

# **Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services Redistribution of Social Worker Tasks: A Fundamental Shift in Social Work Practice**

**BEN GUERRIERI**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services (FCS) division has fundamentally shifted their social work intake practices. To counteract over 600 out of compliance referrals in a backlog and create a new framework for continuing compliance, the agency redistributed its social worker tasks. Through extensive research, staff steering committees, and use of a consultant, management selected to use a hybrid model for the FCS division's new Investigations Unit. To create this new process, the agency combined emergency response workers with dependency

investigations (or court) workers into a single Investigations Unit. At the detention hearing, an on-going worker is assigned to the case in order to provide all case management services, including development of case plans for the life of the case, while the investigations worker provides all data entry and documentation services. This process has yielded incredible success in eliminating the backlog of referrals as well as developing a very successful framework for continued success.

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## **Introduction**

There is an age-old narrative that exists in the field of social work that Napa County has failed to elude like most other counties: There is too much work to do in too short of time with too few workers to do it. Napa County has been growing in size, from 124,000 people in 2000 to 140,000 people currently; and there has been a drastic increase in referrals received and investigations required for emergency response workers. In 2008, there were 956 referrals received at year's end in Napa County, with 44 children removed from their homes. In 2013, there were 1,341 referrals at year's end—with 90 children removed from their homes. Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services was confronting this plotline head on. With a tremendous backlog of over 600 referrals open for more than the mandated 30 days, compounding caseloads and workload for investigations workers was seriously affecting the quality of services being delivered to clients. With too many referrals received and too few workers to contend with the work, it became impossible to chip away at these overdue referrals. The traditional model of social work with three tiers of service, i.e. emergency response (ER) for referral intake and investigations; dependency investigations (DI) to provide case management through the jurisdictional and dispositional hearings; and on-going services to provide case management after the dispositional hearing and throughout the life of the case, was failing to meet the 30-day deadlines and standards of social work for referrals.

This model could prove useful in establishing equity for Napa County's social workers as well as improve outcomes for the agency's families.

California child welfare services are a very highly regulated and legislated field of social work. Social workers have a very large set of laws to follow as well as strict timelines to adhere to for compliance and outcome purposes. As a social services division, child welfare departments benefit from one of the most robust data systems, outcome measures, and review processes (e.g. CWS/CMS, Business Objects, Berkeley Outcomes, SafeMeasures, etc.) with best practices and research bases. It is always an agency's goal to provide comprehensive and quality services to its clients, but agencies also have to adhere to service and timeline mandates.

## **Process for Redistribution of Social Worker Tasks**

In January 2011, the FCS management team had a meeting with Contra Costa County to try to research possible ways to address long open referrals and improve their compliance in the future. However, in choosing a model, FCS wanted to do much more than merely become compliant. The agency set goals for its desired model to: 1) Address improving outcomes and families' experience, and 2) Improve program workflow. This started the long process of redistributing social worker tasks in order to eliminate referral backlogs, ensure timely referral closure,

and smooth out the process of handing off cases from one social worker to the next.

By enlisting the help of a consultant in May of 2011 and utilizing a San Francisco County analysis of child abuse response systems for eight different California counties, FCS was able to begin the research stage of the project. There were three models that all eight counties employ; split, combined, and hybrid models. The large majority of counties use the traditional or “split” model. In this model, a different worker is assigned for each of the three stages of casework. In the “combined” model, one worker handles the investigation and court process through court jurisdiction and disposition, at which point it is transferred to a case carrying worker for case management. In the “hybrid” model, a single worker conducts the investigation and initiates the court process, but a case-carrying worker is incorporated into the case earlier to provide the case management. As part of their research, FCS also surveyed the social workers in its department about their thoughts concerning referrals and what they viewed as the problems to overcome, and established a steering committee comprised of social workers and supervisors from all units to help guide the process. By March 2012, FCS had selected to use the “hybrid” model.

### **Key Elements of the Investigations Unit Redistribution**

The key to this model is an orchestra of rotating workers taking referrals and writing Jurisdictional/Dispositional (JD) reports, all under a framework of intensive supervision models. The first step in implementation of redistribution of tasks was to integrate intake with the court unit into a single pool of investigations social workers. This would become the unit of workers responsible for investigations and the writing of JD reports. Essentially, this broadened the amount of workers available to investigate referrals, thus lowering caseloads in the ER unit. Without direct supervision of referral assignment, there is the potential for the bulk of work to be arbitrarily assigned to a few workers. The only way that this can

be accomplished with equity across the unit is with incredibly intensive unit supervision.

How can combining the workers and the responsibilities of two units address workload issues? FCS uses a very archaic but tried and true method to ensure equity of assignments across the board in its Investigations Unit. An organizational meeting is held every Tuesday between the four investigations supervisors and their manager to discuss which workers will be placed on the rotation list for referrals this week. Supervisors maintain “boards” of each of their workers with pertinent information from the previous week. This includes total referrals assigned during the month, total number of referrals still open, number of referrals open past 30 days, the number of JD reports to be completed, total open cases assigned, and the total number of children on their caseload. In a strict hybrid model, once a worker is assigned a referral to investigate, the next one is assigned to the person below them. FCS has adapted a more supervision rich model, placing the burden of workload management on the supervision team. In order to ensure referrals received that are at a higher risk of becoming an open case aren’t assigned to all of the same workers, supervisors have to work very closely with the screening supervisor. They have to possess explicit knowledge of referrals in order to ensure that they are assigned in a spread to secure an equal workload for each worker. Before the switch in practice, FCS emergency response workers were each investigating 15 to 17 referrals per month. With the additional staff added to the unit and the utilization of this organizational method, an investigations worker can expect to receive 10 referrals to investigate per month on average, or a 30% to 40% decrease in referrals per worker per month.

With the integration of both units, the workload for the DI unit was lessened by broadening the amount of workers who would write court reports. Instead of having a rotation of only five DI workers to write them as well as provide case management through the dispositional hearing, there would now be a rotation of twenty investigations

workers. Instead of writing three to four JD reports per month while providing case management, investigations workers were now required to only write one per month with an on-going social worker providing case management. FCS also built into the structure of the rotation that a single investigations worker would be designated as a petition writer for the entire unit on a monthly rotation. This individual would then be removed from the investigations rotation for that month and would write petitions for every other worker.

As described in the hybrid model, a post-disposition worker is assigned at detention and engages the family in case planning and placement/service-related case management prior to disposition instead of the DI workers that were coalesced into the Investigations Unit. This offset the increased responsibilities and completed the redistribution of standard social work responsibilities. However, it was not the end of the required action on the behalf of management to balance the equity of tasks across the division. One very key point that was brought up by the case-carrying workers in the On-Going Unit was the need to remove visit supervision from their list of tasks. If they were to take on case management for an additional three months of every case on average, they needed this responsibility redistributed. The agency decided to increase the existing contract with the provider Parents Center for visitation supervision.

The last step to finalizing this process was to create a new position to supplement the new unit, a screening supervisor. In order to best manage equity in assignments and workload on a weekly basis, supervisors have been required to analyze received immediate response referrals prior to assignment for signs of likely removal. If a worker is assigned a referral that will likely end in removal, the work associated with that referral is much greater. Thus, to counteract this problem, supervisors have to work very closely with the screening supervisor to spread out the possible removals amongst all the workers. A screening supervisor oversees two screeners for these referrals and helps supervisors in their tasks.

## Successes and Challenges

This model has shown incredible success in Santa Cruz County in addressing all established goals. First, FCS has succeeded in completely eliminating the backlog of over 600 referrals open past 30 days in less than a two-year period. In addition to reducing the backlog, FCS created a structure of supervision that will allow the agency to continue to meet the mandate to close referrals within 30 days. This was by far the largest goal, and the level of success achieved is astounding and noteworthy. By increasing the pool of workers responsible for writing the JD reports, FCS decreased the likelihood of late court reports to virtually zero. This subsequently means fewer continuances for late reports and faster service provision that hastens timelines for reunification.

Second, FCS significantly improved the experience of the families it serves. Through implementation of the hybrid model, FCS established a structure with better continuity of service for its clients by using concurrent social workers assigned to the case. Using this model, there is a single worker to investigate the referral, initiate court involvement, and prepare all court documentation and reports. Concurrently, an on-going social worker is assigned the case at the detention hearing to provide case management services, including development of case plans, throughout the life of the case. This provides fewer changes in social workers, providing stronger connections between the social worker and the family including the child, and a greater connection to the initial reason for removal. With fewer changes in social workers for families, there arises fewer changes of permanency goals, higher likelihood of reunification, shorter stays in foster care, fewer changes in placement, shorter time with open case, fewer instances of abuse post-reunification, and a higher likelihood of living at home one year after reunification. With better, targeted service provision, better outcomes can be achieved.

The largest obstacle to overcome in implementing a fundamental shift in social work practice was to get staff buy-in. In an effort to include everyone

in the process, FCS used targeted staff surveys, a steering committee driven by staff, and a clear voice from management. Social workers were able to voice their concerns and refine the structure and assigned responsibilities. One large concern arising was the necessary change in technical knowledge for ER and DI workers. These two units integrating meant that all of these workers would need to be cross-trained extensively. DI workers would now be required to go into the home and investigate referrals as well as familiarize themselves with referral fields in CWS/CMS for data entry. Likewise, ER workers would now be required to write court reports and familiarize themselves with the case level fields in CWS/CMS for data entry. This would also require a change in soft skills or mindset for case-carrying workers. FCS bridged this knowledge gap by cleverly reorganizing supervisors and workers to offer a cross-pollination of expertise within the Investigations Unit. Supervisors with DI expertise and writing skills were paired with workers lacking in these areas, and vice versa. A series of extensive CWS/CMS trainings were provided, and writing trainings for court reports were also offered. In addition, to maintain fidelity to the outlined roles and responsibilities of staff, several tools and resources were created by the existing management team. Two essential resources meticulously developed new policies and procedures with roles clearly defined as two separate pre-disposition and post-disposition manuals were created and rolled out to staff. These manuals explain in great detail which worker would be responsible for which tasks. These were priceless commodities during the transition period of this division as one of the main questions that arose in day to day operation was “Who is responsible for that?”

The process of redefining roles for established social worker positions was far more complicated than originally thought. It involved the coordination of human resources, restructuring of court documentation, informing the courts of this change, as well as resolving issues of concern with the union representing social workers. The key to success in working with the union was involving the human resources

department in the process early, which helped avoid potential pitfalls with the Service Employees International Union.

The greatest challenge for successful utilization of the hybrid model is the sheer level of supervision required to distribute work evenly amongst social workers. In addition to this role, supervisors in Santa Cruz also assume the role of coaches for their social workers. They are giving technical help to each of their workers in writing skills as well as data entry and management. Without a strong supervision team, the structure of this program would fail.

### **Implications for Napa County**

The implications of redistribution of social worker responsibilities implemented by Santa Cruz County are simultaneously both big and small. While Napa County Child Welfare Services (CWS) does not struggle with closing referrals within 30 days, the agency does suffer from that troublesome narrative of an overworked and understaffed front end. The hybrid model with Santa Cruz’s tweaks would provide additional resources to Napa County CWS units that would help alleviate workload. However, Napa County CWS is a much smaller division with smaller units. The agency’s front end staff have case-loads averaging around 10 referral investigations per month, but with a three worker DI unit, a large burden of case management as well as court report writing is placed on only a few. With a combined unit, efficiency of staff and equity of tasks would be established.

Napa County CWS is constantly researching best practices, current trends, and any form of process refinement to provide the best services possible. Certainly the preliminary findings from Santa Cruz concerning quality of investigation as well as timeliness of investigation are promising and should be considered. However, the more far-reaching goals of fewer permanency goal changes, faster reunification, fewer placement changes, and fewer re-entries have yet to be determined. My recommendation to the agency is to revisit this project after FCS has been given enough time to build a cohort of data for

evaluation, as this project has only been active for a little more than 18 months. For the longer term permanency measures, a minimum of two years of implementation is required to analyze data. Some of the measures (e.g. re-entries into placement, placement stability) require a minimum of three years to build a statistically significant cohort to evaluate.

At some point, if the agency revisits this project and decides that the outcomes that this model improves on current practice, I would recommend that we adopt Santa Cruz's adapted hybrid model. Santa Cruz FCS has already put in the time and energy to create a framework, and FCS has supported it with policies and procedures. I would recommend Napa County use the pre- and post-disposition manuals especially to help supervisors and managers to navigate staff questions early on. Because this project was a redistribution of tasks and not a restructuring, the cost would be minimal at most; I would recommend hiring an additional social worker to allow for a dedicated petition writer. Currently, Napa County CWS has the staff, management and supervision structure already in place to allow for a switch to this model.

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