



# CASEWORK NAVIGATOR

Give your team the tools they need to excel at casework.



# CASEWORK BASICS

## CLOSING CASES

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developed by



# CLOSING CASES

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# INTRODUCTION

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After weeks, months, or even years of hard work, closing a case can be delicate: it is the last opportunity to make a good impression with the constituent, and for the office to integrate any lessons gleaned from working on the case, regardless of the outcome. Beyond considering the constituent's experience and feelings, handling closing cases with forethought can also help caseworkers continue to learn and find their own closure after investing significant time and energy on behalf of constituents.

This chapter will cover how to decide when to close a case, and how to learn from cases by tracking performance and oversight metrics and constituent feedback.

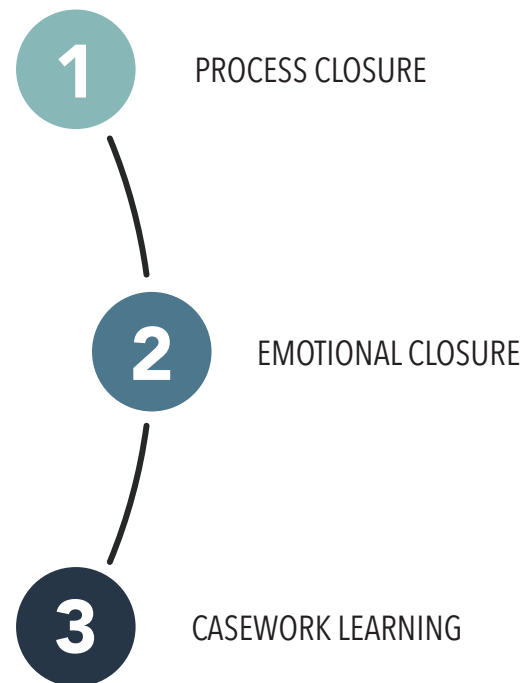


# WHEN AND HOW TO CLOSE CASES

For cases that end favorably, closure is straightforward. However, for more difficult cases, it can be tough for both constituents and caseworkers to know when to stop looking for one more avenue to try.

Congressional staff time is a limited resource, and part of the challenge of casework is deploying it effectively. When a case gets to a point where the Congressional office is no longer the best possible avenue to help a constituent, it is in both the constituent's and the office's interests to help redirect the constituent to other resources that can be more helpful.

In determining when to close a case, there are three angles to consider: whether and how the original problem was resolved; how the constituent feels about the process; and how the office learns from the case. Keeping all three dimensions in mind will not only help caseworkers understand when to let a case go, but can also help create a sense of resolution for constituents as well.



# Process Closure

Process closure is about whether the constituent's initial problem has been resolved to a point where there are no additional steps for the Congressional office. Scenarios where the casework process is resolved may include:

## 01 The agency has returned a final response, with no additional appeal rights or avenues to contest the decision.

For example, a constituent may have received a final determination of eligibility or ineligibility for benefits; or an inquiry has been escalated as far as possible up the chain of command. Agency staff will usually be able to provide insight on whether the constituent has additional appeal rights.

## 02 The case has reached a stage where additional action must come from the constituent.

For example, after receiving an appeal determination where there are additional appeal rights, the constituent must be the one to decide whether to pursue those rights, to start over and reapply for benefits, or apply for a different program. At this point, it is appropriate to provide the constituent with information on those options, but staff must be clear that the Congressional office cannot independently take further action.

## 03 The case has reached a stage where a Congressional office is no longer the most appropriate resource for the constituent.

For example, for higher-level administrative appeals, while the constituent may feel in need of support, they may be better served by contacting an attorney who can provide legal advice, or a trained benefits counselor who can help guide additional decisions. While it is sometimes helpful to continue to monitor a case while the constituent works with a different resource, in most cases, the responsibility should be on the constituent to reach back out if they require additional Congressional assistance.



## 04 The “ask” in the case has changed significantly enough that it may be worth opening a new case.

For example, a constituent who comes in with a problem with one benefits program may also bring up a problem with an additional program. For the purposes of keeping clean records, it is almost always preferable to have separate cases for separate issues unless the issues are directly linked. Some of this decision will depend on CMS platform features: some CMS platforms allow for “related” cases to be created that duplicate important information and documents; others do not. Casework teams should establish principles to determine when new cases should be created from existing constituent inquiries.

## Emotional Closure

As covered in the Intake chapter, casework is not only about solving technical problems: caseworkers are also working to address the constituent’s experience of navigating an agency problem that can impact their livelihood, as well as their perception of their place in government of, by, and for the people. This experience can be deeply stressful, and confusing. Working with a Congressional office can provide a significant amount of emotional closure regardless of the process outcome, which is especially important for cases that do not resolve favorably.

Managing the constituent’s emotional closure on cases may include answering the following:



- Does the constituent understand the steps the casework team took on their behalf, including why there are no longer additional next steps if applicable?
- Does the constituent understand why the decision was favorable or unfavorable?
- Does the constituent have tools to avoid or navigate this problem for themselves in the future?
- Did the constituent have the opportunity to tell their story in a way where they felt heard and respected?
- Does the constituent understand how their experience will factor into legislative/oversight activity to address this problem for others?
- Does the constituent have a better sense of relevant community resources they can consult if needed?



# Casework Learning

Some constituents find validation in knowing that their struggles with an agency will help others in the future. Beyond the specific focus on the substance of the case, it can also be beneficial for caseworkers to take a moment to examine how the office’s casework process worked for this constituent. While these conclusions may not be communicated to the constituent, they can still be helpful for helping casework teams continuously improve, and help caseworkers find closure and validation in their hard work.



Starting point questions may include the following:

- What did the constituent value most about this case? What does this tell the casework team about how to focus efforts in the future?
- What could the casework team have done differently to make this case go more smoothly?
- Would any additional resources/tools have made this case easier?
- Is there any feedback worth providing to other members of the Congressional office, including any interns or other teams, about this case?
- Is there any feedback worth providing to the agency about how this case went?
- Was the investment of time/effort worth the payoff to the constituent in this case? If not, how can similar cases be approached differently in the future?

Depending on the casework team’s structure for management and review, it may make sense to answer the following questions more generally rather than for each case.



# Closing Out Cases

These three dimensions to understanding when to end cases can be a good framework for communicating that decision to constituents. Caseworkers' final interactions with constituents should aim to address as many of these dimensions and questions as possible. For example, a case-closed letter or phone call should aim to cover:

- A short summary of the case, including the actions the caseworker took on the constituent's behalf.
- A summary of the agency's final position, including any potential next steps or decisions that the constituent must make.
- Any circumstances when the constituent should contact the office again.
- Optional additional steps:
  - » Community resources the constituent may wish to consult.
  - » Any lessons the office learned from this case that will impact future legislative/oversight work.
  - » Any opportunities for the constituent to continue to engage with the office, including completing a short feedback survey, attending an event, and/or spreading the word about the casework services offered.



Even for constituents who mostly prefer to interact by phone, it can be helpful to follow up a phone conversation with a case-closed letter that recaps these items in a clear and easy-to-read manner for constituents to refer back to with questions.

It is also recommended that offices consider writing these summary closing letters for all cases, whether they resolve successfully or unsuccessfully: for positive cases, they are still a great way to help nudge constituents to provide feedback and help spread the word about the team's casework services.





# SPECIAL CASES

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The vast majority of cases will go through the standard casework steps, often multiple times: an initial inquiry will lead to follow-up steps, ongoing correspondence with both the constituent and the agency, and finally, a clear end-point. However, some types of cases might not have such neat timelines, and deserve some consideration to develop a policy in advance.

## Long-term Pending Cases

Some cases will be pending with an agency for entire Congressional terms and more: immigration cases with multi-year waiting lists, higher-level appeal cases with year-plus queues, some military records cases, and more can all stretch out through multiple years. For these cases, Congressional offices often have limited scope to be helpful: noting Congressional interest will make sure that the office receives a copy of the decision, but little else. Even expediting processes for these long cases, if they exist, may only speed the process up a small amount.

## Articulate limits & set expectations

To still serve these constituents, casework teams should be clear about the limits of their potential involvement up front. However, they may also consider developing resources to help meet constituents' other needs, including the need to share their story and acknowledge the difficulty of this type of drawn-out agency process, while not letting staff linger on cases where they can have no functional impact.

For example, form letters to constituents inquiring about cases that will be long-term pending may start out by:

- Explaining the process and the expected timeframe for resolution.
- Communicating to the constituent that they will keep their case open, but will only ask the agency for a status update every six months or longer.
- Alternatively, communicating to the constituent that they will note Congressional interest, but will close their case until the constituent receives the final determination, or until the constituent's circumstances change for them to qualify for expediting (if applicable).



# Additional resources and information

However, depending on the constituent's circumstance, the caseworker may also consider:

- Providing a list of resources for the constituent to consult while they are waiting for a decision, including social services, legal help (if they are waiting for a hearing), and any other benefits that may help, like food stamps or refugee support services.
- Providing information on any legislative action that the Member has undertaken to address the long waiting times for specific agency functions, including legislation introduced or cosponsored as well as hearing appearances and other oversight actions.
- Inviting the constituent to participate in another event the office hosts, like a veterans' town hall or a forum on immigration issues, or to share their story with the Member.

## Sequential Cases

It's not uncommon for some constituents to have multiple cases open at the same time or in sequence: for example, a constituent working at a part-time job while on SSI or SSDI benefits may experience repeated difficulties with reporting their income, or a veteran going through the VA appeals process may attempt to re-apply multiple times for compensation for different medical conditions. There are two things to keep in mind in these cases.

First, when is it worth re-opening an old case or starting a new one? This will partly depend on the features of the office's CMS platform. For offices using a CMS that allows cases to be re-opened, it may be helpful to make this decision by thinking about the oversight metrics of the case: does this problem represent a genuine continuation of the old problem, where the initial resolution was not the actual end of the problem? Or is this a new problem with the same program, or a new problem with a different program? For keeping useful records, re-opening the old case is the most accurate reflection of the first option—for all other options, it is likely best to open a new case.

Second, for new problems, casework teams do not help constituents when they become a crutch rather than an option of last resort. Teams should consider setting firm policies for constituents who may request subsequent casework services out of convenience rather than to address problems, including form letters and talking points. These policies can note the team's limited capacity, commitment to prioritizing constituents who have exhausted all normal channels for resolution, and/or constituents in emergency or crisis situations. Caseworkers may also consider having contact information for additional community resources who may be able to support constituents seeking assistance, such as senior centers, community action programs, veterans service officers, and more.



# CASE CLOSING TOOLKIT

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## Case Closing Checklist

### Process Closure:

- Has our team exhausted all reasonable options to help meet the constituent's initial request?
- If the next step is with the constituent, do they have all the information they need to consider further action?
- If the constituent's request has changed dramatically (i.e. new program or new agency), have we opened a different case?
- If there is a future scenario where the constituent should contact our team again on this case, have we communicated that scenario?
- If this is a long term pending case, does the constituent understand the timeline and any additional steps?

### Constituent Closure:

- Has our team communicated the agency's final decision to the constituent, along with all steps our office took to arrive at that decision?
- Have we given the constituent an opportunity to ask any questions, or discuss potential options?
- If the constituent is in need of additional resources, have we provided information they need to contact those resources, including warm handoffs where relevant?
- If relevant, does the constituent understand how our office will learn from this case to inform internal/oversight/legislative operations in the future?

### Internal Closure:

- Are all tags for this case accurate and complete?
- Have we included all final constituent and agency communications in this case's records?
- If this case suggests any process changes or feedback for staff, has that been communicated?
- If relevant, have we set this case up to solicit feedback from the constituent at a reasonable point?



# Sample Case Closing Form Letter

*Dear Mrs. DeSantos,*

*Thank you for taking the time to speak with me by phone yesterday about your case with the Social Security Administration. I wanted to write to send a quick recap of what we discussed and some additional information for your records.*

*When you reached out to our office in February of this year, you let our team know that you had received conflicting letters from Social Security regarding your financial eligibility for Supplemental Security Income. Over the last several months of working with the regional office and the relevant processing center, we were able to determine that the error was caused by your weekly pay stubs being entered incorrectly at the local Field Office. When you provided copies of those pay stubs, we were able to work with Social Security to have your file updated and your benefits restored to the correct amount. At this point, the Social Security Administration and our office consider this case closed, with no further action needed on your part.*

*I understand that this situation was very stressful, and I am glad that we were able to help you resolve it. Going forward, our contacts at the regional office emphasized that you may be able to avoid these problems by submitting your pay records through the Social Security app.*

*Our team is also working to hold Social Security accountable to make sure that problems like the one you faced do not happen to other constituents in the future. My boss recently had the opportunity to relay some of your concerns to the Social Security Commissioner at a recent hearing of the Ways and Means Committee's Subcommittee on Social Security, and is an original cosponsor of legislation requiring Social Security to move up the timetable for modernizing its IT infrastructure.*

*Your comment about how our office's weekend voicemail message was confusing also prompted us to re-record the voicemail to clarify—thank you on behalf of our entire team for your thoughtful feedback. It was a pleasure working with you!*

*If we can be of assistance in the future, please do not hesitate to reach out. You will also receive a short survey by email in the next few weeks, and I would very much appreciate your taking the time to share any additional thoughts on your case and our casework team's service.*

*Sincerely,*

*Susan B. Caseworker*



# Sample Constituent Feedback Survey

Some offices have found an increase in survey responses when the survey comes out from the Member email and in the Member's voice. A sample 10-question survey that covers all of these bases may include:

Full Name:

- Our team may share anonymous quotes from this survey to help more people find out about our casework team's services. If you would NOT like your responses to be shared, please check this box.

How satisfied were you with my casework team's service on your behalf?

—————  —————  —————  —————

Very satisfied      Somewhat satisfied      Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied      Somewhat dissatisfied      Very dissatisfied

On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend my casework team's service to other people in the district?

*Note: this question is called the Net Promoter Score, and is very well-researched as an indicator of business success. We include it with the caution that casework is not a business, and so much of the research and interpretation around this question will not apply directly to casework; however, it is still a helpful marker for team performance.*

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0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

How long did you wait for a response from my office after you first reached out?

- < 1 day
- 1-2 days
- 3-5 days
- 5+ days



How did you find out about my office's casework services?

- Website
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Flier in my community
- Referral from another service provider or elected official
- Heard from a friend, family member, or neighbor

What other resources did you consult on this case?

- Google
- Social media
- Attorney
- Friends and family
- Service provider in my community (please list)
- Other (please list):

Is there anything you wish you had known sooner regarding this case?

Do you have any suggestions for how my team can work to prevent this problem from happening to other constituents in the future?

Is there anything else you'd like me or my team to know about your case or my office's services?



# CASEWORK **BASICS**

Caseworkers often report frustration with finding basic resources on setting up and running a standout casework operation. Our free Casework Basics program fills in the gaps between existing casework resources and on-the-ground wisdom, and serves as a central clearing point for internal and external information on casework.

**01** DEFINITION &  
RULES

**04** AGENCY  
CORRESPONDENCE

**02** STRUCTURING A CASEWORK  
OPERATION

**05** CLOSING  
CASES

**03** CASEWORK  
INTAKE

**06** SAFEGUARDING  
CONSTITUENT INFO

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## PROFESSIONAL **DEVELOPMENT**

For offices interested in taking their casework operations to the next level, we offer a subscription-based professional development program exploring elements of standout casework. In particular, the program will focus on what caseworkers can learn from other industries and fields, and how casework teams can focus on process efficiency and effectiveness.

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