Benefits of Using a Case Management Database

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An immigration case management database (software or web-based) is essential for all charitable immigration programs to cope with ever-increasing caseloads, particularly if comprehensive immigration reform should pass into law. It is wise to plan, purchase, and use a system that meets your case management needs sooner than later, and especially before immigration reform passes.

There are many specific benefits to using an immigration case management database. Below is a list of the many benefits to consider. Quality systems provide:

1) Uniform case management approaches that eliminate idiosyncratic, and often less-than-professional, ways that different staff members enter client data and complete immigration forms;

2) A central location for case data and case notes;

3) Up-to-date federal immigration forms within 24 hours of issuance, thereby eliminating the possibility of filing with an out-of-date form, which can be a form of legal malpractice;

4) Forms that can be completed electronically and automatically upload common data between forms for the same client, thereby eliminating multiple entries and possible data entry errors;

5) Back-up of hardcopy data in electronic form, which is less vulnerable to damage or destruction, in addition to permanent storage of data after a case file is closed and destroyed at the authorized time;

6) A reminder, or "tickler" system to help legal representatives keep track of filing deadlines and appointments, again helping avoid a legal malpractice situation due to human error;

7) Queries to identify on-the-spot critical caseload information such as the number of cases opened and closed; type of service completed in a month; and client demographics by nationality, age, income, and other data points;

8) Report forms to log queries into permanent records for data sharing and analysis necessary for the parent agency's overall needs – data that can be available indefinitely for future reports covering long periods of time;

9) Mail merges generated from client files so that legal representatives can automatically inform clients in a letter about a new immigration benefit or a particular deadline to file a form, saving hours of work;

10) E-filing of completed forms to United States Citizenship & Immigration Services;

11) Easier access for supervisors in monitoring their staff's caseload and cases, thereby spot checking weaknesses in their staff's performance and identifying changes that will better serve clients; and

12) Financial record keeping to track client payments and assist in analyzing program revenue and expenses.

Any quality product on the market should have the features described above. However, it is important to note some differences in products when making a choice. Most important is the difference in training and technical support. Ensure your preferred vendor provides on-site and virtual training in addition to phone and email technical assistance to use its system.

There are some key differences between software and web-based systems of case management databases. Software systems allow you to store data on your own agency's server. Data can only be accessed from the user's computer and the server. It cannot be accessed remotely. A web-based system stores data on an external server managed by the vendor. A web-based system allows files to be accessed by authorized users anywhere there is access to the internet. Data can be accessed by the supervisor for any number of staff cases. Data can be accessed remotely at any time, giving legal representatives and supervisors greater flexibility. The ability to access files from locations remote from the office is a function that will be useful in the event of comprehensive immigration reform, as legalization services will likely be needed at different sites in the community to serve as many people as possible.

Other key differences between software and web-based systems on the market include: cost; start-up training; on-going technical assistance; assistance in migrating existing electronic data into the system, if any; and assistance for a fee in linking the system to the parent agency's central data base and creating new report forms unique to the agency.

The decision to purchase and use a case management database should not be based on personal preferences, but on the industry standard among peer programs and the future needs of the program, particularly if the caseload is expected to significantly grow. Also, the decision should not be based on cost alone, as too many nonprofits have simply bought the cheapest system without considering its functionality. Often they realize they have been "penny wise and a pound foolish." Finally, a good immigration case management database can be one of the most important investments you make in your program.