

An Analysis of Three Bay Area SparkPoint Centers

PATRICIA SUN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the 2008 California Family Economic Self Sufficiency Standards, which include adequate housing, health insurance, food, child care and other basic necessities, a family of one adult and two pre-school children in the Bay Area need to earn \$60,000 to meet the standard. More than 440,000 Bay Area households, and 102,000 households in Santa Clara County, do not earn enough income to meet the self-sufficiency standard. In fact, for a minimum wage earner, it would require at least three full-time jobs to meet the basic needs standard in Santa Clara County. Many of these earners have fallen into the crevice of the working poor because they exceed public assistance eligibility criteria, yet are still unable to meet the self-sufficiency standards in our community. They face multiple, inter-related challenges and barriers that significantly impact their quality of life. These barriers have far-reaching impact: unless addressed now, a significant number of these families and children will remain in poverty and this lifestyle will most likely continue into future generations.

SparkPoint Centers were developed to fill this void by offering families living below the standard integrated services at a single point of entry over a three-year period, with a focus on three areas: *increasing income*, *improving credit*, and *building assets*. While the concept of a one-stop resource center is not new, United Way's SparkPoint Centers elevate and improve on previous models. They build upon a nationally recognized, best-practice model—the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Centers for Working

Families—and deliver bundled services as a single entity to improve economic outcomes.

United Way currently supports five SparkPoint Centers in the Bay Area, located in Oakland, Marin County, American Canyon, San Mateo County, and Fairfield. They are soon to open centers in San Francisco and Contra Costa counties (in Richmond and Bay Point), with a goal of opening a center in every Bay Area county to cut poverty in half by 2020. I visited three centers: Bay Point, Skyline Community College and American Canyon Family Resource Center. Although each center's lead agency and community varies, the ongoing financial support of United Way of Bay Area (UWBA) and the collaboration of various organizations have been the key to the centers' success. Each center is able to customize their service framework to best fit the needs of the community and the strengths of the contributing partners. The medium annual operating budget is approximately \$450,000, with 4-5 full-time equivalent staff serving approximately 200 to 300 clients.

In April 2010, UWBA rolled out a database application called Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) to serve as the key tool whereby all the centers track data, services and program improvements. The application has proven to be more complex and to require more resources than originally anticipated. UWBA continues to improve ETO to be more adaptable to the

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centers' needs and to produce comprehensive results in a meaningful format.

There is ultimately no doubt that the need exists and a service integration model like the SparkPoint Center, can help us meet the need. The positive impact on the community warrants serious consideration. Regrettably, the reality of today's budget woes force Santa Clara County to make the difficult

choice of focusing on more immediate issues: downsizing of staff, increasing of caseloads, and restructuring our business process in an effort to improve efficiency and reduce costs. These current challenges are already placing an enormous strain on existing resources, and may leave little opportunity in the immediate future to invest the necessary time and effort to assemble a successful SparkPoint Center.

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Introduction

Families in the United States are struggling in the aftermath of one of the greatest economic downturns since the Great Depression. According to the 2008 California Family Economic Self Sufficiency Standards, which include adequate housing, health insurance, food, child care and other basic necessities, a family of one adult and two pre-school children in the Bay Area need to earn \$60,000 per year to pay their bills. More than 440,000 Bay Area households, including approximately 102,000 households in Santa Clara County, do not earn enough to meet the standard. As the chart below shows, it requires at least three full-time minimum wage jobs to meet basic needs in Santa Clara County. (See Figure 1, next page.)

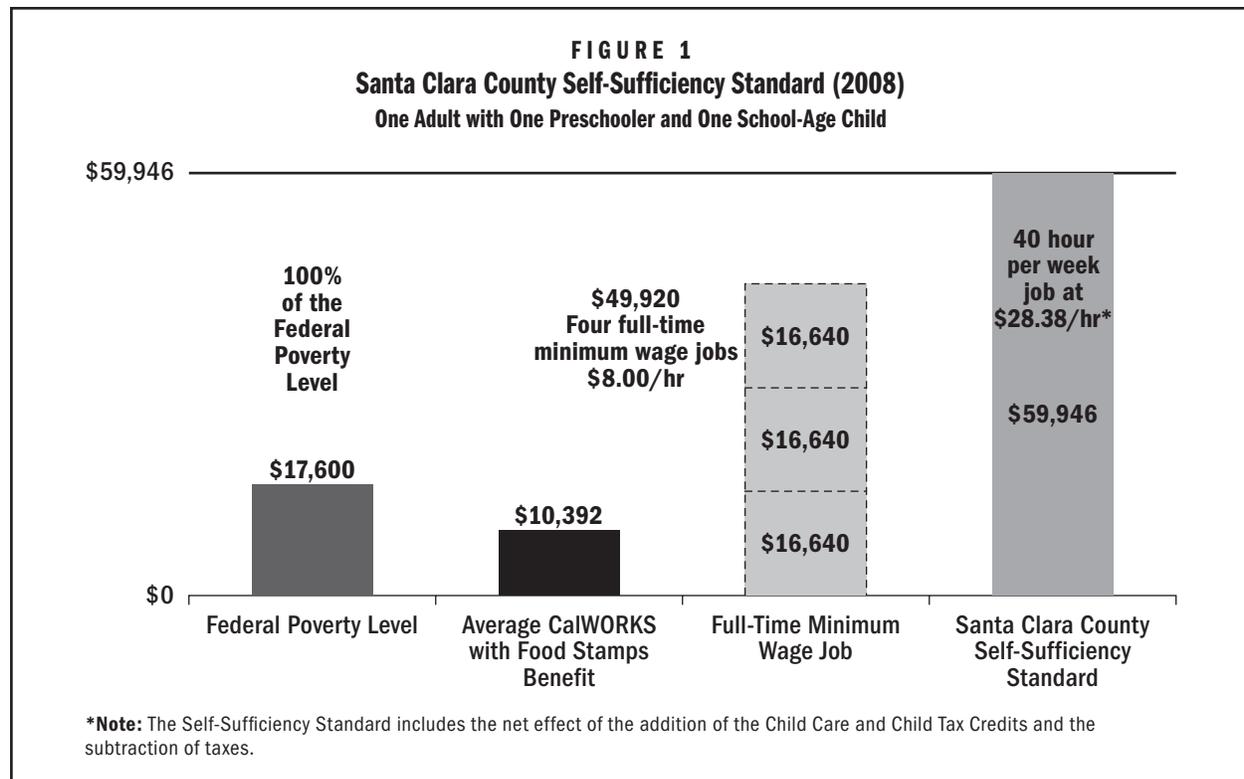
Meanwhile, the Public Assistance program annual gross income threshold for a family of three is \$19,356 for CalWORKS, and \$23,803 for CalFresh. Among households that are below the self-sufficiency standard, only 6.1% receive Public Assistance and 9.7% receive CalFresh. Many families have fallen into the crevice of the working poor because they exceed public assistance eligibility criteria, yet they are still unable to meet the self-sufficiency standard in our community. They face multiple, inter-related challenges and barriers that significantly impact their quality of life. These barriers have far reaching impact: unless addressed now, a significant number of these families and children will remain in poverty and this lifestyle will most likely continue into future generations. SparkPoint Centers were developed to fill this void by offering integrated services at a single point of entry over a three-year period, with a focus on earning a self-sufficient wage, saving for an emergency, and preserving one's credit score.

While the concept of a one-stop resource center is not new, United Way's SparkPoint Centers elevate and improve on previous models by building upon a nationally recognized, best-practice model—the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Centers for Working Families—by delivering bundled services as a single entity to improve client economic outcomes.

What is SparkPoint?

Partners Each center uses a community collaborative model to bring together the most effective non-profit, for-profit and government partners to help clients reach financial independence through a focus on three core services: building assets, growing income, and managing debt. The centers have different lead agencies; however, the lead agencies' unfailing conviction, persistence and dedication, along with the support of United Way of Bay Area (UWBA), are key to the centers' success. The lead agency and its core partners contribute through either funding or services in kind. A second tier partnership is also available for organizations that participate on a fractional basis because of resources availability. SparkPoint services are available to households with an annual gross income that is below \$60,000 for a family of four. The clients work with a coach, who helps create a step-by-step plan to set and achieve personal financial goals. Because change does not happen overnight, SparkPoint commits to working with clients for up to three years to achieve their financial goals with a focus on three areas: *increasing income*, *improving credit*, and *building assets*.

Services Each center has the flexibility to customize their service framework to best fit the needs of the community, demographics, language, average income level, employment opportunities and the



strengths of the contributing partners. Table 1 is a summary of the core services, steps needed and outcome measurements for all of the centers.

Outcome Measurement United Way selected Efforts to Outcomes (ETO), a web-based data management system created by Social Solutions Inc., as its key tool whereby SparkPoint Center partners can track data toward their common goals, integrate service delivery through joint case management, and manage performance for program improvement. Each center tracks data related to goals that are shared across the region and shares their data through participation in local and regional peer learning. Center staff members are expected to enter basic information, including demographics, income, employment status, public benefits information, and SparkPoint activities or appointments and results on a daily basis. ETO launched in April 2010 at the American Canyon site, and has launched at others on a flow basis. The only available data to date is from the Oakland Center: among the 182 participants who had participated in services for one year, 80

participants (45%) had already “bundled” or taken up two or more services to address the many challenges they face. The participants achieved success at reaching their intermediate or one-year goals at an increasingly higher rate depending on the number of services in which they were engaged. Those who take up three or more services have the best results. Success in Oakland was defined as achievements in various areas, including: 5% increase in income, 5% reduction in debt-to-income ratio, 50 point increase in credit score, enrollment in college, acquisition of a skill certification or savings accumulation equal to two weeks of out of pocket expenses. UWBA continues to improve ETO to be more adaptable to the centers’ needs and to produce comprehensive results.

Site Visits

United Way currently supports five SparkPoint centers in the Bay Area: Oakland, Marin, American Canyon, San Mateo, and Fairfield. They are soon to open centers in San Francisco and Contra Costa (Richmond and Bay Point), with a goal to open a

TABLE 1
SparkPoint Services

SparkPoint Core Services	How to get there . . .	Measure the Outcome
Increasing Income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn skills to increase chances of landing a job • Improve resume • Enroll in training for high-demand jobs • Explore career options • Start and fund college education • Enroll in public benefits • Connect with money-saving programs 	Livable income that reaches the Self-Sufficiency Standard (e.g., \$60,000.00 for a family of three in Santa Clara)
Improving Credit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a balanced household budget • Manage credit cards and other debts • Obtain credit report and correct mistakes • Avoid foreclosure with mortgage modification 	Good credit score of 650 or above
Building Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access free and low-cost banking services • Participate in matched savings programs (IDA) • Purchase a home • Open or expand a business • Develop emergency savings and plan for retirement 	Savings equal to three months of living expenses

center in every Bay Area County in an effort to cut poverty in half by 2020.

I visited the three SparkPoint Centers summarized below, and although they are distinct in their communities, lead agencies and origin, all shared an overwhelming dedication and commitment to helping their community gain self-independence and improve quality of life. Their ability to overcome daily challenges can only be born out of love and passion to be active contributors to their communities. It renewed my personal belief that we all share a social obligation and responsibility to be active participants in any measurement.

SPARKPOINT CENTER AT BAY POINT, CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Paul Buddenhagen works for the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Service Department (EHSD) as the manager for the Service Integra-

tion Team (SIT) program, which has two sites (one in Richmond and one in Bay Point). Paul recognized a connection between the SIT model philosophy and SparkPoint's self-sufficiency goals, and believed that by using a multi-dimensional service model such as SparkPoint, the county could increase its success rate of overcoming poverty. The SIT program was already in place at Bay Point; however, with 17.2% of residents below the Federal Poverty Level and 1 in 45 housing units in East Contra Costa County in receipt of foreclosure notices, the need to provide additional tools to assist residents in moving toward financial independence is more critical than ever. Paul presented this idea to the Board of Supervisors district representative, the director of EHSD, and United Way in early 2010 and received full support, along with a seed grant to kick-start the process. Out of one hundred community-based organizations that attended the initial meeting, fifty were interested in participating

TABLE 2
SparkPoint Center at Baypoint
Contra Costa County

Partners	Services
EHSD	Site facility, Public Assistance Intake and Welfare to Work staff
UW of Bay Area	Initial funding, staff training, database support, partnership network, online forum for knowledge sharing, marketing and promotional tools
Bay Area Legal Aid	Legal support for housing and benefits
Brighter Beginnings (also the lead agency in the Richmond SparkPoint Center)	Health insurance enrollment, financial education 101 and CFR prepaid debit cards
Community Housing Development Corporation	Credit reports, financial education services, IDAs, and credit counseling services
Opportunity Junction	Vocational counseling, training program enrollment, employment workshops and placement
STAND!	Financial education and tax assistance
Stride	Employment training and placement in the IT field.

in the program. Nine core partners formed the steering committee through a self-selection process. The steering committee meets regularly and strategizes collaboratively in a transparent environment with frank discussions on how to achieve this shared vision. The center is located at the previous SIT location in Bay Point and is due to launch in May 2011. It will offer the services in Table 2.

Each partner provided funding and/or services in kind, according to their individual resource availability and outcome expectancy. The current annual operating budget is \$450,000 with approximately 4 to 5 full-time equivalents (FTE's), including a director to oversee the daily operations. All staff will be cross-trained to provide a single point of contact for clients, although some services will not be available on-site. A workshop calendar will be available and will be distributed to all partners. A community outreach event is planned for June 2011. It has been almost a year since Paul first presented his idea and worked tirelessly with his team on this project: it is obviously a labor of love. It must be gratifying to see

the vision that began with only a shared goal finally taking root and coming to fruition.

SPARKPOINT CENTER AT SKYLINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE, SAN MATEO COUNTY

Dr. William Watson wears multiple hats as the Director of the SparkPoint Center and the Center for Workforce Development at Skyline College. He was able to leverage successful outcomes by working with Bay Area companies on workforce re-entry training at Skyline College, and by expanding their services to the 41,914 households living below the San Mateo County self sufficiency standard of \$67,620 per year. Among households below the standard, only 1.8% received Public Assistance and 5.9% received Food Stamps. Skyline College recognized the startling needs of families who work yet don't earn enough income. They took an aggressive approach and collaborated with United Way to form a SparkPoint Center in 2009, based on the premise: **Increase in Education = Increase in Financial Independence**. The center is able to integrate classroom instruction and services to

TABLE 3
SparkPoint Center at Skyline Community College
San Mateo County

Partners	Services
Skyline Community College	Site facility and office equipment, staffing by work-study students, ESL classes, scholarships up to \$2000.00 per semester
UW of Bay Area	Initial funding, staff training, database support for outcome measurement, partnership network, online forum for knowledge sharing, marketing and promotional tools
Jewish Vocational Services	Funding support
California Employment Development Department	On-site job training, career counseling and placement services.
Second Harvest Food Bank	On-site food pantry
Consumer Financial Resources	Credit counseling, financial coaching, volunteer income tax assistance
Opportunity Fund	Funding support

achieve more effective outcomes. With an annual operating budget of \$1.5 million, the center employs 8 FTE's and provided services to 200 individuals in 2010, 90% of whom are also Skyline students. The goal for 2011 is to increase outreach efforts through community and college events to provide services to a broader population. A summary of its partners and services is shown in Table 3.

AMERICAN CANYON IN NAPA COUNTY

As the American Canyon Family Resource Center Director since 2006 and a long-time local resident, Sherry Tennyson is fully entrenched in the bedroom community of 16,000, and understands the needs and barriers local residents face on a daily basis. She took on the lead role and pursued a partnership with United Way in 2007 to 2008 to form a SparkPoint Center at American Canyon in order to develop a long-term strategy for achieving economic stability. Her vision is to provide a more wrap-around service model to help families achieve financial sufficiency.

After an initial community needs assessment and service provider survey, they were able to iden-

tify the most urgent needs and barriers to accessing services within the community. As a result, they formed core partnerships with Dream Catchers for employment training, interview classes, job placement assistance services, and with Life on Trac for financial workshops and counseling services. Other services that are available include: one-to-one support, parent education classes, education workshops, food emergency assistance, and volunteer income tax preparation. The center employs 2.5 FTE, has a minimum annual budget of \$250,000, and provides services to 450 families. I believe its success in reaching the community is attributed to the neighborly approach of Sherry and her staff, which is a reflection of her personality and the community's size. She seems to know everyone by name and makes everyone feel comfortable immediately. This is disarming and removes any stigma because it focuses on the families and the community. However, even with the obvious success, a continuous funding stream is a major challenge to ensuring the center's existence that requires full-time effort and attention.

Sparkpoint in Santa Clara County?

In March 2011, the Legislature passed the Governor's proposal to reduce the CalWorks time limit to 48 months, to institute an 8% grant cut, to eliminate childcare for 11 and 12 year olds, and to suspend one year of the Cal-Learn program. All of this further reduces the existing resources for the low-income families. In addition, the unemployment rate remains high at 10.2% in Santa Clara County and 1 in 228 housing units received foreclosure notices in San Jose in March 2011 (per Realty Trac). With diminishing resources on all fronts, we need to find a more efficient long-term strategy to supporting self-sufficiency without additional investments to contribute to regional economic sustainability. As a lead agency or a core partner, SSA would contribute an immense amount of experience by leveraging the expertise and success of the Employment Services Department's 40% Work Participation Rate. This success can be attributed to the long history of cooperative and collaborative efforts between SSA and an extensive list of community organizations that aim to provide a wide array of supportive services to help clients regain employment and move toward self-sufficiency. SSA, United Way of Silicon Valley, Catholic Charities and Second Harvest Food Bank have been working together in the campaign against poverty for a long time; SparkPoint can further solidify our shared vision for the community. The success of the SparkPoint core services can be increased by recruiting additional partners and bundling services to reduce duplication and administrative costs. The center could potentially be located in the central San Jose metropolitan area, since the majority of Public Assistance recipients already reside in the area. SSA already has several Public Assistance offices at the Senter Road campus and it would be a natural segue to reaching out to an ever-growing population.

Recommendation

There is no doubt that the need for services exists; a service integration model such as SparkPoint Center can help us meet that need. It will increase the potential for positively impacting the community. SparkPoint Centers warrant serious consideration. Regrettably, the reality of today's budget woes forces us to make the difficult choice between focusing on more immediate issues such as the downsizing of staff, increasing of caseloads, and restructuring our business process from caseload- to task-based in an effort to improve efficiency and reduce costs. These current challenges are already placing an enormous strain on existing resources, and may leave little opportunity in the immediate future to invest the necessary time and effort required to assemble a successful SparkPoint Center.

Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Paul Buddenhagen from Contra Costa County Employment and Human Service Department for his generosity and patience during this project. His guidance has been insightful and invaluable.