Ethical Behaviors

We all have principles that guide us. This document will discuss ethical behavior and look at some examples and situations. We will discuss your role as a human services worker, and identify how these principles may relate to your job. It may be helpful to review the information in this handout with your supervisor.

Below is a list of five ethical behaviors. Take some time to come up with some words or phrases that you think describe these ethical behaviors, what they mean, and how they may relate to your job. One phrase has already been provided under each behavior to get you started. An answer key at the back of this document lists several suggested terms or phrases.

1. Honesty –
   Being truthful.

2. Integrity –
   Protecting the client's right to privacy.

3. Fairness –
   Providing equal treatment.

4. Respect for others –
   Recognizing human dignity.

5. Accountability –
   Accepting responsibility for decisions.

Protection of Public Trust

On a caseload of 150 cases you may approve over $1 million in benefits a year. As a worker, you have a great amount of responsibility and accountability. As a public employee, you may find that you are held to a higher level of conduct than someone who works in private industry.

How often has the media featured a story about public employees' work behaviors as compared to employees in private industry? We may have our work scrutinized more because we have the public trust and administer public monies.

You may also have seen media coverage on how some clients have chosen to use their benefits from our programs. This scrutiny by the media has resulted in legislative language changes and as a result we need to advise our clients who receive cash benefits that their benefits are intended to meet their basic needs. Basic needs are defined as:

Food
Clothing
Transportation
Shelter
Utilities

Cash assistance is not meant for the purchase of non-essential items such as alcohol and tobacco. Clients should be informed that if they try to use their EBT cash benefits to purchase alcohol or tobacco, they can be charged with Fraud. We are here to provide a ladder up and a safety net for the people we serve. It can be a balancing act.

Here are some guiding principles about where your authority comes from and what your responsibilities are.

You get your authority from the county and state.

Do not use your position for personal or private purposes.

Uphold program rules and regulations even if you disagree with them. Provide equitable access to all assistance programs.

Serve the public responsibly.

Treat everyone fairly and impartially.

Be knowledgeable and perform each service courteously.

If you don't know the answer, get it. Don't be afraid to tell clients you need to research a question and get back to them.

When appropriate, make a referral.

- Example: A health care programs applicant is not eligible for those programs. Refer them to the health care resources in your area. You may wish to give them DHS-4741 Primary Care Resources – a brochure which lists providers in many counties who may see uninsured clients.

- Example: A family is found ineligible for SNAP. You may want to provide the family with a list of local food shelves.

Demonstrate high standards of honesty, integrity and accountability.

Financial Worker Role

The financial worker role involves many different responsibilities.

You may be helping families in times of financial crisis and are often the first in line of defense against poverty. Your job involves extensive client contact and strong interpersonal skills.

An important responsibility is education. Our clients often come into the public assistance office with little knowledge of the programs offered. It is your responsibility to educate clients on the programs offered and the requirements of those programs.

> **Example 1**: A client completes a CAF for SNAP only. Upon conducting the interview and going through the CAF, you determine they may have eligibility for a cash or health care program. Part of your role as a financial worker is to explain to the client their potential eligibility and help them make an informed decision whether they want to apply for an additional program.

Many of you are beginning your job as a financial worker with the same amount of program knowledge our clients possess when they first come into the county agency to apply. Keep this mind when you are working with your clients. Never assume that clients with previous history don't need the program rules explained to them. Take the time to explain complex program policy and requirements so that our clients get the most out of the services offered. As a result, clients have more confidence in you and your agency.

> **Example 2**: When clients receive cash benefit they need to be advised that their benefits are intended to meet their basic needs. Basic needs are defined as:
>
> Food
> Clothing
> Transportation
> Shelter
> Utilities

Cash assistance is not meant for the purchase of non-essential items such alcohol and tobacco. Clients must be informed that if they try to use their EBT card cash benefits to purchase alcohol or tobacco, etc., they can be charged with fraud.

<u>Rule Breaking vs. Flexibility</u>

One of the difficulties we all face with the situations we encounter on a daily basis is determining the difference between flexibility and rule breaking. Here is an example that may clarify the difference.

Example: Your client calls and says she cannot come to her scheduled interview for SNAP and cash assistance because she cannot find anyone to watch her children.

Rule breaking DON'T:
Tell the client she doesn't have to come to her interview. You will process her application anyway.

Flexibility DO:
Tell the client she is welcome to bring her children with her to the interview. Advise her if your agency provides onsite day care for client's children. Or, reschedule the client's interview for a later date. Explain to her why you cannot waive the interview. SNAP does allow for a phone interview. However, cash assistance requires an in-person interview.

There are many situations where you need to think about what is the right thing to do. The answer is not always easy. If you have questions about what is appropriate in a situation, always check with your supervisor.

Some Ethical Questions

How would you handle the following situations? It may be helpful to review these with your supervisor. An answer key is located at the bottom of this document.

1. A client brings you a gift valued at $15. Would you accept the gift? Why or why not?

2. Your sister owns an apartment building and has some vacancies. You have some clients who are looking for housing.

   a. Is it appropriate to give clients information about your sister's rental properties?

   b. Is it appropriate to give your sister the names of clients who are looking for rental properties so she could contact them to see if they are interested in renting from her? Why or why not?

3. You are waiting in line at your local bank. Your client is two people ahead of you in line. When your client gets to the window, it looks like the client is cashing a payroll check. The client has not reported working or receiving another income to you. What would you do?

4. You are going through the grocery checkout line and notice one of your clients working as a cashier. When you get back to your office, you check the case file and discover that the client has not reported working. What would you do?

5. A relative of yours is unhappy about the way his or her public assistance case is being handled. Would you look up the case on MAXIS to check it and get back to your relative with what you found?

Conclusion

As a financial worker, you will need to deal with many situations. Understanding ethical behaviors, your role in the protection of the public trust, and your role as a financial worker will help you in these situations. Find out from your supervisor if your agency has guidelines regarding ethical behavior. Always consult with your supervisor when you are unsure of the right way to handle a situation.

Ethical Behavior Descriptive Terms – Answer Key

Honesty

Being truthful.
Being sincere.
Not cheating, stealing, or acting deviously.
Being consistent and thorough.
Follow through when you say you will do something.

Integrity

Being principled.
Protecting the client's right to privacy.
Being honorable.
Acting on behalf of the agency.
Fulfilling commitments.
Interpreting things clearly.
Living what you speak.

Fairness

Being committed to justice.
Providing equal treatment.
Being respectful and aware of diversity.
Admitting you made a mistake.
Not passing the buck.

Remembering that mistakes can be fixed.
Not taking advantage of another's mistakes or difficulties.
Act according to 'The Golden Rule'.
Use your judgment but don't pass judgment.

Respect for others

Recognizing human dignity.
Respecting data privacy.
Understanding people's right to decide how to live.
Providing people with the information they need to make an informed decision.
Acting with compassion, sincerity and tactfulness.

Accountability

Accepting responsibility for decisions.
Accepting consequences of actions.
Setting a good example.
Keeping promises.
Remember that you are a mandatory reporter.

Protection of the public trust

Safeguarding the integrity and reputation of the agency.
Doing things right the first time.
Taking action to prevent or correct others' inappropriate behavior.
Not abusing your power.
Protecting public interests.

Some Ethical Questions – Answer Key

1. **A client brings you a gift. The value of the gift is $15. Would you accept the gift? Why or why not?**

   Check with your supervisor regarding your county's policy on accepting gifts from clients.

Some things to consider:

As a public employee, you are already paid to do your job.

Would your client expect special treatment in exchange for the gift?

Would you consciously or sub-consciously treat this client in a different way than you treat your other clients?

2. **Your sister owns an apartment building and has some vacancies. You have some clients who are looking for housing.**

   a. **Is it appropriate to give clients information about your sister's rental properties?**

      No, even though your intent may be to help the client, you would be using your position for personal or private purposes.

      Give the client a referral to public or non-profit agencies that assist clients in finding housing.

      Your agency may already have a list of such resources. You could tell your sister about this list, and suggest that she might apply for a listing.

   b. **Is it appropriate to give your sister the names of clients who are looking for rental properties so she could contact them to see if they are interested in renting from her? Why or why not?**

      No, you would be using your position for personal or private purposes.

      This violates data privacy rules. There is a fine of up to $10,000 for each violation which you are responsible to pay and you may be subject to dismissal. Also, this is considered a minor federal misdemeanor and it could cost you up to one year in jail.

3. **You are waiting in line at your local bank. Your client is two people ahead of you in line. When your client gets to the window, it looks like the client is cashing a payroll check. The client has not reported working or receiving other income to you. What would you do?**

   Confronting the person there would violate confidentiality and data privacy.

   You are not close enough to see what kind of check the client is cashing, nor can you see who it belongs to.

   The client may be a newly hired worker. He or she has time (up to 10 days) to report changes and provide verifications.

   You may send the client a brochure on budgeting income, or on reporting requirements.

   You don't have enough information to take any action. Unreported income will eventually be discovered through electronic data matches and you will have a chance to act on the information then.

4. You are going through the grocery checkout line and notice one of your clients working as a cashier. When you get back to your office, you check the case file and discover that the client has not reported working. What would you do?

First, what is different about this situation from the previous?

- In this situation, you know that the client is earning income. In the previous situation, you did not know the details about the check the client was cashing.

The client still has time to report changes, and may have just started working. If the client does not report the job timely, send the client a packet of information and forms to report the employment.

You cannot ignore what you saw. You have an obligation to inquire about the client's job. However, it is important not to jump to any conclusions about the client's intent (e.g., that they have been working and fraudulently obtaining assistance for a long time). Remember, do not ask the client about the job while you are at the store; this would violate confidentiality and data privacy rules.

5. A relative of yours is unhappy about the way their worker handles his or her public assistance case. Would you look up the case on MAXIS to check it and get back to your relative with what you found?

No, it is not appropriate to use your position to check on cases in MAXIS or MMIS that are not part of your own caseload or cases you need to view to do your job. You have no professional need to see the case.

Tell your relative to talk to his or her worker. Clients have the right to ask for a copy of their case record if they have concerns. If they don't agree with the worker's actions, they always have the right to file an appeal.

You are also not permitted to be the worker on your own or any of your relative's cases because that would be a conflict of interest. If such a case happens to come to your caseload, ask your supervisor to reassign the case to another worker.