A Case Study of the Employment Services Component of Alameda County's Social Services Integrated Reporting System

Jennifer Rogers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a result of the economic downturn, California counties continue to struggle to administer mandated programs with dwindling resources and increasing caseloads. The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS) Welfare-to-Work (WTW) program is one mandated program that has endured severe budget cuts; as a result, counties have been forced to seek cost-friendly approaches to managing caseloads while simultaneously ensuring program participation continues to meet the state-monitored federal Work Participation Rate. The WTW program requires non-exempt CalWORKS recipients to participate in work activities such as employment, vocational training, and work-study. Single-parent households must participate in work activities for 32 hours per week, and two-parent households must participate for 35 hours per week.

Over the past two years, San Mateo County Human Services Agency has seen close to a 30% increase in the number of individuals who are considered to be WTW-mandated. It is currently in the process of redesigning the way in which the WTW program is locally administered. While evaluating the various components of the program that may make a redesign successful, it is critical to have a reliable data management and reporting system to effectively serve our public, meet the needs of staff, and allow management to have oversight over caseloads.

This case study delves into the development, implementation, and ongoing construction of the Social Services Integrated Reporting System in Alameda County. The case study is particularly focused on the Employment Services/WTW component, and on the importance of having a data management system. Additionally, this case study considers the feasibility of building and implementing the same tool, or a similar tool, in San Mateo County.

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Introduction

As a result of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, the reporting requirements for the Federal Work Particpation Rate (WPR) became significantly more stringent. To meet the Federal WPR requirements of 50% for all families and 90% for two-parent families, counties must secure a successful method for meticulously monitoring and tracking each individual's movement through the Welfare to Work (WTW) program. While the task may appear somewhat simplistic at a glance, consideration must be given to some of the obstacles that counties may face in accomplishing the task, including:

Regulations
- The 90-day engagement requirement
- Inflexible core versus non-core hourly participation requirements
- Time-limited activities that count towards the WPR (e.g., education is only 12 months)

Funding
- A lack of resources due to decreases in funding
- There is an increased caseload and decreased staff available to monitor
- Multiple overlapping programs and priorities

Participant-Based Barriers
- An inability to secure and maintain: childcare, transportation, housing
- Lack of education
- Mental health and/or alcohol and other drug-related issues

With these obstacles to deal with, it has become blatantly clear that social service organizations simply cannot achieve the required level of success in their WTW programs without a data system that can appropriately monitor caseloads, assist staff in the planning and development of clients' paths towards self-sufficiency, and aid counties in reaching their WPR.

Background

As the WTW Program Specialist in San Mateo County, I have had the unique opportunity to witness the transformation of the WTW model in our county over the past few years. The WPR holds a spot as one of the agency's top priorities and San Mateo County Human Services Agency has taken many steps towards increasing the WPR. It has worked diligently to discover innovative ways of engaging the WTW population. While staff have worked determinedly to maintain their caseloads and absorb the many changes to the program, one thing has remained constant: there is a lack of a case management reporting tool that encompasses the multiple elements needed to supervise individual cases and WPR's. San Mateo acknowledged that their current case data system, CalWIN, simply could not provide them with the types of data and reports they needed. In response, San Mateo sought assistance via a one-year contract with an outside vendor. The goal of contracting with an outside vendor was to increase the WPR through a monitoring of every facet of the WTW caseload. It took almost the entire year of the contract to improve and correct data entry for the numbers to reflect correctly in the contractors' reports. The contract has since ended and San Mateo is solely reliant on CalWIN, which has led to our interest in the Social Services Integrated Reporting System (SSIRS) being used in Alameda County.

History of SSIRS

Don Edwards, Assistant Agency Director in Alameda County, understands the importance of easily accessible, real-time data, as well as the impact that data can have on the success of a program. In 2008, with the support of Alameda County leadership, Don initiated collaboration with IBM to merge data from multiple sources and to assist the Social Services Agency (SSA) in monitoring and tracking caseloads from within the various programs. Don seemed to recognize that in order for a business (in this case, the SSA) to be successful, a high-functioning data system must be in place to allow for tracking and communication across program areas. As a result, the SSIRS was conceived, developed and implemented. The SSIRS has the ability to funnel data from multiple channels and to condense the figures into an easily accessible agency dashboard. The dashboard can provide data that is fed into the SSIRS from the following systems:

- Child Welfare
- Probation (Juvenile)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- Employment Services/Welfare-to-Work (ES/WTW)
- In Home Supportive Services (state system)
- Child Care
- County Adoptions System
- One-E-App (Internal online Medicaid application program)

SSIRS Employment Services—Behind the Scenes

One program that required particular attention for data management and tracking was ES/WTW. Don began working with the Alameda County ES division to focus on the tracking and reporting of their WTW caseload. Similar to San Mateo County, Alameda County had also struggled with the availability of reports in CalWIN, and it had contracted reporting services from the same vendor as San Mateo County. Mirroring San Mateo's experience, Alameda County found that a great deal of the time the contract was in place was spent simply performing data cleanup. All of the data that went into the contractor's reports was obtained from the CalWIN

system. This caused a level of frustration within the ES division because if the data in the CalWIN system was improperly entered or updated, it took at least 45 days for the results of any effort made to rectify the problem to be reflected on the reports. While the agency strove to resolve the data entry complications, Don began working on his own concept of reporting with the goal of reducing the need to continue to pay an outside vendor for reporting services.

The ES component of the SSIRS took longer than expected to be finalized and ready for use; however, a great deal of consideration and effort was expended to ensure the design of the reports met the true needs of line staff and management. Program Planning and Support Supervisor Rhonda Boykin met frequently with ES staff from various levels to gain insight and to ask questions about the key information needed for the reports to act as a true resource for staff from a data and a visual perspective. The programmatic information, such as how the data would be mapped from CalWIN into the reports, was being analyzed simultaneously with the building of the system. Mary Miller, Employment Services Program Manager, notes that it was a great advantage to have the reports built in-house and to gain an understanding of where the data was actually coming from and how it was showing up in the reports, versus their experience with the outside vendor where there was no true correlation between the CalWIN system and the data in the reports. Lessons were learned from the experience with the contractor's reports. For example, prior to implementation of the SSIRS reporting, staff were provided with consistent reminders to ensure the entries they were making in CalWIN were correct. As a result, upon implementation of SSIRS ES reporting, the data in the reports was quite accurate. Data cleanup continues to be a very minor issue in the accuracy of the information being reported through SSIRS.

Reporting Obstacles and Successes

While evaluating the needs of staff and management, a need for reports that were previously produced by a case data system that was used prior to CalWIN

became apparent. These reports were recreated and are now the 108 Case Management and 109 Action Required reports. Some of the specific information included in the 108 and 109 reports includes:

- The number of WTW cases in each office
- The number of cases exempt from WTW that are unassigned
- The number of cases registered for WTW that are unassigned
- The number of WTW cases that need their activity updated in the system
- The number of WTW cases that are in non-compliance

With SSIRS, supervisors now meet on a semi-monthly basis to review the 109 Action Required Report. One meeting takes place during the first part of a month to determine any issues that need to be tackled and to identify next steps. The supervisors reconvene during the second part of the month to review the progress that has been made. All staff have immediate access to the 108 and 109 reports that are directly related to their own caseloads.

In learning about the level of detail the SSIRS reports provide, the question had to be asked: how does the staff feel about this tool? Do they feel like they, or their caseloads, are being monitored and scrutinized too closely? Employment Services Manager Mary Miller reports that, in reality, most ES staff have embraced the reports, and those who utilize their calendars and other tools have benefited greatly. Staff can now take the initiative to access their own reports instead of waiting for someone to send them out to them: staff who are technologically savvy seem to really enjoy this advantage. Because WTW participants are constantly moving through different components of the program and are interacting with multiple staff members, the SSIRS reports have enabled ES workers to have a clear picture of the status of each individual participant. Additionally, by receiving a drilled down version of the data, staff are able to maintain their workload of 150 to 160 cases. Managers have maintained reasonable expectations based on the high caseload numbers and the limited availability of time. Managers strive to assist their

staff with creating reasonable work plans and allotting blocked time for workers who may have reports that reflect minor problems within their caseloads.

Implications and Recommendations for San Mateo County

Alameda County is currently benefiting tremendously from the various dimensions and capabilities of SSIRS. Fortunately, it is also a tool that can be altered and potentially replicated for other agencies. While there is no immediate data available to document the impact SSIRS ES reports have had on their WPR, Alameda County is optimistic that it will play an ongoing role in assisting with increasing their WPR. As San Mateo County is currently seeking opportunities to improve the internal WTW program and increase the WPR, there are options for implementing new strategies, and SSIRS employment services reporting is certainly a tantalizing prospect. Although this case study focused very specifically on the WTW/ES feature of SSIRS, the system also serves as a resource for numerous other program divisions; it not only benefits the Social Services Agency, but it also benefits the population it serves. As Don Edwards said, "SSIRS helps us help the community." Simply put, SSIRS does the background work by consolidating data needed by staff, which enables them to concentrate their efforts on the clients and services needed. Alameda entered into a $1.7 million contract with IBM[1] to develop SSIRS; additional costs associated with the system may include software, hardware, consulting, personnel and training.[2] It's estimated that $1.7 million would be necessary for San Mateo County to obtain SSIRS, but the county would also have to consider the funding behind the manpower to implement the system, including training, and ongoing maintenance. Although the upfront costs may seem unreasonable considering the current budget dilemma all counties are facing, counties may face fiscal sanctions if the WPR is not met and perhaps this is a tool that would assist in

1 Alameda SSA BOS Agenda, March, 2009.

2 Nucleus Research Inc. ROI Case Study—IBM SSIRS Alameda County SSA, August 2010.

increasing the WPR. Additionally, there is a valid return on investment through fraud detection that comes with the SSIRS—it is certainly worth serious consideration. While San Mateo is currently evaluating its WTW program, ongoing efforts are also being made to keep abreast of any method available to monitor and maintain caseloads for all programs. Should the necessary funding be available, I would strongly recommend that San Mateo County take the first three steps to investigate the possibility of moving forward with investing in SSIRS:

- Convene an ad-hoc work group to review reports and information provided by Alameda County for this paper with representatives (holding the ability to make decisions) from each division (e.g., Fraud, Self-Sufficiency, SMC Works/ Employment Services, Child Welfare) to determine need. Compare existing reports to SSIRS options. Include representatives from Business Systems Group and/or Information Services Department to provide any technical input necessary to aid in decisions.

- If necessary and/or requested, re-connect with Don Edwards and/or any other representative available from Alameda County to provide additional feedback and information to San Mateo County.

- Should it be decided to move forward, contact IBM to discuss next steps, including a Request for Proposal and cost proposal for San Mateo County. It might be appropriate to contact additional vendors that may have alternate solutions and/or ideas.