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# Standing with the Sanchez Family

**Social Workers use policy practice skills to promote client well-being**

## Transcription

**Social work supervisor:** What cases do you want to discuss at this conference?

**Social worker #1 (Julie):** I have two: the McDonalds and the Sanchez family.

**Social worker #2:** I want to see if anyone has ideas for additional housing resources for Juanita Robinson, but we can talk through that after we staff Julie's cases.

**Supervisor:** Okay, sure. (turning to social worker #2) Remind me to talk with you about the new supportive housing program at New Light Mental Health, by the way. It's not the right fit for Ms. Robinson, but I want to make sure you understand the eligibility criteria so you can assess if any of your clients are a good fit. (turning to Julie) Julie, where do you want to start?

**Julie:** Let's start with the Sanchez family. I met with Celia yesterday, and the financial strains are really getting to her. Having Roberto (as an aside to social worker #2)—“that's Mrs. Sanchez's nephew—stay with them has increased the pressure on Hector as the family's primary earner, and Celia is worried that his income just won't stretch far enough to meet their needs. We talked about the family applying for SNAP, but she said that Hector will never agree to use Food Stamps. It's frustrating, really, because, while I understand that he is proud and hard-working, the SNAP program was designed to support good nutrition for those in need, and there is no reason why this family shouldn't get that help. I'm not sure what else to try.

**Social worker #2:** Are you sure that the family would qualify for SNAP? Hector and Celia aren't citizens yet, are they?

**Supervisor:** Noncitizens are eligible for SNAP if they are qualified immigrants and since (checking file in front of her) the Sanchezes are Lawful Permanent Residents with more than 5 years in the United States, their immigration status wouldn't be a barrier. Of course, Roberto won't count as a member of their household, since he is undocumented, right? That will make it a little more difficult for them to qualify, but I'm assuming you have run the calculation, Julie, of their income against the USDA guidelines?

**Julie:** Yes, and they are income and asset-eligible. It's just that I think that our cultural differences are getting in the way, too. I don't think that Celia believes that I can understand Hector's reluctance to apply for assistance, and I guess I can't really imagine what it must be like to leave your home country, make so many sacrifices for your family, and then not be able to provide for them the way that you really want to. I think that Celia trusts me, though, at least enough to confide that she is so desperate that she wishes there was a way to apply for SNAP without her husband even finding out. I'm just not sure at all how to get through to him.

**Social worker #2:** What about other options for food assistance? Have you tried the church pantry? What about the mobile food bank?

**Julie:** Yes, absolutely. Celia gets some food from her church pantry, but, of course, Hector has diabetes, and most of the donated food that's available is pretty high-fat and high-sodium, which isn't good for his heart or his weight management. It's such a paradox; so many of my clients who lack enough food are overweight at the same time. It almost seems like obesity and hunger are two sides of the same coin. Anyway, what she needs most are additional resources to help her afford good food at the grocery store. She is a great cook and has learned so much about how to help Hector with his diet and health, but she doesn't have enough money to put those skills into practice. What can I do to connect the family to this critical support?

**Supervisor:** It seems that you already know the answer, Julie; you have to work on building a trusting relationship with Hector so that you and he can partner, together, towards his goal of providing for his family. SNAP could be a tool that Hector uses to meet his family's needs, especially during this difficult time, as they support Roberto, as well. But to get there, you'll have to begin with Hector's strengths and reflect for him what you said earlier, about how many sacrifices he has made for his family's well-being, and how hard that must have been for him.

**Julie:** I know. That has been hard, though, since he works so much that he is rarely at home when I visit with the other family members, and since language is sometimes a barrier; even though he speaks English, I can tell that he doesn't always feel comfortable speaking English with me, maybe because he is self-conscious, or maybe because Celia doesn't understand it well. When she comes here, I can use our interpreter, and it has made building a relationship with her so much easier. I have also talked with Alejandro, their younger son, because he has quite a bit of anxiety and some depression, much of it stemming from the stresses he sees on his parents and his feelings of frustration that he can't provide them with more help. He talked with his mom and tried to explain the system to her, and how benefits could help them, but he just doesn't feel comfortable challenging his dad's position.

**Social worker #2:** Sometimes people accuse immigrants of not adopting U.S. values and customs but, you know, it occurs to me that Hector's hesitation to use Food Stamps is quite (makes air quotes) "American." Maybe he's responding exactly the way that people want him to.

**Julie:** What do you mean?

**Social worker #2:** I read in the paper yesterday that the state is getting a new vendor for the SNAP cards—you know, the ones that you use at the grocery store, instead of the coupons that people used to get? Anyway, they claim that that's the reason for the new design of the card, but I think that sounds fishy. Get this: it's going to be bright red and labeled Food Assistance!

**Julie:** Seriously? Can they do that?

**Social worker #2:** They say that they can. The card SNAP recipients get now just looks like a credit card, and people swipe it just like a credit card, too. Sometimes when I'm at the grocery store in line next to people using those WIC coupons, other customers roll their eyes, but that doesn't happen much with SNAP, since people can't usually even tell that someone is receiving assistance. A bright red card would certainly change that. I can't help but wonder if part of the rationale isn't to try to shame people into not applying for the help, so that then they don't have to pay for it. I know that sounds cynical, but there's no reason for them to make such a blatant move, in my opinion, otherwise.

**Supervisor:** I haven't seen anything about this yet. Is it just a proposed change, or has it already happened?

**Social worker #2:** As far as I remember, the contract for the new card vendor has already been signed. The state privatized that function quite a while ago, of course. The article said that some legislators were upset about it, though, and that there would be a legislative hearing to investigate the details of the new contract and explore alternatives to the design.

**Julie:** That would be such a horrible move. I have had a hard enough time convincing the Sanchez family that they deserve this help, and that there's no shame in asking for assistance when your family is in need, without such an overt stigma attached to getting food aid. If the state moved to a scarlet letter for people in poverty, I would probably have other clients go hungry in order to avoid being embarrassed, too. It makes me so angry, too, especially because Hector works so hard at his job and is trying so hard to improve his diet and his health. How can the state consider something like this?

**Supervisor:** It is maddening, and it often seems like policy changes like this are proposed by people who have very little understanding about what our clients' lives are really like. I doubt that any of the policymakers who negotiated the new contract and the revised design have any idea how reluctant people like Mr. Sanchez are to ask for help, even when they need it, or how hard he works to try to provide for his family. I wish that all of our legislators had to live for a month on a food stamp budget, to see how hard it is to provide for your family's nutrition on so little money.

**Social worker #2:** Julie, why don't you testify at the hearing that the legislature is going to hold about the new SNAP cards? It would be great if Mrs. Sanchez would go, too, to tell her story about how much her husband resists asking for help even when they need it, but I would imagine that she would be very reluctant to do that. Couldn't you talk about the obstacles that your clients face in getting help from government programs, though, about how stigma keeps people from applying for the help that they are entitled to, and about how important good nutrition is to good health? I would help you practice your testimony; I testified once in college when there was a bill to reduce funding for our School of Social Welfare because some legislators objected to the fact that we had a human sexuality course. It was scary, but I got a lot of positive feedback from legislators, and it was a good experience overall.

**Julie:** Do you think I could do a good job? What would I say? And I would have to take vacation time, right, because I can't go to the legislature on work time.

**Supervisor:** Actually, Julie, we could ask for permission from the CEO for you to represent the organization at the hearing. We do lobby on some issues that matter to our programs, through our state association, and this issue certainly falls within our broad concerns about policies that affect low-income families. If you are willing to go, I would be happy to make the request for paid leave on your behalf. I think it's a great idea, and it might make you feel better about having hit a bit of a brick wall with Mr. Sanchez, too—at least you'd be doing something! I wonder if Alejandro might be interested in going with you; maybe he could even share something about how there is so much stigma in his community, already, about using public assistance, and how this move would just make it worse.

**Julie:** He might; I think, at the least, that he would be interested in going with me. He has gotten involved with some political action at the community college where he's taking classes, and he and I have had some good discussions about how policy in the U.S. is quite different from how it's portrayed in other countries. How long would I need to speak? Where would I even go? What if they ask me really hard questions? It's sort of overwhelming, but it does make me feel a little less hopeless...and the idea of those bright red cards just makes me so mad.

**Social worker #2:** I had coffee the other day with a social worker at Stand Up for Kids, the organization that puts on that early childhood lobby day every year. I could call her and I bet she would have a lot of information about how the hearings work and how to prepare. She might even be able to meet you at the capitol that day, to help you get to where you need to go. I'll look for the article so that you have the information about the new card design—I think it even had a picture of the proposed layout. There might be some information online about other states that have done something similar, or about how social workers can oppose efforts to stigmatize receiving public assistance. We can check it out. And, seriously, I will listen to you practice your testimony at lunch every day this week, if you want!

**Julie:** OK, I'll do it. You're right, Susan—these policymakers have no idea how difficult my clients' lives are, or how much it would pain someone like Ms. Sanchez to experience the stigma associated with being branded a 'charity case'. I may not be able to convince the legislature to change the contract or go back to the old cards, but it will feel good to stand up for Mrs. Sanchez and her family. I think about her every time I'm at the grocery store, and about how hard it must be for her not to be able to afford the food that she knows her husband and children need. I'm going to keep trying to get her connected with good sources of food assistance, but I need to try to do something about this policy, too.

**[END SCENE]**