Call Center Task Tracker:
A Look at Santa Cruz County's Process for Banked Cases

Julie Martinez

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department (SCHSD) implemented a enefits Call Center (BCC) in March 2007 as a response to an increase in caseload size in Medi-Cal and Food Stamps. The BCC is a concept where ongoing cases are maintained in a banked caseload with no face-to-face client contact except on request. Currently, in Santa Cruz County, the BCC houses Medi-Cal, Food Stamp, Child-only and Foster/Care/Adoption Assistance cases. These ongoing cases are typically maintained by a group of eligibility staff with the assistance of clerical staff. Having a BCC in place, allows actions to be performed based on staff availability rather than case assignment to a specific worker.

To ensure the equitable distribution of work and quality control, Santa Cruz County developed a Windows-Based program called Task Tracker. SCHSD chose to assign tasks rather than cases for the BCC. In December 2007, the IT department was charged with developing the Task Tracker program that is now being shared as a "best practice" for counties that have or are thinking about designing a BCC. The SCHSD embraced the idea of an automated work environment as an efficient way of doing business. The Task Tracker has helped to accomplish this.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) implement a task-based model for banked Medi-Cal and Food Stamp only cases. Eligibility Workers (EW) II are recommended to complete the tasks associated with these programs. Cash-related cases should be excluded due to their complex program requirements and the need to be available for face-to-face customer contact.

Previously, ACSSA had a Benefit Center (BC) but due to financial reasons the staff and cases were reassigned to the district offices and the BC was closed. Alameda County understands the need to again explore new automated systems that increase worker efficiency. The eligibility workers are not able to properly maintain the number of cases currently assigned, nor can they provide good customer service due to the large volume.

The cost of investing in the Task Tracker application would be minimal for Alameda County since it recently hired two additional programmers/web designers and currently has some of the required software. The investment and business process that would be involved to set-up a BC is well worth the cost for both internal staff and the clients who need the services.

Julie Martinez, Program Specialist,
Alameda County Social Services Agency

Call Center Task Tracker:
A Look at Santa Cruz County's Process for Banked Cases

Julie Martinez

Introduction

Alameda County, like many other counties in California, is looking for ways to work more efficiently with fewer staff. With the caseload rising in all program areas, it is becoming more difficult for Eligibility Workers (EW) to process all the work required to maintain their caseloads. As of January 1, 2009, the overall cases in Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) increased 30% when compared to the same time last year. Although ACSSA is currently hiring additional EWs, it cannot keep up with attrition as workers retire, transfer or get promoted.

Currently the average caseload size for ongoing EWs in ACSSA is approximately 520 cases per worker. In these times of increased applications, the dilemma is how to face the challenge of properly maintaining cases with the current or even a reduced staffing level.

The county previously had a Benefit Center (BC) where it housed and serviced all ongoing cases with no face-to-face contact. The cost of the facility and high caseload made it unfeasible to continue the BC. ACSSA is currently researching a BC environment again.

The purpose of this case study is to research and identify effective tools and technology available to assist staff with case management in a banked caseload environment. My case study for effective technology in a BC environment led me to the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department (SCHSD), which developed a web-based program application called Task Tracker.

Historical Background

The SCHSD used various methods of assigning and tracking the 14,000 cases in the Benefits Call Center (BCC) in March 2007. Some of these methods included using:

- CalWIN,
- Access database,
- Excel spreadsheets and,
- Hand written notes.

Each day tasks for cases that needed to be acted on were assigned manually. The clerical staff would use a daily attendance roster to assign tasks depending on the job function. Tasks were assigned to case maintenance workers or phone workers based on their language, program knowledge and availability.

When staffing shortages occurred, it was difficult for management to track the work that was being assigned manually. A desk audit had to be performed in order for the supervisors to know how staff was managing their work. This required the supervisor to physically go through any files on the EW's desk to identify and record any outstanding task. For the supervisor, auditing the worker's performance proved to be time consuming and for the most part unreliable.

Manual assignment of these tasks often resulted in multiple EWs simultaneously working in the CalWIN case system on the same case. As a result, even if the workers were completing different tasks, the eligibility on the client's case was negatively impacted causing confusion. This created additional work as another person needed to "fix" the case.

The Task Management Tool (Task Tracker) was developed in December 2007, to provide support for the EW in managing tasks distributed from a banked caseload for the Medi-Cal and Food Stamp programs. Due to the increased caseload and the lack of adequate staff in Santa Cruz County, this tool was designed to maximize the use of automation as a

means of tracking accountability in a banked caseload environment. The Task Tracker provides the following basic functions:

- It enables clerical and supervisory staff to easily and concurrently assign tasks to the individual EWs;
- EW staff to self-assign tasks generated during client service calls;
- staff to easily search for open tasks that have been assigned;
- staff to mark assigned tasks as completed or closed and;
- supervisors and management to view statistics of assigned or completed tasks in a given time frame;
- It also produces reports of task activity against defined goals (performance reporting).

The Task Tracker is currently used by all of the BCC staff in Santa Cruz County and has the ability to be used agency-wide if needed. As of January 2009, the Task Tracker has helped manage a caseload of 12,300 Medi-Cal only cases, 3,800 Food Stamp cases, and 750 Foster Care/AAP eligibility cases. To manage the 16,850 cases currently at the BCC, there are twenty phone EWs and 24 case maintenance EWs for the Medi-Cal/Food Stamp cases and four EWs to manage the Foster Care cases. The Task Tracker program may also be modified to include other programs and functions.

Assigning Tasks in the Application

Clerical staff at the BCC assigns case maintenance tasks for EW's to respond to all US mail and other documents received at the application/intake center. These documents are date stamped, sorted by document type, and recorded in CalWIN via the traffic log. The documents are then assigned to the available workers for that day according to their function and/or specialty in the Task Tracker application. The physical document is placed in a manila folder with a cover sheet and checklist. Each cover sheet has bar codes which include:

- Batch Number;
- Case Number;

- Client Names (Last, First);
- Date of Birth;
- Social Security Number (only if available)

The EW assigned the task is responsible for processing the task that is in a pending queue in Task Tracker. When the worker selects the task to complete, the "Task Work Table" window will contain detailed information, such as the expected time frame the task must be completed in, what step the task is on in the process, and who and when someone made changes to the task.

Upon completion of the work, the EW is expected to update the information on the Task Tracker application "Action Log" window. The action log displays the date/time stamp of a task's activity. Anytime a change occurs on a task, the status is updated to reflect when it was started, completed or closed and who made the changes.

The Supervisor's role in using Task Tracker is critical in maintaining fair and equitable work distribution and in delivering the maximum level of supervisory support to the workers being supervised. The supervisor is responsible for reviewing certain tasks. Tasks requiring review are displayed in the supervisor's pending queue and are identified by:

- Task type—Specific tasks set to automatically "require review" and
- Worker profile—Profile/Tasks set to automatically "require review"

Supervisors sort their pending queue's by worker and forward a task list to each worker using Outlook. The task list is updated in the "Task Review" window. The Task Review window allows supervisors to record their findings and enter comments as needed by rating the appropriate status as one of the following:

- Correction needed- Follow-up;
- QA Review Completed;
- QA Review Pending—Follow-up;
- Reviewed—Corrections Made;
- Reviewed—No Errors Found;
- State Review Completed; or,
- State Review Pending—Follow-up

Self-Assigned Tasks

Task Tracker allows EWs or supervisors to self-assign tasks that result from client service calls. The Phone EW and, in some instances the Case Maintenance EW, creates and self-assigns a task based on the client's need while working on the case. The application helps identify and log tasks completed as a result of the service call.

Monitoring Assignment Distribution

Monitoring the distribution of tasks is important in maintaining the overall fairness of task distribution for the BCC staff. Task Tracker is designed to recommend assignment to workers who already have tasks pertaining to the same case number. This has helped prevent a duplication of effort that might occur if the same case was assigned to two different workers.

Some tasks have a high level of complexity and require additional time to complete. The system is able to recognize and assign complex tasks and evenly distribute them. Supervisors are able to view the task type and do not take punitive actions for tasks that may not be completed by the worker on the recommended date by the system due to their complexity.

Quantity and Quality

A variety of reports are available in Task Tracker. Reports are available for workers and management to use as a tool to measure quality and quantity of assigned tasks. The reports help management staff view the data and analyze areas where a worker may need to improve. The reports typically reflect the following information:

- Task Type & ID,
- Case Name/Number,
- Tasks Assigned,
- Tasks Completed (%),
- Days to Complete and
- Supervisor Review Status.

From the Task Tracker system, weekly and monthly priority reports are created and reviewed at the BCC management meetings. The weekly hot list report identifies those tasks that are time sensitive and need immediate action. Work plans, training and evaluations are developed as a result of these reports.

Conclusion

BCC's are becoming more popular and a necessity in California counties to keep-up with increased caseloads with fewer resources. Maintaining cases that are solely assigned to a specific EW is becoming an impossible task with individual caseloads increasing on a daily basis. Counties are turning to a BCC concept with the hope that they will be able to maintain quality in a banked caseload environment and maximize available automation.

Santa Cruz County is operating and managing its BCC very efficiently using automated technology. The overall set-up at the BCC is well organized due to having sufficient clerical support to assist eligibility staff and the use of the Task Tracker application to monitor both quantity and quality. Despite the increasing caseload size, staff members at the BCC are for the most part happy that Task Tracker is available to help prioritize their daily work.

Recommendations

Alameda County is currently looking at the possibility of recreating a Benefit Center using automation to assist with this concept. I recommend that the county embrace a BCC using the Task Tracker application as a tool to track the work of the EW. The cost is minimal for the service it would provide for both internal and external customers. In addition, I would recommend that a BCC consist of Medi-Cal and Food Stamp only cases, as these two programs do not require client contact.

The cost for developing the Task Tracker application would consist of:

- Software:
  Strata Frame $1385 + annual lease fee $685
  Infragistics $600 per developer ($1200)
  Report Sharp $300 per developer ($600)
- Two program developers for the application design
- 72 EW IIs assigned for a BCC caseload size of 57,578

- 89 EW IIIs assigned to cash with companion programs for a caseload size of 26,373

There are 52,003 Medi-Cal/Food Stamp cases and 5,575 Non-Assistance Food Stamp only cases in Alameda County as of March 2009. By removing these program cases from the current workers, the average caseload would be reduced from 520 to approximately 300. Customer service would greatly improve.

The recommended timeline to implement a BCC for Alameda County would be July 2010 (new fiscal year). This will allow the county to set up a planning committee to:

- Research other BCC automation available in other counties;
- Examine our business process and perform cost;
- Perform a budget analysis prior to implementation.

Acknowledgements