Tackling Outdated Technology and Siloed Data

Allowing Social Services Programs to Provide Holistic Care

Social services agencies provide critical support to children, families and individuals. Yet many agencies manage their cases using outdated systems, including spreadsheets and paper documents. Critical information is scattered across multiple agencies and external organizations. The combination of outdated technology and siloed data makes it difficult for staff to get a holistic picture of an individual client's needs.

Whether an agency creates programs to address housing, health, education, violence prevention or employment, a comprehensive understanding of constituent needs is vital. Case management is a collaborative process that monitors, coordinates and evaluates how to meet an individual's needs while empowering program management with transparency and data insights. Modern case management systems allow agencies to better access and leverage data, leading to improved and more integrated services for constituents.

At the same time, a modern case management system cannot do the job alone. For a case management system to have meaning and direction, agencies must adopt a culture of data-informed decision-making.

"A case management solution can help agencies meet the needs of their communities," says Winston Philip, president of Sequivalent, which provides data management training to community-based organizations. *"But first, agencies need to develop their culture around data. Once you have an office that embraces data, you can turn to a quality data system to support your initiatives."*

The Advantage of Accessible Data

Easily accessible program data is the first step toward developing invaluable social services. A modern case management solution can aggregate data from multiple agencies, allowing social services staff to better understand the needs of their clients.

"Siloed data restricts community impact and paints an incomplete picture of need," says Tre Cabrera, community development executive for Social Solutions. *"Public agencies, nonprofits, community-based service providers and other stakeholders can share and integrate data to understand trends and trajectory, scale programs, enhance delivery models and build relationships with new partners that can support the work. Partners' funding allocations also depend on data — and the right data — to prove impact. This type of collaboration is essential to program sustainability."*

Baltimore, Md., has applied this model of accessible data to its violence prevention programs. The Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE) created a coordinated data system across several key criminal justice stakeholders, including the police department and the state's attorney's office. The data from this system allows the office to get a clearer picture of the community and provide wraparound services for both survivors and families navigating the criminal justice system.

Effective community programs must start from a place of accessible data. *"If you want to intervene in communities to create a variety of violence reduction interventions, the one thing you'll need is information,"* says Philip. *"You can then convert that information to actionable steps."*

Through the use of integrated information, MONSE has created effective initiatives such as Safe Streets, a gun violence reduction program that relies on collaboration across multiple community stakeholders.

A case management solution can integrate data not only from the public sector but also from community stakeholders. Without efficient data sharing between the public sector and other partners, social services programs lack the information necessary to maximize service delivery and impact.

"Siloed data is a major barrier," Cabrera says. *"Without data sharing, programs can stagnate, disconnect from critical funding and become arbitrary. Public agencies can bridge gaps with nonprofits and community-based service providers to share and integrate program impact data to drive toward more meaningful*

The Importance of Data Culture

In addition to getting data out of silos, social services agencies should consider what to do with the data once they receive it. Effective data-driven decisions and programs require a strong data culture.

"Data literacy is incredibly important," says Nicholas Musillami, vice president of public sector sales for Social Solutions. *"It is important to have a framework for how people analyze data, how they understand it and how it pertains to the people they are serving. If agencies cannot tell a story about their data internally, it is hard for them to communicate with other stakeholders, including potential funders."*

Jeff Melando, director of public sector sales for Social Solutions, recalls one client in the criminal justice space who used data to acquire funding for a re-entry program for formerly incarcerated individuals. The client offered free tattoo removal for people released from prison within a particular period of time. The program data showed that people who had their tattoos removed were 300 percent more likely to get a job, which is a critical factor in reducing recidivism.

"But without the data to show this type of program could be effective, they would never have been able to get their request approved by a budget office," says Melando. *"There is so much that can be done in the human services spectrum if agencies can tell stories like this with data."*

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A case management solution can help an agency tell such stories effectively. A modern tool can develop dashboards that methodically organize data, allowing organizations to share their data with others for the purposes of demonstrating successes and increasing funding. In addition, staff can customize dashboards to address their specific needs and goals.

But new data technology requires a culture shift. Agency leaders need to communicate with employees to build a data culture that sees information as the lifeblood of their work for constituents. Social services staff who work directly with constituents should understand that collecting and interpreting data is essential to their activities.

"Within social services, a data culture has value because information allows agencies to more deeply understand the population they are serving," Philip says. *"So introducing data culture, particularly to the staff who work directly with individuals, is important. Agencies should promote the value of data not as something that staff has to do for somebody else but for the sake of the people they are serving."*