

Effective Case Notes

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Case notes record important details about services provided to youth, especially to Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth participants. Case notes supplement and synthesize information on a youth's strengths and needs in a range of areas to provide a justification for specific services and activities provided. In addition, case notes can sometimes serve as documentation of factors affecting a youth's eligibility or other important information. Finally, case notes record details of a youth's participation in WIA youth activities and progress toward his or her employment and educational goals.

Case Notes as Justification

Case notes do not just repeat information gathered during intake, initial assessment, and objective assessment. Rather, they provide an explanation of how planned activities can address the specific strengths and barriers of the youth identified during that information gathering. In simple terms, case notes describe how each activity will build on the youth's strengths or address the youth's barriers to achieve desired goals.

Some local areas may use standard forms to record information gathered during intake, initial assessment, or objective assessment and to justify a plan of specific activities based on that information. In that case, the justification presented in the standard form provides the needed explanation of how planned activities address the youth's identified strengths and barriers. If local standard forms do not include such a justification, however, it should be provided in case notes.

Case Notes as Documentation

Case notes are sometimes allowed as acceptable documentation – that is, physical evidence – for eligibility factors (ODJFS WIATL 27). For example, you may confirm a youth's low-income status by a phone call to the county department of job and family services (CDJFS) to verify that the youth or the youth's family or household receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Refugee Assistance, Disability Assistance, or Food Stamps. Likewise, you may be able to use a case note to document

- An observable physical condition such as a disability
- Deficiency in basic literacy skills

A case note recording the information provided orally would serve as documentation in the youth's case file. The case note should include

- The name of the person providing the information
- If the person represents an agency, the name of the agency and the individual's position
- The date of the conversation

Case notes should not duplicate other documentation included in a case files. Rather, they should provide evidence for which physical documentation is not available.

Case notes should also document participant outcomes and any other information recorded in Sharing Career Opportunities and Training Information (SCOTI). For example, a youth's basic skills test score is recorded in SCOTI, but SCOTI does not allow you to provide physical evidence of the score. If the agency or person that gave the assessment reports the results in writing, you would put the written results in the youth's case file as documentation. However, if the results are reported to you orally, in person or by phone, you should write a case note to document all the details provided.

- The name of the person reporting the results and his or her agency and position
- The date the youth took the test
- The name of the test
- Who administered the test
- Where and when the test was administered
- The youth's actual score

In addition, it is helpful to make a case note simply listing any paper documentation of participant outcomes included in the youth's case file, especially for documentation of participant outcomes during follow-up services.

Case Notes as Records

Finally, case notes provide a necessary record of details about a WIA youth participant's case. In particular, it is important to record details of follow-up services and activities in case notes. A great deal of case information is recorded in SCOTI, but not all by any means. Case managers have far too many cases to remember all the details about each youth. And others who may need to handle the youth's case – coworkers, supervisors, monitors – may know nothing beyond the information recorded in SCOTI.

When to Start Case Notes

WIA youth staff should start making case notes as soon as they start a case file for the youth. A case file must be available for each youth at participation. Local areas typically create case files during pre-enrollment activities and enter case notes to

- Record information not captured in standard local forms
- Support an initial assessment or referral
- Maintain physical evidence of eligibility

A case file is required only for WIA youth participants. However, local areas may develop policy with other requirements for case files.

Case Notes: Electronic or Paper?

Case files can be

- Written by hand for a paper file
- Written in a word processor or data management software and printed for a paper file
- Recorded in an electronic file for retrieval
- Written by hand and scanned into an electronic file for retrieval

What to Include and What to Leave Out

You can use your own case notes to refresh your memory about a youth. In addition, others might review your case notes for different purposes.

- A coworker might need to consult your case notes to take action when you are not available.
- A supervisor might review your case notes to monitor the youth's progress or your compliance with local area policy and procedure.
- A monitor might review your case notes in a desk audit to monitor local compliance with state and federal policy and procedure, especially in data validation.

Whether to refresh your memory or to capture the information someone else needs about the youth's case, case notes should always include

- Date of the note
- Name of the staff member making the note
- Description of the event
 - Factual description of the event
 - Purpose of the decision or action involved
 - Decision made or action taken
 - Details of the decision or action

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 - o Reasons for the decision or action
 - o Plans for future action
- In any questionable situation, a citation of federal, state, or local policy or procedure allowing the decision or action

In your case notes, you are not just representing yourself. Case notes are legal documents that also represent your local area WIA youth program. So, ensure that your case notes are appropriate.

- Record facts only – behaviors you observed and statements you heard; don't make a diagnosis.
- Record facts accurately and completely.
- **Never** include judgmental opinions, stereotypical comments, or any offensive statements. Don't make any comment you couldn't defend in a court of law.
- If you must state an opinion relevant to the youth's WIA participation and progress, be sure to label your statement as an opinion.
- Use clear, simple, concise language, including professional terminology if appropriate.
- Don't use slang or street language, clichés, or jargon.
- Don't make sarcastic comments.
- Avoid metaphors or similes; just say what you mean directly.
- Don't comment on details that are not relevant to the youth's participation in WIA youth activities.

General Guidelines for WIA Youth Case Notes

Overall, case notes should justify, document, or record any decision made or action taken by local WIA youth staff in a youth's case. For youth who are referred to other youth programs or services, case notes should provide an explanation of the referral.

- If the youth is a WIA youth participant, explain how the youth will also benefit from other youth programs or services.
- If the youth is not eligible for WIA youth services, summarize the outcome of eligibility determination.
- If WIA youth services are not suitable for the youth, explain how the youth will benefit from other youth programs or services.

For WIA youth participants, case notes should provide any information not included in forms in the youth's case file, including

- History and details of the youth's situation, including both strengths and barriers
- WIA youth activities planned or provided to youth
- Appropriate reference to other WIA youth case documents, including the youth's Individual Service Strategy (ISS)
- A description of how the youth will benefit from WIA youth activities

Case notes should record details of the youth's participation in WIA youth activities.

- Details of significant events in the youth's WIA participation
 - o The youth's participation in WIA youth ISS activities and progress toward ISS goals
 - o The youth's participation in non-WIA youth programs or activities like labor exchange services or WIA adult or dislocated worker activities
 - o The need for changes in the youth's ISS
 - o Information provided orally by service providers about the youth's participation or progress
- Information on contacts with the youth
 - o Date and manner of the contact – face to face, individual or small group, phone call, text or instant message (IM)
 - o Purpose of the contact
 - o Activities during the contact
 - o Any information provided orally by the youth
 - o Outcomes of the contact – actions taken, decisions made, assignments of tasks for next steps
- Information on contacts with other WIA or non-WIA program staff
 - o Name of the contact, position title, and agency represented
 - o Date and manner of contact
 - o Purpose of the contact, information provided, description of outcomes of the contact

Finally, these guidelines apply to all case notes, written for any purpose.

- Write case notes while the information is fresh in your mind; if you write case notes only at the end of the day or once a week, you'll forget things.
- If you jot down quick notes by hand, be sure to add those notes to electronic case notes promptly.
- Case notes are confidential information, so be sure to keep case notes secured.

Case Notes: The Missing Story

All in all, case notes often provide the narrative explanation that is missing in the youth's case file. SCOTI and paper documents in the case file provide lots of facts about who and what and when and where, but those individual facts are not woven together into a story that explains how and why. More than anything else, case notes describe the reasons behind the facts, and they tie those facts together for anyone who might handle the youth's case.

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