

# CASE MANAGERS' EXPERIENCES IN HANDLING PERSONAL DATA IN THE CASE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

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**Abstract.** *The article aims to uncover the personal data protection requirements within the case management process and outline areas for improvement. Objectives include analyzing case management, assessing families in social risk, and discussing personal data protection's concept and necessity in case management. The study examines factors influencing personal data protection in case management and identifies opportunities for improvement when working with families facing social risks. Participants are Vilnius-based case managers with at least one year of social work education and experience. Research methods involve analyzing literature, conducting interviews, and evaluating gathered data. The application of case management to families in social risk is viewed as a complex system, with a coordinated support network reducing social risk factors. Personal data is defined as information identifying an individual, necessitating protection due to technological advancements. The study reveals case managers lack knowledge about personal data protection requirements but strive to adhere to prudent principles. Institutional fear impedes information gathering from various sources due to concerns about violating personal data protection.*

**Keywords:** *case management, case manager, families experiencing, personal data protection, social risk, social work.*

## Introduction

Providing comprehensive assistance to families facing difficulties is a relevant topic in Lithuania, often sparking discussions about the overall purpose and effectiveness of the social protection system (Gražulis, Čižikienė, 2016; Augutavičius, Butvilas, 2018; Augutavičius 2019; Račkauskienė, Zbarauskienė, 2023). In such families, various issues are identified: "One or both parents have harmful habits; one or both parents threaten or use physical punishment as the primary disciplinary method; one or both parents treat children as their property; one or both parents fail to satisfy or threaten to fail to satisfy the child's vital needs; one or both parents use strong authoritarian control as a parenting method; the

family fanatically follows certain movements or stereotypes; unconditionally demands the child's obedience..." (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2003). A social worker must provide services by understanding and considering the specific family situation, best meeting the family's needs, and helping to address emerging problems (Čižikienė, 2018; Kiaunytė, Lygnugarienė, 2019; Nikolajenko, Raudytė, 2023). It is noteworthy that the duties of social workers in working with families at social risk in the Republic of Lithuania began in 2007. While the number of families and children experiencing social risk decreased from 2007 to 2015 in Lithuania, institutions providing social protection sought to ensure effective social support for these families and their children, aiming to minimize the prevalence of such families (Vasiliauskienė, Kavaliauskienė, 2021).

On July 1, 2018, the Law on the Basics of Child Rights Protection of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 1996) came into effect, outlining the organization of assistance to families for case managers using the case management method (Bajoraitė, Norvaišaitė, 2018; Gursansky, Harvey, 2020; Gudžinskienė, Šinkevičė, 2023). The provisions of the enacted law were accompanied by the order No. A-1-141 of the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania on March 29, 2018, On the Approval of the Case Management Procedure (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2018).

The Case Management Procedure was approved by the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania on March 29, 2018, (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019) and it was subsequently amended by the order No. A1-802 on December 30, 2019 (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019). This order came into effect on January 1, 2020, and is still in force. The Law on the Basics of Child Rights Protection of the Republic of Lithuania came into effect on July 1, 2018 (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 1996). In this law, a case manager is described as a "social worker coordinating the case management process, appointed by the municipality's social service institution or another institution authorized by the municipality to provide social services to families in the municipality, under the leadership of the municipality or its authorized person." (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 1996). The law defines the case management process as the "organization and provision of comprehensive assistance to the child and their representatives under the law, coordinated by the case manager, aiming to help them overcome social difficulties, the successful resolution of which would prevent potential violations of the child's rights and create conditions for independently ensuring the child's rights and legitimate interests."

*The research subject is the preparedness of case managers to apply personal data protection requirements in organizing the case management process for families experiencing social risk.*

*Research aim* – to uncover the requirements of personal data protection in the case management process, formulate and present areas for improving personal data protection in the case management process. *To achieve this goal, the following research tasks are addressed:*

1. Analyze the application of the case management process to families experiencing social risk, reveal the concept of personal data protection, and its need.
2. Evaluate the legal regulation of personal data protection in the context of case management when working with families.
3. Examine the factors influencing the peculiarities of personal data protection in the case management process and anticipate the possibilities for the development of personal data protection when working with families experiencing social risks.

*Research methods include :*

- Analysis of scientific literature and documents: EU legal acts, laws, and other documents are used to identify and define the peculiarities and the need for personal data protection in the case management process.
- Qualitative method: Semi-structured interviews with case managers are conducted to ensure objectivity and a deeper exploration of the chosen topic. The interviews aim to evaluate the opinions of the participants, collect research information, and identify trends in the phenomenon under study.

The literature review and research data have revealed the preparedness of case managers working with families experiencing social risk factors to apply the specific requirements of personal data protection.

### **Theoretical aspects of implementing case management process in social work**

Case management is a fundamental component of social work practice. The implementation of the case management process aims to create a coordinated network of assistance services for the service recipient (McLaughlin-Davis, 2018; Gursansky, Harvey, 2020; Gudžinskienė, Šinkevičė, 2023). It provides individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to overcome difficulties independently and encourages them to address emerging challenges on their own. In organizing the case management process, the case manager should focus on enabling service recipients to fully utilize their strengths through the coordinated assistance network, creating favorable conditions for effective communication with the surrounding social environment and dealing with experienced difficulties (Costin, Bran, 2017; Bajoraitė, Norvaišaitė, 2018; Holosko, 2018).

During case management, the case manager employs various methods in addressing the problems faced by families experiencing social risk (McLaughlin-

Davis, 2018; Gudžinskienė, Šinkevičė, 2023). One of the models used to identify needs is the Life Model, according to Gitterman, Germain (2008). In implementing this model, the case manager encourages family members to assess themselves, focusing not only on the problems but also on finding solutions. The case manager empowers service recipients to solve problems and handle complex life situations independently. By choosing this model, the case manager prioritizes strengthening the environment and social network of the family experiencing risk, empowering them to solve problems independently.

Other case management models include the Strengths-Based Approach Model, Crisis Intervention Model, Sociobehavioral (Behavioral Therapy) Model, Reality Therapy (Rational, Cognitive) Model, Communication Interaction (Communication) Model, Psychosocial Model, Functional Model, Social Structuring Model, Mediation Model, and Solution-Focused Approach Model. These models are applied depending on the specific needs and challenges faced by families at social risk (Shier, 2011; Raipa, Čepuraitė, 2017; Costin, Bran, 2017; Holosko, 2018).

The concept of "solutions" is essential in case management. Patron and O'Byrne (2020) argue that when people talk about the problems they face, they often present them as all-encompassing. Therefore, case managers need to seek situations (solutions) where these problems do not exist. The main goal is to avoid talking exclusively about the problem, as focusing on it can exacerbate the perceived difficulties. Case managers need to guide service recipients towards recognizing opportunities for problem resolution, asking questions that redirect attention to potential solutions rather than dwelling on the problem itself.

The Problem-Solving Model, as described by Shier (2011), emphasizes the case manager's role in helping families facing social risk, perform social tasks and ensure relationships with other community members. Studies on the social service system in Lithuania revealed a predominant model featuring characteristics empowering service recipients (Bajoraitė, Norvaišaitė, 2018). These empowering characteristics include social service management directed towards service recipients, respect for the dignity of service recipients, accessibility and availability of services, priority and continuity of services, service provision by an empowered institution, and the civil rights and decisions of service recipients (Kiaunytė, Lygnugarienė, 2019; Nikolajenko, Raudytė, 2023).

Many service recipients in families facing social risk lack a clear vision of their goals. Specialists providing services to these families often encounter rejection, resistance, and reluctance to engage in the assistance process. Negotiations between case managers and service recipients may involve difficulties, as some service recipients refuse to accept long-term goals, while others struggle to articulate their desires and needs (Holosko, 2018; McLaughlin-Davis, 2018).

Therefore, formulating goals effectively becomes crucial in negotiating assistance methods with service recipients. According to Parton and O'Byrne (2000), well-formulated goals should be expressed in the language used by service recipients and should be individualized, achievable, action-oriented, focused on the present, and controllable by the service recipient. These goals should emphasize positive aspects, representing the beginning of change in the service recipient's life, rather than reinforcing the familiar negative aspects.

The application of case management models in practice should empower service recipients to identify and independently address emerging challenges, improving the spiritual, social, and physical well-being of families facing social risk. The goal of the case management process is to enable service recipients to solve emerging difficulties through coordinated service delivery. Cooperation and timely sharing of relevant information between organizations providing assistance are crucial for achieving positive changes in families facing social risk, especially in meeting the physical and emotional needs of children growing up in these families.

The understanding of the concept of risk in families facing social risk is essential. According to Gražulis, Čižikienė (2016), families often encounter crisis situations or risk factors that disrupt the balance of family relationships and acceptable family functioning in society. Families successfully overcoming a crisis enter a new stage of successful functioning, while those unable to overcome a crisis become vulnerable and struggle to perform their intended functions.

Lithuanian legislation, such as the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2006), introduces the concept of social risk. It includes circumstances and factors that may cause or pose a threat to experiencing social isolation for families or individuals. These factors include alcohol or substance dependence, gambling addiction, long-term unemployment and lack of motivation to participate in the labor market, involvement or tendency to engage in criminal activities, experience of harm due to criminal activities, harmful alcohol or substance use, various forms of violence, lack of social skills in family members, and inability to properly care for children's upbringing and development.

Children growing up in families facing social risk often lack a sense of security, self-confidence, and a sense of environment, as they acquire socially unacceptable behavior skills in their immediate surroundings. These children experience sadness, anxiety, decreased cognitive activity, diminished initiative.

#### Processing of Personal Data in the Case Management Process

Before the first meeting where the family case will be discussed, the case manager collects all the necessary information about the child and their family to coordinate and organize the case management process. If needed, the case manager also gathers information about extended family members or individuals closely related to the child, requesting information from social service providers,

educational institutions, law enforcement, and, if necessary, healthcare institutions. The case manager follows point 11 of the Case Management Procedure, (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019) and aims to carry out the assessment of the child's and/or family's needs using the evaluation form specified in Annex 1 of the Case Management Procedure. The legitimacy of data processing and collection is justified according to Article 6(1)(c) and (d) of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council (Eur-lex, 2016), stating that processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation applicable to the data controller (in the case management process – the case manager) and for the protection of vital interests of the data subject (in this case, the child) or another natural person (family members).

The processing of special categories of personal data is carried out based on Article 9(2)(b) of the Regulation (Eur-lex, 2016), as the case manager processes the data of service recipients by fulfilling an obligation and utilizing special rights in the field of social protection. It also relies on Article 6(1)(e) of Regulation 2016/679, (Eur-lex, 2016), stating that data processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the data controller (case manager) acting on behalf of the local government (in this case, the municipality).

It should be noted that all the mentioned organizations provide the necessary information about the child and their family to the case manager free of charge. When conducting the assessment of the child's and/or family's needs, the case manager follows point 32 of the Case Management Procedure (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019), outlining the areas of need assessment: child development, parenting skills, family experiences, and social factors. The case manager identifies risk factors for family members and the child, assesses the level of their manifestation, and evaluates the strengths and abilities of the child and their family to use community assistance, as it can reduce the experienced risks.

During the assessment of the child's and/or family's needs, especially when there is more than one child in the family, each child is assessed individually. This is supported by Braslauskienė R. et al. (2022), who emphasizes that the needs of each child in a family experiencing assistance during the assessment must be evaluated individually. The author also notes that services providing assistance to families experiencing social risk should assess three main areas: parenting skills, child development, and family and community (Braslauskienė et al., 2022).

In point 34 of the Case Management Procedure (34.1–34.4) (Lietuvos Respublikos socialinės apsaugos ir darbo ministras, 2019), four levels of intensity of the manifestation of social risk factors in a family experiencing social risk are presented:

- Level 0 is established when risk factors in the family are not identified, and the needs of family members and the child can be met through

preventive assistance to the child and their family and by using comprehensive services provided in the community.

- Level 1 is established when minor but concerning risk factors are identified. To address them, early intervention is needed, but by providing preventive services to the family and the growing child, concerning risk factors can be successfully overcome.
- Level 2 is established when areas requiring more attention due to more intense risk factors are highlighted, and resolving them requires early intervention and intensive work by a team of specialists.
- Level 3 is established when the situation of the child and their family indicates the need for intensive intervention, and identified risk factors cannot be addressed by providing early preventive assistance or using comprehensive services in the community.

Thus, the form for assessing the needs of the child and/or family is completed by identifying the strengths of the child and their family members, as well as the level of manifestation of social risk factors. If risk factors are not identified during the assessment of the needs of the child and/or family, and the level of manifestation of social risk is assessed as 0, the assessment is considered complete, and the case management process is not applied to the family. If the case manager decides not to initiate the case management process, social services are still provided to the family, and family members are informed about the comprehensive services available in the community during consultation.

In Article 36(1) of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Fundamentals of the Rights of the Child (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 1996), it is stated that the description of the child's situation includes the assessment of the received report about the child and the potential violation of the child's rights, determination of risk and protection factors, as well as the procedure for assessing the need for assistance to the child and/or their family and the procedure for determining the application of protection needs.

In cases where specialists from the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service determine the need for assistance to the child and/or their family, assistance to a family experiencing social risk is provided by the municipality. The case manager, together with the family members experiencing social risk, discusses acceptable ways and means of assistance to the family, aiming to help parents develop parenting skills, change attitudes towards child-rearing practices, ensure a physically and emotionally safe environment for the child, and meet the child's needs. Both family members and the child may receive consultations from a psychologist, social worker, family assistant support, and participate in group or individual positive parenting sessions. When the case manager identifies the need for comprehensive support for the family or child, the case management process is initiated.

The case manager forms a team of specialists, including representatives from the territorial department of the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service, educational, healthcare, and social service organizations within the municipality, as well as representatives from law enforcement institutions or specialists from other areas, taking into account the needs of the child and their family. Representatives from local communities and NGOs, as well as elders, may also be invited. In order to ensure the best interests of the child and protect information about the private life of the family, confidentiality requirements are applied to individuals participating in the family case review meeting. It should be noted that confidentiality requirements do not apply to the child's parents or other representatives of the child according to the law, but only if the information disclosed by the parents during the family case review meeting does not contradict the best interests of the child (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 1996).

In summary, the initiation, organization, management, and implementation of the case management process are possible only when the assessment of the child's and/or family's needs is performed, and the level of manifestation of risk factors in the family is determined during the evaluation. The main goal of case management is to empower the family to act independently, utilize community resources, and ensure the safety and well-being of the child in the biological family.

### **Personal data protection in case management**

In order to reveal the peculiarities of case managers working with families experiencing social risk in implementing the requirements of the personal data protection process, a qualitative research strategy was chosen (Žydžiūnaitė, Sabaliauskas, 2017). The choice of a qualitative research strategy was conditioned by the fact that this approach allows for a deeper understanding of the essence of the research object. Qualitative research, according to Žukauskienė (2008), is a systematic study of a situation, event, individual, or group in a natural environment, aiming to understand the phenomena under investigation and provide a holistic, interpretive, and situationally synthesized phenomenon. The selection of such a research strategy was also motivated by the fact that the required information is obtained through direct, focused interviews with the research participant, with the direction and content of the conversation being determined by the research problem. The research problem is formulated with the question: What factors determine the successful implementation of personal data protection by case managers working with families experiencing social risk, and what are the peculiarities of the personal data protection implementation process highlighted in social work? *Research Object:* The preparation of case managers to apply personal data protection requirements in organizing case management processes for families experiencing social risk. *Research Aim:* To reveal the



requirements of the personal data protection process in the case management process, to formulate and present areas for improving personal data protection in the case management process.

For the empirical study, a scientific literature and document analysis were chosen. During this process, EU legislation, laws, and other documents were used to identify and define the peculiarities and the need for personal data protection in the case management process. To ensure the objectivity of the research and a deeper examination of the chosen topic, a semi-structured interview with case managers was applied.

*Selection Criteria* : Participants work as case managers for at least one year, apply the case management process to families experiencing social risk and with children in Vilnius, Lithuania. Seven case managers participated in the study.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexible discussions between the researcher and the respondents. An initial questionnaire comprised a set of related questions that the respondents were required to answer. Problematic questions included: How do you ensure data protection in your professional activities? What difficulties arise when implementing personal data protection in professional activities? How familiar are you with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)?

The research took place from March 2023 to October 2023, and the preliminary data obtained during this period are presented in this summary. More in-depth quantitative studies are needed for precise information.

*Research Results*: To assess the case managers' familiarity with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), they were asked how their workplace introduced them to the GDPR and its implementation. Some respondents reported having training sessions on GDPR implementation at their workplace. They commented, "There were training sessions on GDPR, more like checking a box, they had no real value to me." Others mentioned a lack of training or discussions about GDPR at their workplace. One participant explained, "The institution did not introduce us, we had no training or any discussions during meetings. The administration told us to follow the GDPR, paradoxically, but that's how it is."

Additionally, the study revealed that case managers independently seek information about GDPR. During the interviews, it became clear that their knowledge of GDPR is limited. The participants mainly rely on colleagues, the media, and internet sources to gain knowledge about GDPR. Respondents shared their approach to dealing with questions related to personal data protection, expressing reliance on colleagues for advice: "If I ever doubt whether something can be disclosed and so on, there are always colleagues you can ask."

During the interviews, respondents' answers to the question "How do you ensure data protection in your work? What difficulties arise when applying personal data protection in professional activities?" revealed that respondents believe they ensure data protection in their work by not disclosing service

recipients' personal data. Their insights indicated that case managers are not familiar with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but despite not knowing the requirements, rules, and possible consequences of GDPR violations, case managers apply the principle of prudence in their work when organizing the case management process for families experiencing social risk, fearing to disclose excessive or inappropriate information.

From the responses provided by the respondents, it is evident that one of the problems encountered by case managers when applying the requirements of personal data protection in the case management process is that: "...too many of these GDPR requirements burden case managers; the workload is increased – organize assistance, monitor the situation, write documents, and additionally, take care of data protection..." (P\_7). Another research participant expressed similar concerns: "GDPR greatly complicates work; all institutions are afraid to violate it, it seems that we are now not working for the good of the family, but trying not to violate GDPR..." (P\_5). Thus, the responses of the research participants indicate that the application of the General Data Protection Regulation may potentially burden case managers' work and cause stress: "...it burdens too much, it causes stress, whether it is really necessary, I don't know" (P\_7). It can be assumed that case managers find it difficult to ensure the protection of personal data not only because they may lack knowledge about personal data protection but also because other institutions are reluctant to provide case managers with the necessary data, fearing to violate GDPR.

The responses of the research participants revealed that the application of the General Data Protection Regulation complicates the work of case managers in the case management process because both in providing and collecting information about service recipients, case managers and the institutions providing information about service recipients strive not to violate the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation. During the study, it became clear that respondents experience a greater workload and tension due to the requirements of personal data protection.

The study participants indicated that, in order to improve the application of personal data protection requirements in the case management process, it is necessary to start with revising the Case Management Procedure, expanding the authority of the case manager regarding information gathering: "...remind ministries that services for the family are organized and applied by case managers, not child rights specialists, and that case managers need information about the family and opportunities to collect and obtain that information without intermediaries" (P\_2). This respondent's opinion was supported by another research participant: "...draw attention to management within the ministry and the fact that case management already receives all sensitive information from child rights, so why can't we obtain it ourselves, reducing bureaucracy?" (P\_4). During the study, it was noted that almost all respondents mentioned that organizing the

case management process would help them ensure compliance with personal data protection requirements: "...digitized files. Special tools and access to data with individually assigned permissions. Files should be transferred within the general social services system...initiate the digitization process and actions at the national level to comply with GDPR" (P\_3). This opinion was also supported by another research participant: "I can say yes, for centers implementing case management – digitize processes, meaning transfer all paperwork into a digital space, and each case manager should have personal access" (P\_4).

The research participants were asked to consider and provide suggestions on what could be done in the future to ensure proper personal data protection in the case management process: "What do you think needs to be changed to achieve effective implementation of personal data protection in the activities of a case manager? The research participants, in providing suggestions, emphasized the need for filling out the case management procedure: "Case managers should have clear instructions on how to work with client data, how long to keep client data, where to store it, and there should also be an algorithm for how case managers transfer data to other organizations to ensure their safety... The ministry should create conditions for case managers to access necessary data, expand the capabilities of case managers, and clarify responsibility for the security of acquired data" (P\_4). Another research participant not only supported this idea but also proposed including case managers themselves in the expansion of the Case Management Procedure: "This again involves including practitioners, adjusting the case management procedure regarding certain things, whether or not, because it needs to be constantly adjusted, as the issues change, the situations change, and it needs to be constantly updated, reviewed..." (P\_6).

Summing up the responses, it can be concluded that case managers acquire limited knowledge about GDPR from colleagues, the media, or the internet. The participants' answers raise concerns about whether case managers who gain knowledge in such ways can effectively ensure personal data protection during the case management process. It can be assumed that the management of social service institutions providing case management services for families experiencing social risk does not understand the importance of GDPR and does not appreciate the potential harm and consequences to their institutions if proper data protection is not ensured.

## **Conclusions**

The research results indicate that case managers, in their efforts to ensure proper personal data protection during the case management process, would prefer a unified internal system for organizations applying case management processes across Lithuania. Such a system would store all personal information about

service recipients, transfer recipient files and documents, and send and receive information, allowing each case manager to personally access the system.

The concept of personal data in legal acts and official documents is formulated differently. Personal data is understood as any information related to an individual whose identity can be established. The issue of personal privacy protection became relevant in Europe only after World War II, with the establishment of democracy. With the rapid development of information technology, the need to protect personal information arose, and personal data protection was regulated at both international and national levels. Despite existing regulations, the concerns of Lithuanian and other European Union citizens about data security persist. Therefore, strict personal data protection measures are necessary.

The study revealed that the case manager, when organizing services for a family experiencing social risk and the child growing up in it, gathers information about service recipients from various institutions. However, due to the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation and the need to comply with its provisions, information gathering is hindered because institutions, fearing to violate personal data protection, do not provide the necessary information for the implementation of the case management process. The research results showed that case managers, in order to ensure proper personal data protection during the case management process, would like to have a common internal system among organizations implementing the case management process nationwide in Lithuania. This system would store all personal information of service recipients, transfer service recipient files and documents related to service recipients, and allow each case manager to personally access the system. The study found that a new revision of the Case Management Procedure is needed, expanding the capabilities of case managers to collect information about members of families experiencing social risk and their children, and obliging all organizations to provide information to the case manager.

During the study, it was found that there is no specific definition describing the case management process in scientific sources. However, in most academic literature, the case management process is described as the provision of comprehensive assistance to service recipients experiencing social risk by engaging specialists and institutions providing services to families and their children. The case management process, as a method of social work, is clearly structured and organized, following a clear sequence of actions and measures. Case managers ensure that service recipients receive individualized, comprehensive services that best meet their expectations and needs.

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