Management Information Systems (MIS)

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What is a Treatment Court Management Information System (MIS)?

Generally speaking, a management information system (MIS) is "a data-processing system designed to supply management and administrative staff with current information about accounts, personnel, etc."[1] In the context of a treatment court, an effective MIS is a modular, detailed database which can rapidly provide team members with relevant information about a program participant. By connecting team members, an MIS can improve communications, reduce inbox clutter, and reduce time spent catching up in staffings and on the phone throughout the week. An MIS also allows the court to examine trends and measure performance.

Why Use an MIS?

Nationwide, courts, and especially treatment courts, struggle to maintain appropriate information and data about both individual participants and their program populations as a whole. This deficiency impedes both proper case management and the court's ability to identify and address areas of systemic concern. For example, without demographic information, courts may not be aware of demographic disproportionality at different stages of participant progression through the treatment court. Implemented properly, an MIS allows the court to monitor each participant's treatment, phase progression, sanctions, incentives, and recidivism. It can also provide a means for the court to analyze information about their population, such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, primary drugs of abuse, and almost any other variable the court would like to assess. Each of these variables can directly

> *"Drug Courts are approximately 65% more cost-effective when they enter standardized information concerning their services and outcomes into an electronic management information system (MIS), which is capable of generating automated summary reports."[2]*
>
> *- NADCP Standards, Volume II*

feed into an evaluation of the treatment court program (like that described in Key Component #8, which is why NADCP Best Practice Standard 10F calls for the use of an "electronic database").

What Key Features Should an MIS Include?

By designing an MIS internally or working with a vendor to design a custom MIS, treatment courts can track any variable of interest. Additionally, a robust MIS will eliminate the need to record redundant information by providing standardized definitions for many data fields. For example, a drop down list for primary drug(s) of abuse would enable programs to avoid duplicative entries for marijuana like THC, cannabis, weed, pot, and hash. Doing this will help to standardize the data for future use.

An MIS can be costly, so if buying an "off-the-shelf" system, it is important to ensure it meets all of your information needs before purchase. These variables can be broadly separated into two categories: variables relevant for individual case planning, and variables relevant for cross-participant analysis. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Some common variables collected for individual case planning include:

- Basic identifying information (e.g. name, address, aliases)
- Basic medical information
- Criminal history
- Drugs of abuse
- Drug test history
- Education and employment information

- Family members (e.g. which live in the area and which regularly communicate with the participant)
- Fee payment history
- Mental health diagnosis
- Program and phase status, including sanctions and incentives history
- Risk and needs assessment history
- Treatment goals, attendance, and accomplishments

Some common variables collected for assessment and evaluation include:

- Criminal history
- Demographic information (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, gender)
- Drugs of abuse
- Education and employment information
- Mental health diagnosis
- Program and phase status, including sanctions and incentives history
- Risk and needs assessment history

"Monitoring and evaluation measure the achievement of program goals and gauge effectiveness."

- Ten Key Components of Drug Courts, Component #8

Different Types of MIS

Smaller jurisdictions with fewer resources have made due with relatively basic software applications. Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Access (including the widely-distributed Buffalo Drug Court MIS) are perhaps the most commonly-used electronic databases among treatment courts nationwide. They're excellent short-term solutions for courts without the resources to buy or develop a purpose-built system.

Excel's and Access's ability to rapidly format and analyze data makes them suitable for periodic self-reflection by the program. They can monitor demographic representation, the average frequency of sanctions, average time to complete the treatment court program, and many other variables of interest. These variables, and the way they interact with one another, can be assessed more holistically through a full outcome evaluation.

However, older versions of Excel do not enable workbooks to be edited by multiple users in different locations in real time. As drug courts grow, a dedicated MIS becomes a more suitable option, allowing each team member to update information on participants as they interact with them. As a networked MIS is introduced, it becomes important to review state and federal privacy laws, restricting access among team members as necessary.

For more information about MIS, including those that are free or in the public domain, contact American University's Justice Programs Office.

Endnotes

[1] Management Information System. (n.d.). Oxford English Dictionary. Retrieved May 23, 2016, from http://bit.ly/1VfCA7K

[2] See also: Carey, S.M., Mackin, J.R., & Finigan, M.W. (2012). What works? The ten key components of Drug Court: Research-based best practices. Drug Court Review, 8(1), 6–42.

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