

The Challenges in Management Facing Rural Human Service Agencies

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Abstract

This study seeks to identify common challenges that face rural human service agencies. The goal is to identify barriers agency administrators face in their mission to provide high quality care for different service populations in rural areas. All of the agencies studied exist within the service area of an accredited human services program. Consideration is given to how this knowledge can improve the struggles existing in management and the importance of such knowledge in informing research and curriculum in human services programs.

Introduction

Since the 1980's human service agencies management teams have faced growing challenges in meeting their mission to provide services to the groups they serve. Research supports this claim especially in rural communities (Hopkins, & Hyde, 2002; Friedman, 2003). Many rural social services operate with, at best, modest budgets along with few service providers or no programs at all (Allard, Cigna, 2009). The continual economic, demographic, cultural and political changes in rural areas make the social services even more difficult to sustain the current needs of the community, let alone expand these services. Some managers defined the broader socio-political and economic environments as having significant impact on their agencies especially in relations to funding levels constraints and their challenging work load. (Lehmann, 2005) Other issues management face are recruiting, retaining an adequate workforce, internal organizational challenges, staff stress, burnout, alienation, low morale, staff lacking technological expertise, and diversity in the service workforce (Humphreys, Wakerman, & Wells, 2005; Parker, et al 1992)(Hopkins & Hyde, 2002). Along these same lines, other research shows problems with communication among different human services, applying for proper funding (or competing for the same funding), or using technology as a key resource to perpetuate there services (Winter 1999; Massoni-Maddigan, Burchick 2000; Martinez-Brawley, 1995; Reisch, Sommerfeld, 2003; Richgels, Sande, 2009).

Many of the human resource management agencies environmental challenges are the result of the continuing devolution, privatization and commercialization of social welfare policies/programs. (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002) Because there are many external and internal challenges the expectations placed upon the managers are increasing. Research shows the human service managers face high expectations of the qualities and responsibilities as well as

managers having high expectations of themselves. Managers in rural areas feel job mobility constraints regardless of their own level of ambition. The managers feel two types of constraints, one is caused by the selected number of senior positions available in rural areas resulting and the second is access to management development opportunities in support and training in the rural areas (Lehmann, 2005).

With all the obstacles human service managers must overcome, whether in rural areas or larger cities, some research has implied that certain models or methods may help improve productivity and services. Research conducted by Reisch and Sommerfeld reveals a breakdown in communication among human services working with each agency. The research indicates the larger the human service organization the more collaboration with other agencies however, the smaller the organization the less collaboration (2003). This may signify that rural communities do not collaborate or communicate among other agencies as well as larger human service agencies which management must address to resolve this issue. Along with collaboration with other agencies come forms of isolation that managers experience from rural areas due to factors such as geographic distance, size of the organization, trust and relationships with other organizations. The distance from those controlling funding and resources meant the managers had no formal exchange and leave managers unsure about the level of mutual understanding. The distance and limits on communication combined to reduce manager's confidence that their knowledge and understanding is being conveyed correctly. (Lehmann, 2005)

Other research indicates technology is a valuable asset for human services agencies, if used properly. Management Information Systems can help avoid duplications, determine eligibility, provide workflow tools, provide remote accesses, use knowledge management collaboration, and provide up-to-date data (Massoni-Maddigan, Burchick 2000; Martinez-Brawley, 1995; Geffen, Kost, 2006). If agencies would computerize and/or use an information system compatible with other human service agencies, a potential reduction in time and effort may be accomplished. In addition, fully integrated information systems with each agency could provide more accurate information by avoiding duplication errors. This would also help with scheduling staff, billing, and reporting needs. (Massoni-Maddigan, Burchick 2000). The human service management challenge with all the technology is the communication gap between the agencies, developing a roadmap for their organization to understand and everyone to follow, and acquiring the necessary education for the information system for employees. Both Manefee and Martin note that many agency employees are lacking in technological knowledge that places them behind in information systems and processing. (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002) The challenge that faces a human service manager is keeping employees educated in information systems and processes. Menefee recommends managers embrace the expanded roles of communicator, boundary spanner, innovator, organizer, resource administrator, evaluator, policy practitioner, advocator, supervisor, facilitator, and team-builder. (Hopkins & Hyde, 2002)

Research shows rural areas face a distinguishing challenge in ensuring that they have a suitable number of health care professionals to serve patients. Younger people are not choosing careers in the health field as often as they used to which encounters challenges within management in the human service agency. A reason for the lack of health care professionals could be the consequence of isolation within the agency. A solution for isolation could result in management using information technologies to create a network of co-worker collaboration

between sparsely located hospitals and rural care providers within which communication about care plans for specific patients can occur and reduce the isolation of employees. (Thomas, 2006)

Along with the importance of an up to date information system, the need to transfer knowledge is vital. Many agencies have a high turnover rate which means knowledge turns over as well. Martinez-Brawley, recognizes the need to transfer this knowledge in the most efficient manner possible because employees may change but the skills, knowledge, problems and procedures do not (1995). A well implemented information system can help to provide the key tools to transfer this knowledge from person to person and agency to agency but also is a challenge for managers in the agency.

The literature reviewed above touches upon a series of important themes that affect rural human service managers. However, the body of research in this area tends to be small and focused on how particular problems affect particular kinds of agencies. There is a lack of research that integrates the challenges of human service management agencies, serving different populations, in rural areas.

Methods

Purpose: The goal of this study is to better understand some of the challenges being faced by rural administrators and providers of human services in the region surrounding a Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE) accredited human services program.

To better understand the obstacles that local and regional agencies face, the authors, one a professor in administrative science and the other professor in the human service program, employed methods of analysis typically associated with the field of administrative sciences.

Instrument: An expert panel of seven human service administrators from rural northwest Pennsylvania was assembled and queried on challenges they face in carrying out their missions. The panel represented agencies serving a broad range of individuals/populations, including adjudicated youth, early intervention, adult and childhood mental retardation, and drug and alcohol prevention and treatment. They also represented different types of agencies including private, county, and state run agencies. An important goal of this study was to identify overarching challenges experienced by different types of agencies serving different populations. Insights gained from the expert panel were used to inform the creation of a survey instrument.

Common themes of challenge that emerged from the panel of administrators include:

- Information management/computer systems/reporting
- Recruiting and retaining qualified professionals
- Transportation
- Communication and coordination between agencies
- Government regulations
- Local culture
- Continuum of care issues

These themes were combined with questions about the role of the university program and personal job satisfaction of the respondents into a 34-item questionnaire. Scaled items were

rated on a Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 4 (Neither Agree nor Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Disagree).

In addition, two open-ended questions were asked: (However, for this particular analysis we disregarded the second question from our analysis)

1. What are the biggest challenges you face as a human service provider in a rural area?
2. How can local colleges and universities be constructive partners in your mission?

Before any assessments were done, the authors obtained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Assessments were completed via in-person interviews.

Respondents: There were 41 individuals each representing a different agency. Twenty five were from "not for profit" agencies, 8 were from "for profit" agencies, 3 represented county agencies, 3 represented state agencies, 0 were from federal agencies, one identified as "other", and one chose not to identify agency type.

The respondents represented a diverse array of institutions, populations served, and services provided across a 5-county area. Examples include: educational outreach/early intervention; HIV/AIDS; behavioral rehabilitation; independent living; mental retardation services; rape crisis services; nursing homes; visiting nurses; county agencies of mental health, mental retardation, aging, and substance abuse; spiritual counseling; special education; substance abuse (inpatient and outpatient); child care; adult day care; probation/parole; and vocational rehabilitation.

Results

As noted above, several factors emerged from the expert panel. These factors were included in the scaled items of the survey. The items regarding information management/computer systems showed that respondents, as a group, tend to neither agree nor disagree with statements relating to training and resources necessary to maintain computer systems and manage information.

Similarly, accessing qualified workers did not emerge as a strong obstacle. Respondents did acknowledge competition between human service agencies to recruit workers and expressed some frustration with pay-levels at their agencies.

Transportation did emerge as an agreed upon obstacle to providing care. However, the biggest obstacle was in the amount of time required, not the cost to the agency. That is, too much staff time is spent getting to or transporting clients. Money was not as big of a problem as expected, because transportation reimbursement is available at most agencies. Several administrators commented on the fact that transportation reimbursements are a valuable source of additional tax-free income for their employees.

Government influence was generally regarded as slightly less than neutral across the board. Government related items queried included changing forms, support for innovation, and awareness of challenges being faced.

Analysis of individual items that were rated at 6 or higher, or 2 or lower include:

- There is an even playing field between urban and rural areas in getting government support and resources (m=6.1, sd=1.1)
- There is a culture of poverty and lack of education unique to some individuals and families in rural areas (m=1.9, sd=0.93)
- I am personally satisfied with the work I do at my agency (m=1.8, sd=1.2)

Other key items include:

- I am NOT aware of recurring service needs across generations in the same families (m=5.7, sd=1.9)
- There is a culture of poverty and lack of education unique to some individuals and families in rural areas (m=1.9, sd= 0.93)

Items that were marked by the greatest variance (measured by standard deviation) were:

- There is competition between human services agencies to recruit and retain human service workers (m= 3.3, sd=2.2)
- Third party payers, such as health insurance and managed care companies, positively affect the services provided by my agency (m=3.6, sd= 2.2)

There were interesting responses to the open ended question: What are the biggest challenges you face as a humans service provider in a rural area? Funding and transportation were the overwhelming responses, listed by approximately half of all respondents. Other items listed by multiple respondents include retention of employees, poverty, referral options/continuum of services, communication, job opportunities for clients, stigma, and poor third party reimbursement.

Discussion

In reviewing the responses to the scaled survey items, there was clear agreement among human service providers that within rural areas there is a relatively small subculture of poverty and dependence upon social service agencies. Furthermore, this problem is associated across generations within families. Discussions with the original expert panel expanded upon this observation by pointing out small groups of individuals consume inordinate amounts of time and resources. Solutions that can focus on cultural change within these groups of consumers would relieve human service agencies of their disproportionate burden. This would in turn help administrators focus these resources to other urgent areas within the organization. This insight has implications for policy, education, and future research.

The survey results also reflected a theme noted among the expert panel, that despite high levels of challenge and stress, they feel respected in their community and satisfied with their jobs. It is clear that non-monetary rewards are essential to job satisfaction in the field of human services. However, employee retention of qualified employees shows as a major concern. As administrators the need transfer these same attitudes and feeling to their employees might be key.

The search for common challenges did not always work out with uniformity in responses. The two items reported above that had the greatest variance, i.e., recruitment and retention of workers, and the effects of third party payment, were very significant for some, but not all respondents. This observation is borne out in the fact that both items were listed multiple times in the open ended questions.

Transportation is the hallmark problem of rural service delivery, and that was borne out in this survey. The scaled items on the survey asked questions related to agency funding, but missed the very strong concerns of human service administrators regarding their ability to remain solvent. This was revealed in the fact that over half of respondents took the time to list it (usually first) as the biggest challenge they face as a provider in a rural area. While the expert panel worried about the ability to recruit and retain employees within their budget, the larger, more diverse sample worried about their ability to fulfill their basic mission.

Similarly, it was expected that access to students as volunteers, interns, and employees would be valued by the respondents to this survey. What was less anticipated was the extent to which rural human service administrators prioritize active and open communication and involvement with local colleges and universities. They consistently reported a desire to partner in areas such as grant-writing, program development, care provision, training, and they requested direct access to students to increase awareness of their agencies. This suggests that many agency administrators would like a greater and more active role with the university. Programs should consider how to cast a wider net for advisory board participants and create more formal opportunities to communicate about programs, beyond just internship supervision.

The authors hope to encourage human service professors in rural areas to take an active role in researching the challenges faced by community partners. Results of this study painted a textured picture of challenges agencies face in the day to day delivery of services. Many of these problems are the daily task administrator's face in rural human service business. Being that many of these services are nonprofit facilities and added stress factor for administrators is yearly funding issues and grant writing. An underling factor and important part for administrators is the communication and accessibility to shared information. The more resources or "central bank" of information these service agencies's can share, the better potential they have to save time and effort with duplications. Also, this research hopes to encourage administrators to understand and promote job satisfaction among their employees to promote the retention of qualified personal.

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