Human Services By the Batch

By Jonathan Walters

Back in quainter days, human services casework was handled by one person managing the entire process. A staffer would meet prospective clients face-to-face, assess needs versus assets, figure out what benefits that client was eligible for and then manage the case through its lifetime, including tending to changes in income, address or family status.

Those days could soon be over, if they're not gone already. Cutbacks in staff have come at a time of surging need. Many working poor clients can't make it to a social services office between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Evolving federal eligibility rules are making face-to-face transactions increasingly unnecessary for certain assistance programs. These factors have contributed to the reality that the old-fashioned way of managing cases may not be effective any more for clients or those who serve them.

Instead of one person handling caseloads, more and more frontline staff are now managing by "task," that is, it's more about processing applications, checking for any information that would indicate fraud and updating case information than it is about one person working face-to-face with clients. With task-based processing, the option to work with clients that need more personal assistance is still offered when requested or required.

"Going to a task-based approach to human services is part of a broad national trend to re-examine business processes in human services, generally," says Olivia Golden, senior fellow with the Urban Institute (UI). Her organization is currently partnering with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) on a nine-state pilot program supported by the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Called the Work Support Strategies Initiative, the effort is aimed at helping states design and implement strategies and processes to ensure that low-income working families get and keep the full package of supports for which they are eligible.

In Golden's view, whatever makes life simpler for individuals and families certainly has the potential to make it simpler for caseworkers, too. "Our feeling is that if you can reduce the burden and headaches for families, then you're reducing the burdens and headaches for staff, too," Golden says.

The task-based approach to managing benefits is among numerous business processes that are emerging as a promising piece of the streamlining picture, says Golden. It's a strategy that a number of New York counties are now pursuing, spurred by an overwhelming need to cope with scarce resources.

"It became a matter of necessity, quite frankly," says Shawn L. Yetter, Commissioner of the Tioga County Department of Social Services. "We saw shrinking staff as local budgets were being hit, combined with fact that Medicaid and food stamp cases were growing by the hundreds. You take those two things together and the results can be catastrophic."

Or at least very tough on staff, says Valerie Nitti, who leads Tioga's transition to and implementation of task-based casework. With frontline caseworkers wrangling 800 to 1,600 cases, the job had become impossibly overwhelming, she says. Being able to break down that caseload into tasks has been hugely important in both getting a handle on cases, and
in improving staff outlook. "At the end of the day, people are going home with clean desks and a clear idea that they've accomplished something," says Nitti.

While there's much to love about a system that gets away from the old model of "to each case a case manager," those with experience in switching to a task-based system say it's not for everybody and it's not easy to do.

On that score, Tioga and Schenectady Counties, in collaboration with the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations have developed a how-to guide (see below) that allows jurisdictions to assess whether the task-based approach is worth considering, and how to launch such a system.

One key to consider: Include staff from the very beginning when considering such a significant new way of doing business. "We actually let staff, within certain constraints, design the system," says Nitti.

The guide also covers the sort of detailed data analyses that welfare offices should do in order to understand key variables like workload patterns and the time it takes to handle various transactions, which will in turn help managers figure out -- at least approximately -- staffing requirements.

Even though task-based management can streamline operations quite a bit, Nitti emphasizes that supervisors have to continually help caseworkers focus on the connection between transactions and people. "We may now be a processing center," says Nitti, "but every time you process a transaction or touch a piece of paper, you touch a family or individual who needs help. Not only that, you're dealing with these issues before they become a crisis."