

The Challenges of a Partnership:
**Examining Santa Clara County’s Department of Children
and Family Services—CalWORKS Partnership Unit**

DENISE REYNOLDS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Agencies are increasingly finding a crossover in case-loads for economic assistance and child protective services. In 1999, the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency developed a partnership between the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and the CalWORKS Department.

An important aspect of this partnership has been the co-location of staff along with efforts at service coordination between knowledgeable employment technicians and social workers.

The focus of this internship was to assess the strengths and challenges of the program and to see how Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department could build upon Santa Clara

County’s strengths and overcome the challenges to enhance service delivery to common clients.

It is recommended that Contra Costa County Employment and Human Service Department gets buy-in from Division Managers in both the Workforce Services Bureau and the Children and Family Services Bureau to ensure successful program implementation of such a partnership.

More specifically, this could involve quarterly meetings about program outcomes and processes; internal marketing of the partnership program; co-location of staff at least on a pilot basis; ongoing collaborative training; and, oversight by a full-time manager of the partnership program.

Denise Reynolds is a Eligibility Work Supervisor in the Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services Department.

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History and Background

Agencies are increasingly finding a crossover in case-loads for economic assistance and child protective services. This crossover is consistent with research findings linking poverty to the risk of child abuse and neglect. One response at the local and state level has been an effort to find ways to integrate public assistance and child welfare services.

In 1999, the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency developed a partnership between the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) and the CalWORKS Department. The purpose of this partnership was to coordinate mutual clients’ differing plans. Due to having multiple workers in different programs, many program requirements and mandated activities; it is crucial that a family’s service and case plans are coordinated so that goals are realistic and achievable.

In Santa Clara County the Partnership Unit is comprised of DFCS social workers and CalWORKS Employment Technicians (ET’s) who work closely to make sure both the child welfare and CalWORKS plans become integrated. One very important aspect of this partnership is the co-location of staff. The ET’s are housed in the same unit as the DFCS social workers thus increasing communication between workers and therefore, a client’s chance for success. Before the partnership clients were faced with the difficult dilemma of meeting the requirements of both their mandated child welfare plan and their CalWORKS self-sufficiency plan. Clients were faced with the potential of losing custody of their children or their cash grants due to the conflicting program requirements. One of the goals of the Partnership Unit was to reduce this dilemma for clients.

Identifying Common Cases

The criterion for involvement in the Partnership Unit is that the client has a connection with both the DFCS and the CalWORKS programs. The cases of families served by both DFCS and CalWORKS Employment Services staff are referred to as “common cases”. There are two types of DFCS cases that qualify:

- The family is receiving CalWORKS, and the parents are participating in CalWORKS Employment Services (CWES), or are temporarily exempt from CWES activities.
- The family is receiving Family Reunification Services.

For these cases three criteria must be met:

- The child or children have been removed from the home and family reunification services are planned.
- The social worker has determined the CWES services are necessary for family reunification.

At this point in the service delivery the cases are referred to the Partnership unit.

The Referral Process

The referrals for the “common cases” come from various sources. Common cases can be identified in two ways:

- CWS/CMS and Cal WORKS computer databases are searched by DFCS Emergency Response (ER) clerical staff at the point of case opening. When a case is common to both units, the ER ID clerk will indicate “CalWORKS case” and route the case to the assigned social worker (SW).
- For those individuals not receiving CalWORKS, the DFCS social worker completes a

“CalWORKS Application Guide” to determine eligibility. If it is determined that they may be eligible for assistance, they are directed to one of the Intake Application Centers to apply for CalWORKS. If eligible and the case is opened, it is then sent to the Partnership Unit for continued services.

Service Coordination Meetings

An initial meeting is set up between the co-located ET, the DFCS SW and the client. The purpose of this initial meeting is to coordinate a common case plan. During this meeting the workers are looking to:

- Identify the client’s strengths, barriers, needs and concerns.
- Review the client’s employment plan
- Review the DFCS plan, which may be under development or already set.
- Identify CWES activities and the hours to be integrated into the employment plan.
- Identify and secure services to support the plan.
- Review expectations and verify the client’s requirements.
- Have client sign appropriate forms.
- Plan next steps with client.

Both the SWs and ETs have very specific roles in this partnership. The SW’s role is to:

- Monitor the parent’s child welfare services case plan for progress and compliance, and communicates issues and barriers to the ET.
- Make adjustments in the child welfare services case plan as needed in coordination with the ET.
- Request, if necessary, that the ET convene a Service Coordination meeting to better coordinate activities and services.
- Participate in Service Coordination meetings when the child welfare services case plan is updated.
- Inform the CalWORKS eligibility worker and the foster care worker as to whether CalWORKS Employment Services continue to be necessary.

The role of the ET in this partnership is to:

- Take the lead in calling Service Coordination meetings with the social worker and parent to identify employment activities and CWES hours to be integrated with the child welfare services case plan activities.
- Monitor the parent’s CWES plan for progress and compliance.
- Communicate issues and barriers to the social worker.
- Make adjustments in the CWES plan as needed in coordination with the social worker.
- Attend Service Coordination meetings when the child welfare services case plan has been updated.
- Convene other Service Coordination meetings, as necessary.

After the initial meeting, the client is sent to Assessment for testing and an appropriate employment plan. After the plan is developed and signed, it is returned to the co-located ET who monitors the parent’s plan for progress and compliance. The ET is responsible for provision of CalWORKS supportive services, which may include:

- Transportation
- Childcare
- Counseling Services (domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse counseling, including drug and alcohol residential treatment)
- Ancillary support (books, fees, tools, uniforms, cosmetic dentistry)
- Expungement services (legal services and tattoo removal)
- Vocational training
- Professional clothing (Career Closet for Women and First Impression for Men)

The co-located ET is responsible for the maintenance of the case until the CalWORKS case is discontinued or the DFCS case plan is closed. They are notified of the DFCS case closing by the social worker.

Partnership Strengths

After meeting with Marsha Earle (Social Work Supervisor of the Partnership Unit) it became clear to

me that the focus of this project would be to assess the strengths and challenges of the program and to see how Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department could build upon Santa Clara County's strengths and overcome the challenges to enhance service delivery to common clients. I began by interviewing members of the Partnership Unit, asking them the same question. *What do you see as the strengths and the challenges of this partnership?*

There was a consensus when it came to the first strength. All staff members were in agreement that the greatest strength of the Partnership Unit was the co-location of staff. This co-location has fostered both formal and informal working relationships among the staff and the departments. These relationships have benefited the clients, who get timely access to a wide range of services. The partnership has also fostered a greater understanding of each program among the members of the Partnership unit. They have learned to appreciate the others' job in a way they would not have before the partnership. Communication is the key to a successful collaboration. Co-location offers the collaboration necessary to maintain ongoing, open communication with staff in order to prevent conflicts for the family and to maximize the effectiveness of services.

The second strength of the Partnership Unit was the initial Service Coordination meetings. Staff felt that this meeting ensured that all involved in the partnership were on the same page. All parties receive the same information at the same time. The message being sent to the client is that "We are all in this together. Your success is important to us, and we will work together to assist you and your family on the road to a successful future." All of the staff agrees that the Partnership Unit has been a success, if for no other reason than the two workers from different disciplines have established positive working relationships and are serving a common client more efficiently.

A third strength pointed out by staff was the knowledge each brought to the partnership. The ETs expressed how they felt they were a great resource to

the social workers on eligibility issues, and how they learned so much from the social workers about child welfare issues. This environment of open communication allows each worker to bring his or her expertise to the partnership. Staff feeling of worth is directly attributed to the success of the Partnership unit.

Partnership Challenges

With every successful partnership there are some challenges. There were several challenges brought up by the members of the Partnership Unit. Two major challenges that the partnership faced were:

- The early identification of common cases is not as simple as it first seemed. Initially common cases were identified by CMS/CWS and CDS databases, but, with the implementation of CalWIN and its inability to interface with CMS/CWS, this early identification step has been eliminated leaving this function up to the ETs in the Partnership Unit. The ETs described how time consuming this process could be. The ETs expressed how they had to research if the case was open to DFCS and for how long the case would remain open. Cases have to be projected to be open for longer than 30 days to be assigned to the Partnership Unit. Finding cases and determining status takes a lot of work on the front end for the ET. The ETs expressed a strong desire to have the system generate a report with this information thus eliminating the need for them to conduct individual searches.

- The next challenge the Partnership faced was huge. They felt they were not receiving the necessary support or buy in from management. Many felt that the partnership was not viewed as important any longer. Staff agreed that initially management promoted and supported the Partnership Unit, but after the fanfare died down the unit's significance seemed to dwindle. Staff stated that the DFCS-CW Partnership coordinator had too many other assigned duties so that he could not focus his efforts solely on the Partnership. Staff reported feeling that overall, interest in the Partnership Unit has been declining due lack of reinforcement by management. This loss of program momentum has reduced coordinated

case planning efforts. Partnership staff really are very positive about the work they are doing, but felt they needed to see management more visible and vocal in supporting this partnership.

Recommendations

I believe agencies need to constantly recognize and affirm the need for change and the importance of the task at hand. In the beginning of a new partnership, all participants have grand visions and a great deal of energy. However, as time passes, it is possible to become disillusioned or overwhelmed by the task. Leaders must stress the importance of developing partnerships. I believe that leadership is key and engaging high level leadership would not only be helpful in program development and agenda setting, but will support projects in challenging times.

I would recommend that Contra Costa County Employment and Human Service Department gets buy-in from Division Managers in both the Workforce Services Bureau and the Children and Family Services Bureau to ensure successful program implementation. Leadership must foster passion for the program. While a few committed individuals can effect great change, it is important to foster commitment and to extend it to as many of those involved as possible.

I would also recommend quarterly meetings where information is shared on program outcomes, challenges and successes. I would recommend that at least one high-level manager from each bureau is in attendance. Further, I would recommend to the department that we market this partnership program internally to our own staff and make fliers or brochures on the partnership to distribute throughout the agency so that information is readily accessible. I feel it is important to educate the internal as well as external customer regarding the value of this collaboration in order to gain support.

I would definitely recommend co-location of staff, as this has been one of the greatest strengths of Santa Clara's Partnership Program. Working together in the same unit promotes communication and teamwork. Perhaps the county could pilot a

combined unit of Children and Family Services Social Workers and Cal WORKS Eligibility Workers in Contra Costa County to see how this would work. To further encourage communication, I would recommend structured, informational meetings as well as informal social gatherings for staff.

I think it would be beneficial for the county to develop collaborative training and initiatives bringing together the social workers and eligibility professionals. Further, on-going training will lead to better outcomes for clients and staff alike.

Finally, I would recommend one person to oversee the project in Contra Costa County on a full-time basis. Their sole responsibility would be to monitor and track the partnership's progress and outcomes. Hopefully with this sole coordinator, there would be better accountability. This person would be in charge of providing quarterly data reports. I believe it would also be a great idea if the partnership provided self-assessments. From these assessments, staff could come together to share strengths and challenges and determine action steps to improve.

The partnership between DFCS and CalWORKS is an important collaboration. The goal is to provide coordinated services that eliminate barriers, enhance the quality of life, lead to family stability, self-sufficiency, child safety and well-being.

Acknowledgements

I would like acknowledge the following staff in Santa Clara County and thank them for gratefully giving of their time while I completed my internship: Marsha Earle, Supervisor of the Partnership Unit; Patricia Phillips, Employment Technician, Karen Crawford, Employment Technician, and Norberto Hernandez, Employment Technician.

Finally, from Contra Costa County, I would like to thank my director, John Cullen. I would also like to thank my Managers, Fran Treas and Kareen Morgan, for supporting my participation in the BASSC Executive Development Program. I would also like to give my thanks to the staff and faculty of BASSC and UC Berkeley Extension for their support.