Best Practices for Client Care during Service Disruption and Uncertainty

During times of funding and programming uncertainty, client care may need to shift and adjust to prepare for unexpected and unanticipated interruptions. The impact of a sudden change in care can create anxiety for both clients and staff, especially those with a history of loss, such as individuals and families who have been forcibly displaced. It is important for direct service staff to adopt trauma-informed approaches when managing service disruption in their caseloads to protect against further traumatization and to ensure clients have access to vital services.

This document provides guidance for managing service disruption, either through transferring cases to staff internally or referring clients to external support services. The steps outlined emphasize the importance of prioritizing client safety, transparency, empowerment and collaboration to ensure continuity of care and minimize any potential negative impacts.

Impacts of Service Disruption

Service disruption can significantly impact both clients and staff within an organization. For clients, the transition can lead to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety as they adjust to new staff or cope with reduced access to resources and support. This change can also affect community trust with the organization providing services. For staff, service disruption can create feelings of guilt and concern for client wellbeing, and for those staff assuming responsibility for cases, added stress due to an increased workload. Effective communication and support during this process are crucial to mitigate these challenges and ensure a smooth transition for all parties involved.

Potential impact on clients

- Feelings of abandonment and loss
- Reminders of previous loss and grief
- Increase in anxiety and uncertainty
- Reduced access to resources and support
- Disengagement from services
- Loss of trust in organizations, institutions and society

Potential impact on staff

- Feelings of guilt
- Concern for client wellbeing
- Avoidance of transition conversation with clients
- Minimizing impact on personal wellbeing
- Increased workload

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Implementing a trauma-informed approach to service disruption is essential for ensuring that clients feel supported. This approach acknowledges the potential impact of change on individuals, mitigates negative impacts through transparent communication and collaboration, and promotes resilience in clients as they move forward.

- **Safety**
  Provide a safe space to discuss changes with clients (a room that is private and confidential) and normalize emotional reactions to change.
- **Trustworthiness and Transparency**
  Have direct and transparent conversations with clients about the circumstances for change and plan for next steps (what is happening, why it is happening, when will it occur, and what happens next). Be transparent about what you do not know, explaining that you may not have answers at this time and that things will likely continue to change.
- **Peer Support**
  Provide information and referrals for clients to connect with other community members through ECBOs, schools, faith and religious centers to foster peer support during times of change and adjustment.
- **Collaboration and Mutuality**
  Create a plan together with clients, ensuring clients can voice their needs, for example, are there referrals that can be made to support their goals, do they have preferences on how their case is transferred?
- **Empowerment, Voice and Choice**
  Provide clients with options for next steps and create choice whenever possible (options for new provider, preferences on referrals, respect choice to close out case with organization); Inform clients of their rights (who can they go to if they have concerns).

- **Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues**
  Recognize the impact of change by being mindful of how loss and uncertainty can impact clients response (allow extra time for any emotional regulation or grounding, as well as questions); provide referrals that match their preferences including cultural and gender alignment, provide information regarding changes, such as closure letters and referral contacts, to client in writing in client's primary language.

Steps to Support Clients during Transition

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Prepare for Change

1. Determine options for ongoing care to present to clients including internal case transfer, external provider and support resources.
2. Prepare clients in advance by scheduling a discussion on case disruption prior to your last session. This will provide clients some time to process the change prior to ending the working relationship with their caseworker.
3. Prepare yourself for a potentially difficult or emotional conversation with clients. Take time to manage your own internal response, take breaks between meeting with clients, and incorporate relaxation and self-care techniques during and between client conversations

Validate Concerns and Emphasize Strengths

4. During conversation with clients, validate any emotional response and provide time to address any questions or concerns, ensuring the client understands next steps.
5. Emphasize client's strengths and resiliency by providing concrete examples of demonstrated coping skills and successes in the past.

Maintain Continuity of Care

6. Review the case plan and summarize the client's progress towards meeting goals. Explore new and ongoing needs and complete any final assessments for the program.
7. Document the client's progress and needs in case notes as well as any follow-up recommendations. If transferring to an outside agency, obtain a Release of Information (ROI) from the client to ensure ongoing needs can be communicated to a new provider.
8. Safety plan with clients to ensure access to resources during any transition period, including emergency contacts. Ensure clients have contact information for any new staff or referring agency for independent follow-up.

9. Facilitate a warm hand-off whenever possible, scheduling 10-15 minutes to introduce the client to the new team members or referring agency to reduce anticipatory stress.
10. Provide a case transfer or closure letter that includes: client name, start date of services, end date of services with caseworker, reason for service disruption (transfer or case closure), summary of client work such as progress on goals and key referrals, contact information for new caseworker or agency, additional referrals including one emergency hotline.[1]

Seek Support

11. Discuss any specific client concerns with a supervisor.
12. Recognize that this process, including the uncertainty and moral injury caused by unexpected service disruptions, is challenging and will bring up a range of emotions for you as the service provider.
13. Seek out and utilize support from supervisors, colleagues, and professionals to support your mental health and wellbeing during this time.

1 Discuss with client what information is safe to include and be cautious of sharing any information that is not critical to service continuity (i.e. immigration legal status, diagnoses, etc.).