

SPECIAL DELIVERY: THE NEED FOR A SPECIAL PROJECTS MANAGER

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INTRODUCTION

This case study is the culmination of a 15 day internship with Child Welfare Services Bureau of Contra Costa County Department of Social Services. My mentor was Steve Peavler, Social Service Division Manager of Special Projects. I accompanied Mr. Peavler during several community based organization meetings and observed several community based organization sites which were special projects that Mr. Peavler developed. I also met with division managers of the Child Welfare Bureau of Contra Costa County Department of Social Services and with their contracting staff. My focus during the internship was to learn about the duties of the Special Projects Manager and how San Francisco Department of Human Services might benefit from having a similar position within its' department.

The strength of any community lies with the condition of its weakest member. When one falters, it is the community's responsibility to provide a safety net.

Counties provide a multitude of social services statewide. These services began as ideas and were implemented after they were proven to be effective. People have come to depend on county services whether it is financial assistance, emergency services, housing, etc. However, before county social programs are implemented they start out as special projects.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Special projects within a social service department are new projects that are not part of the basic services provided by the county. These projects are supplemental and temporary by nature and are often limited by evaluation periods or budgetary constraints. Special projects may become part of the basic services provided by the county. They are often renewed to give counties sufficient time to properly evaluate their effectiveness before incorporating them into the general services curriculum.

PROPOSAL, MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION

Generally, special projects have three phases; proposal, management and evaluation. The proposal phase incorporates all facets of the new project starting from conception to grant funding. The management phase entails monitoring and troubleshooting projects while they are in progress. The evaluation phase determines how effective the project has been and whether it deserves to be continued.

This case study will show the problems San Francisco Department of Human Services faces in implementing special projects and how the Contra Costa County Department of Social Services effectively avoids those same problems by having a full time special projects manager.

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SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICE

Currently, San Francisco Department of Human Services does not have a full time manager over Special Projects. The Deputy Director takes on the responsibility for developing special projects and appoints managers who are responsible for developing and overseeing their own special projects as well. These managers are also responsible for managing their own division and sections within the department. Currently, I am responsible for several special projects as well as managing a section at the San Francisco Department of Human Services.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICE

Steve Peavler is the Special Projects Manager for Contra Cost County Department of Social Services. Mr. Peavler initiates, manages and evaluates special projects that serve the community. He does not have a staff but acts as the central hub for all issues concerning the implementation of new projects within the department.

PROPOSAL - NURTURING GOOD IDEAS

Investigating the needs of the community is an essential part of developing projects that will help the community. This includes talking with clients, doing needs assessment surveys, data gathering, networking with community based organizations and getting feedback from line staff are some of the vehicles for starting special projects that will address the community's needs. This requires a lot of time and leg work.

When you combine managing day to day operations with special projects, operational issues, such as

case driven crisis, community complaints or personnel issues take priority. These issues need immediate attention and quickly become a constant distraction away from the special projects. Consequently, meetings get postponed and deadlines can be missed because managers are continuously addressing more urgent operational issues. Good ideas need nurturing in order to be implemented. Part of that nurturing process is time and attention without which these projects would be doomed for failure.

Contra Costa's special projects are contracted out to community based organizations . The Special Projects Manager coordinates the request of proposal (RFP) for the various projects. He is responsible for orchestrating the meetings for all parties that will be involved in the proposed project. He works with the community based organizations on what services they will provide. He is responsible for formally presenting proposals to the essential parties, ie. Board of Supervisors, foundations and the community in general. The Special Projects Manager also acts as a liaison between the county and the State which authorized the implementation of programs.

Another component that the Special Projects Manager is responsible is for researching funding sources for these special projects. Often, State financial support does not completely fund a project and the difference must be made up from private funding sources. The Special Projects Manager researches those funding sources, writes proposals and makes presentations to make up the gap to properly fund the special project.

This way the project proposals are given adequate support because the Special Projects Manager is not side tracked with operational issues and can

devote his full attention to administering special projects.

MANAGING SPECIAL PROJECTS

Even after projects are funded there are still administrative problems to overcome. The Deputy Director of San Francisco's Department of Human Services says that there needs to be someone who exclusively handles problems with special projects as they arise. Managing special projects poses the "key person problem." The key person problem is when one person knows all the intricacies of a project, but is also responsible for managing other sections within the department. When a problem arises it is the key person that must respond despite whatever other tasks they might be doing at the time. Since, special projects have less priority than operational tasks they are often addressed at a later time. Depending on the nature of the problem regarding the special project, this can greatly hinder its' service delivery.

On the other hand, Contra Costa County Special Projects Manager is The Key Person in charge of all projects. He handles questions and problems that may arise from community based organizations. He provides them with the needed resources so they can effectively provide their contracted services. This is done by keeping communication lines open. Without the distractions of operational issues he is free to concentrate on ensuring that the contracted services are delivered to the clients.

EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS

Evaluating projects is essential to determine if the project should be continued because it is effectively serving the needs of the community. Each project has different guidelines for evaluation. Part of the

Special Projects Manager responsibility is not only to coordinate the schedules of those involved in a projects evaluation but also provide guidance to ensure that the project is evaluated by the intended goals as set forth by the department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for special projects to be effective they require a huge time commitment. If a special project is going to succeed it must have the necessary staffing support. Time constraints, scheduling conflicts and operational distractions will persist if the manager of a special project must also be responsible for managing a section with the department of social services. Since those distractions will remain a constant, the only way to provide better service is to delegate someone to exclusively handle all issues relating to special projects.

HOW THE COUNTY BENEFITS

Complete array of county services

The only way a county can provide comprehensive services to the unique members of the it's community is by providing special projects. Many times core social programs do not address the needs of specific groups. Having special projects is a way for counties to serve those individuals.

Sufficient Time Allocation

A Special Projects Manager will be able to give sufficient time to nurture the special projects. Operational conflicts that once placed special projects in the shadows will no longer be a threat to the special projects survival.

Focus on results

Having sufficient time to manage special projects will allow the Special Projects Manager to properly

develop, coordinate, monitor and evaluate special projects. Projects that get the staff's full attention are more likely to be managed better and have creative solutions to problems facing the community.

Accountability

Someone within the department will be accountable for the management result of the special projects under his/her management. Managing special projects by delegation or committee has proven to be inefficient. There are too many different problems that arise from the special projects alone. Managers who are also responsible for managing a section within the social services department ensures special projects will never have priority over operational issues when there is a conflict.

Follow Through

A Special Projects Manager will ensure that county services promised will be delivered. Counties have a track record of implementing projects then walking away from them within a short time. This can be devastating to individuals who are receiving the services the county intended. Counties have a responsibility to follow through with services and not let them disintegrate under the heavier weight of operational crisis.

Positive Public Relations

As a firm believer of integrated and collaborative services that support and protect families, individuals and children it is important that people be able to depend on county social services in their time of need. When counties follow through with services positive public relations are created. People become more confident in the social service department in particular and the municipal government in general.

REQUIRED SKILLS

A Special Projects Manager must have good people skills. Solid communication skills, both written and oral, is a must. A Special Projects Manager must be extremely organized, open minded and flexible. Negotiating will be an integral part of the job and must be done with aplomb. The candidate must be a team player with an ability to work collectively. Unlike other managers within the department the Special Projects Manager must be able to identify and work with key people within the community. It is these people with their unique position in the community that will provide an abundance of insights and ideas. The Special Projects Manager should have all of these skills to effectively manage a special projects program.

SUPPORT

Within the Special Projects Manager's budget there should be funds allocated for secretarial services, consultants, grant writers, statisticians and evaluators. These support staff will work with the Special Projects Manager on a part-time or contract basis.

Working with Contra Costa County was an extremely rewarding experience. Observing how Steve Peavler worked collaboratively with community based organizations was particularly enlightening. It was very refreshing to see how much he enjoyed his work.