The Evolving Context of Social Work Case Management: NASW Releases Revised Standards of Practice

Introduction
Though case management has been integral to social work since the founding of the social work profession, the practice of case management has changed greatly over the past century. NASW’s revised standards for social work case management reflect this evolving context and reinforce the social work profession’s leadership role in case management. The standards equip social work case managers to respond effectively to clients in a variety of practice settings.

Social Work Case Management in the 21st Century
Since its inception in the late 19th century, social work case management has become both widespread and specialized. Social work case managers work with a broad array of client populations across practice settings and specialties. Likewise, the philosophical foundation of social work case management has shifted over time. Whereas early caseworkers viewed themselves as benevolent helpers, social work case managers now recognize their relationship with clients as a partnership. Considerable diversity in paradigms still exists, however, and social workers may find their case management approach influenced by client population, employment sector, practice setting, and payer (Waxley, 2011). Moreover, though case management remains integral to most social work jobs (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006), social work case managers increasingly practice alongside nurse case managers, case managers from other professional backgrounds, and consumer or peer providers. Case management—along with related practices such as care management and care coordination—is also gaining increased consideration on a national level, especially in health care reform, as policy makers, administrators, and payers strive to decrease costs and increase quality. In many such deliberations, however, specific roles and qualifications for case managers or care coordinators have not been defined.

In response to these changes, NASW recently revised its Standards for Social Work Case Management (2013). Social workers contributed to the revision process by participating in an expert panel (which reflected a variety of practice settings and specialties) and submitting feedback during a public comment period. The standards include six guiding principles.
• person-centered services
• privacy of the client–social worker relationship
• person-in-environment framework
• strengths perspective
• collaborative teamwork
• intervention at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (NASW, 2013, p. 17–18)

These principles are reflected throughout the 12 standards, which address various aspects of social work case management practice.

Applying the NASW Standards in Practice

The following case examples illustrate how the NASW Standards for Social Work Case Management (2013) may be applied in practice.

ETHICS AND VALUES.

An older couple hires a geriatric care manager to help them figure out whether they can remain in their home or need to relocate. The couple’s adult children contact the case manager, urging her to move their parents to a nursing home without delay. They even offer to assume financial responsibility for the care. The social worker understands that she must honor her clients’ wishes and cannot provide information without their consent. She explains that her goal is to support the family in coping with the stresses of the situation and to provide information about various options available to them. The couple decides to move their parents to a nursing home.

PRIVACY.

A case manager is working with an adult protective services agency and finds out that her client, who is a senior citizen, is being subjected to financial exploitation. She knows that she must report this information to the appropriate authorities, as required by law.

QUALIFICATIONS.

A social worker supervises a new graduate who is working with a community-based health care organization. The social worker observes that many of her clients experience difficulties accessing accessible, affordable transportation options in the community. The social worker, in collaboration with her colleagues and members of the organization’s grassroots advocacy network, forms a task force to address the issue. She identifies key stakeholders, including transportation providers, advocacy groups, and community members. She then brings together these stakeholders to discuss the issue and develop a plan of action. The social worker uses the data to secure ongoing funding for the program. She also presents her findings at a local conference and coauthors a journal article to illustrate the value of social work case management in supporting vulnerable populations.

PRACTICE EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT.

A social work case manager is working with a small group of social workers staff a pilot case management program serving veterans. The social workers seek to evaluate the program’s success in helping veterans access resources and transition from military service to civilian life. They use a variety of methods, including qualitative client surveys, validated measures, and program evaluations, to obtain this information. In the process, the case managers examine not only outcomes but also the quality and efficiency of the case management process. They convey their aggregated findings to the agency administrator, who uses the data to secure ongoing funding for the program. The social workers also present their findings at a local conference and coauthor a journal article to illustrate the value of social work case management in supporting veterans.

INTERDISCIPLINARY AND INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION.

A social work case manager is working with an individual reentering the community following incarceration. The case manager obtains his client’s permission to communicate with other professionals and organizations—such as a parole officer, county social services office, job placement service, and behavioral health agency—serving the client. The social worker exchanges information with all involved parties about the respective roles each plays in supporting the client’s reentry. He proposes a follow-up conference call, including the client and all involved service providers, for the following month to discuss the client’s reentry process.

The following case examples illustrate how the NASW Standards for Social Work Case Management (2013) may be applied in practice.

Case management constitutes a core function of, and specialty within, social work practice.
• person-centered services
• privacy of the client–social worker relationship
• person-in-environment framework
• strengths perspective
• collaborative teamwork
• intervention at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (NASW, 2013, p. 17–18).

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ETHICS AND VALUES.

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QUALIFICATIONS.

A social worker supervises three case managers within a housing agency. Her manager, the agency administrator, wants to hire a newly graduated MSW who is not yet licensed. The state in which the agency is based licenses MSWs at the graduate level and requires such a license to practice social work. The social work supervisor explains to the agency administrator that the MSW is not able to practice without a license and that she, as a supervisor, would be putting her own license in jeopardy by supervising an unlicensed social worker.

KNOWLEDGE.

A social work case manager leaves a job in a managed care company to work for a community-based health care organization. Most of his new clients have limited economic resources; some are undocumented and have limited English-speaking ability. Though already knowledgeable about community resources, the case manager immediately seeks additional information about such programs as the Children’s Health Insurance Program, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, pharmaceutical assistance, Legal Aid, and professional interpretation services. He also establishes a relationship with a local cultural organization serving the Hispanic community and seeks continuing education addressing trauma related to the refugee experience.

CULTURAL AND LNGUISTIC COMPETENCE.

A social work administrator realizes her case management company has few clients who acknowledge being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). She convenes a committee of her colleagues to determine how the organization can be more welcoming to LGBT clients. The committee revises the company’s intake forms and adds images of same-sex couples to the organization’s office space and marketing materials. The social worker invites a trainer from a local LGBT organization to work with the staff for a day. During the training, one staff member realizes ways in which her behavior may have alienated LGBT colleagues and clients, and the entire staff commits to recovering on a quarterly basis to assess the company’s progress in creating an LGBT-affirming environment for both clients and employees.

ASSESSMENT.

A social work case manager in an adult protective services agency has her first meeting with a middle-aged woman referred for a family crisis. The woman is acutely ill and has no family support. She needs assistance with several activities of daily living. The case manager begins the conversation by explaining that her goal is to support the family in coping with the stresses of illness and care giving. The woman responds that she desperately needs help and is struggling to balance her full-time job with caring for her husband. She also acknowledges having felt too proud to ask for help and not knowing which services might be available. The social worker also talks individually with the man, who expresses concern about being a burden on his wife and openly to outside assistance. The case manager observes the couple that a great deal of strength and mutual caring exists in their relationship. She then reflects that the couple seems to have three main goals: to remain in their home together, to ensure high-quality care for the man, and for the woman to be able to continue working outside the home. The couple concurs, and the three agree to meet again in a couple days to identify steps and resources to achieve those goals.

SERVICE PLANNING, DELIVERY, AND INTERVENTION.

A social work case manager in a child and family services agency is working with a family displaced by a natural disaster. During the assessment process, the social worker ascertains that the family’s goal is to settle in the area for the remainder of the school year. The social worker intervenes rapidly to address the family’s immediate needs for shelter, food, clothing, and health care. She then helps the parents reestablish communication with family and friends in their home state, access benefits for disaster survivors, and connect with job-search resources. The case manager also helps enroll the children in the local school, collaborates with the school guidance counselor, and arranges for the children to meet with an art therapist. Moreover, she works with her agency and neighboring organizations to determine how to respond effectively to other displaced individuals and families.

ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP.

A social work case manager works in a rural, consumer-owned organization for people with disabilities. She observes that many of her clients experience difficulty accessing accessible, affordable transportation options in the community. The social worker, in collaboration with her colleagues and members of the organization’s grassroots advocacy network, forms a task force to address the issue. The task force identifies existing transportation resources, communicates recommendations for improvement to existing transportation vendors, and works with the vendors to educate the community about service options. Given the scarcity of resources available to cover a large area, the task force develops a plan to seek funding for a volunteer- and peer-based transportation network. The task force also identifies federal, state, and local legislators addressing accessible transportation, educates the organization’s constituents and other potential allies about the bills, and meets with legislators to build support for the legislation.

INTERDISCIPLINARY AND INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION.

A social work case manager is working with an individual reentering the community following incarceration. The case manager obtains his client’s permission to communicate with other professionals and organizations—such as a parole officer, county social services office, job placement service, and behavioral health agency—-serving the client. The social worker exchanges information with all involved parties about the respective roles each plays in supporting the client’s reentry. He proposes a follow-up meeting to discuss the client’s reentry process.

PRACTICE EVALUATION AND IMPROVEMENT.

A small group of social workers staff a pilot case management program serving veterans. The social workers seek to evaluate the program’s success in helping veterans access resources and transition from military service to civilian life. They use a variety of methods, including qualitative client surveys, validated measures, and program evaluations, to obtain this information. In the process, the case managers examine not only outcomes but also the quality and efficiency of the case management process. They convey their aggregated findings to the agency administrator, who uses the data to secure ongoing funding for the program. The social workers also present their findings at a local conference and coauthor a journal article to illustrate the value of social work case management in supporting veterans.

RECORD KEEPING.

A social work case manager works in an educational setting for teenagers with behavioral disorders. She maintains accurate, timely documentation and other records in a secure database. Her documentation identifying transportation resources, communicates recommendations for improvement to existing transportation vendors, and works with the vendors to educate the community about service options. Given the scarcity of resources available to cover a large area, the task force develops a plan to seek funding for a volunteer- and peer-based transportation network. The task force also identifies federal, state, and local legislators addressing accessible transportation, educates the organization’s constituents and other potential allies about the bills, and meets with legislators to build support for the legislation.

A journal article to illustrate the value of social work case management in supporting veterans.

WORKLOAD SUSTAINABILITY.

When new management takes over a mental health agency, both caseloads and documentation requirements increase. Over the course of a year, one social work case manager constitutes a core function of, and specially within, social work practice.
Case management agencies
Case Management
Among social workers in clients or more are common Social work caseloads of 50 gerontological social workers. are among the most common social workers report spending hospitals and health clinics spend more than half their health care settings, 70%

has a growing number of clients who are American agency’s own program evaluations and the and, over time and in collaboration with her support from her employer, in a continuing
turns to the social work literature and also seeks work case manager struggles to provide her
professional literature.4, 5

resources addressing the client–social work case

MSW, and Kondrat & Early’s 2010 article on the working


Kondrat, D. C., & Early, T. J. (2010). An exploring the working alliance in mental health case
management. Social Work Research, 34, 201–211.


References


Social workers cope? (Arrington, 2008).


Case management agencies in the U.S. work case managers strategies to provide health care access to a large number of clients, many of whom live with schizophrenia. Her colleagues report similar experiences. The social worker requests a meeting with her supervisor to discuss her concern. That meeting, the case manager identifies the most time-intensive functions of her job, describes how the growing caseload size and documentation requirements have affected service quality, and conveys anecdotal information she has gathered about caseload sizes in similar programs. She reiterates her commitment to the agency’s mission and requests her supervisor’s assistance in decreasing caseload size. The supervisor, who is also a social worker, schedules a meeting with the entire case management staff to discuss the department’s workload. Following the meeting, the supervisor approaches the agency administrator and advocates that an additional case manager be hired to ensure high-quality service. She also proposes, and offers to chair, an internal task force to develop policies for determining and maintaining caseload size. The task force, which includes direct practice employees, incorporates in its recommendations data from two of the agency’s own program evaluations and the professional literature. 1

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETENCE. A social work case manager with a decade of experience in HIV/AIDS work is qualified to practice without supervision but participates in ongoing continuing education and seeks supervision or consultation as needed. She has a growing number of clients who are American Indian or Alaska Native. The social worker has little experience with these groups and recognizes the needs to boost her knowledge and skills. She turns to the social work literature and also seeks information from reliable sources, such as the Indian Health Service, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institutes of Health. The case manager also enrolls, with support from her employer, in a continuing education course on culturally competent practice with American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN). This course links her with other social workers with personal or professional interest and experience in the topic. She works closely with some of her own clients, many of whom have schizophrenia. Her colleagues report similar experiences. The social worker requests a meeting with her supervisor to discuss her concern. That meeting, the case manager identifies the most time-intensive data on her job, describes how the growing caseload size and documentation requirements have affected service quality, and conveys anecdotal information she has gathered about caseload sizes in similar programs. She reiterates her commitment to the agency’s mission and requests her supervisor’s assistance in decreasing caseload size. The supervisor, who is also a social worker, schedules a meeting with the entire case management staff to discuss the department’s workload. Following the meeting, the supervisor approaches the agency administrator and advocates that an additional case manager be hired to ensure high-quality service. She also proposes, and offers to chair, an internal task force to develop policies for determining and maintaining caseload size. The task force, which includes direct practice employees, incorporates in its recommendations data from two of the agency’s own program evaluations and the professional literature. 1

Conclusion
Case management constitutes a core function of, and model practice for, social work. Social work case management has evolved, and will continue to grow, in response to changes in both practice and policy. The NASW Standards for Social Work Case Management (2013) exemplify these changes, highlighting the principles and elements integral to social work case management across client populations and practice settings.


References
1. See, for example, Austin & McCollard, 2009; Berger, 2009; Giddens, K., & Kaszynski, 2009; Lightfoot, 2009; Mather, 2009; Mosley, 2009; Parkinson, 2009; Ritter, 2009; Kienan, 2009; Sullivan, 2009; Vandeplaschen, 2009; Bannister, 2009; Walsh, 2009.
4. See, for example, Austin & McCollard, 2009; Berger, 2009; Giddens, K., & Kaszynski, 2009; Lightfoot, 2009; Mather, 2009; Mosley, 2009; Parkinson, 2009; Ritter, 2009; Ritter, 2009; Kienan, 2009; Sullivan, 2009; Vandeplasschen, 2009; Bannister, 2009; Walsh, 2009.
6. Social work case managers may find the Case Management Caseload Concept Paper, published jointly by the NASW and the Case Management Society of America and NASW (Craig, 2006), useful in deliberations regarding caseload and workload in health, behavioral health, and compensation settings.
7. The CaseWorkers Capacity Calculator (CWC), which builds on the 2008 NASW-NSASW casework concept and a 2011 survey of NASW members, may also be useful to social workers working within health plans or in acute care hospitals. The CWC software, developed by Consulting Management Innovations, Inc. (CMI) and available free of charge at www.socialworkers.org/caseloadcalculator, allows users to download comparison data regarding caseload ratios of case management settings. The software does not, however, identify recommended caseload ratios.
8. Social worker self-care, addressed in the ethics section of the revised case management standards, may also be affected by an unsustainable workload. Please refer to NASW’s policy statement addressing professional self-care (2012d) and professional impairment (2012d) for additional information. See also the NASW Center for Workforce Studies Report, Stress at Work: How Do Social Workers Cope? (Arrington, 2008).

NASW's revised standards for social work case management reflect the evolving practice and policy context and reinforce the social work profession’s leadership role in case management.
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In response to these changes, NASW recently revised its Standards for Social Work Case Management (2013). Social workers contributed to the revision process by participating in an expert panel (which reflected a variety of practice settings and specialties) and submitting feedback during a public comment period.

The standards include six guiding principles and 10 core practice standards that distinguish social work case management.

Children & Families
• Social Work Services with Parents: How Attitudes and Approaches Shape the Relationship

Clinical Social Work
• 2012 Medicare Updates for Clinical Social Workers
• Clinical Social Workers and 5010: Frequently Asked Questions for the Social Work Profession
• Documenting For Medicare: Tips For Clinical Social Workers
• Retiring? Tips For Closing Your Private Practice
• Risk Management in Clinical Practice

Leadership and Organizations
• Organizing for Office Safety

Education
• Addressing the Educational Needs of Older Youth
• Gangs: A Growing Problem in Schools

Workforce & Career Development
• Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs): Opportunities
• Career Coaching: A Valuable Resource For Social Workers
• Furthering Your Social Work Education: Obtaining A Doctorate
• Negotiating A Higher Salary
• Networking: Finding Opportunities for Career Development
• Securing The Social Work Job You Seek: Advice For The Interview Process
• Setting and Maintaining Professional Boundaries
• State Health Insurance Exchanges: What Social Workers Need to Know
• The Value of Social Work Mentoring
• Transitioning Across State Lines: Licensing Tips Beyond The Interview Process
• Setting and Maintaining Professional Boundaries
• Overcoming Economic Hardships

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Chris Herman, MSW, LICSW
Senior Practice Associate
cherman@naswdc.org

The National Association of Social Workers
750 First Street NE
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241
SocialWorkers.org

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