

The Generalist Worker & the Helping Perspective

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Chris Herrington works for Odyssey House, which he describes as a "non-profit residential adolescent substance abuse treatment facility." Chris has worked for this organization for roughly two and a half years and maintains a dual title role within the facility as both Medical Coordinator and Support Staff Supervisor. After previously experiencing unemployment for about a year, Chris' decision to work for Odyssey House was influenced by his own past experiences with the understanding that those same experiences could help him better relate to and help the kids in the program.

Target Population

The target populations of Chris' particular facility are male and female adolescents ranging from ages 14-18 who are in need of substance abuse counseling. The youth served have a history of substance abuse in combination with noncompliant, antisocial, or combative behaviors falling outside of social norms. In order to meet the needs of each client, Chris' main focus of client care revolves around problem solving in relation to finding appropriate medical treatment and coordinating transportation to various medical and legal appointments.

In addition to working directly with clients, Chris also coordinates with a variety of individuals associated with the clients in order to provide the best possible care. Such coordination involves client family members, involved staff, as well as medical and legal personnel who attend to client well being and overall treatment progress.

A Day in the Life Of...

The typical day for generalist workers can vary greatly; however, as Burger (2011) mentions, many generalists have multiple forms of responsibility which can include documentation, general supervision, scheduling for clients, self or others, and coordinating client care.

A routine day for Chris falls along similar lines. He describes his daily work routine to be a mixture of many things. For a smooth running facility, as Support Staff Coordinator, Chris must maintain support staff scheduling, provide accurate and detailed information both verbally and written for oncoming staff, and handle any conflicts that may arise between staff, clients, or the combination thereof.

In addition to his role as a staff supervisor, Chris also maintains his role as Medical Coordinator for the clients in which he serves. This role functions as an ongoing process of meeting client needs and includes a wide spectrum of tasks. Some of these tasks include assessing the needs of the clients and arranging corresponding medical appointments, communicating with caseworkers and treatment team personnel, as well as still meeting expected time frames for each task needed. For example, if a client's caseworker contacts the facility, Chris has 24 hours to respond to him or her. Additional deadlines include assessments and scheduling appointments within 30 days of client admission, as well as following up with continued client care.

Needless to say, as Chris performs a dual role for his agency, it's possible that on occasion his responsibilities may come in a heavier load. Bearing this in mind, it's easy to see

where personal and professional conflicts may arise for a generalist worker with a high level of responsibility.

Obstacles and Issues

Many professionals in the generalist category face a wide array of complications and issues which interfere with their ability to perform at their best. Such issues can be based on ethical controversies, personal and professional limitations, and even ensuring quality of care to name a few. For Chris, such challenges and limitations are no stranger to his work.

Ethically, and consequentially professionally, Chris has to ensure that clients and staff are being treated in an appropriate manner. This includes staff to client, client to staff, client to client, and staff to staff behaviors. When situations do come up where ethics are in question, it is Chris' responsibility to ensure that the problems are handled in a professional and appropriate manner.

One way an individual can experience personal limitations is through being overworked and thus experiencing burnout. A large concern for burnout within organizations is how it will affect the individual. Borritz et al. (2005) suggest that as human service workers experience burnout, their sickness rates could increase as high as 21%, depending on their personal lives. Such high rates are obviously possible for an individual such as Chris who is fully responsible for ensuring that his facility is properly staffed at all times. Such a responsibility indirectly states that if a shift is not filled, he is responsible for covering it. In a facility where staff turnover is relatively high, the likelihood that Chris will have to fill more shifts than his regular schedule is relatively high. This is of course, only one aspect of personal limitations which can influence adequate service delivery to clients; however, the possibility of burnout runs exceptionally high

for professionals such as Chris who have the added responsibility of scheduling staffing as well as client care.

Likes and Dislikes

After interviewing Chris, I realized quickly that being in a supervisory role in human services would not be a long term goal of mine. Given the level of responsibility and potential for stress that existed with his title, I felt that at present, such potential stress is not something I would be willing to endure. On the other hand, I was very impressed by his level of responsibilities and his ability to perform his job well. His devotion to the clients and his lack of negative regard for the field was encouraging to hear, especially as he expressed the disadvantages of being in a supervisory role.

Ultimately, it would appear that for as much self-gratification as there is potential for in the field of human services; the amount of associated stress that can also stem from the position may be worth a second and more in depth evaluation.

References

- Borritz, M., Rugulies, R., Villadsen, E., & Kristensen, T.S. (2005, July). Burnout As A Predictor of Self-Reported Sickness Absence Among Human Service Workers: Prospective Findings from Three Year Follow Up of the PUMA Study. *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, 63(2), . doi:10.1136/oem.2004.019364
- Burger, W. R. (2011). *Human Services in Contemporary America* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.