

Drug Evaluation Network System (DENS™) Software Overview

The DENS™ Software Suite is an electronic ASI data collection system created with substance abuse treatment providers in mind. It automates administration of the ASI through an intuitive, time-saving interface used mainly by counselors at treatment facilities. The software takes very little time to learn and has a host of benefits unavailable to states and/or programs currently using paper and pencil instruments.

To schedule a DENS training or for more information on the DENS Software System, contact Meghan Love, Senior Program Manager, at mlove@tresearch.org.

Comprehensive Intake Assessment

The DENS Suite is a vehicle for the collection of the ASI, the most widely used substance abuse assessment instrument in the world. Mandated by numerous state and county governments, it is a standardized, semi-structured, multi-focused screening and assessment tool identifying problems in many different areas of the client's life: General Information, Medical, Employment, Alcohol/Drug, Legal, Family/Social, & Psychiatric issues. The software uses the same semi-structured format as the original ASI instrument to ensure questions are posed in the order intended. With the click of a button, interviewers can administer either the complete ASI interview or a shortened interview called the ASI-Lite. Less personally sensitive questions are asked toward the beginning, with more personal items and sections such as Family/Social and Psychiatric appearing toward the end. This allows a counselor to build rapport before posing intimate questions.

Advanced Functionality with Little or No Learning Curve

The software was designed to be as easy to use as possible, especially for those with little or no previous experience with computers. All major functions are accessed through a point-and-click strategy, and all frequently used buttons are visually identified through a corresponding graphic. There are no menus, or "options" screens to configure. After a brief initial sign-in and registration process (completed with TRI staff via phone or e-mail), every aspect of the DENS Suite is configured and available for immediate use by counselors, who can perform all software functions without memorizing commands or mastering complex procedures. Onscreen help is present at all times (for both software functions and the ASI interview), and there is room within the title bar of the program to enter a telephone number users may call should they have a question or require further assistance within their program.

DENS software training is normally included in the TRI ASI training protocol. We have found consistently that even those with the most elementary level of computer literacy feel more comfortable using the DENS Suite once they are properly trained and have spent some time practicing using the software.

Coding, Crosschecks, Defaults & Range Checks

Embedded in the DENS Suite are a number of time-saving, quality assurance measures to assure the data collected is as accurate as possible. Most visible among these is a series of Crosschecks and Defaults within the ASI portion of the software.

Sample Crosscheck:

Drug & Alcohol section: if a counselor codes a client with more days "drinking to intoxication" than the number of days coded for "drinking" at all, a pop-up message will appear warning the counselor that this situation is not possible, prompting them to recode either "days drinking" or "days drinking to intoxication". The computer automatically directs the counselor to the item to be recoded.

Sample Default:

Legal Section: if a counselor codes a client as not awaiting trial or sentencing for any criminal charges, the software will automatically code the next item (asking for the specific charge for which they are awaiting trial or sentencing) as "not applicable" with a code of N.

Crosschecks and Defaults are a time-saving way of guarding against contradictory responses throughout the course of a client's intake assessment and ensuring a counselor is coding consistently and according to standardized ASI coding conventions. In addition to these safeguards, each text field within the DENS Suite is set to accept only a particular set of characters as a response (i.e. a "how many days in the past 30" question will only accept a numerical answer between 0-30). This "Range-check" feature guards against typographical errors, and ensures the counselor is attuned to the specific information being requested in each field.

Hints & Comments

Each ASI item within the DENS software is displayed along with a "hint" at the bottom of the screen. These hints provide information on the intent of the item, any special coding rules, and recommended additional probes to provide clinicians with more detailed information. The content of the hint box changes each time the counselor clicks on a new item within the ASI, assuring that the display is always relevant to the question being asked.

Also included in the software is a text box for entering comments. This is available for each item on the ASI and allows a counselor to enter additional information and detail for each question. The content of the comments box refreshes as the counselor moves from item to item (similar to the hints), and all comments are automatically integrated into the understandable text and logical sequence of the ASI Print-out and Narrative Summary (see below). There is a place at the end of each ASI section for counselors to write additional comments or note information gathered beyond the standard ASI items.

Aggregate Reports

These reports summarize the entire database on one computer, providing an overall look at the clients at a particular facility (if all client data is entered into one PC). They compare each of the following pairs of groups listing averages for nearly all items included on the ASI.

- a. Male vs. Female Client data
- b. Clients entering treatment Last Year vs. This Year
- c. Welfare vs. Non-Welfare receiving clients
- d. Criminal Justice System (CJS) vs. Non-CJS involved clients

2. Security

Several security features are built into the software to guard against unauthorized access to client information. The entire client database is password protected, making it difficult for someone to simply copy the file from a facility computer and view it outside the DENS software environment. Within the software itself, there is a password protected login screen, preventing access by anyone other than users sanctioned by a treatment program. Further, when adding usernames to the software a system administrator can decide whether or not to grant new users "administrative access," which gives them permission to add and delete users themselves. This feature helps administrators limit access (if desired) to only those counselors who have passed ASI competency measures.

3. Training & Competency

It is important to ensure that counselors using the software within a treatment program are competent and comfortable with its operation before they attempt to utilize it during an assessment. To this end, there is a "practice" section within the software program which allows counselors to complete mock interviews just as they would if a client were present. The screens in this portion of the software function exactly the same as the actual ASI screens, but the data entered is only stored temporarily and in a separate location than actual client data. Counselors can do as many practice ASIs as they want, and TRI offers a series of competency measures should an organization wish its staff to become officially certified in ASI coding and administration.

4. Administrative Functions

In the administrative functions of the software, users will find all the tools necessary to maintain the software and manage their data. Here, counselors can back up their client database so no data is lost in the event of a computer malfunction. Aggregate reports are generated from the administrative area of the DENS Suite, and counselors can batch print client narrative summaries from here as well. In addition to being able to print multiple narratives at once, counselors can use the batch printing feature to customize the order in which ASI sections appear within the narrative report. This feature is useful for facilities that report to a specific agency that only requests certain information about clients (i.e. only Legal & Alcohol/Drug data).

5. DENS Data Export Software

Also available is a separate program called DENS Data, which allows a facility to export its client database to a statistical analysis package such as SPSS. The program can also convert a DENS database to Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. DENS Data is a useful utility for performing more advanced analyses of your site's data than the DENS Suite software is capable of completing on its own. Further, if you have more than one computer at your site running DENS, this data export utility offers a way of merging the data from several machines into one database, allowing you to get an overall picture of your site's clientele.