E-Case Notes made easy

Peter Latimer, Sharon Yarnton, Zoe de Crespigny, Carolyn Shaw
PROJECT TEAM: Peter Latimer – MOS Cessnock CC; Sharon Yarnton – Manager Wollongong PDC; Zoe de Crespigny – Senior Project Officer, OS&P, Carolyn Shaw – Corporate Records Manager. IC&T, NSW Department of Corrective Services

This project was an Executive Leadership Program (ELP 07/003) presentation to the Board of Management, NSW Department of Corrective Services in February 2008.

The aim of the project is to encourage staff to utilise E-case notes feature to its fullest capability to ensure offenders are given the opportunity to transition from custody to community smoothly and seamlessly. The project team will design a Prompt Card page that can be introduced into the DCS staff issued personal diaries, which when utilised would assist DCS staff to successfully and confidently access and utilise the e-case notes facility and submit meaningful case notes."

E-Case Notes is a crucial part of managing individual offenders following the principles of the Department in dealing with offenders, by staff and the community. To this end, an easy to access prompt tool has been designed for use by all staff to ensure that the Electronic Case Notes (E-Case Notes) they make on an offender is meaningful, valid and objective for all staff that read the notes in order to make right and proper decisions regarding the offender’s placement, care and future direction.

Aim
The aim of this project is to encourage staff to utilise E-Case Notes to its fullest capability. This will ensure offenders are given the best possible opportunity to address and change their offending behaviour and make the transition from custody to community in a smooth and seamless manner.

Issue
It has become apparent that the use of E-Case Notes has not been taken up comprehensively by some staff members. The Departmental Annual Report, Corporate Plan and the NSW State Plan have inspired our project to provide a tool to allow and support meaningful, valuable and reliable e-case notes to fully enhance the through-care and seamless program pathways for offenders, both in custody and in the community. To enable this, it is imperative that staff successfully and confidently understand access and utilise the E-Case Notes functionality.

From our initial consultation and discussions, it appears that users of Case Notes are not confident in using the e-facility nor are they providing detailed, meaningful or informative descriptions within the notes. This does not allow for appropriately informed case management, classification and welfare decisions to be made on behalf of offenders and opens the Department to potential allegations of neglect of Duty of Care.

The objective of this project is for all staff that are required to contribute to E-Case Notes, are supported in their use of the system in an effective and appropriate manner. The creation of a prompt tool, designed to fit into the officers’ diaries that will assist as and when needed is the proposed outcome and recommendation of our endeavour.

Background
E-Case Management is strategically designed and required to comply with the mission and goals of the Department of Corrective Services Corporate Plan as well as the departments’ roles and responsibilities under the State Plan.

Mission : Manage Offenders in a safe, secure and humane manner and reduce risk of re-offending. NSW Department of Corrective Services (2006) Reducing re-offending is also in line with priority R2 in the NSW State Plan. NSW Premier’s Department (2006)

A letter along with a précis of the project was sent to Assistant Commissioner, Luke Grant requesting his support and endorsement of our proposal for this project. Meetings and discussions have been held with key stakeholders to gain their approval, support and any advice and suggestions they may have had to offer. Once this approval and endorsement was obtained, a letter of introduction and a survey was sent
to all Managers of Offender Services & Programs (MOSP) and Case Officers throughout the state to gather information on:

- how many of them are using the system, and to what level
- if they are not using the system, why they are not,
- the training they received and needs
- the types of problems they may be experiencing
- any positives of the system.

The team anticipated that the results would then determine some of the identified areas of weaknesses in recording appropriate information, for instance,

- the type of information that should be recorded, i.e., educational achievements, behaviour, employment, drug and alcohol issues, welfare
- the language used when recording information,
  - subjective comments such as “I believe”, “I feel”, “I heard” or “I think” should not be used,
  - Objective comments such as “It was observed” or “the offender stated”. Recording facts for example, courses completed, family contact and communication, and welfare issues should be used.

From the number of officers that are not currently using E-Case Notes, we hoped to ascertain the value of a simple prompt tool for them to refer to when making E-Case Notes.

One of the initial success measures will be the endorsement and support of this project by the stakeholders involved and invested in the E-Case Notes and through-care project. Another indicator will be the results from the surveys that have been sent out to Case Officers and MOSPs.

The success of this entire project will be evident when E-Case Notes are used by all appropriate DCS staff and the notes are meaningful, reliable, and valuable and allow for the seamless transition between custody, Community Offender Services and the general community, addressing whole of post-sentence programming ultimately decreasing and reducing the risk re-offending.

Methodology
The most effective method of gathering information from a wide range of staff from across the state was to design a questionnaire.

The team proposed that it would be of benefit to design two separate questionnaires, one aimed at Manager Offender Services and Programs and the other questionnaire aimed at the Case Officers. The reason for this is that the Manager and Officers have different needs and responsibilities, with the MOSPs having overall responsibility for Case Management within their centres. If the questions were designed to specifically meet the audiences’ tasks and duties were as direct as possible, we would be more likely to get complete and honest responses. We also wanted to keep the questionnaires as simple and as clear and concise as possible, with the use of mainly closed questions. This was also done deliberately in an attempt to make responding quick and easy and to encourage participation.

Copies of two surveys were mailed through the internal mail to the Manager of Offender Services and Programs in every Correctional Centre in NSW. One survey was for the MOSP to complete and the other was for the MOSP to distribute amongst the case officers in that particular centre.

The first piece of interesting and valuable feedback was from two Managers who advised the ELP team that if we wanted to maximise our response rate that we should forward the surveys by e-mail. We did this immediately and indeed many of the returns received were electronic.

In addition to surveying Managers and case officers a number of people were identified as key stakeholders including the following:

- Board of Management members
- General Managers
Managers of Security
Managers of Offender Services & Programs
Brian Keogh, Assistant Director, Inmate Classification & Case Management
Kyleigh Heggie - representative for Kate Stevens, Project Director, Throughcare & E-Case Management/OIMS Renewal Project,
Ross Feenan, Manager, Offender Assessment Unit
Mark Pearson, Manager E-Learning Unit, CSA
Various Case Officers

Firstly, these key staff members needed to be informed out of professional courtesy that this project was being undertaken and they were aware of our reasons for venturing into and engaging within their areas of responsibility. Letters were also sent to them seeking their endorsement for the project. Secondly for us to seek advice from experts in the field. We carried out video-taped interviews with a number of staff, targeting central stakeholders first. We visited a regional Correctional Centre to gain insight into some of the issues experienced by the front line staff required to use the system. Meetings were conducted with the General Manager, MOSP and Manager of Security, Case Management Supervisor, custodial case officers and case notes, interview locations and computer access sites were observed and reviewed for content and availability.

The interviews were extremely valuable, informing us of the strategic directions of the department, the interviewees' opinion to the usefulness of our topic as well as their absolute support for the project and the prompt card.

A call was also placed to Ian McCurtayne from the Parklea Print Shop to ascertain options of insertion of the prompt card into the diary and the associated costs of insertion. Mr McCurtayne was asked the following:

1. the costs of adding two additional pages into the officers diaries
2. the costs of printing the cards into the diaries
3. the costs of printing stickers to stick into the diaries
4. the costs of laminating a card to insert into the sleeve of the diaries.

The expert advice received from Mr McCurtayne was that the stickers would be extremely high in cost, labour intensive and impractical as staff tend to attempt to peel them out to see what they are 'covering up'; the laminated cards would be impractical as the prompt card is a two sided card and officers would have to take it out and flip it for it to be of use. We were advised that the printing of the card directly into the diary would be the most cost effective and practical solution. There are already two spare pages in the diaries, so there is no need to insert additional pages. The costs would be simply for the art work and an informal costing of this was approximately two hundred dollars.

Results
Fifty five responses were received from Case Officers and twelve responses were received from MOSPs. The responses were closely evaluated and analysed with team meetings held to discuss the major issues highlighted and determine the benefits and use of a prompt card to address and improve the quality of e-case notes.

At the conclusion of the evaluations, it was apparent that three common themes throughout both interviews and surveys were identified as the major issues;

1. Difficulties with availability of computers and access to networks
2. Officers lack of confidence in the use of E-Case Notes (no spell check on OIMS)
3. Issues around training needs of Case Officers

We do recognise and accept that the issues of access to computers and networks within Correctional Centres is out of scope of this project, however, we believe that as it has been a recurring theme, we need to identify and acknowledge it as an issue that has been raised by the staff and managers within the Centres using this system. We also acknowledge the department is aware of this issue and is in the process of improving the technological constraints.

The Case Officer survey responses have provided a vast range of answers
ranging from a seeming lack of care, interest and understanding to positive and enthusiastic responses with an encouraging attitude towards e-case notes. A number of anomalies came to our attention, although this gave us a good evidence base to produce the framework of the prompt card.

Of the twelve responses from MOSPs, 100% advised us that Case Notes are being used at their centre and the rate of staff trained in the use of e-case notes is either 99% or 100%, whereas only 51% of Case Officers have said that they have received e-case note training.

The survey revealed 100% of MOSP respondents advised that in their opinion, staff are not having difficulties in using the e-case system. This figure dramatically differs from the question posed to Case Officers of “are you comfortable using e-case management?” Whilst 35% of responses to this question showed that officers are NOT comfortable using the e-case notes. Whilst 85% of the total number of respondents answered that they felt confident in knowing what to include in the case notes. Therefore, this suggests a lack of confidence in the use of technology rather than a lack of confidence in their skills and abilities to write a valid and meaningful case note.

If Case Officers are having difficulties or do not feel comfortable making e-case notes, it would be expected that the results of audits may reflect this and it become a discussion point for further training requirements. However, 67% of MOSPs have responded that their Case Management Supervisors are conducting monthly audits on the e-case notes. This does not seem to have been reflected in the results we obtained.

The variations between responses from MOSPs and Case Officers could be due to a number of issues, such as:

- lack of open communication between the two,
- lack of forums where these issues can be discussed,

- assumptions made by managers that there are no problems because no one has spoken to them or voiced their concerns,
- people do not know that they are not doing the right thing because no one has ever told them that they are
- people do not feel comfortable putting their hand up and asking for help.

Most importantly for this project, the responses from Case Officers have indicated the prompt cards for the diaries will be a valuable source of quick and easy information to access and will be of use and used by the majority of respondents (65%), while 50% of the MOSPs indicated that the prompt card would improve case note information within their centre.

**Recommendation**

The team recommend the implementation of the prompt tool into the resource section of the 2009 Officers diary. At a one off cost of two hundred dollars for printing and artwork, this tool can be reproduced every year for inclusion in the officer diaries.

Our research shows that this prompt tool will:

- enhance and assist staff to effectively utilise the OIMS E-Case Notes functionality.
- enable staff to manage offenders
- allow for the seamless transition between custody, Community Offender Services and the general community, addressing whole of sentence programming decreasing the risk of reducing re-offending.
Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E-Case Notes Prompts</th>
<th>E-Case Notes Do’s &amp; Don’ts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enter OIMS</td>
<td>✓ Maintain case information, check for alert entries &amp; offenders program pathway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type your Username and Password</td>
<td>✓ Record every formal interaction with an offender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Click utilities icon</td>
<td>✓ Be objective (“the offender stated”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Click Caseload icon</td>
<td>✓ Record disciplinary actions and misconducts committed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure you are in the correct CC location</td>
<td>double click caseload icon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double Click Case Management</td>
<td>✓ Record changes in behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter MIN &amp; Click execute query icon</td>
<td>double click case management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Case Notes section, click in Source field, click the v icon &amp; enter the appropriate information</td>
<td>✓ Record offender actions to address offending behaviour through participation in AOD or other therapeutic programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Click in Type field, click into the v icon &amp; enter information</td>
<td>✓ Record family of welfare issues and record action and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Click on the conf icon, this will confirm who you are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Click the location field to automatically enter your work location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof read the contents and if correct, click on the save icon</td>
<td>x Don’t write subjective comments  e.g.: I think…I believe…I feel…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x Don’t write anything that is not factual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x Don’t use inappropriate language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References: