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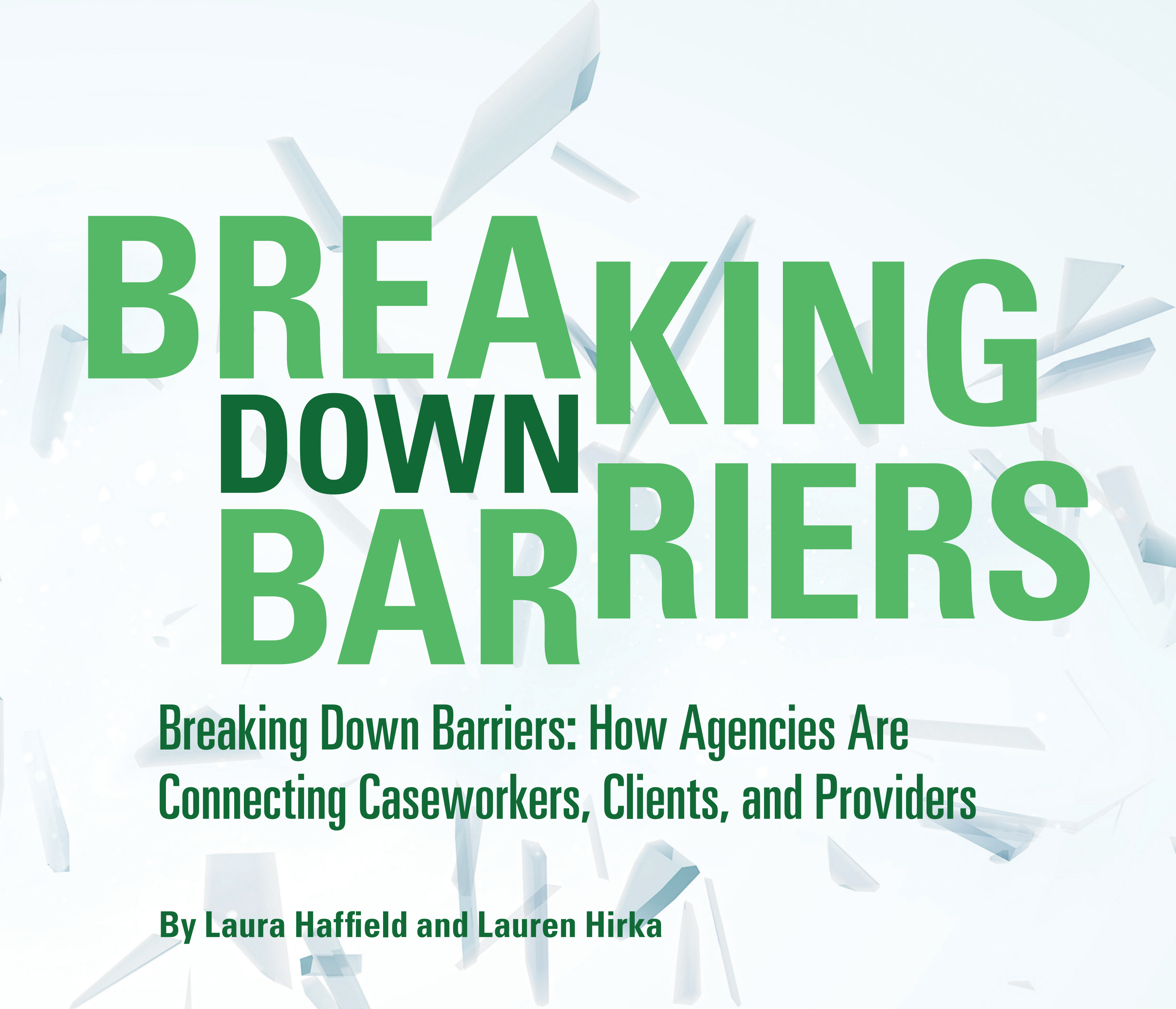

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Breaking Down Barriers: How Agencies Are Connecting Caseworkers, Clients, and Providers

By Laura Haffield and Lauren Hirka

One of a social worker's most important responsibilities is collecting and disseminating critical information to make life-altering decisions in a timely manner. Schools, courts, hospitals, placement providers, treatment providers, advocacy centers, and most important, clients and families—the list of organizations and individuals outside the agency that might provide this critical information is lengthy. Yet the processes in place for sharing it have historically been complicated and counterproductive.

Today, the tides are turning. The industry is embracing more flexible work practices. Modernization efforts encourage collaboration, especially sharing data and information about the mutual clients we all serve. Technology is becoming available to help reduce friction and facilitate more meaningful collaboration across programs and people, both inside and outside of the agency.

But there is also a catch because not just any technology will do. Human services leaders have long cried out for tools that are truly built from their perspective and around the needs of those they serve. The time is now to bring this vision to life.

Current Limitations

Let us use the common task of a worker obtaining a child's medical records to put the challenges with manual methods of collaboration and client engagement into perspective. Can you spot the hurdles?

- First, I need to get consent from the child's caregiver for these protected records to be released to me. I drive to her home at our scheduled meeting time, hoping it works. If not, I cannot come back until next week.
- I need her to sign a release of information that the provider who maintains the medical records will accept. If I use the wrong version of the form, I will have to start from scratch.
- Once I have gotten the signature, I need to drive back to my home office and double check the submission process for this provider. It says to scan and email the document, so I do. And then I wait. I start to wonder—did I check all the right boxes? Did I use the right form?
- Finally, I hear from the office that the provider is sending the records to the agency. I drive there to look at them so I can finally start the decision-making process.

Despite best practices that encourage collaboration and data sharing, this type of scenario that requires a lot of manual work is still common for many caseworkers. Here is a deeper breakdown of three specific tasks that are key to collaboration, yet tedious and error prone without the right tools.

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- **Completing forms.** Workers need clients and providers to complete and sign forms, such as releases of information or referrals to establish services. With current system limitations, the process is clunky when anyone outside the agency is involved. Best-case scenario is everyone is present to sign or finalize the form together, which has become increasingly difficult as more work is completed virtually. When that is not an option, the worker sends a partially completed form to the provider or client for a signature and then uploads or scans into the system the version they get back, which creates multiple copies.
- **Sharing content.** Whether it is a court report, case plan, or summary of a family team meeting, workers are often required to share items from the case file with clients and providers. They often download the items to email, but that is not always secure and workers may find themselves locating and resending content repeatedly. Even using a file-sharing service causes additional friction and duplicate copies of files. There is also the risk of losing documents on the receiving end based on the external organization's systems.
- **Uploading content.** Workers often request documents and information from clients and providers for the case file—for example, a child's individualized education plan or a client's behavioral health report. Today, workers collect this paperwork in person or request it to be texted, emailed, faxed, or mailed back to upload or scan into the system. Someone must make sure the document ends up in the right case file, is categorized correctly, and the assigned worker knows it exists. If this process takes too long, clients may have to provide the same documentation multiple times, which causes confusion and frustration.

Painting the Bigger Picture

Over the past couple of years, agencies have adapted time and again to meet clients' needs while protecting their workforce and maintaining compliance. However, when these tools are not designed to support the way human services workers engage clients, it creates more problems to be solved.

For example, many agencies have had to cobble together disjointed software and apps that do not integrate or communicate. Each holds different pieces of a client's story, which makes it difficult for their support system to work together to make decisions or determine next steps. They also create barriers to inviting clients and providers to participate in the case planning process. They also can become expensive for agencies based on how the cost is structured (for example, paying per interaction or signature). All of this can inadvertently deepen the divide among everyone involved.

Future Possibilities

It is time to flip the script on client engagement and collaboration. A secure portal that empowers clients and providers to be active participants in case planning not only improves engagement, but also takes some of the onus off workers, which is especially helpful during high turnover and workforce shortages.

See what happens when we re-envision these same three tasks through the lens of what is possible with people-centered, purpose-built technology:

- **Completing forms.** Rather than waiting days or weeks to collect a signature on a release of information, the same form can be shared through the secure digital platform and completed in minutes—no matter where the worker or client is. This allows workers to obtain critical information or begin services for their clients as soon as possible, and when they are most engaged, which sets them on a more immediate path to success.
- **Sharing content.** Workers can easily share case plans, team meeting summaries, and other appropriate portions of a case file with their clients, which can be accessed from any device. The worker can see if the client has viewed the documentation in question, which helps them drive more productive conversations. This adds a layer of transparency and trust to the process.

- **Uploading content.** A client's therapist can easily and securely submit progress reports to the case file in a way that triggers an automated notification to the worker. This cuts out manual handoffs and the progress report is added to the case file in a few simple clicks. The worker can immediately use this information to inform their decisions or actions.

Any one of these improvements is beneficial on its own, but they become even more powerful when you consider other difficult, often manual processes that could be impacted as a result. Here are a couple of examples:

- **Cross-county collaboration.** This type of technology could break down barriers when workers need to collaborate with their counterparts in another county or tribe (something that happens often right now due to staffing shortages). It can also break down information-sharing silos between different programs within the same county.
- **Prepping for audits.** Think about the amount of time, labor, and resources typically required for an agency to prep for an audit. Rather than pull multiple staff members away from their usual duties to find and organize the required case files, you could use the portal to give the auditor secure access to the specific case files they need without all the extra work.

Collaboration and Client Engagement in Action

Cabarrus County Department of Social Services (DSS) in North Carolina and Carver County Health and Human Services (HHS) in Minnesota are leveraging a new client and provider portal, Traverse® Connect, to facilitate better collaboration and information exchange.

"Cabarrus County DSS is always looking for innovative ways to collaborate with clients and community partners. Traverse Connect will equip our DSS social workers with a new way to more seamlessly communicate with those partners and the families we jointly serve," said Todd Shanley, chief information officer for Cabarrus County, North Carolina. "Streamlining the process of getting families linked with community partners who provide services based on their needs is critical in this world. Traverse Connect is a way for that to happen."

Workers use the portal to share specific content and forms with stakeholders outside the agency and request signatures or documents to be uploaded. Clients or providers can use any device to securely view or submit requested information to be automatically added to the electronic case file.

Rachel Rosckes, a social worker with Carver County HHS, uses the technology to streamline how she completes annual documentation. She prepares the necessary documents and forms, sends them out to clients electronically to sign, and collects the finalized versions back—all through just one tool. "What used to take me two weeks with mailing information to a family took me 30 minutes from start to finish," Rachel said.

An industry built on human connection can only reach its full potential when people are at the center of every system and process in place to support the important work being done.

Prioritizing client engagement while reducing the time and effort required to exchange information is a critical step toward empowering every individual or organization with a stake in the case to focus on planning and providing the right care for the people they serve.

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