

SOAR Dialogue Highlights

4/18/13

Attendees: Emily Carmody, TJ Reynolds-Emwanta, Donna Taylor, Tracy Miller, Daphne Drew, Pamalia Davis, Joyce Allen, Dan Ferrell, Dawn Johnson

Introductions

- Emily Carmody- Had a great SOAR training in Greenville in March. Many attendees already starting applications. Looking to schedule our next training at the end of June in Orange County.
- TJ Reynolds-Emwanta- PD case that was officially approved (first one since TJ has been at CenterPoint). Several cases in process. Have an upcoming Implementing SOAR Training in Winston-Salem, and we have a full house with a waiting list. Looking forward to generate interest in SOAR in the community.
- Donna Taylor- In W-S with TJ, and I am a newly trained SOAR caseworker.
- Tracy Miller- Two pending cases at the moment.
- Daphne Drew- One case headed to DDS soon.
- Pamalia Davis- One approved this month and one pending case.
- Joyce Allen- One pending case right now.
- Dan Ferrell- Kathryn is coming back to Wilmington from a month in Bahrain. Looking forward to having her back.

Federal and State Updates

On this month's SOAR Dialogue Call, the group heard and discussed federal and state updates that impact SOAR.

Federal Updates:

- USICH and SSA Policy Advocacy
 - Fall 2012, Emily had conversation with Deb Dennis at PRA (over the national SOAR TA center) about needed federal policy changes within SSA to support SOAR casework. For example, a national SOAR process would allow states to follow the same process to expedite SOAR cases and clarify issues with local SSA offices.
 - NCCEH then asked for a phone call with the USICH (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness) to discuss policy changes that are needed with SSA and having SSA as a more active partner.
 - USICH created and oversees *Opening Doors*, the federal plan to end homelessness and allows a place for collaboration and partnership to address issues related to ending homelessness.
 - NCCEH, PRA, SAMHSA, and some national advocates have been having regular phone calls to discuss issues. Results of these phone calls include:
 - Meeting between SSA, PRA, and SAMHSA to discuss specific policy issues related to SOAR.

- A roundtable for homeless advocates with SSA in February that was open to all advocates and allowed SSA to hear about barriers that homeless applicants face.
 - Now we are asking for SSA and national advocates to have regular meetings to discuss these issues. SSA is receptive to this idea, and USICH and SSA are meeting at the end of this month to discuss homelessness issues.
 - Questions:
 - Dan- Who is at the table at the SSA side?
 - Acting Commissioner of SSA- Carolyn Colvin is involved and many other staff from SSA are participating in the meeting.
 - She was also present at the roundtable.
 - Being very proactive in this matter.
 - Barbara Poppe will also be present at the USICH meeting.
- Sequestration
 - We have now past the budget deal deadline and are starting to see effects of federal sequestration.
 - Some programs are exempt from sequestration: TANF, Medicaid, SSI/SSDI benefits
 - SSA's budget is not exempt. Have to make a 5.1% decrease to budget.
 - At this point, most of this budget has been spent.
 - SSA will accomplish most of this budget cut with employee furloughs.
 - We are not sure how this will affect local offices in NC but we have already seen some changes:
 - SSA office hours have been cut.
 - SSA has a hiring freeze so some offices are now understaffed.
 - SSA has travel restrictions which include local travel restrictions to come to meetings in the community.
 - Please be on the lookout for these changes and challenges at your local SSA offices.
 - What changes have you noticed at your offices?
 - TJ- We have definitely had a reduction in hours in Winston-Salem. Staff cuts have also happened and now have a backlog in cases. Office does not take appointments on Thursday anymore. SSA could not attend the local training due to travel restrictions.
 - Emily- These cuts may affect our average decision days on cases due to it taking longer to process nonmedical information for applications.
 - Dan- I got a summary of an SSA Alumni Association meeting in Seattle. SSA executive in the region told the group that for two years they have only been hiring temporary employees and retired annuitants and are losing a lot of Baby Boomers on staff to retirement. No formal training for temps and the demand on the offices is increasing. Would not have heard this from SSA previously.
 - Emily- Things to keep in mind:

- SSA is our partner with SOAR. While it may be frustrating to have extended days until decision, we need to be understanding of the challenges SSA is facing while advocating for our applicants.
- If you start to get misinformation from Claims Reps of temporary workers, please keep NCCEH informed.
 - First, please contact your office's SOAR contact (usually the manager) to let them know what you have been told to get clarification.
 - Next, let NCCEH know so that we can follow up with our state SSA representative. Randy has been a great resource for us in addressing information gaps that happen at SSA offices.
- Cuts are also being made at SAMHSA, the agency that sponsors the SOAR program.
 - Not sure how this will affect the SOAR program in an ongoing way.
 - PRA has cancelled/postponed recent events (a Train the Trainer training and SOAR State Lead meeting) as SAMHSA is figuring out funding cuts.
 - This will not affect NC trainings at this time.
- Cuts will also be made at HUD.
 - Looks like about 140,000 rental vouchers (Section 8 vouchers) will need to be cut nationwide.
 - This will affect local Housing Authorities in different ways.
 - Advocates think that most of this will be done through shelving vouchers as the vouchers turnover rather than handing them out to the next person on the waiting list.
 - If you start seeing these changes in your community, please keep NCCEH informed so we know how this affecting NC.
 - Some Housing Authorities have reserves that will allow them to continue vouchers while handling cuts.
 - Questions:
 - TJ- How will this affect the DOJ settlement in NC?
 - Emily- The DOJ settlement is focusing a lot on state funding. If a person that is in the target population (3,000 individuals in Adult Care Homes and state hospitals with mental illness who are at risk of going to an Adult Care Home) qualifies for a federal rental voucher, then they will use that, but if not, the rental assistance will come from state funds.
 - Emily- So this may affect the number of federal resources that NC can use to offset state funds. However, the DOJ settlement relies on the General Assembly appropriating funding for the settlement in the state budget.

- Emily will forward the group a document that outlines the possible HUD cuts. Again, these are possible cuts, and we don't know what HUD's decisions will be for cuts.
 - Dan- Martha Are let us know that it looks like our ESG rapid rehousing money will be reduced of as much as 8-10%. Trying to keep this in mind with our current program. This will constrain the number of SOAR clients that we can get into rapid rehousing.
 - Emily- Yes, that is a pending decision from HUD. They are figuring out how to balance the cuts to ESG and CoC funding.
- Expanding Acceptable Medical Sources
 - Yvonne Perret continues to work on expanding medical sources to LCSW, PA, and NPs.
 - The official process is underway and it is still moving through SSA.
- National Health Care for the Homeless and PRA are planning on doing a webinar about the newly released Drug Abuse and Alcoholism policy. Emily will send out the webinar information when it is scheduled.
- PRA Announced 2012 National SOAR Outcomes:
 - North Carolina is looking good compared to national outcomes.
 - National SOAR Outcomes
 - Approval rate
 - Cumulative (from start of program): 66%
 - For 2012: 58%
 - Average for initial applications for non-SOAR: 29%
 - NC: 80% cumulatively and for 2012
 - NC was named in the Top Ten states for highest approval ratings!
 - Average Decision Days
 - Nationwide: 98 days
 - NC: 90 days
 - Only statistic that stood out was CE requests
 - Nationwide: 26%
 - NC: 35%
 - CEs are often requested when there isn't enough medical information for DDS to make a decision.
 - In NC, since we have had a special process at DDS, this rate has increased. Not sure if this is because DDS needing to have back up information for their SOAR decisions.
 - TJ- I have not noticed this with Donna but other, previous DDS examiners who were assigned to SOAR asked for CEs.
 - Dan- We found funding for outside evaluations to decrease the amount of CEs requested and have also been able to get reduced pricing for evaluations.

- Overall, NC should be proud of the quality of work and how we contribute to the national outcomes.

State Updates:

- At this point, the Governor and General Assembly have decided not to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.
 - So, in NC, Medicaid is operating under business as usual when it comes to eligibility.
 - This decision can change at any point and Medicaid expansion is still possible in NC.
 - Proposed Medicaid changes in NC include having private companies bid to manage the program for the state. NCCEH will keep you posted on these changes as we know more.
 - There is some hope that the federal government will strike a deal with NC so that they will approve the proposed Medicaid changes if the state expands Medicaid to newly eligible populations.
 - NCCEH will keep you posted about any advocacy efforts when it comes to Medicaid expansion.

NC SOAR 2013 Goals:

- Emily sent out an email summarizing where we are with our goals:
- Total Outcomes: Goal is 125 SOAR Outcome Reports per quarter
 - We received 106 SOAR Outcomes this quarter
 - Next quarter we will increase our goal to 132 SOAR Outcome Reports to stay on target
 - A number of people who had not previously submitted SOAR outcomes began submitting outcomes this quarter.
 - Ideas to help support meeting our Second Quarter Goals:
 - Donna- How many people are SOAR trained in the state?
 - Emily- Total: over 900 people trained, 121 people to date are actually using SOAR
 - These numbers include the last group of trainees
 - TJ- Keep encouraging communities to come together to create a SOAR work group
 - Help to generate more interest in the community about SOAR
 - Keep people who are trained involved in the program and completing applications- asking them to commit to one case per year
 - Help to mentor caseworkers as they are completing cases
 - Address barriers completing applications
 - TJ- Having more face-to-face meetings of SOAR caseworkers in NC to help support each other in generating more interest and support for SOAR
 - Emily- If there is anything I can do to support community SOAR workgroups, please let me know. These groups do allow communities to support, sustain and grow SOAR in the state.
 - Joyce- A refresher training may be helpful to get previously trained individuals back into the loop.
- Approval rate: Goal is 85% in 2013
 - First Quarter approval rate is 80%
 - We can still meet our 2013 goal

- Ideas to help support meeting our Second Quarter Goals:
 - Emily- Besides improving quality of SOAR applications, are there suggestions from the group?
 - TJ- How do you track applications through different levels of applications?
 - Emily- for the most part, people do update cases so if a case was denied at the initial and approved at reconsideration, the case would move from the denial column to the approval column.
 - Emily- We only track the outcomes after the SOAR caseworker is involved in the process.
 - Emily- Some people have suggested a Medical Summary Workshop. If we can do this without violating confidentiality, would a workshop be helpful?
 - Yes- any help would be great.
 - Emily- I will see if I can fit this into the training schedule for the year. In the meantime, you can always submit MSRs to me for review.
- Decision Days: 77 days average in 2013
 - Our average decision days is 86 days
 - Our median decision days is 78 days
 - As we accumulate more cases, this average will come down because outlier cases will affect the average less.
 - Emily- we will watch this for the second quarter to see where it goes. The SSA furloughs and cuts may also begin to have an impact on this goal.
- If you think of any suggestions for ways NCCEH can support SOAR caseworkers in meeting these goals, please email Emily at soar@ncceh.org and we will see about implementing them.

Next SOAR Dialogue Call: Wednesday, May 15th at 10 AM

(Please note the change from our regularly scheduled phone call. Emily will be at a conference on Thursday speaking to hospital social workers about SOAR.)