

# ASSESSING COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT AT THE SANTA CLARA SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY: HOW TO AVOID TALKING TO OURSELVES

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## COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Ever since the patchwork monster known as "welfare reform" climbed off the lab table and lurched into the streets, social service bureaucracies have scrambled to make peace with it. Welfare managers learned early on that if they tried to fight the hodgepodge policy, few politicians would join them. Social service advocates who trudged to the capitol seeking allies spent a lot of time sitting in lobbies with their hats in their laps.

So with welfare reform banging on the gate, county welfare departments must plot to tame it using two strategies: making better use of existing resources and teaming up with local businesses and community agencies. The latter approach has gotten a lot of attention. Human services administrators sing the praises of "public-private partnerships" at every opportunity. A year ago, it was the social service anthem; today it is the only song in the air. The road to community partnership is smoother for an agency that has already established good, active relations with its community. Seen in that light, certain enterprises that once seemed extravagant—dedicating time and money to public relations, for instance—now look like slick investments. Welfare departments that have made themselves and their issues known around town have created a basis for cooperation; in counties where outreach was an afterthought, collaboration is starting from near zero.

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency Office of Community Relations and Development, where I interned, works to raise citizen, business, and non-profit awareness of social service programs and activities through deft management of media contacts and direct community outreach. The threeperson OCRD unit became fully operational in February 1996, when social worker Gil Villagran (my mentor) arrived to oversee and supplement two public information officers, Michelle Swalley and Belinda Quesada.

Community relations staff arranges media coverage of agency events, write press releases, and handle public relations logistics. The unit screens press contacts, with Villagran acting as department spokesman and gatekeeper, and also creates and distributes informational materials to an extensive mailing list of agencies and media outlets.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Villagran makes frequent presentations on welfare reform to a variety of community, school, and civic groups. He is extraordinarily effective in the speaker's role, whether addressing district attorney investigators, teen parents, or Silicon Valley business people. Soft-spoken and unassuming, delivering material that is dry, intimidating, and confusing, he manages to hold diverse audiences' attention. No formula accounts for his success but one: He is obviously and

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive review of OCRD history and functions, see *Public Information Efforts of Bay Area Social Service Agencies* by Jamie Buckmaster and Shirley Kalinowsky in the collection of 1996 BAASC case studies. This essay documents the community relations unit and presents a good synopsis of public information efforts in other counties.

deeply committed to helping individuals and their communities make the best of hard circumstances. He believes strongly that people must be educated and fully informed so that they can make intelligent choices, and he works to accomplish that. His quiet passion comes through, and that gets his message across.

## **SEPARATE REALITIES**

SSA's outreach project, part of its effort to manage welfare reform, has an internal counterpart. To work well with others, an agency must simply work well, after all. Employees must be efficiently deployed, well trained, and well uisposed if they are to complete vital tasks consistently-and these qualities are hard to achieve and sustain in times of change. One way to help employees accommodate themselves to condit: ::Is that elude definition because they are in radical flux is to keep them informed. Workers who understand what drives policy and what their role is have a better chance to succeed than do those who are in the dark. An informed staff can also serve as a reliable source of suggestions and initiatives.

As essential as it may be, however, SSA managers have not found it easy to convey a tumbling kaleidoscope of details and contexts coherently to 2300 employees. It has been hard for management to find a sure starting point because common ground between administrators and workers is skimpy. Welfare reform planning consumes an enormous share of managers' time and energy; daily reality for clerical; eligibility, and service staff, on the other hand, is largely status quo. Managers have devoted months to building the future, absorbing new concepts, terms, and priorities in the process. Line employees, meanwhile. have gone on administering the present pretty much as usual. More than ever before, managers and workers inhabit separate realities.

The fact that workers stolidly carry on does not mean they are immune to anxiety about welfare reform. In Santa Clara, press coverage of the subject has been so pervasive that even if SSA bosses had kept mum, employees would be asking questions and speculating-and if they didn't, labor unions would urge them to start. Absent a concerted information campaign by SSA management, welfare reform in Santa Clara could become an issue defined at the worker level almost entirely by the news media and the unions.<sup>2</sup>

As far as the media goes, at least, Santa Clara managers have few complaints. The *San Jose Mercury News* has run more than 100 stories dealing with welfare reform since the beginning of the year-a rate of almost one a day-and more than 300 in the last sixteen months. (By contrast, in all of 1990. when a surge in welfare was big news, the paper printed only 77 articles that so much as mentioned welfare reform, recipients, grants, laws, or rules.)<sup>3</sup> SSA administrators say local news coverage is generally balanced and accurate. OCRD's meticulous care in maintaining good relations with reporters and helping them understand the issues deserves a lot of credit for that.

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<sup>2</sup> "The union is doing a great job getting the word out. especially away from Technology Drive [SSXs administrative headquarters]." one manager told me.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics obtained via archival searches at <http://newslibrary.infi.net/sj/>. The other major paper in Santa Clara County, the *Sari Francisco Chronicle*. has published more than 200 welfare reform stories since January 1996, including the "Making Welfare Work" series (<http://www.sf.,ate.com/wais/search>).

To an anxious employee, however, there is no such thing as good press. News reports on benefits reductions read like the first steps towards layoffs and "out-sourcing." Stories about elderly immigrants or teen moms demonstrate that social services workers labor in meaner times with fewer tools and no political support. Workers cannot and do not take the news lightly, and rumors and speculation fly.

## **TRAINING PLAYS A ROLE**

Late last year, as ambient anxiety was ramping up, SSA's staff development specialists drafted a training plan with the goal of converting disparate eligibility workers into integrated employment development teams. Training manager Joan Linderman's task force recommended that eligibility workers learn rules for all income maintenance programs as well as employment development techniques; that they acquire new computer skills; and, finally, that they "make a `mind change' in how they view their role with the client."<sup>4</sup>

This curriculum represents radical mutation, if not outright extinction, of the traditional eligibility worker role. It involves not just information exchange but professional character development. Would the atmosphere of increasing anxiety help or hurt that undertaking?

Some Santa Clara managers and staff I spoke with suggested that the agency tolerates a level of anxiety, especially within eligibility ranks, as one way of keeping workers aware that they face choices. Stress won't go away, this thinking goes, so use it.

Anxiety also may function as a kind of threshold test. In a brown-bag lunch meeting with staff that I attended, Yolanda Lerner Rinaldo twice made the point that some current employees **may "not be suited" for the department's new direction.** The current director of my department (San Francisco) and his two immediate predecessors have made similar statements in meetings with employees.

At a trainers' "brainstorming" session held December 13, 1996, several participants alluded to worker attitudes they thought impede learning and productivity. Their comments about welfare workers closely resembled media commentary about welfare recipients, making it clear that eligibility staff and clients share similar predicaments.<sup>5</sup> Welfare reform demands that both groups overhaul their concepts of themselves and their understanding of how they sustain themselves.

While discussing strategies to help staff make what they called "the transition" (though to exactly what was still indefinite), trainers hit on the idea of teaming up with Gil Villagran to develop "a crossdisciplinary speaker's bureau." Not only would such a bureau increase the department's presence at community meetings, they thought, but bringing diverse employees into the outreach

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<sup>4</sup> Memo from Joan Linderman to the Welfare Reform Training Committee, September 4, 1996. Linderman has since retired. The resulting personnel shift that could mean the training plan is again an open issue

<sup>5</sup> Sample participant comments and recommendations as recorded in the minutes: "Address behavioral problems of staff", "Attitudinal changes are needed ...the Agency needs a major organizational, cultural transformation." "Staff are our customers too. Professional behavior needs improvement"; "[there exists a] bureaucratic `red tape' and `not my job' attitude." The brainstorming session covered many subjects in some depth; comments on staff attitudes consumed only a small portion of the committee's attention.

effort would seed staff ranks with experts able to address peers' concerns.<sup>6</sup> Villagran's success in the community made him a logical partner. The similarity between community outreach and internal communication had become explicit.

At around the same time, Villagran was attending a separate series of meetings devoted to staff communication. These were gatherings of a work group (one of several) formed after an administrative retreat the previous autumn. By late February, when I attended, participation was lagging. Only Villagran, the General Assistance manager, George Soto, and a representative from the Office of the Public Guardian showed up. Soto, however, brought news that slapped a little urgency onto the proceedings: SSA Director Yolanda Lenier Rinaldo had given the committee a month to submit a plan for effectively communicating welfare reform developments to staff.

Villagran and Soto tried to come up with a communications model for the plan, something that already worked well. Villagran suggested the redesigned employee newsletter, Working Together, which his unit publishes. The other men had not read the latest issue, which was just out. Everyone quickly agreed that while company newsletters can carry a unifying message, they are rarely timely, often go unread, and cannot be relied on as a standalone medium of change and education.<sup>7</sup>

All paper publications, committee decided, had similar limitations. Whenever possible, communication should be direct and personal. Success depends largely on the clarity and credibility of the message and on the character and skill of the messenger. "Everybody knows the buzz words," Soto said, "but not that many are good at it."

## **THE PLAN**

After four more meetings, the committee produced a plan emphasizing direct personal communication.<sup>8</sup> Its draft report first explained why such a plan was needed, saying that SSA administrators had received "a consistent message from staff that management is not sharing information frequently or timely enough, and that the information is presented in a confusing and complex manner...[that] promote rumors, fear, mistrust and anxiety."

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<sup>6</sup> The speakers bureau is now in operation. Until it was established, Villagran himself had handled almost all community speaking engagements. Even now, he is effectively the face of SSA and the voice of welfare reform in much of the community. In February and March, he was the departments representative at 31 of the 68 community forums and events. Other agency speakers—some of whom, one manager told me, "are really the wrong people to be doing this"—made one or two appearances each. Villagran, on the other hand, is consistently in the public eye, at community events, and on the streets working on behalf of SSA.

<sup>7</sup> The volume of paper-based information is immense. I looked through a single file of inter-office memos Villagran had recently received. It was six inches thick and contained more than 300 documents, some lengthy and complex—material that would take a day or more to absorb—as well as dozens of graphics-laden invitations to retirement parties and other celebrations. It is easy to see how, mixed with a daily paper flow like that, a modest company newsletter might not catch many eyes. In fact, partly for just this reason, SSA has placed a "moratorium" on new newsletters.

<sup>8</sup> I received a draft, undated copy of the plan on April 15, 1996, my last internship day. It may change substantially before going into effect. Implementation already appears to have been delayed.

To help remedy that situation, the committee recommended wide distribution of the quarterly employee newsletter. Working Together, and the every-six-weeks Pro Employment Agenda, a bulletin containing legislative updates and community news. Also, the committee said, staff should receive ad hoc Welfare Reform Alerts "as late breaking news/legislation occurs." In addition, the department should sponsor regular community forums and occasional symposia.

The plan's focal point, though, is activity surrounding a new document called the Manager's Briefing Tool, a comprehensive monthly summary of breaking welfare reform news. In apparent violation of its mandate to assure an informed staff, the committee recommended the Briefing Tool be sent not to employees but to facilities managers (people in charge of all operations at each of SSAs buildings). This anomaly is strategic. The Briefing Tool is a means, not an end; it exists precisely to place the message in managers' hands.

The plan establishes monthly meetings at which facilities managers would update all staff using the Manager's Briefing Tool as source. Comments and questions from each session would be recorded and, along with written staff evaluations of the presentation, be "routed to a central resource for the purpose of identifying the effectiveness of Agency communications and agency-wide issues and questions. This feedback would be used to improve successive briefings."<sup>9</sup>

Managers become central to employees' experience of the changing environment in this scheme. Making local administrators the principal source of accurate and timely news should serve to enhance their presence as well as reinforce the fact that impending changes are a shared phenomena. This is what the communications plan means when it promises to make managers "change agents": Managers are to lead, define, and become an intimate part of employees' efforts to understand and adjust to change.

If, in contrast, official news arrived only on paper, it would most likely become just another item in the general info-churn, to be discussed (or ignored) by employees along with rumors and common chat. This plan creates a structured public dialogue between each facility manager and his or her staff. Moreover, because employee comments and questions are on the record (creating an official "grapevine" component) staff members themselves are immediately involved in the official discourse, and dialogues at each building become part of the dialogue at other locations. This information flow (through a "central resource") should serve to continuously refine and clarify the message.

### **COMMENTS ON THE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

The communications plan presumes that the department has a research and publishing capacity capable of generating timely, regular, accurate, and substantive briefings and updates for managers. The undefined "central resource" must also be able to tabulate and organize employee comments and questions. These are not trivial tasks.

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<sup>9</sup> Exactly- who will constitute the "central resource"-which will be responsible for tracking the information flow-is not spelled out in the plan.

The plan tries to create a sense of community and mutual accountability between managers and staff at each department site. It combines town hall-style meetings with a formalized "grapevine" to keep people at all levels viscerally involved with each other and their changing environment. I wonder if a single monthly meeting can achieve this task. The plan might be more robust if line supervisors and unit meetings were incorporated into the strategy.

The plan's structure, delivering constantly changing news by way of a dialogue that flows among various centers and between hierarchical levels, is perfectly suited for Santa Clara SSAs nascent intranet system.

The plan seems to require-or hope-that each manager be a "great communicator." Gil Villagran succeeds in this role because his conviction, passion, and goodwill are always apparent to his audiences. The plan may rely a bit too much on the notion that various managers will be able to forge a similar rapport with employee groups.

The plan's use of parallel and redundant modes of communication is wise. It acknowledges the ambient bubble and froth of talk within an agency and tries to put management's message into play at every level. This, in the end, is probably the best, if not only, way to achieve what the advertising industry calls "maximum penetration." One caveat: For this to work, management must have an extraordinarily clear, well-developed, and credible message.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SAN FRANCISCO COUNTY**

Both Santa Clara and San Francisco counties serve diverse client populations through large and varied workforces. Santa Clara's staff (60% larger than San Francisco's) serves a mix of urban, rural, and suburban areas; San Francisco is a thoroughly urban environment. While Santa Clara's employees are scattered throughout a vast populated basin-a communications obstacle San Francisco does not face-that county has facilities, equipment, and computer systems that promote more efficient data exchange than San Francisco can achieve.

At the time I am writing this, neither county has a firmly established welfare reform plan or a fixed idea of what worker roles will be. Both have made extensive collaboration with community entities central to reform planning, which has been carried out by large numbers of employees, mostly managers and specialists. Workers who are not directly involved or immediately affected by that effort, however, also tend not to be well informed about it. By coincidence, both counties have undergone recent changes at the top few executive levels. In

San Francisco, it is likely that having three executive directors in a year has helped turn planning into a jolting series of stops, starts, and course changes. In my experience, planning committees now often explicitly spend a great deal of time trying to figure out "what the director wants," sometimes extrapolating from nothing more than a few words or a phrase reported second hand. There is a sharp distinction between doing that and designing reality-based programs-and it is much harder to explain clearly to non-planners why the group has chosen a particular course when that choice is based more on exegesis than analysis.

Both counties recognize the need to communicate what is happening in a systematic, comprehensive fashion to workers and clients, but neither has managed to do so consistently. (In San Francisco, from what I have seen, community agencies are better at informing clients than the Human Services department. Nobody is particularly good at informing staff.) Probably the main impediments here are two: First, planning itself consumes so much time and energy that there is little left to share with nonplanners. Second, plans are so fluid and diverse that when messages do get out, they appear contradictory, sketchy, or vague.

Still, just the effort to create a communications strategy has revealed some assumptions, priorities, and values at work in Santa Clara County that may otherwise have remained hidden. Just as it can for individuals, committing an agency to make known systematically what it is doing and why may in itself be salutary. Even more, it can reveal unexamined assumptions, give body to inchoate ideas, and let loose a dialogue that could be just broad, deep, and inclusive enough to raise many prospects that are now grounded or foundering.