

CASE MANAGEMENT WITH OLDER ADULTS: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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BACKGROUND

The origins of case management were established in the early development of the social work profession, at the beginning of the 20th century, in the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement House movement (Sowers-Hoag, 1997). Since its inception, case management has emerged in a diversity of fields, including mental health, primary health care, long-term care, child welfare, disability, and aging (Moxley, 1996). Traditionally, case management services for older adults were most common in not-for-profit agencies that primarily served frail, low-income seniors who were at risk for institutionalization. In more recent times, both public and private sectors have supported implementation of case management services with older persons, especially for those with long-term care needs.

Several factors have influenced the context for the development of case management services for older adults: population trends, such as the increased number of older Americans; advances in medicine resulting in prolonged life expectancies; families becoming more geographically dispersed; the fragmentation of the health care delivery service system; scarcity of resources, such as safe and affordable housing; the inability to contain the costs of health and mental health care; the privatization of care; and limitations of existing services in the community.

The increase in the number of older Americans has been accompanied by an associated evolution of services for seniors, such as: home care, companion services, adult day care, homemaker services, chore services, home healthcare, housing, transportation, and home delivered meals. These services, intended to help older adults remain in their own homes and communities, are provided by a variety of sources, including private sector agencies, the

federal government, states, and local communities. The result is a complex web of services and programs without a central point of entry. In an effort to help older persons and their families negotiate this intricate service network, many public and private programs developed case management as a core component of their services.

Social workers are often called upon as first responders in addressing the psychosocial needs of older adults and their caregivers. As case managers, social workers often act as permanent consultants or facilitators in the lives of older people who may still be capable of handling their personal affairs, but who need help with the vicissitudes of aging.

Additionally, increasing numbers of older adults have physical disabilities, cognitive impairments, or mental illness. Of particular concern are those with complex conditions marked by chronic physical or mental health problems, multiple co-occurring disease processes, and difficulties with personal, interpersonal, social, and economic situations (Scharlach, Simon, & Dal Santo, 2003).

CASE MANAGEMENT DEFINED

The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 2003), defines case management as: "A procedure to plan, seek, and monitor services from different social agencies and staff on behalf of a client." Case management is a highly individualized approach that considers the unique aspects of the person and at the same time provides a holistic orientation that views all aspects of the client system, including the client family, friends, their situation, and their environment. Case management, often referred to as care management, requires knowledge of community resources and entitlements, skills in matching clients with resources, linking of

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resources, and serving as an advocate. While there is no single definition of case management, the term generally encompasses the tasks of assessment, formulation of a case plan, coordination of the necessary services older clients need to remain living in the community, monitoring these services, and making adjustments to services when individuals' needs change.

HOW CASE MANAGEMENT WORKS

Usually, one agency takes primary responsibility for a client and assigns a case manager, who coordinates services, advocates for the client, and who sometimes controls resources and purchases services for the client. Case management may involve monitoring the progress of a client whose needs require the services of several professionals, agencies, health care facilities, and human services programs. It typically involves client outreach and identification, comprehensive multidimensional assessment, and frequent reassessment. Case management can occur within a single, large organization or within a community program that coordinates services among agencies.

GOALS, FUNCTIONS AND ROLES

The primary goal of case management is to optimize client functioning by providing quality services in the most efficient and effective manner to individuals with multiple complex needs (Bellos & Ruffolo, 1995). Like all methods of social work practice, case management rests on a foundation of professional training, values, knowledge, theory, and skills that are utilized to attain goals that are established in conjunction with the client and her or his family.

According to the NASW's information booklet for "Social Work Case Manager" and "Advanced Social Work Case Manager" certification (NASW, n.d.), social work case managers perform the following core functions:

- 1) **Engagement:** identification of, and outreach to, clients;
- 2) **Assessment:** needs, functional, biopsychosocial, strengths, comprehensive intake, sociocultural, and resource/financial assessments;
- 3) **Planning:** intervention, treatment, care, rehabilitation, strategic, support, and crisis intervention;

- 4) **Implementation/Coordination:** service brokering, monitoring service delivery, project implementation, and client support;
- 5) **Advocacy:** systems improvement, client well-being and functioning, liaison, and mediation;
- 6) **Reassessment/Evaluation:** monitoring, efficacy, efficiency, data collection, and analysis; and
- 7) **Disengagement:** discharge planning, transfer, and termination.

The diverse and complex nature of providing services for an older population warrants comprehensive multidimensional assessments, coordination of care, and efforts to increase independence as much as possible (Scharlach, Simon, & Dal Santo, 2003). Not only are older clients faced with wide-ranging medical and care needs, but they are also dealing with concerns related to loss, grief, fear, and anxiety over loss of independence, and end of life (Sowers-Hoag, 1997). When working with this special population, issues such as housing options, family dynamics, health care decision making, financial planning, competency, end of life, and quality of life need to be addressed.

In case management with older persons, a clinical understanding is particularly important, because older clients tend to have multifaceted needs that put them at greater risk of abuse, neglect, and institutionalization. While there may be situations in which case managers simply link clients with resources, the real world of professional social work case management is much more complex. Clinical skills, such as the development of the client-worker relationship, interviewing, assessment, and problem solving are all crucial elements in the development and implementation of an accurate and holistic care plan (Sowers-Hoag, 1997). These skills are also necessary to understand and deal with a client's ambivalence, fears, and resistance.

Research suggests that experienced professionals, such as master's level social workers, are best at providing case management services. Workers in the aging services arena who lack professional training and skills may unknowingly overlook essential aspects of assessment and case management, such as client self-determination and other related ethical issues that could result in inadequate care (Scharlach, Simon, & Dal Santo, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Aging is a complex process, consisting of, and affected by, biological, psychological, and social factors. In the past, institutionalization was often seen as one of the most effective methods of providing continuous care for older persons (Morrow-Howell, 1992). However, the current trend towards aging in place has propelled the growing popularity of utilizing case management as a means for helping older persons to live independently in the community. The increasing emphasis on the use of case management in the social service and health care delivery system is an attempt to provide a strategy that will minimize the gaps in services and fragmentation in the provision of services to older adult clients (Sowers-Hoag, 1997).

Today, professionally trained social workers providing case management services can be found in virtually every service setting, from community agencies, to hospitals, from managed care to private practice. The expected rise in the number of older persons who will live in the community, along with continuing changes to the health care system, suggests that there is likely to be an even greater demand for professionally trained and credentialed social workers to provide and oversee case management services for older adults and their family caregivers.

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RESOURCES

Administration on Aging (AoA)

www.aoa.gov

This site is maintained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; it provides resources, news and developments, and information for older adults and caregivers.

Benefits Check Up Rx

www.benefitscheckuprx.org

The National Council on Aging (NCOA) offers BenefitsCheckupRX, a free, confidential tool that older adults or their families can use to locate programs and service in the community.

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

www.socialworkers.org

Visit NASW's Web site for more information about NASW's Specialty Certifications and NASW *Standards for Social Work Case Management*.