**Handout 1 - Overview of Casework**

**Defining Case Work**

Casework is one of the oldest professional forms of community service practice. Its form and focus has changed over time in response to the environment but its fundamentals remain the same.

Casework is that part of community service practice, which is concerned with assisting individuals. Within the case management model it is the component of practice which offers a direct service to individuals. In the case management model this is called counselling. However unlike therapeutic counselling, the service of casework includes everything from practical assistance, resolving a resource issue, through to interpersonal interventions to assist with an emotional or personal problem.

While casework is an old form of practice and while the fundamentals remain the same, it continues to emerge and develop. In 1937, Gordon Hamilton wrote:

"When we think of fundamental concepts we are inclined to imagine a static practice. The truth is that casework concepts are dynamic. They change, grow and develop as they are shaped by new experience and knowledge" (Roberts and Nee 1970: 35)

This statement while written some seventy years ago remains true today.

**How is Casework different from Case Management?**

This is not a simple question to answer. The lines between case management and casework are very blurred. Perhaps a better analogy is that of overlapping circles. However for our purposes here, we have defined them in the following way:

- Both *Case Management* and *Casework* are similar in that they are both viewed as approaches from the human services/community services areas to working with complex individual or family cases.

- Where they differ is that *Case Management* provides a managed approach to linking services with the needs of the client; operating like a coordinating system in order to achieve outcomes for the client/s. *Casework* is essentially a problem solving approach, using specific strategies to provide services for the client. At the client level, *Casework* can be defined as client centred and goal orientated directly linked to the needs of the individual.

- To simplify; *Case Management* is the plan for providing services/support to a client/s whereas *Casework* is the implementation or actual doing of that plan.
Values Underpinning Casework

1. Genuine concern for the person receiving assistance
2. A belief that it is possible for a person to change their lives
3. A willingness to work cooperatively with the person needing assistance
4. Respect for the client regardless of their culture, class, gender and history
5. Commitment to "best practice" - this includes a commitment to supervision and participating in professional development activities
6. Willingness to operate in an open and sincere way with the client
7. A belief that the cultivation of self reliance is better than rescuing the client
8. A belief that the client has the right to make their own choices and determine their own life path according to their own value system
9. A client must take responsibility for their own actions
10. Maintenance of client confidentially

Goals

- To help people to create a meaningful life for themselves fashioned from their own value system
- To resource people in a way that enables them to take responsibility for their own lives, that is to become self reliant
- To build a person self efficacy

Skills of the Case Worker

The skills of an effective Case Worker include:

- The ability to establish a relationship - engagement.
- Empathy, or the ability to see the issues from the point of view of another person.
- The ability to help others to obtain new perspectives on themselves, and their problems.
- Effective listening skills - this includes responding in a way that lets the client know that their problems, and feelings about these problems, have been understood. This allows the client to process their own problems without becoming reliant upon the Case Worker.
- Effective questioning skills which can assist the person to explore the things that interest them and concern them.
• Needs assessment skills or the ability to analyse the client within their environment and to identify the external and internal resources need by the person to improve their lives. External resources refer to the material and social resources that must to be mobilised to meet a need or to help a client fulfil a goal. Internal resources are the personal, social and emotional skills needed by a person to become self reliant and empowered in their interactions with their environment.

• A practical understanding of the community services sector and where resources can be located and how these can be obtained.

• A conceptual understanding or a way of interpreting the issues faced by the clients using sound psychological, sociological, and political theory.

• Exploration skills - to help the client to explore all the possible options for resolving their problems and the consequences of choosing these options.

• Reflection and evaluation skills to assist in monitoring and reviewing the progress of the client within their case plan.

Knowledge of the Case Worker

• **Human systems:** It is critical to have a comprehensive understanding of the systems that the client interacts with, particularly the family system. This allows the Case Worker to assess the needs of the client within their environment; to locate potential resources from within the client's own system; and to identify targets of change within the client's system.

A target of change is the area within the client's social system that needs to be developed or adapted in a different way to enable the client to have their needs met and to become more effective in their interactions with their environment. Sometimes it is the client who is the target of change, sometimes it is another part of the system e.g. the family.

• **Child protection:** The Case Worker must have a sound understanding of the relevant Child Protection Act in their State or Territory and their obligations under the Act. In most community service agencies, even where the law does not require mandatory reporting, the rights of a child to safety and protection are considered a duty of the community service worker.

This duty is reflected in the policies of most organisations, which stipulate that where a child is suspected of being harmed or at risk of harm, a notification must be made to the relevant child protection agency. This obligation overrides the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of clients.

• **Cultural awareness:** Australia is a multicultural society with a range of diverse language and cultural groups. While many human experiences are shared, the interpretations of these events can vary between cultures.

It is critical that the Case Worker is able to accept and respect diverse perspectives on life's events. It is also critical that they are able to demonstrate cultural empathy.

• **Community services:** A practical understanding of the community services sector and where resources can be located and how these can be obtained.
**Human behaviour:** A sound understanding of the lifecycle of people and the inevitable crises that occur during different phases of life and the impact that these crises have upon the individual and their families, is necessary if a Case Worker is to appreciate the appropriate context to understand the presenting problems of the client.

**Sociology:** no person exists in isolation. Many problems encountered by clients of the community services system are shared with many other people. No matter how great the contribution of the individual to their problems, caseworkers must always keep an eye out for situations that the clients, as individuals, cannot change. When an individual's private problems are a public issue, the caseworker may need to work with community workers, advocates and activists to achieve wider social reform. In order to recognise and understand the causes of social injustice the worker must be aware of social processes and the way the society organises itself.

**Source:**

- Slattery, Peter 2002 *Youth Works - A very practical book about working with young people* Peter Slattery, Dulwich Hill.