion Question

ZA: We'll be going into another Slido, if you can join us one more time. We would like to ask,

What are some examples of client strengths?

ZA: Resilience. That is a wonderful thought, and I definitely agree with that. Determination, resourcefulness, hardworking, persistence—these are all wonderful strengths that all of our clients have. Willingness is a great one. Language skills, being innovative, the stories that they share, having advocacy for them, being informed, their willingness. These are all wonderful. You can keep it going. I love to see these strengths. We will be moving on to the next element.

Identifying and Incorporating Client Strengths

ZA: As Jasmine noted earlier, it's important to include client strengths within your documentation. This helps incorporate the client's individuality in your documentation and helps keep a strengths-based focus throughout your services. Depending on your funder, this may be even a requirement.

ZA: One important way to incorporate client strengths is in your service plan. You can write about how a client will use their unique strengths to achieve their goals. For example, you have a client who is very intelligent. They might use that strength to help them accomplish their goal of getting their first job. If you work with a client who's very kind and friendly, they might use that strength to help them achieve their goal of getting housing because their personality may help them when talking to an apartment manager.

ZA: I had a client who participated in the New York City Marathon this past November, finishing the run in just under four hours. His passion for running showed his motivation, discipline, and goal-setting skills. He has been able to find a supportive community and promote self-care in a way that is beneficial for him.

Using Templates and Tools

ZA: We will now be moving on to the next slide, where we will be talking about implementing templates as a great way to streamline the process and ensure important details are consistently captured. Using templates can improve consistency and serve as a quality control measure to make sure important data points are entered for each case. Not using a template can lead to incorrectly entered or missing information.

ZA: The primary benefit of templates for staff is that they can serve as a memory aid. You don't have to remember every detail of what needs to be included in your documentation every time. In this way, it also saves case managers valuable time by streamlining the process of writing notes. Templates could be customized for each program so that they capture all the important details that are relevant to your programming and for any requirements from your funders.

ZA: Case notes, in particular, are an important place to collect data about your programming and show off the important work you are doing. Templates should also be broad enough that you can capture the unique elements of each client's case and allow for client voice. Funders don't want to see case notes that look like they have been copied and pasted.

Peer Case File Reviews

ZA: We will be moving on to peer case file reviews, which are another tool that can be implemented at your agency to improve the quality and compliance levels of your documentation. They're an important tool to help your agency prepare for audits, which can happen at any time.

ZA: The peer case review file process goes as follows: First, supervisors utilize a list of all of the clients in the program and their assigned case managers to select case files for review and assign reviewers. Next, staff members utilize a checklist developed by the program manager that encompasses all of the agency, program, and funders' requirements for documentation to review each other's files. Then the file goes to the case manager who is responsible for the case to fix any errors or deficiencies. Lastly, the file goes back to the supervisor to review and sign off. This review can happen on a monthly or quarterly basis with usually one to two case files at a time and can be open or closed cases. We recommend agencies schedule time for staff to do this together so that it is less of an administrative burden.

Protecting Confidentiality

ZA: Keeping our client notes confidential is an important thing to remember when we are talking about documentation. Protecting client confidentiality is everyone's responsibility at your organization. That includes support staff that do not provide direct services, such as the person working at the front desk. It also includes your monitoring and evaluation staff who may be looking at client information to provide data for funders. Almost everyone will come into contact with private client information, such as names, birthdates, Social Security numbers, or other information, and are responsible for keeping that information safe.

ZA: Protecting your client's privacy is very important to build trust in the relationship. If a client thinks that you are going to share details about their lives or their struggles with other members of the community or that you are not going to be a good steward of their records, they will likely have a difficult time trusting you and opening up to you. If you're going to send client information outside of your organization, such as for a referral to an external resource, make sure that you get your clients to sign a release of information before you give out any information.

ZA: Be sure to inform your clients of the limits to confidentiality. There are times, such as discussed previously, where we can't keep our client's information private. It's important for clients to be aware of that in advance, so that if there's an emergency that ever arises, it won't be a surprise, and it won't feel like a breach of trust. Of course, any paper files should be stored in a locked filing cabinet when not in use, as is good practice. If you use an electronic database, make sure that you lock your computer screen whenever you walk away from your desk.

Time Management Tips

ZA: We know that fitting in case notes when you have so many other things going on is such a challenge. I know I still struggle with it sometimes as a case manager too. We want to go over some tips for time management.

ZA: First is prioritize tasks. Prioritize what is important for you to get done each day. Focus on completing any urgent tasks before moving onto activities that are less timely, and create a schedule based around this.

ZA: Second is to set boundaries with your clients. Sometimes we have those clients that can really demand a lot of our time. They stay past their scheduled time or walk in when they need something. Some clients can push our boundaries and ask us to help with tasks that they can do themselves. I know I've had clients who are not yet used to the social customs here being so different from their home country, but it's important to set these boundaries and explain to them as such. Continuing to set boundaries with clients and encouraging them to do what they can do themselves will free up some of your time.

ZA: Next is to schedule time to get your notes done. As long as you are diligent about sticking to this, this can be extremely effective. Ask your manager if you can block out some time on your calendar each day to get notes done. Whether you prefer to complete them at or right before heading out or if there's a different time in your schedule, building in some time to do this every day will help ensure that your notes are completed.

ZA: Fourth is to limit distractions. There's often so much going on around us at our agencies. It can be hard to focus. If you work in an office with a door, shut your door. Maybe even write a note on it to let your coworkers know that you are concentrating or writing notes and to please not interrupt unless there's an emergency. Personally, I sit in an office with a few other people, so I find that wearing headphones is very effective. Even if I'm not listening to anything, it's a good way to shut out the noise and focus on my work.

ZA: Then don't let it pile up. Just a few days of getting behind on notes can lead to a huge pile-up. Of course, the best way to avoid this is not letting it pile up on top of each other in the first place. If you can only squeeze in 15 minutes before you leave, or if you can only get one note done that day, just get what you can done, because it will be one less note to write later.

ZA: Finally, consider using a template to write your notes. Templates can take some of the mental burden out of writing case notes. Instead of trying to remember every element that needs to go into the note, a template will remind you what to put in. I will give a warning though that some funders do not like templates, so they may not like when every note sounds the same. The key is when using templates to keep them open enough that you are still able to include the client voice and the individual details of what happened. Now I will hand it back over to Jasmine for the questions.

Q&A Panel

JG: Thank you so much, Zainab. Okay, so we've covered quite a bit today, and we're now in the Q&A portion of the webinar. We haven't received many questions, and I hope that is because you're taking in all of the information that we've provided to you today and maybe we've potentially answered some of the questions that you may have had throughout the webinar. We'll give just a couple of minutes to see if any questions pop in.

JG: We did have one question that came through. The individual asked,

I'm mindful that case notes could be reviewed by external entities. Do you have guidance on how to document client information, particularly around immigration status, in a way that prioritizes client privacy and safety?

JG: This is a really important question. Our approach is to document only what's absolutely necessary to provide services. If immigration status isn't required, then don't collect it. If it is, we keep it minimal and stored securely. The less sensitive data we hold, the lower the risk to clients if records are ever accessed. When in doubt, it's smart to consult legal counsel or a trusted immigrant rights group.

JG: I am not seeing any other questions pop in.

Any suggestions on how we can create our own templates?

JG: We would love to help support you with this. We do have a couple of resources on our website that I believe will be shared out in the email you receive tomorrow. We have some templates on our website that you can reproduce or actually use for your support. Yes, we had a couple of questions on templates. Feel free to also reach out to us if you want to work on that more personally with your organization as a technical assistance request. We can help walk you through how that can look for you. You would just go to our website and fill out the form and someone would be in contact with you.

JG: Okay, not seeing any other questions pop in. We'll go ahead and move on to our last slide before we get to our survey.

Conclusion

Reviewing Learning Objectives

JG: We hope you are now able to explain the importance of documentation within the case management cycle; describe different elements of the case file including case notes, service plans, and critical incident reports that adhere to most program guidelines. We also hope that you're able to now apply new tools and techniques to improve the quality and efficiency of case management documentation.

Feedback Survey and Recommended Resources

JG: We would love it if you completed our brief survey. Please scan the QR code or click the link that will populate in the chat. You will get this link also in the follow-up email that you will receive tomorrow. We'll give you just a few seconds to complete that.

[silence]

JG: Okay, here are our recommended resources that we believe will add value to your learnings today. You'll receive these links as well in the email that you'll receive tomorrow. They also should be populated in the chat for you.

Stay Connected

JG: All right, so thank you so much for joining us this afternoon. Please stay connected with us, and we look forward to serving you all soon. With that, we will hang out for a little bit to see if there's any additional questions, but everyone have a wonderful afternoon.

The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.