

Serving Two Masters: Patient Advocacy and Case Referrals

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The reality is vocational rehabilitation counselors and case managers do serve two masters. The first responsibility is to the people to whom services are provided: the clients. Acting in a case management capacity, a provider of rehabilitation services is professionally and ethically obligated to advocate for clients, promoting their well-being and autonomy.

At the same time, however, the vocational rehabilitation counselor/case manager relies upon referral sources in a way that will generate more business—and more referrals. It can be a difficult line to walk at times. Consider this scenario:

A case manager in a vocational rehabilitation counseling agency has an ongoing business relationship with an insurance adjuster. This is a valuable connection that results in many referrals to the agency. When the adjuster calls with another referral, however, this time he tells her, “I’m sending you this case, but the only thing you’re permitted to do is direct placement. Just find this person a job without doing any assessment.”

What should the vocational counselor/case manager do?

In an agency or private company setting, one alternative would be to take the information under advisement and seek administrative direction from a supervisor on how to proceed. However, that raises the possibility that the supervisor will remind the case manager of a quota that must be fulfilled. Therefore, the referral must be taken. If that happens, the case manager is back in the same place, and the quandary continues.

There is an ethical way to proceed, one that serves all parties—especially the client for whom the case manager must advocate—and also promotes the greater good; that is, by educating the adjuster.

Here’s how this scenario might play out. The case manager tells the claims adjuster that handling the case the way he suggests—a placement without an assessment—may not be possible. She won’t be able to give a definitive answer, however, until contact has been made with the client.

Based on the initial client interview, the case manager realizes that she cannot in good conscience place someone who has heavy medical restrictions and a limited work history without conducting an assessment. Unless an assessment is made, too much risk is placed on the injured worker, the client’s needs cannot be served, and there is too much risk/financial exposure transferred to the potential new employer.

This may not be an easy message for the case manager to deliver to a valued referral source. However, it all depends upon the personal relationship that has been built over time. In this situation, the case manager explains the situation, points out the risks, and makes her recommendation for an assessment. If the adjuster respects her professional judgment and opinion, most likely he will go along with the plan in order to assure a placement that has a better chance of being successful.

As this scenario shows, vocational rehabilitation counselors and case managers face competing interests of the clients to whom they provide services, and the parties who pay for those services. Although this reality is at the root of many ethical conflicts, it's important to recognize that businesses are frequently built on personal relationships and education.

Recognizing the need for ethics education based on real-world scenarios and experiences, the Commission for Case Manager Certification CCMC offers an online module (see www.ccmcertification.org) that carries two continuing education units that can be applied to requirements for maintaining the Certified Case Manager (CCM) certification. The ethics module has also been approved for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors and Certified Disability Management Specialists who have requirements for ethics CEUs to maintain certification.

Vocational rehabilitation counselors and case managers who strive to build relationships with integrity and trust will be able to educate others regarding the delivery of services in a competent and highly ethical manner. The potential beneficial impact extends beyond a single case to help improve the understanding of rehabilitation and case management services among adjusters and other business contacts. Through those efforts to educate a broader business base, there will be greater advocacy for injured workers.

This can only be accomplished if the vocational rehabilitation counselor or case manager is truly interested in educating the adjuster or other party, and not judging them as “bad” or “wrong.” The other parties’ points-of-view are just different, based on the desire to control costs and manage the priorities as they see them.

The case manager’s role is not to save every situation, but to have the objectivity to act with highly ethical and professional standards. Then with the clarity of purpose, the case manager acts in accordance these standards to promote advocacy, to provide high quality services, and to build business relationships with integrity.

Carole Stolte Upman is a Commissioner of the Commission for Case Manager Certification (CCMC), and the current Chair of its Committee on Ethics and Professional Conduct. In addition, she is founder and president of Chesapeake Disability Management, Inc., and Director of Maturity Concepts: Care Management & Consulting, both of Towson, MD.

The Commission for Case Manager Certification (CCMC) is the first and largest nationally accredited organization that certifies case managers. For more information on the Certified Case Manager (CCM) certification or the CCMC's online ethics education module, see the web site at www.ccmcertification.org.