Promising Practices for Incident Management

How We Can Keep Vulnerable Citizens Safer

By Sarah Salisbury and Ashley Fawcett

Photo Illustration by Chris Campbell

P rotecting those who are most vulnerable, particularly our elders and people with intellectual or physical disabilities, is an essential function of state governments. As the backbone of systems of care that provide the programmatic and financial supports for these populations, state and local human services agencies have a core responsibility to ensure that people are safe and that abuse and neglect of program participants is prevented.

In trying to identify and prevent such abuse and neglect, many state human services agencies are hindered by fragmented processes and insufficient information technology (IT) systems for incident reporting and management. States, providers, and officials directing these programs can improve services and decrease risks by improving their incident management business processes, upgrading their IT systems to improve information sharing, and developing standardized, automated protocols for reporting and tracking incidents within their existing IT systems. Doing so will help those being served to realize their human potential and more fully contribute to their communities.

The Challenge

Human services programs operated by state and local government agencies, often through a network of third-party contracted provider entities, promote well-being and a higher quality of life for our nation's citizens that have physical and intellectual disabilities with long-term special needs. States retain responsibility for service oversight and the protection of these individuals from abuse and neglect. They are ultimately responsible for tracking, investigating, and managing incidents and complaints reported by individuals (recipients, family, community members) and providers.

In most states, incident reporting has evolved in a piecemeal manner, agency by agency and provider by provider. It is not uncommon for states to maintain different processes and systems to manage incidents for vulnerable individuals receiving support or services at state operated, licensed, and certified programs and facilities. This often leads to business problems such as:

- Multiple systems and databases for incident reporting and management translate into additional costs for user training and system maintenance;

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- Legacy incident management systems (or lack thereof) customized to meet evolving business needs;
- Inconsistent data elements across multiple agency systems;
- Lack of standardized reporting, provider information across programs/agencies, and cross-program coordination.

As a result, state human services agencies often lack access to quality incident data across all of a state's human services programs (even within the same agency). This can inhibit an agency's view of critical information inclusive of the full incident management lifecycle. To complicate matters, individuals may be served by multiple programs and providers may contract with more than one state human services agency. Problems can occur when agency populations overlap and incident management systems do not communicate with one another. A disparate system of incident reporting can result in:

- Inhibited progress toward client-centric, integrated human services delivery, including data integration efforts across agencies and programs;
- Inability to identify trends that drive preventive measures, strengthen responses, and improve existing approaches to incident management and continuous quality improvement of services;
- Risk that agencies charged with oversight of vulnerable individuals can be held responsible for recipient injury or death; and
- Risk to individuals when no single agency obtains a full picture of incidents occurring at the individual or provider levels.

Real-Life Implications

The lack of incident management, coordination, and oversight results in public agencies increasing their dependence—and spending of public funds—on both public and for-profit providers that serve individuals with disabilities.

The statistics are sobering for the 53 million adults (one out of every five adults) in the United States that live with a disability:[1]

- In one recent study, more than 70 percent of individuals with disabilities report they have been victims of abuse (this included verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, neglect, and financial abuse), and more than 90 percent of individuals with disabilities who were victims of abuse said they had experienced such abuse on multiple occasions.[2]
- Among individuals with disabilities who reported being victims of abuse, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) did not report it to the authorities.[2]
- In most cases, when victims with disabilities reported incidents of abuse to authorities, nothing happened.[2]

U.S. crime statistical systems do not identify children with disabilities, making it difficult to determine their risk of abuse. However, a number of small-scale studies found that children with all types of disabilities are abused more often than children without disabilities:[3]

- Studies show child disability rates of abuse are variable, ranging from a low of 22 percent to a high of 70 percent.
- One in three children with an identified disability for which they receive special education services is a victim of some type of maltreatment (e.g., neglect, physical, sexual).
- Children with any type of disability are 3.44 times more likely to be victims of some type of abuse.

The above statistics exemplify the risk that states and providers face every day when not thinking critically about incident management.

Promising Practices

Some states have made strides toward improving their incident management processes, procedures, and systems. Unfortunately, there are still too few examples of these real-life promising practices described below.

Consolidating Human Services Agencies' Incident Management Systems

Pennsylvania consolidated three incident management systems into one enterprise incident management system covering intellectual
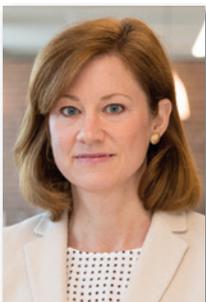
disabilities, long-term living, aging, early intervention, child welfare, mental health, and substance abuse populations. This transition created a centralized incident management repository and allowed providers to report incidents in accordance with the Adult Protective Services Act.

Exploring Universal Incident Management

In 2013, New York State created a separate agency to transform how the state protects individuals in state-operated, certified, or licensed facilities and programs.

The state recently developed business requirements, conducted a fit-gap analysis of existing systems, and evaluated commercial off-the-shelf products to help inform the feasibility of a Universal Incident Management System (UIMS) that meets cross-agency needs and maximizes efficiency by smart re-use of existing technology assets. A UIMS would help ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable individuals, including people with disabilities, a history of substance abuse, and

other medical, mental health, and behavioral health needs, in addition to children in foster care and special education.

Creating a Statewide Child Advocacy Office

In 2008, legislation designed to overhaul the Massachusetts child welfare system included creating a new child advocacy office. This child advocacy office investigates incidents involving children in state care, including reviewing complaints from the public and reporting any findings directly to the governor. In response to a recent series of high-profile incidents at residential schools for children with disabilities, the child advocacy office initiated an inter-agency review of the public and private residential and day programs that provided educational services to children and young adults with complex needs, and the oversight systems for these programs. Specific objectives include identifying and improving assessment and monitoring of risk factors to improve the safety of children at residential schools, and identifying process improvements to

enhance the efficiency of monitoring and oversight.

Improving Incident Management and Quality of Services

States and providers can proactively improve their incident management systems before circumstances beyond their control force a reactive response to an adverse event. However, it is important to recognize that the success of any endeavor, incident management included, is not solely dependent upon a technology solution.

Modernizing technology without redesigning business practices and policies will not solve the problems discussed above. It is critical that states address business processes before moving forward with any technology solution.

There should be a shared focus on implementing incident management data standardization and process consistency wherever it is possible, without compromising the missions and requirements of involved agencies. States can achieve this goal by:

- Identifying and considering relevant enterprise initiatives that can resolve current business problems such as developing common data elements, master provider and client indices, business rules engines, and web services;
- Identifying a solution to support incident management and quality assurance needs for programs and agencies that do not currently have an incident management system;
- Reviewing and re-engineering business processes; and
- Analyzing and modifying regulations, policies, and procedures to improve consistency and clarity.

This will provide states with the economies of scale to support a coordinated approach to incident management and, where appropriate, establishing a foundation to further address the unique needs of agencies and programs. States with a cross-agency commitment to incident management should complete a further series of essential work activities prior to moving forward with the design, development, and

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implementation of any technology solution, including:

- Establishing a governance structure;
- Developing detailed business requirements;
- Creating data management and governance procedures;
- Conducting outreach and communications;
- Identifying funding; and
- Completing procurement requirements (if needed).

States that choose not to implement a technology solution can still

reap significant gains by taking steps to ensure incident management standardization and consistency. If a state determines that there is a cross-agency commitment that will meet the broader business needs of the agencies, a further series of essential work activities should be completed prior to moving forward with the design, development, and implementation of any technology solution. States and providers that take steps to improve their incident management processes and IT systems will reap the rewards of better outcomes for their most vulnerable populations. ◼

Reference Notes

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2. Baladerian, N. J., Coleman, T.F., & Stream, J. *Abuse of People with Disabilities, Victims and Their Families Speak Out: A Report on the 2012 National Survey on Abuse of People with Disabilities.* September 5, 2013.
3. Davis, L.A. *Abuse of Children with Intellectual Disabilities.* March 1, 2011.

effectively, which in the end, is what we all hope to achieve.

Future Challenges for the Delivery of Public Human Services: Anyone involved with human services delivery knows that what we do every day is not easy; it takes a special dedication and devotion to helping others work to reach their full potential. We face many challenges moving ahead, but within those challenges lies opportunity. In 2013, the proposal to merge Perry County Transportation into Job and Family Services arose—an opportunity I did not want to miss. Access to transportation has been proven to have a positive impact on local economies and I was sure that the Perry County community

would benefit from integrating transportation with the other human services we provide. The integration effort showed immediate impact; residents now had access to transportation to meet essential needs like getting to medical appointments, local businesses now had access to new customers, and jobs were created—we needed people to transport our residents.

This is an example of the future I, and many of us, see for health and human services—integration of multiple agencies under one roof to provide a single point of service for our clients. The more we can utilize technology, the faster we can move toward a more collaborative and integrated model of service delivery.

Little Known Facts About Me: My husband, Mike, and I currently live in New Lexington, OH, with our children on our family farm. When we are not working with the horses on the farm, we are heavily engaged with volunteering in our community: the community theater, county 4-H club, and many local benefits with our musical talents. We also enjoy going camping as a family.

Outside Interests: I am involved in many community programs outside of work such as the United Way of Muskingum, Perry, and Morgan Counties, and the Perry County Community Improvement Corporation. ◼