



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

Scope of Social Work Practice
Case Management & Care
Coordination

December 2015

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We would like to thank the members of the
AASW Scope of Practice Working Group for
their contribution to the development and writing
of this document.

Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) *Scope of Social Work Practice* series provides an overview of the role, scope and contribution of social work practice. By focusing on the specific skill of case management and care coordination, the aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing are underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights. Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as system or structural issues) that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work, case management and care coordination

Social work has an extensive history in case management and care coordination. The social work profession and the practice of case management developed concurrently, with health social workers being among the first

professional case managers.¹ Social work case management is 'a method of providing services whereby a professional social worker collaboratively assesses the needs of the client and the client's family, when appropriate, and arranges, coordinates, monitors, evaluates, and advocates for a package of multiple services to meet the specific client's complex needs.'²

Generally models of case management practice lie on a continuum, from 'brokerage' at one end, through models that are based on 'relationship' and 'continuity of care' to 'clinical case management' including specialist interventions and rehabilitation, and 'intensive case management' at the other end. Case management is a commonly used term in the human services field that in recent years has been underpinned by the importance of care coordination.

For social workers, care coordination is about developing a relationship with the client that seeks to foster collaborative decision-making in assuring that services are well targeted and person/family-centred. Social workers understand that care coordination is most importantly about building a positive working relationship with the client in order to develop care plans that address their needs, strengths, and goals.



¹ National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (2009). *Social Work & Care Coordination*, NASW Press, Washington DC

² Society for Social Work Leadership in Health. (2015). *Social Work Best Practice Healthcare Case Management Standards*, SSWLHC, PA

Social work case managers work directly with the client with responsibility for the core functions of assessment, planning, linking, advocacy, review and case closure. Therefore social work activity is at multiple levels including individual, family, relationships, community and the broader social context. Traditionally, the primary setting for case management work has been the health, community and public sector.³ In recent years this has expanded to include private or contract based case manager roles through various models of packaged care, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and My Aged Care.

Professional social workers bring valuable skills and knowledge to the case management and care coordination process. Social workers operate from a person-in-environment perspective and recognise that individuals can best be understood within the multifaceted context of their environment.⁴ With this perspective, social workers are well equipped to assess both the psychological and social aspects of a client's situation, and to develop interventions accordingly.⁵

This expertise is especially critical given the complex psychosocial issues that clients' can experience, and can pose significant barriers to care and improved wellbeing. In this regard, social work case management is distinct from other approaches as it addresses the client's needs at both individual and larger systemic levels.

“Care coordination is most importantly about building a positive working relationship with the client”

³ AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/17>

⁴ Kondrat, M. E. (2008). Person-in-environment. In T. Mizrahi & L. E. Davis (Eds. in Chief), *Encyclopaedia of Social Work* (20th ed. Vol. 3, pp. 348-354). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

⁵ For a comprehensive assessment and intervention planning system based on the person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, see Karls, J. M., & O'Keefe, M. (2008). *Person-in-environment system manual* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Scope of social work practice: Case management and care coordination

Case management and care coordination are an important practice skill of the social work profession. The scope of social work services provided through (but not limited to) case management varies according to organisational context, and these can include:⁶

- Systems navigation and coordination of services, especially during transitions of care or other significant life transitions
- Advocacy on behalf of, and in collaboration with, clients
- Education (e.g. understanding health and welfare systems, wellness promotion, parenting skills, management of acute or chronic conditions, job-search strategies) for individuals, families, and communities
- Resource information and referral (e.g. financial, housing, legal, medical)
- Individual counselling
- Couples and family counselling
- Family-team conferences
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the service plan
- Permanency, life span, and advance care planning
- Team and organisational service development, planning and collaboration
- Group interventions (i.e. psychotherapeutic groups, professionally facilitated psychoeducational groups, or peer-led support groups)
- Family caregiving support interventions
- Crisis intervention
- Disaster planning and preparedness
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Policy and research development

⁶ National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (2013). *Standards for Social Work Case Management*. NASW, Washington DC

The AASW believes that successful case management and care coordination is dependent on:⁷

- Establishing an empathic and respectful working relationship with the client
- Developing an assessment of the client's circumstances and needs in collaboration with the client, other members of the treatment team, other service providers, and family and friends wherever possible
- Developing a service plan with the client that takes account of short-term and long-term goals and identifies how the case manager will support those goals
- Implementing the service plan with the client
- Consulting with family, significant others, members of the treatment team and other service providers as appropriate for the implementation of the service plan
- Advocating with and for the client to obtain resources and to support the client to achieve goals
- Reviewing, revising and monitoring the plan regularly with the client

The contribution of social work to case management and care coordination

Social work case management is a multifaceted role that is informed by the three core values of professional social work, as outlined in the AASW's *Code of Ethics* – respect for persons, social justice, and professional integrity – which apply to relationships with clients, colleagues and organisations. Social workers understand the importance of working with other professionals, individuals and groups in order to maintain a collaborative approach.

As professionally trained practitioners with highly developed communication and relational skills, social workers are also adept at negotiating competing interests and conflict resolution.

Social workers collaborate with clients to ensure their health and wellbeing outcomes are achieved by engaging with appropriate support systems (formal and informal), and evaluating their effectiveness. Furthermore, in their commitment to human rights and social justice, social workers are highly adept at advocating for the rights of clients against the discrimination, reduced opportunities and abuse they can experience.

Given social workers' training and experience, they play a crucial role as case managers in identifying and addressing barriers that may be limiting the achievement of improved outcomes.

Conclusion

Social workers as a professional group are well suited to the case management and care coordination role given their focus on understanding and taking into account the full complexities of clients' circumstances. Social work is a highly skilled profession that is specifically focused on providing holistic care.

Social workers' demonstrated expertise in navigating complex health and social service systems,⁸ combined with their unique psychosocial perspective, illustrates the profession's significant contribution in the role of case manager and care coordinator.

⁷ AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/17>

⁸ Bronstein, L. R., Gould, P., Berkowitz, S. A., James, G. D., & Marks, K. (2015). Impact of a Social Work Care Coordination Intervention on Hospital Readmission: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Social Work*, swv016.

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