

Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Advocacy Program and San Francisco County's SSI Advocacy Initiative

MARGARITA GALLO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

San Francisco County's CalWORKs program is committed to assisting individuals and family members with disabilities through access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. It is estimated that 250-300 of the individuals who are on exemptions in the CalWORKs Program in San Francisco are potentially eligible for SSI. Currently, most of these individuals are exempted due to reasons related to either a medical or mental health condition. However, the needs of these individuals could be better addressed through the SSI program. If these participants complete the SSI application process and meet the requirements, their families greatly benefit since the SSI grant is higher than a CalWORKs grant. In addition, these participants also benefit from neither having to comply with the CalWORKs work requirements nor having their grants decreased due to a sanction or for reaching the program time limits. Individuals with serious physical disabilities or psychological conditions usually find it easier to apply for CalWORKs benefits due to the lack of support in navigating the complex SSI application process. A structured Advocacy Unit in the CalWORKs Program would more effectively assist these individuals in navigating this complex process. It is estimated that between 32% and 44 % of CalWORKs

recipients may have an unidentified disability or health-related limitation and 19% of the children receiving CalWORKs have some type of disability. This is especially significant for the CalWORKs population since having a disability or having a child with a disability can be a barrier to employment and grounds for an exemption from various program work requirements.

It is also important to note that all of these exempted individuals are included as part of the population used to calculate the county Work Participation Rate (WPR). Since they are included in the denominator, as required by the state and federal government, their inclusion has a negative impact on the county's WPR.

Since San Francisco's CalWORKs program is currently in the planning stages of creating a SSI advocacy unit, I selected the Contra Costa SSI Advocacy Program as my 15 day project in the BASSC program. In addition, I decided to also research specific information regarding the structure, process and best practices of the SSI Advocacy Initiative in the San Francisco County Adult Assistance Programs (CAAP) that provide General Assistance for single adults, in order to compare the structure and processes of the two initiatives, as well as cost effectiveness and outcomes.

**Margarita Gallo, Work Participation Rate (WPR)
Coordinator, San Francisco Human Services Agency**

Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Advocacy Program and San Francisco County's SSI Advocacy Initiative

MARGARITA GALLO

Background

Currently, San Francisco County serves individuals who may be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) by having the Eligibility Workers and Employment Specialists identify them. After participants are identified, their workers refer the individuals to the following two different tracks for support:

- The CalWORKs Social Work Services Unit—for individuals with a physical disability.
- Westside Community Services—an agency that provides mental health counseling services to the CalWORKs population in San Francisco.

Westside Community Services refers individuals with psychological conditions to The Positive Resource Center (PRC) for SSI advocacy services. The participants must be in treatment with Westside to be referred, and there is a maximum of 100 clients at any point in time. In the past year, through referrals to the Positive Resource Center program, the agency has successfully assisted 28 CalWORKs participants in receiving SSI benefits.

The Social Worker Services Unit has also had some success in helping this population with the SSI application process. In the past year (January–June, 2011), this unit successfully assisted 67 participants in getting their SSI applications approved. However, this unit is also in charge of helping CalWORKs participants with other issues, such as housing, domestic violence, truancy and other kinds of emergency services. Creating a unit that is solely dedicated to identify, support, assist and work closely with individuals with disabilities to obtain SSI benefits is a vital piece in streamlining the process.

Even though screening participants to be referred to two different tracks for support in the application process has proven to be somewhat successful, having a centralized process will increase the rate of approved and awarded applications. This increase in SSI awarded families will at the same time produce substantial savings in grants in the CalWORKs program.

Findings: Contra Costa

In 1984, Contra Costa County (CCC) created the Employment and Human Services Advocacy Program unit. The program serves Contra Costa County's West, Central and East communities. Their offices are located in Richmond, Pleasant Hill and Antioch.

The purpose of this unit is to assist both General Assistance and CalWORKs clients with the SSI application process. This unit works closely with clients to ensure that they complete all the necessary steps to correctly submit, process and obtain the approval of the SSI application.

Clients come into the unit at various stages in the SSI process.

Eligibility staff in the Contra Costa General Assistance program and social workers in the Social Service Intensive Assessment unit in the CalWORKs program identify clients that have completed a CW61 (Exemption Form) and who are already exempted from participating due to a medical disability or psychological condition and refer these clients to the Advocacy Program.

The Advocacy Program supervisor screens cases and makes a determination regarding the appropriateness of the referral. After this initial screening the case is assigned to a social worker in the Advocacy Unit for the duration of the process. If needed, the supervisor will approve the social worker request for a psychological evaluation. Contra Costa has contracted one psychologist to perform this function.

Unit Structure

- one social work supervisor
- six social workers
- one unit clerk

Advocacy Unit Internal Process

- Unit clerk receives referral.
- Supervisor reviews the information and assigns the case to a social worker.
- Assigned social worker sends the client an invitation with the introductory packet, including among other forms, the Advocacy Introductory Letter. The client is invited to meet with the social worker. The client is given 14 days to respond. If the client does not respond within this time frame, the social worker makes a second contact attempt by either sending a second packet or following up with a home visit.
- Social worker meets with client to conduct an in-depth assessment. The SSI application is completed online and submitted to SSA the same day or within a week.
- SSI applications are completed and submitted within the required time period to maintain the protected filing date or to meet the appeal deadline.
- Social worker continues to gather appropriate documentation to submit to Social Security Administration (SSA) within 30 days of initial appointment.
- Social worker works closely with clients to ensure the client follows up and completes all necessary steps to keep the process moving until the SSI benefits are granted.

Contra Costa Advocacy Unit Outcomes (from January through November 2011)

- The Advocacy Unit has served 678 cases county-wide. They included 486 were GA (72%), 184 from CalWORKs (27%), and 8 were CAPI in process of phasing out (1%).
- Contra Costa estimates that a minimum of 61% of the Advocacy clients were successful in obtaining SSI.
- Contra Costa recorded that 171 cases were granted SSI (approximately 17 cases per month).
- Total minimum GA grant cost avoidance for 12 months, based on Advocacy worked cases that are granted SSI, is estimated at \$ 251,940.

Findings: San Francisco

The SSI Advocacy Initiative in San Francisco's CAAP program (General Assistance) was created in 2004. This initiative serves only CAAP clients. The purpose of the initiative is to serve, coach, support and effectively assist clients to complete the SSI application process. All CAAP applicants are screened for either a medical disability or psychological condition by the Triage Unit. This unit serves approximately 1,100 clients per month. The Triage staff completes the Employability Assessment form with clients and screens the client to determine whether the client is employable, unemployable, or has a Temporary Medical Condition (four months). As a result of this screening, approximately 35% of these individuals are found to be unemployable. Of the unemployable, 20% are referred to SSI Advocacy.

After the Triage Unit screening, clients are assigned to a case manager. A second appointment is scheduled with their case manager. At this meeting, clients sign releases of information to facilitate the documentation of the case. When all the information has been gathered, the case manager refers the client to the Disability Evaluation and Consultation Unit (DECU). At their third appointment, a determination is made as to whether the DECU unit staff will represent the client in the application process. If further documentation is needed, a case manager

continues working with the client until the process is completed and benefits are awarded or denied.

Initiative Structure

- Program Manager
- Triage Unit—staffed by the Richmond Area Multi Services Agency RAMS (contracted services) includes **one supervisor (PhD in Psychology) and four Clinicians** (Master in Psychology or Social Work)
- **One DECU (Disability Evaluation and Consultation Unit) which includes one lead physician, one lead psychologist and seven clinicians** (Psychologists or MDs).
- **Three SSI Case Management (CM) Units which include one supervisor and six case managers.**

Advocacy Initiative Internal Process

After the Triage Unit assessment, potential SSI eligible clients are referred to a case manager. The case manager conducts a second assessment with the clients. Clients sign a Release of Information (ROI), and the case manager starts to gather verifications. The case manager has access to online information through a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Public Health (medical records) or AVATAR (mental health records).

Within 30 days of the appointment with the case manager, clients are given a third appointment with a DECU clinician (physician or psychologist). After this appointment, the DECU clinician makes a decision regarding whether or not to represent the client until the claim is allowed or disallowed by the Disability Determination Service Division (DDS). The DECU unit serves approximately 200 clients per month; 70% of these clients are represented by DECU.

Case managers decide, investigate and find evidence that documents the limitations and disabilities of clients. All these parts are equally important. Case Managers continue to work with clients throughout the different phases outlined below. Case managers carry an average of 110 cases. The three units currently carry 1,672 cases.

Case Management Process Phases

The phases of the case management process include:

- Referral
In this phase, the case manager (CM) collects basic information to prepare initial paperwork prior to contact with client. Main referral sources include Triage, PAES Counseling Service (PCS) and outside agencies.
- Assessment/Engagement
In this phase, the CM meets with the client, arranges to have the client assessed by DECU, collects evidence, coordinates with the team, and helps determine whether or not the client will be accepted into the SSI CM Program.
- Development
In this phase, the CM completes all of the forms in the application and gathers medical evidence. This is usually done in four to five, one-hour sessions with the client.
- Liaison
In this phase, the CM follows up with the SSI application packet submitted to SSA. This happens approximately three to four weeks after delivering the application packet. The case manager ensures that the application is moving forward and contacts the SSA Analyst as needed. The CM provides any missing documentation and resolves any obstacles.
- Post-Grant or Denial
In this phase, the CM follows specific steps for each case depending on whether the SSI grant is awarded or denied. After completing these steps, the CM closes the case.

Advocacy Initiative Outcomes

- Out of approximately 1,600 clients, 810 were awarded SSI benefits during Fiscal Year (FY) 2010-11.
- The net benefit for HSA is approximately \$4 million. For every dollar spent, the agency recouped \$3.76 in the form of reimbursements from SSA and forgone future aid payments. Also, the San Francisco Department of Public Health (DPH)

often receives a substantial Medi-Cal reimbursement once a client is awarded SSI. For every dollar spent, SF-HSA and SF-DPH combined recouped \$5.16.

Conclusions

After completing this internship and based on the information collected during the research and study, I concluded that it would be beneficial for the CalWORKs program in San Francisco to create a SSI Advocacy Initiative to effectively assist and support CalWORKs participants in completing the SSI application process.

In the past year, the Employment and Human Services Advocacy program in Contra Costa County has successfully assisted between 65 and 75% of their CalWORKs cases identified as potentially SSI eligible in obtaining SSI benefits.

The SSI Advocacy Unit in the CAAP program in San Francisco has also successfully moved 810 eligible CAAP participants from the county-funded CAAP program, during the FY 2010-11, to the more appropriate federally-funded SSI Program. These two initiatives have proven to be successful and cost-effective by saving money in the form of the grants (CW and CAAP grants) as well as recovery of some medical costs in the form of reimbursement from the federal government for the CAAP clients.

This will also benefit the community as these families will spend these federal funds locally fueling the county's economy.

For the CalWORKs program, when these participants are granted SSI benefits and are discontinued from the program, they will receive substantially larger SSI grants and they are no longer considered Work Eligible individuals. No longer being Work Eligible means that they will no longer be factored into the county's Work Participation Rate. Moving these participants from an exempt CW status to SSI eligible will help the county to increase the work participation mandates and avoid any possible financial penalties for having a low rate. The county will be in

a better position to meet the state and federal work participation requirements.

Effectively establishing this initiative will benefit everyone involved in the process.

Recommendations

My recommendation for San Francisco County would be to create an effective and well-structured SSI Advocacy Program to serve potentially eligible SSI CalWORKs participants to obtain SSI benefits. The county may use available information from Contra Costa County's Advocacy Program and San Francisco County's SSI Advocacy Initiative to develop a plan that efficiently serves our CalWORKs population.

PROPOSED ACTION STEPS:

- Develop a plan to create a SSI Advocacy Unit. Use as a starting point the currently established Social Work Services Unit.
- Create a Triage unit to screen CalWORKs applicants at the front end to determine employability and need for SSI advocacy.
- Develop a process to screen existing cases for SSI advocacy.
- Select the appropriate people to staff the SSI Advocacy Unit.
- Partner with the SSA office to allow the SSI Advocacy Unit to receive training, guidance, support and coaching regarding the SSI application process. Provide ongoing training as needed.
- Develop written policies and procedures for consistency and follow up.
- Develop performance and outcomes measures for the unit.
- Provide training to CalWORKs staff to effectively identify possible participants.
- Develop activities that can be allowed as Welfare to Work activities. Some of these activity hours can be counted as work participation hours and would include:
 1. Meetings to complete any applications or documents related to the SSI process.

2. Appointments that clients attend to gather necessary verifications.
 3. Medical/psychiatric appointments to complete assessment and/or evaluation.
 4. Appointments at the SSA office to submit documents.
- Create forms for CalWORKs staff to use to identify, refer and report participants.
 - Strategize to avoid duplication of services for SSI Advocacy clients.
 - Explore SSI advocacy services for children in CalWORKs families.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer special thanks to Robyn Currie, Workforce Services Division Manager, and Tonya W. Spencer, MSW, Social Work Supervisor. I would also like to thank the San Francisco County CAAP Program for allowing me to meet with them to learn about the SSI Advocacy Initiative, Kevin Heaney, SSI Case Management Supervisor and Triage Contract Manager, and Dr. Thomas Neill, Client Health Services Manager.

