CDS

Community Development Specialists, Inc.

Working with communities to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of human service delivery throught the use of technology and business planning.

Concept Paper on

Human Service Systems Reform Through Case Coordination and Information Sharing

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Introduction

Annually, billions of tax and private dollars are spent on human services yet there is an ever-growing disparity between those that have and those that have not. Service agencies, charged with alleviating the disparity and stewardship of the funding, receive or submit positive evaluations for the services they deliver yet the demographic data of those they serve points to a decrease in well-being. There is a need for a new business paradigm based on client well being. Benefactors must take a leadership position to facilitate the change.

Background

Community Development Specialists, Inc. "works with communities to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of human service delivery" and have met with measured success in changing the service paradigm. CDS markets the Client Referral Network, a sophisticated user-friendly Web-based software solution to service coordination. CDS has worked with 12 counties in three states. The following are perceptions and observations from this combined experience.

The observations put forth herein are not intended to be critical of individuals or workers within the human service industry. Generally, they are very caring and giving persons. They have been put into a system with failing processes that are in need of reform.

Current State of Service Delivery – Governmental

The dysfunction of the governmental services is widespread and intractable in the current environment. Governmentally funded agencies, as a rule, do not coordinate services with each other or with nonprofit agencies. County social services perform their niche of function, workforce development performs their niche function, and community action performs their niche function…. High caseloads, organizational structures, statutes, rules and regulations… are all real and perceived barriers to service coordination and sharing information.

System reform, to date has taken the tack of redefining position terms, eligibility requirements of the client, and creating regional governance authorities. What once was an eligibility technician is now a case manager. The term case manager takes on many meanings depending on who is being asked and the purpose of the discussion. The institutional reality is a case manager is just that - they manage the case and thus, ensure at a minimum and often at a maximum, that statutory requirement is met. The case file is managed rather than the welfare of the client or family. Information is gathered and services are doled out to the extent that an individual is eligible.

Across the nation there are small pockets of local initiatives attempting service coordination through collaboration and information sharing. We have worked with many of these initiatives in Arkansas, North Carolina and South Carolina. In all cases, local governmental services are either restricted in their level of participation or not allowed to participate by the state-controlling agencies. There are now state initiatives to attempt to coordinate services. Planning for such initiatives is being done in Vermont, Massachusetts, North Carolina, South Carolina, Idaho and other states have implemented such initiatives with varying scopes and degrees of success.

Current State of Service Delivery – Nonprofit

Nonprofit agencies generally fill a community need, are an extension of a national organization, receive government pass-through funds or provide billable services as a basis of their mission and existence.

Some nonprofits are entirely supported through billable services while others rely strictly on community and/or foundation support. Generally all are competing for a limited and ever shrinking "pot" of dollars, albeit from a variety of sources. At times, agencies even compete for clients. The competition is by nature a result of the competition for funds.

Generally, nonprofit agencies do not directly coordinate the services they deliver or share information with other agencies serving a common client. Many of the same barriers exist for these agencies as the governmental agencies. Unlike governmental services, these barriers are mostly perceived and not real.

Benefactors of the nonprofit agencies have begun asking for agencies to report outcomes for the funds they provide. However this reporting process tends to focus on how many clients are served and how satisfied the client is with the delivery of that service. The result is the outcomes are often quantitative rather than qualitative. Service objectives or goals may be set, but by the nature of the service, it is often merely the act of receiving or completing the service or being satisfied with how the service was delivered. The overall well being of the client population is subjugated to the number of clients contently receiving or completing the service. It is assumed that receiving the services and being pleased with it produces and inherent client benefit.

It is time to demand a service delivery system that treats the whole person and has an overreaching outcome measurement of client self-reliance. Ultimately, sharing of information and coordinating services not only benefits the client but creates internal organizational efficiencies and prevents redundant and cross-purpose service delivery. Moreover, collaboration, information sharing and service coordination reduces system abuse of the small minority of persons who rotate from one service to another.

Reforming the Nonprofit Service Delivery System

Three issues were previously identified as gaps for the successful creation of a service system that is coordinated, treats clients holistically and expects qualitative outcomes for families:

1A lack of a well-defined process and structure for service coordination and information sharing
2.Lack of technical sophistication of the management and workers and related data collection and communication tools at their disposal
3.Benefactor funding strategy and outcome reporting requirements

The niche structure of human services and a delivery process that focuses on a single service event often treats symptoms of disparity rather than root causes. Often, this leads to individuals and families being raised to a nominal functioning level and support is then withdrawn. We consistently see the same families rotate in and out of crisis and in and out of a 'revolving door' system. Agencies generally provide service in what CDS refers to as 'service delivery areas'. Unfortunately, these areas have no relationship to the existing governmental structures areas. The areas have a defined set of agencies that provide service to the citizens residing within it. Most of the agencies are enduring and well established. CDS brings these stakeholders together to collaboratively develop procedures for universal client intake, protocols for client referral, follow-up to referral and client-based management of cases.

The first issue that must be addressed in facilitating this process is overcoming the real and perceived barrier of client privacy and confidentiality. With the assistance of local and state agency attorneys, CDS has developed a privacy and security model that removes this barrier to the point of allowing anonymous referrals and follow-up from "sensitive" agencies such as abuse shelters and rape crisis centers. The process must be facilitated to maintain each agency's individuality and mission yet promote joint case planning through communication and sharing. Each agency has a case management role, but the paradigm switches from managing the paper to managing client welfare. When services are overlapping or redundant, cost sharing strategies are implemented. When services are at cross-purposes, a methodology for compromise and client input are established and followed. A governance of the collaborative is established with formal memorandums of understanding defining roles and responsibilities of each agency. The governance becomes a clearinghouse for mediating agency issues.

Once procedures are in place defining the structure and process of service coordination, tools must be provided to enable it. It is not practical, given case loads and time constraints, to believe that service workers can physically meet to plan service strategies for every case that is common. Without tools, there may even be no awareness of the commonality of a case. The technical sophistication of human service administrators and workers is varied. Most nonprofits do not have large technology budgets or infrastructures and cannot afford staff dedicated to technology. Generally if technical support is available at all it is outsourced. Many of the agencies we have worked with have workers that fear technology and fear "breaking" whatever they touch. Others have embraced technology and have been very creative in developing internal solutions to managing their individual work.

As a hard-wired technology infrastructure is generally not available to the nonprofit community, and because it is very expensive to procure, a Web-based strategy presents a cost effective alternative. Because of the varying levels of technical sophistication the software tool must also be intuitive to workers and user friendly. With virtually every community with which CDS has worked some level of software customization has been necessary to meet local requirements. The Client Referral Network (CRN) was developed over nine months in biweekly joint application design sessions with representation of virtually every human service discipline. This input from users into the software development has made CRN a user-friendly information-sharing tool. Elderly volunteers, who never used computers, embraced the software in their daily routines. Canned, off-the-shelf, products are generally prescriptive in the data collected, not Web-based and designed by technical persons making them complex for users to navigate.

An efficiency issue faced by CDS when working with agencies with existing legacy data systems was duplicate data entry – data entry into the legacy system and into a shared network. CDS has extensive experience with the import of data from existing data systems. Once the data migration is completed for the networked agencies, data entry and reporting functions for all users are handled by CRN.

Finally, nonprofits desire 24/7 technical support. We have found when a tool is user friendly, that the support is seldom utilized, but it is a comfort to know it is available when it is needed.

The nonprofit benefactors have a large stake in ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of human service delivery. There is an increasing tendency for benefactors to try and ensure the success of nonprofits by providing them with technical support. The support is often based in education for individual nonprofit leaders. “Eighty-five percent (85%) of current executive directors will transition out of their positions between 2000 and 2007” (Support Center for Nonprofit Management, Don Crocker Executive Director, http://www.supportctr.org/executive-transitions.php). Although academic education is important for leadership, the high turnover may negate it as a long-term strategy for creating organizational effectiveness. We believe that organizational effectiveness can only be measured in the success of those the organizations serve – the efficacy of the services in relation to the total needs of the individual or family being served. Service efficacy can be achieved in a niche-structured system, but more by accident than by design. When it is achieved, there is no process or available data tool to have knowledge of the achievement and thus no ability to replicate the service process that led to the achievement.

The only way the nonprofit service delivery paradigm will change to a coordinated outcome-based model is for the benefactor to demand and support the change. We have nine years experience in engaging this change and have developed tools to make the change a reality.

CDS would welcome a dialogue leading to a partnership with individual or groups of funding stakeholders to plan a gentle strategy of agency engagement to this end.