All of the notesheets are kept in one place and used as a basis for the periodic (e.g., once a month or bimonthly) dictation of a summary entry into the agency record.

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9.6 Problem-Oriented Recording (POR) and the SOAP Format

PURPOSE: To facilitate concise recordkeeping that focuses on the client's problem and the professional interventions to deal with that problem.

DISCUSSION: *Problem-Oriented Recording (POR)* is a method of recordkeeping that often has been used in hospitals and medical programs and is now used by many social agencies, as well. POR has a number of advantages:

- It permits the worker, agency supervisor, outside consultants, or researchers to review the way in which a particular problem was approached by the worker or agency.
- It displays the interrelatedness of problems experienced by a client, yet it permits focused attention on each specific problem.
- It promotes case coordination and teamwork because it facilitates interprofessional communication and clarity of direction.
- It provides continuity of professional attention on specific problems, even when there is personnel turnover in the agency.
- It provides a mechanism for follow-up and the monitoring of progress toward problem resolution. A review of a problem-oriented record will quickly reveal inaction or actions unrelated to the client's problem.
- It encourages concise recording. Because specific problems are kept in focus, irrelevant information is kept out of the record.

POR consists of four components, which are related to the basic steps of the problem-solving process: (1) establishment of a database; (2) listing of specific problems, each of which is assigned an identifying number; (3) development of an action plan to address each problem; and (4) implementation of the plan.

The database consists primarily of the information collected during the intake phase and includes a description of the problem that brought the client to the agency. Many of the data appear on the record facesheet. These data should be systematically collected, organized, or recorded, for they provide a foundation for identifying and conceptualizing the client's problems and yield a preliminary problem list.

A problem can be anything of concern to the client, the social worker, or both. All problems become part of the problem list. Each problem is assigned a number and described in behavioral language. Diagnostic labels are avoided, if possible. The problem list serves to focus case planning and intervention. What the social worker does should be logically related to a specific problem in the list. As problems are resolved, they are removed from the list. However, the resolved problem's number is not reassigned; each number is used only once. Thus, the intervention and progress on a specific problem can be traced throughout the case record. In a sense, the numbering system serves as an audit trail. It is important that the problem list be on a separate page in the case record; this makes it easy to find the list and provides a ready reference point for a review of progress and planning.

Figure 9.3 is a sample problem list for Mrs. Brown, a mother of three, who was reported to a protective services agency for child neglect. Note that each numbered problem is dated according to when the problem was first identified. If additional problems were identified, they would be added to the list. Problems 2 and 3 have been resolved, but problems 1 and 4 continue to receive the worker's attention.

Some agencies achieve greater uniformity in recordkeeping by developing a *master problem list,* which involves the use of a standard nomenclature and numbering system to refer to the problems they typically encounter. For example, the number 15 might be assigned to the problem of "Unsafe housing," and all workers would use this number in their records when working with a client with this concern. Using a master problem list also facilitates program evaluation and research on the types of problems brought to the agency and the types of services provided.

POR requires some type of response to each item on a client's problem list. Basically, three actions are possible: (1) to intervene, (2) to secure additional information in order to more fully understand the problem, or (3) to do nothing except monitor the situation and wait for further developments.

FIGURE 9.3 Problem List for the Brown Family

Problem Number	Problem	Date	Inactive or Resolved	Date Resolved
1.	Crowded housing	4/10		
2.	Short of food money	4/10	Client enrolled in food stamp program	4/20
3.	Johnny (age 8) needs glasses	4/15	New prescription issued by Dr. Green	4/25
			at clinic	
4.	Ann (age 10) failing in school	4/28		

If an identified problem requires an intervention (i.e., planned change), it is helpful to use the ***SOAP*** format to describe the proposed action and its rationale. The acronym SOAP represents these elements:

S *Subjective information* describes how the client feels about or perceives the situation. It is derived from client self-report. By definition, subjective information does not lend itself to independent or external validation.

O *Objective information* is that which has been obtained by way of direct observation by professionals, clinical examinations, systematic data collection, and the like. As compared to subjective information, this category of information can be independently verified.

A *Assessment* refers to the professional's conceptualization or conclusions derived from reviewing the subjective and objective information.

P The *Plan* spells out how the professional intends to address or resolve the specific problem.

Once the plan has been formulated, intervention follows. Clients are only helped by *actions,* not by *plans,* no matter how logical or well written.

The POR requires the use of the SOAP format; however, the SOAP format can be used apart from the POR system. Figure 9.4 is a SOAP entry related to problem 2 (lack of money for food) in the Brown case (Figure 9.3). Note the deadline set for making the application. It is important to set a deadline for accomplishing a particular task; this encourages implementation and action.

FIGURE 9.4 Sample SOAP Entry

Subjective: Mrs. Brown states she worries about children's diet. The children complain of being hungry and to her embarrassment they have asked neighbors for food. Since Mrs. B grew up on welfare, she has vowed "never to go on the dole." She says she is in a "panic" about the thought of losing her children.

Objective: Her job earns $250 take-home pay per week. Rent is $600 per month. It is hard to follow Mrs. Brown in conversation; she jumps from topic to topic. Agency records indicate that she was herself neglected as a child and placed in foster care for two years.

Assessment: Family does not have enough money for food. Mrs. Brown is probably eligible for food stamps. Much of her disorganization is due to her anxiety about losing children to foster care, which is, in turn, related to her own experience in foster care. She fears that accepting welfare will label her as a "bad parent."

Plan: (Problem #2) Need to support Mrs. Brown's application for food stamps and show her that application is a way to be a "good mother" under these very trying circumstances. Need to assure her that agency has no plans to place her children. Begin effort to help Mrs. B find higher-paying job. Complete food stamp application by 5/25.

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9.7 Managing Time at Work

PURPOSE: To make the best possible use of limited time.

DISCUSSION: Nearly every social worker is faced with the problem of having too much work and too little time. Thus, the worker must use time-management skills as a way of increasing efficiency on the job. Consider these guidelines:

1. Come to terms with your resistance to using time-management principles. Do not hide behind the claim that you are too busy to get organized. Some people appear busy because they are always in motion, but activity does not always mean that something is being accomplished. Make sure your activity is productive.

2. Understand your agency's mission and your job description. Unless you are clear about what needs to be done, you cannot figure out ways to do it effectively and efficiently. If your assignments and responsibilities are not clear, discuss them with your supervisor or administrative superiors. Find out what tasks and assignments are of highest priority within the agency.

3. Recognize that in order to be effective and efficient, your job must be consistent with your personal and professional values, goals, and style. A mismatch between what your agency expects and what you can do or want to do is a recipe for frustration for both you and your colleagues at work.

4. Be proactive, not reactive. Anticipate the tasks that need to be accomplished—and the problems or delays that may arise in completing those tasks—and then take action. Do not procrastinate.

5. Use "to-do" lists. Good managers of time create a *"things-to-do" checklist* and then carry it with them. Estimate how long it will take to complete each task on the list, so adequate time can be budgeted. Anticipate deadlines and begin tasks early enough to meet them. It is usually best to tackle lengthy tasks before those that can be completed in a short time. It is also best to work on the most difficult tasks when your energy level is highest (e.g., first thing in the morning). Reserve some time at the end of each day for clearing your desk and taking care of last-minute activities.

6. Plan your work and set priorities. Develop both daily and weekly plans. At the end of each day, as well as at the end of each week, write down what you plan to accomplish the next day and the next week. Prioritize this list of tasks by using, for example, the ABC Priority System. Write *A*'s next to those tasks that are most important