

# ***SparkPoint Centers: A Model That Works*** **Bridging the Gaps for the Working Poor**

**DORIS V. HINTON**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Contra Costa County, along with other Bay Area counties, joined the United Way of the Bay Area's SparkPoint initiative in bundling services for the working poor to lead them towards financial stability. Many of San Mateo County's working poor families struggle to make ends meet as their food, housing, health, childcare, transportation and employment are at risk. In the last five years, the number of households earning less than \$50,000 has increased from 28 to 37 percent. (Sustainability Hub—SMC 2010 indicators). The SparkPoint Model focuses on three major points: increased income, financial stability, and obtaining access. The centers commit three years of service to each individual. Research indicates that individuals who receive two or more integrated, bundled services are 60% more likely to return for more services. The San Mateo County Human Ser-

vices Agency is interested in learning about and participating in a SparkPoint Center as a way to aid the working poor and facilitate their life transformation into self-sufficiency.

### **Recommendations**

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency should consider collaborating with Skyline City College. A staff person could be out-stationed several days per week to offer integrated services to the individuals at the SparkPoint Centers. The agency could discuss potential plans and an implementation process with the Cañada College Workforce Director, who is currently in discussion with United Way of the Bay Area and has expressed interest in a SparkPoint Center at the Cañada Campus.

---

**Doris V. Hinton**, Human Services Supervisor,  
County of San Mateo Human Services Agency



# ***SparkPoint Centers: A Model That Works*** **Bridging the Gaps for the Working Poor**

**DORIS V. HINTON**

## **Background**

San Mateo County strives, yet struggles, with the working poor population to aid them towards self-sufficiency. Many of our working poor families struggle to make ends meet while their food, housing, health, childcare, transportation, and employment are at risk. In the last five years, the number of households earning less than \$50,000 decreased from 37 to 28 percent. (Sustainability Hub—SMC 2010 indicators).

The graph below shows that having an income at the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which is commonly used to determine eligibility for public support programs, is not enough to be self-sufficient. Neither is the average CalWORKS entitlement with Food Stamps, which is even less income than the FPL. To meet the most basic expenses for a family of three in San Mateo County, one would need to work more than four full-time minimum wage jobs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). See Figure 1, next page.

In the last five years, the cost of living has risen in San Mateo County (Insight Center for Community Economic Development):

- Food costs have gone up 15%.
- Health care costs have climbed significantly, up 30%.
- Since 2003, the rise in costs has resulted in an increase in the Self-Sufficiency Standard from \$10,116 to \$67,617 per year for a family consisting of one adult, a preschooler, and a school-age child.

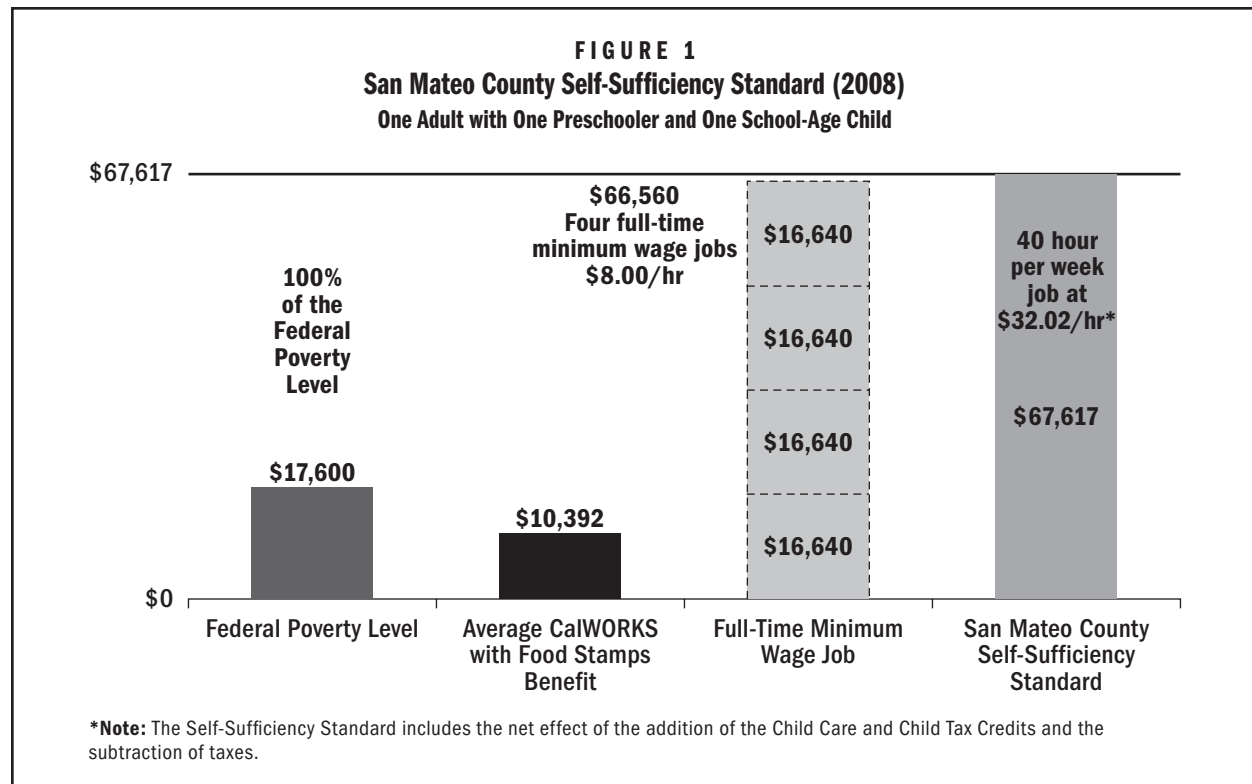
In San Mateo County, there are 41,914 (22.1%) households below standards, and 91.8% of those households have one or more workers (Pearce, 2009). The real question is: how do we serve and move families in our communities from being low-income

toward self-sufficiency? What step-by-step model can we join efforts with or simulate to assist our families in working on a plan that is designed for their specific needs and to help them gain financial self-reliance? SparkPoint Centers fill in the gaps and bridge the step-by-step process needed to successfully transition the working poor towards self-sufficiency. The model for the United Way of the Bay Area's SparkPoint Centers is partially based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Centers for Working Families. The model includes three types of bundled and co-located services: 1) income-building and support, 2) financial literacy and coaching, and, 3) asset-building. Each SparkPoint Center brings several non-profit and government agencies together to offer integrated, complementary services in one convenient location (Skyline College Achieve, Winter 2009–2010).

## **History**

In 2010, Contra Costa County joined the efforts to reduce poverty. The county decided to open two SparkPoint Centers, one in Richmond and the other in Bay Point. Under the leadership of Paul Buddenhagen, Contra Costa County's Service Integration Program Manager, the planning began for the Bay Point SparkPoint Center. The BayPoint SparkPoint Center opened on March 2, 2011. Mr. Buddenhagen focused on some of the key elements he had experienced over the course of the previous year. The following were emphasized as key to the implementation process:

- Outreach
- All partners being on-board and committed.
- The lead agency retaining the services of a consultant



- United Way providing technical support, an on-line share drive, and seed funding (\$100,000)
- Planning for a budget of \$550,000 to \$600,000 in the 1st year and for ongoing fundraising
- Devoting one full-time or half-time staff from the lead agency

Buddenhagen recommended a visit to the SparkPoint Centers that had opened in the last year. SparkPoint visits were made to American Canyon, Skyline College Canyon, and Bay Point. I also participated in a conference call with the United Way SparkPoint Initiative Regional Director. There was a common theme amongst the leaders of the SparkPoint Centers: they often stressed the amount of time and commitment needed for the center. Dr. William Watson, SparkPoint Director at Skyline College said, "Partners must be committed both publicly and in their hearts." Sharon Tennyson, Director of the American Canyon SparkPoint Center and Family Resource Center, stated that sometimes you may start with one set of partners, and later may need to change partnerships. She advised seeking partners who have a common goal. Paul Buddenhagen from Contra Costa

County stated, partners must be committed and see the value of the Center for their agency. Emily Harpster of the United Way of the Bay Area stated that all partners must be champions.

### Model

SparkPoint Centers have a welcoming atmosphere where hard-working, low-income families can access a range of services to help them transition out of poverty and achieve financial stability. There are currently nine SparkPoint Centers. Each Center effectively collaborates with non-profits and government partners to assist individuals in achieving their personal financial goals. Research has shown that financial change does not happen instantly; therefore, SparkPoint Centers commit to working with individuals and families for up to three years to help them achieve their financial goals. SparkPoint services focus on three areas: improving credit, increasing income and building assets. Individual financial stability is measured through the following outcomes: a livable income (self-sufficiency standard), a good credit score, savings, and amount of debt (United

Way, Box share drive, 2011). The SparkPoint Centers are an easy way to access truly integrated services. Rather than receive a referral to an additional program, individuals are accompanied to the next room for services that can address their needs. Studies have proven that if an individual uses one service, there is a 20% chance they will return. If they use two or more services, there is a 60% chance they will return for more (E. Harper, Director-SparkPoint Initiative Director, interview 2011).

### Implications

Research indicates that 91.8% of households in San Mateo County include one or more workers (Pearce, 2009). The requirements of implementing SparkPoint include, but are not limited to:

- Staff time (If the county is the core agency, requires one staff at 50% to 100% time)
- Recruiting and collaborating with partners who share the same vision and commitment
- Ensuring a budget of \$500,000 to 600,000 for the first year (Seed funding of \$100,000)
- Transitioning the working poor toward self sufficiency and increasing their services
- Increasing the Work Participation Rate for Humans Service Agencies
- Increasing financial stability and improving income and assets in the community (through integrated bundled services)
- Staff commitment to the community for three years of services

### Limitations

The first SparkPoint Center in the Bay Area opened approximately two years ago. Further research will be needed to conclude their effects on communities after three years of services. In Contra Costa County, Buddenhagen stated that one limitation to the Centers may be that the initial services start with the individual. One other observation of a potential limitation may be the limit of twenty candidate referrals per partner. Contra Costa County's strategy, however, is to start out small and grow.

### Recommendations

San Mateo County Human Services Agency should consider engaging in the SparkPoint Initiative. The agency should join forces with already-partnered agencies and add to the bundle of services offered in the SparkPoint Centers. Currently, San Mateo County has a SparkPoint Center at Skyline College. The Human Service Agency and the community could benefit from collaborating and building a strong partnership with the SparkPoint Center. The Human Service Agency can potentially:

- Collaborate with Skyline City College and state an interest in joining the SparkPoint Initiative.
- Partner with other agencies and non-profits to join the SparkPoint Initiative. The Cañada College Workforce Director has expressed interest in joining the SparkPoint Centers Initiative
- Out-station a worker one day or several days per week to offer integrated services to the individuals at the SparkPoint Center

To ensure involvement in the near future, the San Mateo County Agency needs to partner with Skyline College to discuss the current services and funding, to view the availability of staff and services, and to incorporate resources for the existing population at the SparkPoint Skyline College.

In conclusion, the SparkPoint Center Initiative should be seen as a vital instrument in the process of helping families move into self-sufficiency. SparkPoints should become the bridge to working with poor families and connecting them with bundles of services that will ensure their success in achieving financial stability.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Paul Buddenhagen, Contra Costa County's Service Integration Programs Manager, for the abundance of information and for the time spent during this process. Paul's guidance and direct connection to other SparkPoint Centers was invaluable. Many thanks to those who contributed to this enriching experience in which I have gained knowledge that I commit to transmit to future programs. It's been an amazing expedition, and I will always honor this experience. Contributors:

### CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

- Paul Buddenhagen, Service Integration Programs Manager

### AMERICAN CANYON

- Sherry Tennyson, Family Resource and SparkPoint Center Director
- Stacy Lopez, Community Employment Specialist

### UNITED WAY OF BAY AREA

- Emily Harpster, United Way Regional Director for SparkPoint Initiative

### SAN MATEO

- Dr. William Watson, Director, SparkPoint San Mateo—Skyline College
- Ken Kong, San Mateo Works Manager
- Susan Rogers, Supervisor

In addition, I would like to thank the Executive Director Leadership team of San Mateo County for granting me the opportunity to complete this study and enrich my knowledge, as well as the county's opportunity to improve our services. Special thanks to Ken Kong, SMCWorks Manager, for his encouragement, support and time. Thank you to my staff and family for their patience and support.

## References

- Dr. Pearce, D. (2009): *Struggling to make Ends Meet in California*, University of Washington. [www.liveunitedca.org](http://www.liveunitedca.org).
- Dr. William Watson, Director, SparkPoint San Mateo—Skyline College & The Center for Workforce Development, Interview/meeting, 650-738-7035, [watsonw@smccd.edu](mailto:watsonw@smccd.edu), March 2, 2011.
- Emily Harpster SparkPoint Initiative Director, United Way of the Bay Area, Conference, [eharpster@uwba.org](mailto:eharpster@uwba.org), call/interview, March 2, 2011.
- Insight Center for Community Economic Development. <http://www.insightccd.org/communities/cfess/ca-sss/cfes-county-san-mateo.html>. Retrieved April 5, 2011.
- Paul Buddenhagen, Service Integration Programs Manager, Contra Costa County, interview/meeting, 925-313-1793, [pduddenh@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:pduddenh@ehsd.cccounty.us), March 1, 2011.
- Sherry Tennyson, Family Resource and SparkPoint Center Director, American Canyon. Interview/meeting, 707-363-0058, [sherry@americancanyonfrc.org](mailto:sherry@americancanyonfrc.org), March 7, 2011.
- Stacy Lopez, Community Employment Specialist, American Canyon, interview/meeting, [stacy@americancanyonfrc.org](mailto:stacy@americancanyonfrc.org), March 7, 2011.
- Sustainability Hub: 2010 Indicators—Income Distribution and Poverty. <http://sustainabilityhub.net/2010-indicators/economy-incom-distribution-and-poverty>. Retrieved April 5 2011
- Stacy Lopez, Community Employment Specialist, American Canyon, interview/meeting, [stacy@americancanyonfrc.org](mailto:stacy@americancanyonfrc.org), March 7, 2011.