

# **A GREAT WIND IS BLOWING: WELFARE REFORM PLANNING IN SONOMA COUNTY**

James Ramoni\*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*"A great wind is blowing and that gives you either imagination or a headache."*

How prophetic that a phrase attributed to Catherine the Great, referring to the changing times of the latter 18th century, aptly describes both the opportunities and emotions one can experience in response to the late 20th century overhaul of our nation's welfare system. Welfare reform. Self sufficiency. TANS CaITAP These were words, acronyms, and phrases that I initially knew little of but keenly recognized became part of my daily lexicon in the early days of my Sonoma County internship.

Why study welfare reform? For me, I recognized early on as a student in the Executive Development Program that if I hoped to advance my career I needed a broader understanding of my home Agency. As a child welfare social worker and supervisor, I was cognizant of the concept of welfare reform in theory but believed it should only be the concern of the Income Maintenance Department. Shortsighted? Of course. So when asked my area of interest to study during the three week internship I indicated "welfare reform" hoping my choice would be experiential, meaningful, and enjoyable. Pleasantly, it was all of these.

Sonoma County was arranged by my director Yolanda Rinaldo who had recently relocated to Santa Clara County after a six year directorship in Sonoma. "Go and interact with the Welfare Reform Planning team and bring back that kind of teamwork," she said. Intrigued, I approached welfare reform planning in the truest spirit of an intern, namely, observe, assimilate, and above all ask questions. What a refreshing change from the daily bureaucracy of public service, and what an opportunity to interact in a whole new milieu. The stage was set.

## **BACKGROUND**

Sonoma County, a mid-size county with a total Population of 422,100 of which 38,944 (9.2%) of its residents receive some form of public assistance, is situated in an area of Northern California known for its bucolic scenery, fine wines, and relaxed pace. It is also a county that has made significant progress in its welfare reform efforts in a reasonably short period of time. In November 1996 the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, in response to the Federal Welfare Reform Act, approved the formation of a Welfare Reform Planning Division (WRPD) to carry out the following tasks:

- Analyze the federal welfare reform bill to determine potential impacts on Sonoma County;
- Develop recommended positions on optional provisions and work through the county's lobbyist and professional associations to influence formulation of a state welfare reform plan which

\*James Ramoni is a Social Work Supervisor in the Department of Family & Childrens Services of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

addresses local needs and avoids cost shifts to Sonoma County;

- Develop a proposed implementation plan, including service delivery strategies consistent with state and federal funding and the following goals:
  1. Reflect the needs of Sonoma County residents by insuring the participation of all "stakeholders" in its development;
  2. Provide employment and child care services coordinated with economic assistance;
  3. Insure that parental support obligations are met;
  4. Provide a safety net for individuals and families who despite their best efforts are unable to enter the mainstream of society, while not shifting costs to local government;
  5. Provide the assistance needed to lift families and individuals out of poverty and into self sufficiency; and,
  6. Reinvest all block grant money saved back into services to support the principles of lifting families out of poverty.

The staffing of the WRPD initially consisted of four staff members: the Director of the Economic Assistance Division, Linda Kalenik, and three Program/Planner Analysts each of whom possessed significant knowledge/experience in GAIN (Karen Fies), Medi-Cal and General Assistance (Judy MacMaster), and AFDC (Greg Varley).

Initially I was skeptical of four individuals tackling the complex behemoth known as HR 3734. What little I had understood of welfare reform in my home county of Santa Clara seemed overwhelming. Nearly 20 work groups were assembled the summer of 1996 to strategize our county's response to the federal legislation. Executive and mid-managers were assuming additional responsibilities within all departments of the Agency to forecast what the future would look like. Staff were assembled with regularity to dialogue about the potential impact soon to be upon us. How then, I asked, could four people in Sonoma County handle it all?

### **INITIAL EFFORTS**

From the beginning it was clear that the planning team held hard and fast to the belief that community input into welfare reform would be a major factor to its ultimate success. One of the first steps taken to hear the community's collective voice was the scheduling of three separate community forums convened in January, 1997. Held in the cities of Petaluma, Santa Rosa and Guerneville. each forum was scheduled for a three hour period-the first 90 minutes were devoted to presentations made by Human Service Department staff as well as personnel from the Sonoma County Department of Health Services and the Social Security Administration. Additionally, a representative from the California Department of Social Services was present at each forum. Following these presentations the community was afforded the remaining time for both comment

and questions. A total of 182 people ranging from members of the public to stakeholders in the child care, health care, education, and communitybased organization (CBO) communities attended the forums. Moreover, the planning team routinely responded to community requests for information and spoke to church groups, CBO's, and County Departments and Commissions. Clearly, welfare reform was steadily gaining momentum and the team believed that information about its impact, both potential and obvious, would empower and mobilize the community to prepare as necessary for the sweeping changes about to take effect.

Concurrent with the three community forums, the WRPD and the Employment and Training Division conceived an interesting random sample study to ascertain information to the following question: "If the federal government's TANF work requirements for public assistance were implemented *today*, how well would Sonoma County recipients fare?"

On a brisk Saturday in January a group of 12 staff assembled to review 525 cases (9.1% of the thetotal AFDC population) using November 1996 as the chosen review month. The hand-collected data was first sorted into three main categories:

<i>Category:</i>	<i>Description:</i>
Earnings	Hours of paid work
In School	Hours in education or vocational training (may/may not be involved in GAIN or NET
Work Activities	Hours spent in any kind of job search, work experience or other GAIN activity

These categories were then sorted into three time frames:

0-19 hours per week

20-29 hours per week

30 or more hours per week

The findings were noteworthy.

Breaking the sampled population into single- and two-parent households, the study revealed that in single parent households 9.4% of the included, sampled individuals met the hours of work activities required per week to meet TANF requirements. For two-parent families, 8.6% of the individuals surveyed met the requirements. Based on these results, the WRPD recognized the need to focus their efforts on improving both the *work participation rates and job placements* in Sonoma County.

## **GAINING MOMENTUM**

My mentor Linda Kalenik and I clustered the first two weeks of my internship in mid-February and my last week during the final days of March. We believed this would give some time to allow program planning and policy surrounding welfare reform to develop thereby revealing progress. And progress was evident.

Upon my return Linda had returned from her interim WRPD duties to her full time assignment as Division Director of Economic Assistance and the newly hired Welfare Reform Planning Division Director was in place. The new director, Jerry Dunn, hailed from Orange County and had previously held the position of Deputy Director of Employment Services for that county's Social Services Agency. Additionally, Jerry had extensive management experience in **GAIN**, **JTPA**, and employment and training service delivery as well as serving on several Southern California Private Industry Council (PIC) boards. Jerry's vast knowledge base in areas critical to welfare reform planning success boded well for Sonoma County's strides towards implementation. Moreover, his experience nicely complemented the direction the county had focused its planning: work participation and job placements. Also during my final week a report to the Board of Supervisors was being prepared to apprise them of the Department's welfare reform planning activities. This summary provided detailed information about all activities/actions implemented to date as well as the request for the Board to formally support the CSAC/CWDA legislative proposal on welfare reform for California.

Early in my internship I came across a memo which outlined the Human Services Department's management goals for FY 96-97. The first goal was to develop a plan for welfare reform implementation for Sonoma County and then outlined the steps listed previously in this case study. Given my brief exposure to this resourceful, skilled, and compassionate team, it's my impression that Sonoma County is well on it's way to making their original goals reality.

## **CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Reflecting on the knowledge gained during the past three months, my understanding of welfare reform is now more anxiety provoking then it was when I could claim "naivet6". The ramifications for Santa Clara County with the prospect of continued grant reductions, soaring rental rates, and too few jobs that afford a "livable" wage bode poorly for my home community without consideration of several transferable approaches executed in Sonoma County.

Community education and awareness is an overriding facet of welfare reform planning that must be continued. Sonoma County's community forums and subsequent "presentation on request" service demonstrate the Department's commitment to both informing and listening to the public. Santa Clara County has offered similar events and needs to continue these informational meetings but on a smaller scale. District offices, including the Assistance Application Center, should host weekly informational forums so recipients can obtain information in person. Our county's four Family Resource Centers (Nuestra Casa, Ujiram, Asian Pacific, and Gilroy) also afford an opportunity to inform large numbers of people of the coming changes in a comfortable, informal environment that again reflects a personal touch.

Job training and job retention skills, seen as a major focus in Sonoma County, should also be a major piece of our Agency's planning. To date, our County's Employment Support Initiative is a good start. I would recommend its success will be due to several key players taking active roles rather than implementation being governed "by committee".

One revealing aspect of interning in a smaller county was the realization that "bigger is better" is a fallacy. Therefore, to minimize problems due to too many players, one must give authority to

several knowledgeable, experienced staff, allow them to develop as a team, and encourage them to maintain a focus as to why they're doing what they've been chartered to do. Such factors, once in place, can minimize staff from getting bogged down by the bureaucracy that surrounds them and permit them to carry out the complex tasks they've been assigned to implement.

Finally, the most important element that needs to be given our full attention is the human and emotional toll the forthcoming changes will have on our neighbors, friends, and loved ones. Overhauling our nation's welfare system in retrospect seemed inevitable; however, implementation of new legislation without compassion and empathy will readily spell disaster. Sonoma County's WRPD team has compassion as do several key staff I am familiar with among Santa Clara County's team. This is tantamount for the newly developing welfare/public assistance delivery system through the new century and beyond, as all of us-supervisor, manager and line staff in all departments within an agency redefine welfare and the role of the human service professional working within a county's social services agency.