

West Marin Services Center: A Legacy of Social Services Integration

KISHORE JAYASWAL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Social work' is often described as an occupation focused on improving the lives of those in need. 'Community' is synonymous with a feeling of fellowship toward a common goal. Community social work summarizes what the West Marin Services Center personifies; a group of dedicated staff who hold a common goal of helping people in a rural community. This consolidated outstation of the Marin County Health and Human Services Department has been operating for more than 40 years, proving that value and worth within a community can stand the test of time. This service center is able to provide true wraparound services through direct engagement and referrals. From CalFresh and CalWORKs to Medi-Cal and Child Protective Services, this outstation is a beacon of the Point Reyes Station and surrounding areas.

Sonoma County does not have such a rural county program. However, the need in semi-rural migrant worker communities like Agua Caliente and Boyes Hot Springs seems like an ideal reason to begin such a legacy. Making many county services that are available in Santa Rosa closer to home and connected to the community will help provide a model for regional community-based public social services. Most states across the union have validated to the federal government that practicing and implementing public assistance programs locally is more effective. Most counties have equally shown how extending service even closer to their constituency is even more efficient. Doesn't it make sense to continue with this trend and extend services farther into the communities that most need it?

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Introduction

I always tell people that I don't really work in public service, I work in information technology. I worked in Silicon Valley for ten years and worked at a startup that went public. I really have nothing to do with social work. In reality, I have now been working for county social services for more than ten years. Does this finally give me the credibility to say that I am a public servant myself, or I somehow at least support those that do "real" social work? I guess it took me more than ten years to figure out that I should probably try and better understand what it is that "we" in social services do.

Stepping out of the land of ones and zeroes, the Bay Area Social Services Consortium executive development program has provided me an opportunity to try and better understand several aspects of what makes up county social services and how an integrated approach to community support and social work has proven to stand the test of time helping a rural agricultural community for more than 40 years.

'Integral' is defined as pertaining to, or belonging to the whole. Yet in many county social services organizations, a key function of success—integration into the community—gets lost or forgotten. Starting in 1972 in Point Reyes Station, California, there has been a concerted effort to build a consolidated and connected organization to help the community of West Marin. The West Marin Human Services Center holds community integration at the core of its success.

The Service Center

There are most certainly many beautiful, idyllic examples of what a dairy farm looks like; tall green grass, rolling hills, black and white spotted cows grazing in front of old oak trees. West Marin does indeed fit that ideal. It is also a large agricultural community where work is tough, housing is expensive, and opportunities and services might not be easy to get to. Point Reyes Station has a population of less than 1,000, but it is the hub for several other rural communities including Olema, Stinson Beach, Bolinas, Tomales, Dillon Beach, and Inverness. Point Reyes Station is also the location of the Marin County Health and Human Services Department West Marin Service Center (WMSC)—or as locals simply call it, the 'Service Center.'

This county-owned building sits out by a low bluff and marsh area at the south end of Tomales Bay. It is open Monday through Friday and provides CalFresh, CalWORKs, county Medical Services Program, Medi-Cal, Adult Protective Services, In Home Support Services, Child Protective Services, and Community Health and Prevention. It also offers mental health and substance abuse services to all the residents of West Marin. Besides these core services provided by county staff, the Service Center also hosts Woman, Infant, Children (WIC) supplemental food, health care and nutrition program, several self-help groups, the Senior Services Collaborative, the Marin County District Attorney's Victim of Crime Program, classes for parenting and mental health, and legal aid from the Legal Aid of Marin.

Community integration seems critical to the success of the Service Center. The staff, regardless of which county program they work for, know about each other's services and practice information sharing on a daily basis. All services at this outstation are provided as if it is a single entity, even if a 'team' of staff from differing disciplines provides the actual services.

The largely bilingual front office staff technically work for the traditional social services side of the house and act as the primary 'mission controllers.' They are the greeters, the handlers, the translators, and the initial smiling faces that are the first thing someone sees when they walk through the Service Center doors. Staff are clearly committed to providing integrated services, and clients seldom realize there are multiple agencies and programs at play.

All of the services that were listed earlier are services that are offered at the main county complex in San Rafael, 20 miles away. The only primary economic assistance service a resident of West Marin would need to go over the hill for would be for GA - General Assistance. Since its inception as a county behavioral health services outstation in the early 1970s, the Service Center has remained a true social work-oriented hub for the underserved rural and often minority population of West Marin.

All programs of traditional county economic assistance services are offered except GA. Eligibility is determined for Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and CalWORKs; Electronic Benefits (EBT) cards are even printed and issued. All client verification documents, including those mandated for annual reporting and renewal of benefits, are scanned and processed at the Service Center.

There are approximately 10 county staff of various disciplines that work in the Service Center, along with several interns.

Staff like working at the West Marin Service Center and feel more connected to the clients by being located in their community. It takes a specific type of person to be successful in the rural or out-stationed environments. Staff needs to be able to know their limits, but also be able to push the boundary.

To be successful in an out-stationed environment, all workers have to have initiative. There are no program analysts or direct supervisors at the outstation, which makes it imperative that staff are able to be quick on their feet and have a thorough understanding of all services and systems used to provide those services.

An outstation is not a place for an inexperienced or 'green' employee of any service discipline. They must be masters of their social services area of expertise, but they must also be able to think outside of their program and focus on overall client support strategies and be willing to use their own judgment. There has to be a sense of urgency and respect for the client's time, as many of them have travelled far and made sacrifices to get to the Service Center.

Day-to-day building operational duties are shared; even garbage and recycling is taken out by staff and everyone looks out for the general upkeep and maintenance of the facility. Calls are answered by office assistants who have a working knowledge of all services offered within the Service Center and the West Marin community at large. This collaboration with the community at large is a critical component of the success of the Service Center.

Like many county social services agencies, the Service Center leverages state and federal funding to support its operations. Costs are spread across the various programs with 25% to Mental Health, 30% to Economic Assistance, and 45% to Adult and Child Protective Services. For the 2012/2013 fiscal year, the Service Center had an operating budget of roughly \$1.6M of which over \$1M was funded by the federal and state governments. The remaining \$600,000 was funded through the County General Fund.

Community Collaboration

To build a public service system that is sustainable and effective requires the ability to look at the problems and needs of the community and the available resources as a whole. This is why the integrated services model is a core component of this enduring service center. Interagency partnerships are essential, and provide the client with the most resources regardless of the point of entry.

Community based work is at the heart of social work and social services in West Marin. From the publicly accessible common room to the Coastal Health Alliance office across the parking lot, this Service Center is connected to the area at large. It is an active member of the West Marin Community Collaborative, which provides a monthly venue for all public service providers to bring up issues, initiatives, and solutions.

Being located in the community that one serves personifies ease of access from the client perspective. This provides visibility in the community, promoting where to go and who to see for services. In many cases, referrals from mandated reporters become easier, less burdensome, and less frightening because folks know and trust the actual person behind the phone. Clients might see these same social workers at the Palace Market, the Pt. Reyes Station Post Office, or the local Bovine Bakery.

True “wraparound” services become much more of a reality when the actual services are available under the same roof. From clothing and food to WIC and legal aid, clients are not forced to travel far and wide to receive important services that comprehensively support a positive transition and outcome.

The public health nursing components are also integrated into the Service Center and the community, which often partner with the local FQHM organizations to provide immunization and educational outreach for the elderly and families. This provides a blended service offering between differing organizations with the common goal of helping the client versus competing for their business.

Collaboration also occurs for adult and aging services where In-Home Support Services and Adult Protective Services are partnered with county Public Health, hospice, West Marin Senior Services, and county Behavioral Health Services. Workers in each respective field see each other often and know the common clients. Community collaboration is also personified from a political perspective. There has always been both community and supervisory support. It has now become an expected and relied upon institution in the community.

Challenges and Opportunities

Although the outstation successfully provides a myriad of direct services and a connected link to the rest of the service community, there are challenges and opportunities to add and improve upon this system.

Currently, there is no General Assistance aid available from the Service Center. Those clients in need of this service would have to go “over the hill.” In addition CalWORKs, clients do not have the ability to attend the required orientation and counseling locally either. Additionally, tracking data related to all client flow into the Service Center is not available. There is no single formal intake and assessment system. Therefore, trending and analysis of overall performance is difficult.

Fingerprinting services are also not available at the Service Center. Clients that need to be fingerprinted have to travel to the San Rafael main county campus to be processed. When regulations change, it often takes longer for system and process revisions to matriculate down to the Service Center. Often, Service Center staff have to leverage subject matter experts back at the home office.

Other peripheral and support services that are often in need but currently unavailable and/or not directly integrated include child care, drug treatment, and drug testing. Many of these services are only available in San Rafael or other urban areas, which makes transportation a challenge. There is a private service called TripTran, and public bus service is available, but both are infrequent and at times difficult to navigate to where clients actually need to go.

Success in Sonoma

From the dairies of Marin County to the vineyards of Sonoma County, there are several considerations for success of a consolidated services center in Sonoma. The most critical aspect is the overall commitment to community collaboration and integration. The success and longevity of the West Marin Services Center hinges upon its ability to be an integral part of the community. Not only would a Sonoma

County service center of this nature have to provide outreach to clients, but there would also need to be a concerted effort to reach out to other service providers in the community at large. These relationships would be critical to have established prior to standing up a service center.

Geographic location will also be important; being located in an underserved area that has a known high quantity of eligible clients that are need of services. An area like the Sonoma Valley of eastern Sonoma County might be ideal. Areas like Boyes Hot Springs and Agua Caliente have a large population of migrant farm workers similar to West Marin. Considerations for access to easy and reliable public transportation will be important.

A comprehensive Sonoma County public services offering would also be required for a successful service center. Other county departments like Public Health, Mental Health, Child Support, Sheriff's Department, and Probation would need to be located, at least in part, in the same facility. General Assistance, a full complement of CalWORKs services, and the ability to complete fingerprinting locally would be useful as well.

Collaboration with existing local service providers will be another key ingredient. Developing relationships and partnerships with organizations like La Luz, Nuestra Vos, St. Josephs Healthcare Mobile Services, Tribal Services, First 5 Sonoma County, and WIC will be imperative. Identifying what service gaps exist and what time of the year services are most needed will be helpful in determining new service provider opportunities.

Service center positions would be funded similarly to how they are claimed at the non-outstationed location (central). The service center should efficiently leverage federal and state dollars by ensuring that programs with a higher funding match (e.g. CalWORKs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal) be offered. This would help offset other programs that might be needed but are not self-sustaining.

Staff that chose to work in the Sonoma County Service Center will need to be seasoned in their discipline, but willing to work with others to provide

holistic service and support to the local community. Ideally, these staff would all be bilingual as well. A dedicated service center analyst position would also be important to provide enhanced reporting, compliance, and policy support.

A county-owned facility would be ideal if possible. It would ensure a strategic commitment to the community. The facility should have a common area that would be a shared resource for the community and other organizations, including audio-visual capabilities. It should have an inviting front reception and intake area, with a standardized electronic system for the reception staff to use for intake. Interview rooms should be multipurpose and private; able to service health, economic and adult/child services. A video conferencing solution would also provide distance learning and service collaboration options. Additional shared "hoteling" workspaces would be useful for field staff, interns, and non-full time positions.

At Sonoma County Human Services, the goal is to protect and improve the well-being of the individuals and families that reside there. The vision is to meet the needs of the community and empower clients through accessible and responsive services. However there are areas, like the Sonoma Valley, where services are not easily accessible. When clients finally access many county services, they often find themselves having to navigate "service silos." A consolidated county service center would be an ideal way to help those in need and become a valued integrated community resource.

Acknowledgments

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