UCLA
Policy Briefs

Title

Barriers to Engagement: Client Perspectives from a Community-Based Organization

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rs0k27b

Authors

Katz, Sarah
Cecil, Zachary
Horowitz, Chloe
et al.

Publication Date

2020-07-01

UCLA **Lewis Center**
for Regional Policy Studies

Barriers to Engagement: Client Perspectives from a Community-Based Organization

Sarah Katz, MSW; Zachary Cecil, MSW;
Chloe Horowitz, MSW; Nicole White, MSW • 2020

Issue

Client disengagement presents numerous problems for mental health agencies and represents a significant barrier to effective mental health treatment. Failed appointments due to client disengagement result in inefficient use of staff time and a decrease in staff morale. Frequent client withdrawal increases the cost of treatment, decreases revenue for therapists and agencies, and denies access to limited mental health resources for others in need. Client disengagement is an issue well known to service providers and social researchers alike. Whereas numerous studies have attempted to gain insight into the problem and offer practical solutions for both clients and clinicians, client attrition still needs greater understanding and better solutions. Therefore, the goal of this research is to understand, from the perspective of clients and case managers, the barriers that prevent consumers from accessing mental health care and engaging in the treatment process. Findings can suggest practical and efficient solutions to address these barriers, resulting in increased client engagement within outpatient mental health settings.

Study Approach

During summer 2019, St. Joseph Center recruited this research team to conduct a study on the agency's behalf, for the purpose of understanding client disengagement. Once the study sample was selected by St. Joseph Center, researchers evaluated reasons for disengagement using a qualitative approach, gathering data, comparing it with previous research findings and conducting one-on-one interviews with five St. Joseph Center clients and three case managers who work for the agency.

The research team then utilized line-by-line open coding methods to organize and label interview data. Interview data were re-coded to regroup data into appropriate categories, which helped identify core concepts and patterns. Lastly, the research team utilized selective coding to link acquired data with data outlined in the review of existing literature. Coding aided in determining any explanatory patterns within the gathered data.

Research Findings

» Homelessness was a reported barrier among two out of three case managers and three of the five clients. Every client mentioned they had experienced homelessness at some point during their time with St. Joseph Center.

» Geographic proximity was identified by one client and one case manager as a barrier for engagement in mental health services.

» Three clients reported transportation as essential to regularly accessing services. One client expressed that lack of funds for transportation was an issue that they faced, and two other clients acknowledged that the agency provided them with a bus pass when possible.

» All three case managers described the challenge of losing contact with their clients as their clients were moved through the medical or criminal justice systems as major systemic barriers to continued engagement in services.

» The lack of funding for mental health resources also provided a significant systemic barrier.

» Clients and case managers identified that frequent staff turnover, high caseloads, and low staff wages, negatively impact clients' ability to access and utilize mental health services.

Code	Definition	Frequency
Geographic Proximity	Access to services as it relates to distance required to travel to service center from housing or resting area	6
Health & Mental Health	Health and mental health complications or comorbidities	9
Homelessness	Currently or previously unhoused	10
Policies & Practices	Related to staff and client policies, including staff census, wages, provider fatigue, high caseloads, and lack of funding	24
Systemic Barriers	Barriers outside of the control of the agency or individual	8
Therapeutic Alliance	Forming a positive bond between case manager and client; establishing trust between case manager and client; ability to reach case manager when needed	12
Transportation	Ability to access services as it relates to ability to acquire means of transportation to service center	5
Engagement	Related to definition of engagement	5

Figure 1.

Categories of codes representing treatment barriers

» Past negative experiences with providers triggered distrust with current providers, which all three case managers identified as having a negative impact on clients' ability to engage with them.

» The presence of severe and chronic mental health symptoms or co-morbid substance use was a recurring theme in the data. Both case managers and clients reported that incarceration and health issues impacted clients' ability to engage.

Recommendations

The findings suggest that better client engagement might result from improving accessibility of services. This barrier to client engagement might best be resolved through the opening of additional service sites or satellite offices, enhancing remote meeting options for case managers, and/or allocating more funding to client transportation to sessions.

Better client engagement might mean decreasing individual case manager responsibility. This could improve case

managers' ability to meet the expectations of their clients, and improve overall service utilization.

Increasing staff numbers could improve staff retention in addition to increasing face-to-face client time, potentially improving rates of consistent client engagement. Moreover, increasing the amount of client face-to-face time might also increase client willingness to engage with case managers through improved therapeutic alliance – an important influencer of client engagement detailed within the study.

For More Information

Cecil, Z., Horowitz, C., Katz, S., & White, N. (2020). Barriers to engagement: Client perspectives from a community based organization (Master's project, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jr2j2zn