Nonprofit and Social Work Case Management eBook
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are approximately 649,300 social workers in the United States. This number is projected to increase and continue to rise higher than many other professions. At a high level, this statistic indicates the increasing need for social workers in a variety of organizations, including nonprofits and government agencies.

Social workers and case managers are an integral part of many nonprofit and government social welfare programs. Often on the front lines, many social workers and case managers are the actual implementers of their organization’s services. They meet with clients, performing home visits, referring, removing obstacles, and collecting valuable information about the people they serve.

Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of social workers and case management staff must be a high priority for a nonprofit and government organizations.

This eBook includes practical advice that you can implement whether you are a program manager, executive director, social worker, or other nonprofit staff member.

The goal is to leave you with some actionable takeaways to help move your organization forward and improve the lives of your clients.

Ready to get started?
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Managing the Challenges of Social Work Case Management

Social work case management is a particularly challenging field. It requires an understanding of many different types of case management all rolled together in one. As a result, many social workers complain about the amount of time they have to spend properly handling the documentation and management of their cases, and they lament how this takes them away from spending adequate time with their clients. As a result, this can be an incredibly frustrating model under which to operate.

However, with the advent of new programs and services to help ease the burden of client tracking, social work case management no longer has to be so challenging.

Social Work Case Management: An Overview

Social workers have a tremendous challenge because they have to handle their clients’ cases across a wide array of services, often acting as the point person for a dozen or more different service providers, organizations, and agencies. They need to be able to effectively meet client tracking standards for all of these diverse stakeholders, and they need to maintain a high level of accuracy in their data collection. Although the National Association of Social Workers provides standards for case management, this is just one more thing for social workers to keep in mind, rather than a definitive guide.

The areas social work case managers are often responsible for can include:

- Medical Care
- Psychological Care
- Substance Abuse Treatment/Counseling
- Housing
- Employment Services
- Child Care
- And much more
Furthermore, with funders focusing more and more on evidence and outcomes, many social work case managers feel pressured to show clear results in a field where “results” may not always truly be cut and dried.

With so many responsibilities, it is no wonder that one additional case management need or responsibility can often be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back.

**Social Work Case Management: Resources**

The good news is that there are solutions available. New software tools can ease the client tracking process, allowing social workers to focus on quality improvement in their actual service delivery and resulting in better outcomes for clients. Programs such as Social Solutions ETO software can help improve social work case management processes by simplifying the data collection and entry process as well as managing much of the back-end reporting which used to fall either to the case managers themselves or an administrative team member.

The Centers for Working Families (CWF) provides one example of how Social Solutions can help. Because their goal is to provide a comprehensive approach to help low-income families reach financial stability and success, their programs are integrated with a number of various community organizations, and they work in a wide variety of social service sectors. By using a solution from Social Solutions, CWF was able to move beyond case management in order to efficiently identify target populations and assist the families in reaching greater financial stability, independence and success.

Social work case management has traditionally been fraught with challenges and complexities with few good solutions. However, the era of technology has changed all that. Utilizing software and programs to help with client tracking frees up social workers to focus on what is truly important: serving their clients and communities. Without the administrative burden of managing copious amounts of data, social services organizations are able to move beyond social work case management and can focus on continuous quality improvement of their services.
The case management assessment is the first step in the case management process and truly sets the stage for the entire journey. This journey can vary widely depending on the outcomes of the assessment and the type of services required by the individual who is being assessed. However, most organizations only devote a limited amount of attention to this part of the process. They may have a form which standardizes some of the intake proceedings, or they may just rely on the case manager to ask the right questions to accurately assess the client’s needs.

Such a haphazard methodology of case management assessment needs to join the rest of the case management process in the modern era, and with the right tools and technology, this is a problem which can easily be addressed.

Case Management Assessment Examples

In 2003, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of the Department of Health and Human Services came out with a report which listed out Potential Core Performance Measures that could be used to better benchmark and quantify both the current state homeless individuals and potential gains within local communities.

Their recommendation specifically was that “despite constraints, mainstream programs should be encouraged to collect data on living arrangement (or homeless status) at time of enrollment, and periodically, to collect more in-depth information about homeless individuals served as part of special surveys or studies.”

They also came up with a number of possible performance indicators that could be measured depending on the type of program and specific needs of the community. Those indicators fell into five categories, which still serve as good guidelines when thinking about benchmarking in the homelessness services sector. The five categories are:

1. The New York State Department of Health has what they call an Initial Comprehensive Assessment
2. The [Oregon state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](https://www.oregon.gov/ODHS/Services/TANF.cfm) intake procedure, on the other hand, is much more reliant on the case manager’s initial interview with the family and a self-assessment form.

3. [Victory Programs](https://www.victoryprograms.org/), a Massachusetts-based organization focused on health and housing, offers a 23-page intake assessment packet which covers a broad range of topics.

While some organizations have strong case management assessment practices in places, others do not. Some have long intake forms while others rely on case workers’ experience to extract the necessary information. How these forms are handled demonstrates an even greater disparity. With this lack of standardization, it is no wonder that funders are frequently pulling their hair out trying to figure out exactly how to use their money to serve the populations they want to help. This lack of structure or consistency is one of the major reasons client tracking is such a buzzword right now and something everyone is trying to focus on improving.

Believe it or not, the initial assessment has a major influence on the outcomes and tracking the evidence and data from start to finish is absolutely critical in being able to focus on continuous quality improvement. However, having to fill out a 23-page form is equally challenging as it takes the case manager’s focus away from the dialog with the client. Furthermore, sorting and tracking those 23 pages of data is a full-time job for someone else at the organization.

Thankfully, due to recent advances in technology and software tools, your organization can extract the data it needs while simplifying and streamlining the assessment process, allowing your people to focus more of their attention on program delivery.

**So What Is the Solution?**

Case management software, of course.

The right case management software can help your organization work with data in real time, rather than just on the back end, a benefit which made a tremendous difference for [Mathematica Policy Research](https://www.mathematica.org/). In this case, using the [ETO Social Solutions software](https://www.eto.com/) improved their data quality by collecting that data at the point of service rather than at “unnatural” case management assessment intervals and moreover, for researchers and evaluators, a mirrored site of key data is available which can be accessed without upsetting data on the client’s end.
Conclusion

Case management assessment no longer has to be an arduous and challenging process. Collecting the data required when bringing new clients into your organization can be simple and customized to their particular situation and their individual needs at any given moment. Client tracking has been revolutionized by the advent of case management software, and it’s time for your case management assessment process to catch up.
While it may sometimes feel like case management documentation and thorough notations can draw you away from the important work you do when you are face-to-face with clients, maintaining detailed records can have a significant impact on the long-term success of both your organization and the individuals it serves. Having the proper software tools in place can also greatly ease your organization's case management efforts and help keep the focus on creating successful outcomes for your clients, where it belongs.

Keep reading to learn how proper case management documentation & software tools can help your organization track client and constituent outcomes in the most effective way possible.

**Benefits of a Great Case Management Documentation System**

A good case management system for human and social services is more than just a place to store your notes. Having the right case management tools for your organization means [streamlined processes](#) that can benefit the clients and the bottom line.

As funders turn their attention to [outcomes data](#), it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to be able to provide this evidence. A case note documentation system that's built for collaboration on the web can provide your organization the network it needs to excel.

The right software program can take you far beyond online document management and basic client tracking. It can enable your organization to analyze data in a more efficient manner, and the data, in turn, can yield important insights into what methodologies or programs are working best and how to improve the ones that are not accomplishing their objectives.

A case note management system, rather than adding additional work for your team, can also help streamline processes and actually reduce the amount of time spent on paperwork and client tracking. In most cases, well-
kept case records are a valuable asset that will enable your organization to continuously do more with less.

**Case Management Documentation Standards**

Currently, the [National Association of Social Workers provides standards](https://www.nasw.org) on case management and proper documentation. They require that managers and agencies adhere to specific standards of case management documentation and that agency policies include specific documentation requirements for record keeping.

According to their requirements, well-documented case records should contain at least the following notations:

- written permission to release information, signed by the client,
- relevant historical and demographic information on the client, the client’s family, and significant others,
- results of the initial assessment and periodic reassessments of the client, including data on the client’s psychosocial, behavioral, and physical status,
- the social work plan and specified goals, interim objectives and time frames, and schedules and procedures for monitoring progress toward accomplishment of goals and objectives,
- the outcomes for a client,
- referrals to other agencies or resources, including follow-up and feedback from or recommendations by outside agencies or individuals,
- the cost of the care plan, and
- reason for termination of services.

(Please see the [NASW website](https://www.nasw.org) for more details and the [New York Department of Health website](https://www.health.ny.gov) for information on how they document case management outcomes.)

Utilizing the right [case management](https://www.nasw.org) documentation software can remove a lot of the guesswork and room for error from the equation. A case management documentation software system can be configured to require the client record case notations needed. Case notations can be entered digitally, maintaining standardized responses, and reducing the time to document cases – especially with online case management documentation software. Cutting down documentation time also allows caseworkers to maintain a focus on what they do best – helping individuals in need.
Online case note documentation is the first step towards effectively using outcomes management to improve services. By finding the right solution for your nonprofit organization, such as Social Solutions’s ETO Software, you can ultimately increase the amount of time you are able to invest in clients and eliminate much of the hassle that is normally associated with the documentation process.
Discharge planning for social workers is one of the most vital facets of the practice of healthcare and mental health case management. The exact areas and fields that constitute discharge planning still remain debatable. These are also dependent upon the setting, in most cases.

In a broader setting, the process involves linking patients and their close family members with vital resources that are outside of the present healthcare setting as a means of offering follow-up healthcare services.

Discharge planning, which is a vital part of case management in social work/services, can also be defined as a process where a patient receives assistance in developing a healthcare plan to make sure that he receives ongoing healthcare maintenance even after being discharged from the hospital. It is also called “continuity of care” and aims to offer services that can help a patient become more independent despite his illness.

For patients with mental health problems, discharge planning involves the use of effective and functional mental health case management software. This software is a huge help when it comes to continuously monitoring the mental health condition of someone dealing with minor to severe mental health disorders.

**Understanding the Discharge Planning Process**

for the patient. The field also requires other professionals that offer patient care services to be involved in implementing the process. This can include physical and occupational therapy, utilization review, speech therapy and nursing.

The discharge plan developed for patients is a hospital-wide plan which involves not only the patient but his immediate family members, doctor, nurse, social worker, dietitian, pharmacist and others involved in his case.
Discharge planning for social workers also works by initiating, coordinating and facilitating all efforts designed to improve the health of individuals.

Due to the broad hospital configuration variations, different department titles are now also covered in discharge planning. This includes the discharge planning department, continuity of care and clinical social work department, case management and patient resources department, patient, family and social services, resource management department and utilization management services.

**Protecting Patient Welfare**

Discharge planners fulfill roles and responsibilities that are extremely useful in improving the general welfare and wellbeing of patients. These functions include the assessment of the specific healthcare needs of patients that might need assistance after being discharged as well as making the necessary arrangements in order for these needs to be ultimately met.

A good discharge planner is also someone who is skillful in performing more accurate assessments, conscious of different community resources, well-organized and has excellent communication skills. The discharge planner should also be aware of the specific things that should be included in the checklist when trying to develop the most effective and suitable discharge plan for specific patients.

Discharge planning for social workers also involves an initial admission screening process which is helpful in identifying which patients require the help of discharge planners.

Among those who might need this type of service are patients who are more than sixty-five years old and live independently, developmentally disabled, unemployed or no insurance, no recognizable residence or address, those who have attempted suicide, those who deal with readmissions within just thirty days, patients with no identification, those who suffer from multiple trauma and victims of violent crime.

Knowing exactly who can benefit from the process is helpful in providing a good discharge planner with a solution on how she can prioritize work.
Over the past few years, “big data” has almost become a household word. From hospitals to classrooms, what was once the business of search engines and financial markets is increasingly affecting every aspect of business and life, and that includes the nonprofit and human services sectors.

So, if you know you’re succeeding at some level and you can see and even count your “impact” with little more than a calculator, why is nonprofit data management important? Why should you consider integrating nonprofit database software into your evaluation and assessment activities?

Nonprofit data management can feel daunting, especially if your organization is small and doesn’t have anyone with nonprofit database management expertise on staff. Often, organizations start their data collection efforts using the most readily available tools – notebooks, spreadsheets, and human memory. While those tools can work for some needs, the lack of efficiency and limited ability to analyze and communicate what that data is telling you is a big problem.

**Funders Want Numbers**

Ok, so perhaps the most obvious answer to “Why should I be using nonprofit data management software?” is that your funders increasingly want to see a laundry list of statistics as part of your impact and results reporting. Grants from major foundations and federal agencies often have explicit requirements, not only for the kinds of information you need to collect, but even the type of data management system you use.

But, it’s not just about satisfying administrative requirements. Federal and foundation grantmakers care about data because it helps them define and identify the social return on their investment. Outcomes-oriented philanthropists provide funding to nonprofits because they want to effect long-term social change.

Solving individual problems (housing the homeless) and changing individual social systems (streamlining healthcare) are certainly important. But, the real goal is often improving the way the world works for everyone.
Data gives philanthropists the ability to zoom way in to see what is working on the ground and then zoom way out to see how and why change is happening (or not happening) across time and space. In turn, they can use not only their money to support the most successful nonprofits, but they can use their influence and reach to help less successful programs improve.

**Nonprofit database software** like Social Solutions’ Efforts To Outcomes Software, gives you the tools you need to communicate detailed, nuanced information to your funders. It also gives you a baseline for analyzing, sharing, and testing best practices and lessons learned. Over time, that ability will help you maximize the impact of funding dollars (and increase your ability to capture more).

**Measurement Is More Than Counting**

It’s easy to get caught up in just “capturing as much data as you can.” But, data management starts by knowing **what questions you want to answer**, and perhaps most importantly, recognizing that there are probably a lot of things you don’t even know that you don’t know. Connecting your mission with outcomes data and individual program metrics can be tricky, but when you take the time to do it well, you transform your data management system into a powerful tool for organizational and programmatic performance. In turn, that means delivering on your mission and doing more good.

Implementing strong nonprofit database software also means freeing up manpower to collect qualitative data (i.e., stories) that can’t be captured in numbers. Having robust data analysis tools also helps you identify stories you didn’t know were there. Together, numbers and stories allow you to tell a detailed story about what you’re doing and why it is or isn’t working. The data can validate and add clarity and detail to your instincts and conventional practices. In turn, stories can help you to explore all that stuff you don’t know you don’t know, identify new questions, and refine metrics and outcomes evidence.

**Measure, Then Act**

Data only matters if it translates into action. That’s why good nonprofit database management processes include time to analyze data and rethink programs in response to data-driven insights. It’s also why it’s so important to not just measure success, but also to track and measure failure.

One of the biggest benefits of implementing nonprofit database software is that it can dramatically shorten
the time it takes to collect and analyze data. More than just an improvement in process efficiency, it shortens the amount of time programs are operating under faulty assumptions or wasting resources on ineffective interventions. Not only does that allow your program to find and fix problems sooner, but it also increases the number of people who can benefit from that learning.

**Don’t Fear Data**

Whether you’re dealing with “big data” or relatively small data, [tapping into the power of data-driven decision-making](#) can turn your hard work and good intentions into lasting, sustainable impact. And, at the end of the day, isn’t that why you got into the nonprofit gig in the first place?
Due to vast technological advances, our ability as social service providers to collect and assess evidence has improved dramatically throughout the late 20th and early 21st century. As a result, evidence-based practice models are becoming more widespread.

Furthermore, funders, both private foundations and governmental organizations, are starting to insist more and more on the use of evidence-based practices in social work fields. As a result, it is becoming increasingly important for anyone working in the social services sector to have a solid understanding of evidence-based practice models. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) even keeps an Updated Inventory of Evidence-Based, Research-Based and Promising Practices, speaking to the importance of these concepts in the public sector.

Keep reading to learn more about the types and components of evidence-based practice models and how they can affect your organization’s work.

**What is Evidence-Based Practice?**

Before we look at the types of models out there, it is important to first understand what constitutes evidence-based practice. According to the Social Work Policy Institute:

**Evidence-based practice** (EBP) is a process in which the practitioner combines well-researched interventions with clinical experience, ethics, client preferences, and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services.

Because our ease of access to information has improved drastically in the past few decades, acquiring evidence is
a much simpler process and has certainly prompted the move towards evidence-based approaches.

However, evidence-based practice implies more than simply acquiring data. According to the Council on Social Work Education, there are five important steps involved in any evidence-based practice model.

1. Formulating a client, community, or policy-related question;
2. Systematically searching the literature;
3. Appraising findings for quality and applicability;
4. Applying these findings and considerations in practice;
5. Evaluating the results.

This last step is particularly significant because evidence-based practice models need to continuously improve if they are to be effective. As a result, each new case should be considered additional evidence and should be analyzed along with the pre-existing data. This kind of perspective helps our social service practices continue to keep pace with a changing world.

The Models

While much could be written about evidence-based practice models, we are just going to touch on a few key concepts and models, as well as resources where you can obtain additional information.

1. Stages of Change: The Stages of Change model involves progress through a series of stages, and is designed to evaluate an individual’s readiness to change. Like other evidence-based practice models, it allows for evidence to be considered and taken into account regularly throughout the process. There is an inherent feedback loop that considers the patient’s needs and progress.

2. Parents as Teachers (PAT): This model is one of the performance models that accompanies ETO software. It is designed to meet the needs of those who receive federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program funding.

3. Perform Well. PerformWell is a website that helps provide information about performance management to nonprofit professionals. The site includes information on a number of different evidence-based practice models that organizations can avail themselves of.

While not a model, per se, there are also numerous tools available to organizations looking to implement
Evidence-Based Practice models. For example, the Annie E. Casey foundation’s Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development is an interactive website that helps organizations identify and fund programs that are scientifically proven. Similarly, TRASI or Tools and Resources for Assessing Social Impact, from the foundation center, can help organizations learn what tools are out there to aid them in measuring outcomes and utilizing evidence.

On a national level, the social services world is just beginning to understand what evidence-based practice models can look like and how they will help our organizations. More models are sure to emerge over the next few years that will offer better standards for implementing evidence-based approaches. Resources like this one from the Promising Practices Network are helping organizations begin to look at how to create evidence-based practice models that meet the highest standards currently set in the industry.

Furthermore, with the widespread use of software like Social Solutions ETO Software, our ability to collect and analyze data will continue to improve drastically, enabling even better outcomes for clients and constituents through the use of evidence-based case management and other evidence-based practices.
Our country dedicates billions of dollars in resources each year to tackling a vast number of social issues. As nonprofits, we invest this money, along with countless hours of blood, sweat, and tears, in coming up with innovative solutions to a plethora of social problems. Despite all this effort at the front end, programs have – on a national scale – produced poor outcomes.

What is causing this discrepancy? While we focus an enormous amount of energy on developing and/or utilizing evidence-based programs and practices, intervention fidelity and anticipated results are often elusive. The emphasis on utilizing evidence-based practices and programs stems from the belief that employing a method that has been tested lends credence to your work and results. The problem with this mindset is that these programs and operations are often researched under ideal conditions. When agency staff attempt to reproduce them in real life conditions, they are not able to maintain intervention fidelity. Therefore, they do not achieve the same outcomes. Our collective focus on innovation and evidence has come at the expense of paying attention to what it takes to replicate effective programs and practices under real-world conditions.

**Producing Consistent Outcomes by Building Implementation Capacity**

In order to achieve socially significant outcomes for our clients, innovation is simply not enough. Of course, we need to continue to come up with new and improved ways to solve social ills, but we need to support these innovative practices with more than just research evidence. Effective implementation is critical to ensuring the consistency necessary for our operations and practices to be successful.

**How – Pay Attention to Implementation Drivers**
While the “what” in our outcome equation—our programs, practices, and interventions—are critical, they are only effective when utilized with an eye toward intervention fidelity. In addition to the “what,” we need to focus on the “how.” How we implement our programs and interventions is an essential variable when looking at the consistency of results and the long-term success of our program. We need to not just know how we intervene, but how we implement those interventions. We need to be constantly aware of our implementation drivers:

- How and who we hire
- How we train our new staff
- How we coach all our employees
- How we give performance feedback

Selection, training, coaching, and performance assessment are all very important to have built into our agency’s routine so that we regularly produce staff who are operating at a high level and who can consistently produce those reliable results we are all seeking.

### When – Implementation Stages

The “when” of implementing our interventions and practices is also vital to ensuring optimal outcomes for our clients. It is essential that we produce an agency plan that orders our steps in the process in such a way that we most closely hew to the research. Implementation stages can be as critical to our success as the actual operations or practices we choose. Trying to do too much too soon can cause our results to fall far short of our goals.

### Risky Adaptations

While the “what” in our outcome equation—our programs, practices, and interventions—are critical, they are

While it is sometimes necessary and prudent to alter aspects of the program model you are implementing, there are several adaptations that are considered risky and can impact intervention fidelity. Avoid making the following changes, which are considered risky by University of Wisconsin-Madison’s article [Program fidelity and adaptation: Meeting local needs without compromising program effectiveness](https://www.wisc.edu):

- Reducing the number or length of sessions or how long participants are involved
• Lowering the level of participant engagement
• Eliminating key messages or skills learned
• Removing topics
• Changing the theoretical approach
• Using staff or volunteers who are not adequately trained or qualified
• Using fewer staff members than recommended

Who – Agency Leadership

The “who” of implementation is another necessary element in maintaining intervention fidelity. Implementation teams who are focused on maintaining the implementation drivers mentioned above are critical for agencies that value providing consistent and high-quality service to clients. In order to move toward consistency of results, agency leadership must support the implementation, sustainability, and scale-up of usable practices and interventions by integrating the use of implementation stages, drivers, and performance assessments. The key to effective implementation is to integrate, sustain, and improve interventions, all while working toward more and more constancy.

The Key to Producing Consistent Outcomes

When you study your own agency’s results – successes and stumbling blocks – you may find that you have data right there in your own organization that says when we do things this way we produce the outcomes that we want. Those effective innovation practices are tied to those positive outcomes of the innovation. Combining this agency self-reflection with a concentration on the “how,” “when,” and “who” listed above can move your agency from one with good ideas, but less than ideal results, to one whose innovative interventions result in consistent positive outcomes for your clients.
About Social Solutions’ ETO Software

Managing to Housing Outcomes

The whole focus of your work is trying to accomplish a certain mission… you have to spend your time focused on your mission and the software needs to be real easy for you to use. Like having the right tools for the right job.

Brad Pierson, Clinical Director
SIMS Foundation

ETO® and Apricot software for Nonprofits are complete performance management solutions that support nonprofits’ needs to spend less time on compliance and funder reporting and more time on ensuring the effectiveness of their services for the people who rely on them.

Designed by direct service workers for direct service workers, ETO and Apricot help measure the incremental progress of your participants, understand the effectiveness of your programs, and demonstrate impact to key stakeholders both quickly and easily. Whether you provide case management, training, support groups, or other direct services, ETO and Apricot can help you serve your clients more effectively.

Stop collecting data in disconnected systems and spending inordinate amounts of time on compliance and funder reporting. Manage to outcomes and determine the true impact of your programs with specially designed software for human services organizations.

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Or contact us online at http://www.socialsolutions.com/contact-us/