

The Role of Social Work in Health Advocacy

By: Michelle Chiaro, MSW, LSW

When people hear that I'm a social worker, they immediately assume I work with the poorest, most debilitated individuals. I have done that and much more. In my 30 years of social work experience, I've helped countless people with a variety of personal and health-related concerns. I've helped those with substance abuse issues, worked in the foster care system, provided a variety of counseling services, and assisted children and families with mental illness.

Most clients came to me through a clinical setting or a government-sponsored nonprofit organization. This left the general public to fend for themselves, often too proud to seek help or unaware of how to find the help they needed.

But today the opportunity to touch more lives exists in the continuum of services and programs offered by employers across the country. With the advent of consumer-driven health plans and other cost-saving measures, employers are shifting more responsibility to the employee. Health advocacy and employee assistance programs (EAPs) were designed as tools to assist people with these complex health and life issues.

About Health Advocacy

Modern health advocacy services began appearing in the 1990s. They were created around the idea that healthcare, as well as

employer benefit packages, were becoming so complicated that people needed help navigating the system. The idea was that a more informed patient made better healthcare decisions, thus saving money and improving health outcomes.

Employers saw the possibilities and began hiring outside firms to take the burden off their human resources departments that were being bombarded by employees needing help untangling healthcare issues. Employers attracted and retained valuable employees due to the richness of their benefit packages.

They also found that the use of a third-party advocacy service protected employee privacy and kept the company in compliance with strict HIPAA laws.

Many health advocacy services are comprised of a call center staffed by a team of health advocates, typically registered nurses, and supported by medical directors, social workers, and benefits and claims specialists.

When employees call a toll-free number, they are assigned an advocate who works with them one on one to resolve a range of clinical, administrative, and insurance-related issues that usually overburden employees and human resources staff.

Advocates serve as liaisons with healthcare providers and insurance plans. They help employees locate in-network providers, obtain second opinions, resolve insurance claims and billing errors, and assist with eldercare, research treatments, and related issues.

Resolving these issues expertly and efficiently helps increase productivity, saves time and money, and helps both the employee and the employer get the most value from the healthcare experience.

Over the years, health advocacy services have expanded to not only help people improve their health and make smarter medical decisions but also to balance work and life demands, get connected to the right benefits, and even lower their medical bills.

About EAPs

All of us have experienced some type of personal problem, concern, or emotional crisis at some point, and balancing the needs of work, family, and personal responsibilities isn't always easy. We often take those issues to work with us, resulting in stress-related illnesses, reduced productivity, and sometimes job termination.

Employers first introduced EAPs and work/life programs in the 1940s to address growing alcohol addiction problems among industrial workers. Most of these programs were run by recovering addicts in the form of self-help groups or referrals to Alcohol Anonymous programs. By the 1980s, these programs expanded to address personal issues that affected employees and were often tied to employee performance. In some cases, those who needed help entered inpatient facilities for treatment.

Taking the idea a bit further, modern programs cover an endless variety of employee and family issues, provide access to a counselor, and often make referrals to a complex network of outside resources. By the late 1990s, an estimated 20,000 EAP providers were in operation in the United States, according to the Employee Assistance Professionals Association.

An employer, as a complementary service to an employee's health benefit plan, offers these modern programs. Often an extension of health advocacy services, EAPs and work/life programs provide a wealth of support services that were previously only available to those in specific, often nonprofit and clinical settings. These programs are designed to help people lead happier and more productive lives at home and at work by offering support on issues such as stress, divorce and separation, mental health, legal and financial problems, substance abuse, and anger and grief counseling.

In most cases, EAPs and work/life programs make a professional counselor available to employees. The counselor's role is to first listen and help clearly define the problem; second, to assess the type of help needed; and third, either provide the required help or make the most appropriate, cost-effective referral. A third party conducts the services, so conversations and actions are always confidential.

Why Social Workers?

After working for many years in a clinical setting, I heard about the growth of health advocacy and EAP and work/life services. I admired the concept and saw the possibilities as a social worker with a wide range of experience dealing with life issues.

Social workers are ideally suited, and have the credentials, to champion advocacy. We have been trained with a set of specific values and ethics and are committed to client self-determination. In addition, we practiced confidentiality and informed consent long before HIPAA became the rule. We are experienced in cultural diversity and have developed collaborative relationships with other disciplines, allowing us to freely network to locate a variety of resources for our clients.

The social worker's role is one of advocacy, to empower members with the knowledge, resources, and understanding to better help themselves. The social worker is a listener and a voice of reason to those who have been frustrated with work or life, or with the stress of managing their health and the health of their families.

As an employee assistance professional at a national health advocacy company, I get a first-hand look at the desperation families experience as they attempt to traverse the complicated system—often as a result of very traumatic events. Imagine a mother struggling to get therapy for her daughter with a serious mental illness or an intellectually challenged son who's being denied his medication. What if you or someone you loved was tormented by debilitating distress after being held up at gunpoint? Would you know how to locate a posttraumatic stress disorder specialist?

These are just a few of the cases where I was able to provide clear direction and assistance to families in need.

And there's no doubt we are making a difference in people's lives. Over the past year I've successfully handled dozens of cases and gained incredible insight into the workings of the employee benefits and healthcare

systems. It has become very clear that employers are seeing the benefits of offering health advocacy and EAP work/life programs to their employees. Employees are less stressed, more confident, and feel supported as they face some of life's biggest hurdles.

But at the same time I need to be reasonable in my expectations; advocacy work has limits. I know I can't fix what is broken about our system; I know I don't have a magic pass that lets me plow through red tape or perform medical miracles. I'm often bound by the rules of the same system that leaves my members in a glassy-eyed daze. It's not easy work, but when I'm successful, I feel the pride and satisfaction in helping people with very serious, often life-changing issues.

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