

# **WELFARE REFORM PLANNING IN SAN MATEO COUNTY: CAREFUL PLANNING USING MODERATE PROPOSALS**

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## **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Over the last several years there has been a ground swell of discontent with the American system of public assistance, culminating with passage into law of massive reform that ends the entitlement of citizens to public assistance if they meet specified standards of poverty. San Mateo County reflects the politically conservative environment that represents some of the sentiments of discontent that toppled the old system. It is a suburban county with a majority white population, relatively few poor people, relatively high per capita income, and relatively few people on public assistance. Consistent with the sort of place it is, San Mateo County has produced and enacted a welfare reform plan that reflects the mainstream public mood calling for welfare reform.

The county's actions on welfare reform also reflect foresight. San Mateo County appears to have begun planning for welfare reform months, and in some cases years, before other Bay Area counties. In securing adoption of what appears so far to be a serviceable plan, San Mateo has succeeded earlier than surrounding counties in its adaptation to the new world of welfare reform.

This case study will describe the proposal and explore possible reasons for its success including the following: (1) Adopting proposals that are "mainstream" relative to public opinion, (2) Adopting proposals that focus on administrative means of reforming welfare and do not encroach on the role of the state and Federal governments as higher sources of policy direction, and (3) Accurately foreseeing that welfare reform was coming and getting started early to produce and execute a plan.

## **SAN MATEO COUNTY'S WELFARE REFORM PLAN**

### **The Impetus**

In the introduction to its Welfare Reform Plan of January 26, 1995, San Mateo County officials cite public opinion research showing that the public, in searching for the causes of poverty, finds the cause primarily in lack of individual effort and not in surrounding circumstances.<sup>1</sup> While such public opinion about welfare is never far from the minds of welfare administrators, in framing the problems driving welfare reform San Mateo County officials implicitly acknowledge the influence of factors beyond the individual that may impede the achievement of self-sufficiency. These factors they saw embodied in the welfare system itself. To form a common view of the problems of the existing system, and, presumably, to begin building

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<sup>1</sup> A Welfare Reform Proposal From San Mateo County California, Jan. 26, 1995, p. 3.

political support for reform, in July of 1994, San Mateo County social services officials held a forum on welfare. This forum became the launching point for their reform efforts. The forum was attended by 75 "customers" (agency clients, aid recipients, etc., presumably), public and private agency personnel, and other interested parties. Consistent with the view that the system is the problem or part of the problem, forum participants found many deficiencies in the existing system. These included multiple regulatory schemes for different programs serving the same individuals, and separate determination of eligibility and aid payment levels for such forms of assistance as child care, housing, cash assistance, Food Stamps, and employment assistance.<sup>2</sup> Forum participants believed that arrangements for serving aid recipients were designed to meet the "system's" needs, rather than those of the customer.

Perhaps because county officials have relatively little influence in shaping the broad outlines of policy in an area like welfare and perhaps because it is most reasonable to work on things you can control, in conceiving the problem, San Mateo county officials do not report looking for causes beyond the individual welfare recipient and the welfare system.

### **The Plan's Response to Existing Conditions As They Were Perceived**

In introducing their plan to reform welfare, San Mateo county leaders took what may be a common approach among government officials, framing their vision of a new system using the rhetoric of the business world. The following appears in the Executive Summary of their 1995 plan:

"As American industry has had to look at capital investment to re-tool aging machinery and processes, human services must look to the same concept to 're-tool' the methods we use to deliver services. We can no longer expect outdated, manual, categorical processes to meet the needs of the vastly changing American public. It is time to look at short-term capital investment in retooling services to high risk populations as an investment in reducing longterm public costs and strengthening the future of our communities and our nation."<sup>3</sup>

Focussing on fixing problems with the welfare system, county officials identified "important principles of public service reform" that would drive their efforts. These included "...managed care, multidisciplinary case management, self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, and more efficient and effective use of resources ...."<sup>4</sup> Giving the new system still more concrete embodiment, the 1995 forum participants envisioned "...an ideal approach that would include a comprehensive case management system that could help poor families in achieving self-sufficiency through the provision of job-focussed activities and training."<sup>5</sup> Those at the gathering hoped for "... (a system) eliminating categorical 'corridors' so that one worker and one customer can together assess the customer's needs and design a plan of service delivery that addresses those needs."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

In addition to specifying general administrative attributes of an adequate system, San Mateo County officials sought to create welfare reform policies expressing the conservative social philosophy on welfare that has become the orthodox public view. A central part of their proposal is "...implementation of a child benefit payment to support poor dependent children with the expectation that adult family members will begin their work towards self-sufficiency immediately... Family caretakers, as well as absent parents, will have incentives to provide both financial and emotional support to children with public assistance payments being short-term, emergency help in crisis situations, rather than a way of life". Absent from this formulation is the old view that the purpose of the welfare system is income maintenance to keep those without jobs from falling below an income level that guaranteed ability to feed, house, and cloth one's self and one's children until work could be found. Central to the plan is the notion that the purpose of the welfare system is to put people into jobs. By this standard the old system must be judged a failure.

As to administrative arrangements, the new system put forth by San Mateo County reflects an emphases on "public-private partnerships" that is current in government social service delivery organizations. Locations where those eligible for services under the new program can go to be served include many community-based organizations in addition to the usual county offices.<sup>7</sup>

Another popular and contemporary feature of the administrative arrangements for the plan is the use of a global assessment of families when they apply for services. This approach puts the focus on the whole client, eliminates "categorical thinking" about client problems and reverses the change in welfare administration that occurred in the late 1960's when services and eligibility determination were separated. That change was an attempt to accomplish determination of eligibility at lower cost by replacing better-educated generic case-carrying workers with lower-paid, less educated workers.

The program in San Mateo County includes referral to a "Work First" program of job preparation and job search for anyone determined to be eligible for TANF or "at risk of TANF", including those working part time or in low income employment. The Work First program is a 5-day workshop that includes "decision-making, goal setting, stress management, assertiveness training, action planning, conflict resolution, interviewing skills, time management..." and several other areas of focus.<sup>8</sup>

Upon completion of the Work First program, clients are sent to a "Network Center" to put into practice skills learned in the Work First program by actually looking for work. A client who gets and then loses a job returns to Work First without going through program entry. In this way, clients can cycle through the system receiving services according to their needs.

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<sup>7</sup> Processes/Procedures for all Service Areas-SUCCESS Service Delivery Model San Mateo County Human Services Agency. February 28, 1997. pp. 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

## **Adoption of the Success Program by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors**

On Tuesday April 8, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisor adopted the Human Services Agency's welfare program with some fanfare and sighs of relief by agency leaders. This marks the end of one journey and the beginning of another-the actual implementation of the plan with all the challenges that will present.

## **Tentative Hypotheses to Explain the Legislative Success of the Human Services Agency**

Clearly, a variety of factors operated to produce the creation and adoption by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors of the Human Service can be discussed here. I will limit my comments to a discussion of a few possible causes. The factors I will mention, if operative, no doubt operated in concert with other factors to produce the result.

One factor that may have played a role is that the county's proposals can be viewed as consistent with harsh public opinions about welfare recipients and the causes of poverty. As noted earlier, San Mateo County's program rationale prominently features evidence that the public views the poor as personally deserving of blame for their plight. It also includes statements to the effect that the existing welfare system is an indefensible failure.<sup>9</sup> Consistent with public views of the poor, the steps through which poor people must pass to get aid under the new plan do not seem calculated to make them feel good about themselves. While a "hardedged" welfare system is nothing new, through programs like that adopted in San Mateo County, the broader society is now giving welfare applicants and recipients an even tougher message about their past behavior and expectations for future behavior. There appears to be no clash between the proposals put forward by the San Mateo County Human Services Agency and public views of the poor and the causes of poverty. This is not the case in every California county. Some counties have put forth proposals whose premises seem less harsh in their judgements about the poor. Some of these proposals have faired less well in the legislative process.

A second possible explanation for the early legislative adoption of the SUCCESS program is that San Mateo adopted proposals that focus on administra

tive aspects of reforming welfare (e.g. achievement of cost savings, stream-lining operations, "one-stop" [or minimum stop] shopping, integrated service delivery). There appears to be no attempt to carve out a role for the county that might compete with the state role in breaking new ground on welfare policy, at least not in ways that clash with general public sentiment on the issue.

The third possible explanation for San Mateo County's legislative success may be their accurate perception that welfare reform would become a reality coupled with their early and brisk planning for general change. Their planning documents describe discussions of administrative reforms and participation in pilot programs dating back to 1992. These earlier activities became building blocks for their welfare reform proposal the was recently adopted. An example is their

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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. A Welfare Reform Proposal from San Mateo Conuty California. p. 3.

participation in the WORK PAYS demonstration project that emphasized obtaining employment even at minimum wage, as a strategy that could lead to self-sufficiency.<sup>10</sup>

So, in summary, three factors seem to have played some role in San Mateo County's early conceptualization and legislative passage of viable welfare reform proposals. These are (1) Adopting proposals that are "mainstream" relative to public opinion, (2) Adopting proposals that focus on administrative means of reforming welfare and do not encroach on the role of the state and Federal governments as higher sources of policy direction, and (3) Accurately foreseeing that welfare reform was coming and getting started early to produce and execute a plan.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Addendum C.