

# STAFF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

Jennie Hwang Loft\*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### BACKGROUND

Social services agencies need to examine how business is conducted to survive into the next millennium. In a time when the economy is global and the job market intensely competitive, how does government stay viable? There are many challenges to recruiting and retaining new social services employees including:

- Shortage of traditional career paths for women (particularly in social work);
- Decrease in unemployment rates contrasting to an increase in job growth throughout the state;
- Increase in Hispanic, Asian, and African-American population;
- Impending mass exodus of baby boomer retirees.

### STRATEGIES OBSERVED

Alameda County Social Services Agency has in place many innovative strategies to recruit and retain employees. These strategies are outlined below:

- Innovative recruitment methods in Children and Family Services;
- Internship programs in the Program and Evaluation and Research Unit and Information Services Systems Division;
- A wide range of in-house training modules;
- Mentoring Program.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

The following are recommendations for San Mateo County Human Services Agency to consider for recruitment and retention:

#### Recruitment:

To attract a larger pool of new employees I recommend:

- compressing time of performing civil service testing;
- providing incremental bonuses for staff who recruit new employees;
- establishing a loan forgiveness plan and relocation reimbursement for social workers;
- implementing administrative and technology internship programs.

#### Retention:

To reach more employees within the organization I recommend:

- Expanding in-house training modules ranging from staff to executive managers for skills needed for advancement;
- Improving the management style of supervisors and managers to build team loyalty;
- Establishing internship programs for administration and technology departments, which will provide on-the-job training and allow existing

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staff to move into more responsible positions as lower level positions are filled with recent college graduates;

- Creating a mentoring program that allows staff to shadow managers and opportunities to career possibilities.

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### **BACKGROUND**

Social services agencies need to examine how business is conducted in order to survive into the next millennium. In a time when the economy is global and the job market intensely competitive, how does government stay viable? There are many challenges to recruiting and retaining new social services employees including:

- Shortage of traditional career paths for women (particularly in social work);
- Decrease in unemployment rates contrasting to an increase in job growth throughout the state;
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### **Shortage Of Traditional Career Paths**

At one time, there was a ready pool of employees who worked for government agencies because of job security and flexibility. Jobs in social work, nursing, and teaching were performed predominantly by women. Today, career choices for women have expanded dramatically, thereby shrinking traditional workforce pools. The lack of social workers is compounded by those who leave the field “due to low pay, high caseloads and poor morale” (According to officials at a public hearing held by Assemblywoman Aroner in December, 2000.) Social workers are among the many professionals that social services agencies desperately need.

### **Increased Job Growth**

Moreover, the current job market continues to expand with many jobs readily available for all professionals. From 1995 through 1999, the unemployment rate for San Mateo County dropped from 4.2 percent to 2 percent; for Alameda County from 5.8 percent to 3.4 percent; for the state from 5.6 percent to 4.2 percent; and nationally from 7.8 percent to 4.2 percent. By contrast from 1995 through 1999, the job growth rate for San Mateo County increased from negative .5 to 1.4 percent; for Alameda County from negative .2 to 2.1 percent; for the state from negative .2 to 1.6 percent; and nationally from .4 to 1.2 percent. For the latter part of the 1990's, the nation enjoyed an unprecedented economic growth of jobs.

### **Increased Ethnic Population**

Census 2000 was recently completed. Preliminary numbers indicate that California's population is growing, Hispanics becoming one in three Californians versus one in four as was the case in the 1990 Census. The increase in other ethnic populations also include Asians and African-Americans, particularly in San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, and Santa Clara counties. California's Anglo population has officially dipped under 50 percent and is no longer a majority, though still the largest racial or ethnic group. In the last few years, social services agencies have been filling many direct service positions including social workers, eligibility workers, and community workers with bilingual

workers. The new census figures demonstrate a further need to accommodate increased minority population and service need.

### **Baby Boomer Exodus**

Finally, the aging of the baby boomers will affect many government agencies including San Mateo County. As part of its succession plan review, the County of San Mateo found that as of June, 1999, 72 percent of the 60 top-level managers (division directors, deputy directors, department heads) are over 50-years-old and eligible to retire. Almost 55 percent of the 250 mid-level managers (program managers) are also over 50. As one generation of management staff slowly retire, a new generation of managers is needed. As the incoming generation workforce enters into social services agencies, work benefits and organizational culture demands may be vastly different from the previous workforce.

### **PURPOSE**

Due to the dire needs of social workers and other professionals in social services agencies, the purpose of this case study was to review the recruitment and retention strategies at the Alameda County Social Services Agency and provide recommendations to the San Mateo County Human Services Agency. Along with assistance from many other departments, but primarily working with the County of Alameda Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs and the Human Resources Department, the following are recruitment and retention strategies observed and researched.

### **RECRUITMENT**

This section summarizes recruitment strategies in children and family services, across the region,

within the information services division, and in the program evaluation and research unit.

### **Children and Family Services**

Traditionally, Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) had a steady flow of graduating social workers through established partnerships with colleges: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, and San Jose State University. Social worker outreach was mostly performed by word-of-mouth. Approximately two years ago, SSA noticed a decline in the enrollment of social work students. This was not a phenomenon occurring solely in Alameda County but also in other counties throughout the Bay Area. Since the past recruitment partnerships with nearby schools were solid, there was no other recruitment plan in place for SSA.

To fulfill immediate Child Welfare Worker I, Child Welfare Worker II, Child Welfare Worker Supervisor vacancies, SSA created and deployed new recruitment strategies. Working with their county human resources department, the SSA Human Resources Department shortened the process of the civil service exam by compressing time. This is a freedom within structure concept: still within the civil services rules (the screening and hiring panels in place), but with the flexibility of compressed time.

To increase the pool of social workers, SSA began recruiting social workers from outside the area. In March, 2000, a team of screening and hiring panels were convened to visit and recruit from five university campuses where social work programs are well-known: Boston, New Orleans, St. Louis, Ann Arbor, Washington D.C. Recruitment efforts were scheduled for two full days at each school. The teams of civil service screening and hiring teams consisted of managers and front line staff from both Child

Protective Services (CPS), and SSA Human Resources Department. Utilizing the streamlined civil services exam process, the hiring panels were able to hire on the recruitment day. In addition to an increase in salary of 12.5 percent to an already competitive salary compared to other parts of the country, SSA also used the San Francisco Bay Area's culture and weather as recruitment lures. Ten hires resulted from this innovative recruitment strategy. Strong communication between SSA, its Human Resources Department, and county Human Resources staff ensured that this recruitment strategy was able to work.

SSA Children and Family Services also participates in UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare's activities in order to familiarize social work students with Alameda County. It is important for the SSA to network within the community to de-mystify the bureaucratic system by connecting a "face" to the department. Often, students will ask about job opportunities at Alameda County SSA through this informal networking.

In addition to the compressed time in which the exams were executed, additional benefits were implemented to enhance social worker recruitment including: 1) a loan forgiveness program for eligible employees. Those hired as Child Welfare Worker I, II, and Supervisors who pursued their Masters in Social Work (MSW), may receive a maximum of \$34,000 to be paid to qualified employees over a period of time. The social worker is to remain with the SSA for five years under this program; 2) social services agency will pay for re-location costs; 3) new employee referral fees for Child Welfare Workers I, II, and Supervisor positions for employees (\$500 to employees when new hires passed probation in 6 months, \$500 more after 12 months of service) during 12/1/99 through 12/31/00; and 4)

SSA helps with clinical license costs for social workers after graduate work.

### **Regional Efforts**

In a regional effort to address the need of social workers, the Bay Area Social Services Consortium's Human Resources Committee (BAHRC), a committee made up of personnel representatives from Bay Area counties, and the Bay Area Academy will work together to: a) improve public perception of social work, b) explore out-of-the-area recruitment, c) review effective and creative funding for retention, and d) develop more coordinated approach to social work curriculum. In addition to regional efforts, the BAHRC is also collaborating with the California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) on recruitment and retention strategies.

### **Information Services Systems Division**

In 2001, technology drives how we work. Social services agencies are becoming more technologically savvy. More agencies are networked to in-house and statewide computer systems along with new computer programs/systems to help streamline eligibility and distribution of financial aid. The need for Information Technicians (IT) has grown tremendously.

Alameda County SSA Human Resource Department works collaboratively with the county personnel department by creating provisional positions for county category positions (positions that can be placed anywhere within the county). These are temporary positions until the testing for a particular position is open. This process helps to compress time when hiring (the department has already recruited and screened the candidates). The SSA Information Services Systems Division (ISSD) takes advantage of this recruitment process.

Another recruitment tool, which ISSD uses, is its Information Technology Internship Program. Currently, ISSD recruits interns from two Contra Costa community colleges. They target students who are at the end of their Microsoft Certification Service Engineer (MCSE) courses. These courses may take up to two years to complete, but a student may take advantage of an accelerated curriculum completing courses in one year. When an intern is secured, they are teamed with an IT staff, given step-by-step instructions on one task, and later, entire projects, based on their abilities. Work schedules for interns are flexible depending on their school schedule; most work schedules are confined to regular work hours with a few exceptions for major projects. By contrast to private industry, ISSD offers flexibility in learning new projects. The interns are not paid and the experience is considered part of the school curriculum. This innovative internship program has been in place for approximately two years. In the next fiscal year, ISSD plans to expand the Information Technology Internship Program to two community colleges in Alameda County. ISSD is also reviewing stipends for interns in order to provide a more credible work history for interns. ISSD plans to expand the internship program in order to recruit a much needed larger pool of IT staff which will allow for existing IT staff to continue up the career ladder within the division.

### **Program Evaluation and Research Unit**

For over ten years, the Alameda County SSA Program Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) has had an Administrative Internship Program to assist the unit. PERU conducts operations and policy analysis, data and trend analysis, process and program evaluation, mapping, demographics and cluster coordination, and data management. PERU is a

perfect place for interns to exercise their research, computer application, and writing skills. Originally, outreach to internship candidates was targeted to UC Berkeley, then eventually branched out to San Francisco State University and San Jose State University. Flyers are sent to Social Sciences Departments about paid internship opportunities, for example to graduating students in Sociology, Anthropology, and Psychology. Interns report to a supervisor in PERU. After the first year of internship, the person may move to the next level as a consultant. There may be as many as four interns/consultants at one time. These positions are paid, with limited benefits. Currently, PERU is reviewing possibly changing job categories for interns. The PERU Administrative Internship Program is an innovative way of recruiting future permanent employees for SSA.

### **RETENTION**

Once employees are hired and trained in their position, organizations need to have in place skills enhancement programs and career ladder steps to retain their employees. Alameda County does this through its Human Resources consulting team, management style, and mentoring program.

### **Human Resources Consulting Team**

Skills enhancement is key to career advancement as well as job satisfaction. Alameda County SSA's Human Resources Consulting Team (HRCT) provides many training courses. Up-to-date training series are available to all job categories including Enhancing Workplace Skills, Management Skills, and Professional Development. HRCT provides easy access to courses, application process, and transcripts via the Intranet. HRCT also recently expanded their learning organization philosophy by

incorporating an on-line learning opportunity with California State University at Long Beach, Department of Social Work.

### Management Style

Managers and supervisors hold the key to staff retention. Many organizations know this, but how are managers and supervisors trained on this crucial retention skill? According to Philip J. Harkins's *What Every Manager Needs to Know* about Retention, best managers and supervisors build confidence and hope through vision and strategy; practice the art of paying attention to the person; develop, reward, recognize, talk to staff; build commitment, loyalty and trust (they also get it back); build and maintain relationships (team becomes reason they stay); and create clear communication systems (share information up-front before employees hear them).

### Mentoring Program

Alameda County SSA is committed to providing skills enhancement programs to their employees. In addition, the community supports diversity in the workforce. The Mentoring Program is a pilot program implemented in December, 2000 by the SSA's Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs (OHRDA) in collaboration with other SSA departments and diversity advocates. The program offers support and learning opportunities for all SSA employees. According to the Mentoring Program Handbook, the program is designed to, "encourage, coach, develop, and inspire leadership." The Mentoring Program matches twelve mentees to twelve mentors through an application process. The mentor role provides shadowing opportunities and resources as well as encourages promotional career

moves. The mentee signs a contract committing to the program by, among other guidelines, fulfilling the required four to eight hours a month until October 2001, and demonstrating a willingness to accept new challenges, and willingness to learn.

### CONCLUSION

Alameda SSA assessed, planned, and implemented a strategic recruitment and retention plans to continue their valuable community work. Moreover, innovative ideas were considered to replenish the workforce pool, create environments to meet new staff expectations, and to develop career opportunities and skill enhancements for their Agency to thrive.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

The following are recommendations and outcomes for San Mateo County Human Services Agency to consider:

**Outcome:** A larger pool of new employees

I recommend:

- Compressing time of performing civil service testing;
- Providing incremental bonuses for staff who recruit new employees;
- Establishing a loan forgiveness plan and relocation reimbursement for social workers;
- Implementing Administrative and Technology internship programs.

**Outcome:** More employees stay within the organization longer

I recommend:

- Expanding in-house training modules ranging from staff to executive managers to expand skills needed for advancement;
- Improving the management style of supervisors and managers to build team loyalty;
- Establishing internship programs for administration and technology departments, which will provide on the job training and allow existing staff to move into more responsible positions as lower level positions are filled with recent college graduates;
- Creating a mentoring program allowing staff to shadow managers and opportunities to career possibilities.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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