

# Contra Costa County's Intake Integration Business Change

## *Lessons Learned*

HUONG TRAN

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, Californians experienced severe job losses due to the financial institutions crisis and “housing bubble” impacts. This year alone, California’s unemployment rate reached a 2-digit number, an increase of 4.6 percent from its November 2008 rate. Job losses result in higher demands for social services. Counties struggle with limited resources and look proactively for ways to deliver services with less cost. With that vision in mind, I chose to study Contra Costa County’s Intake Integration Business Change project to determine which Phase I “Quick Wins” recommendations could be of benefit to Alameda County Social Services.

Implications for Alameda County from Contra Costa County “Quick Wins” project include:

- Implement a benefits self-screen tool to increase accessibility to programs by allowing customers to self-screen via the county website prior to applying.
- Enhance programs accessibility by installing a kiosk or computer in the lobby. Incorporate QR7’s and documents submission reading. The fiscal costs are estimated per kiosk.
- Upgrade “multi-program worker” concept by re-introducing group intake process with Eligibility Technicians III in lieu of Eligibility Technicians II. There are no fiscal costs; labor buy-in is needed.
- Mirror Contra Costa East County’s Medi-Cal Mail-In-Unit workload balancing process by using Alameda County real-time SSIRS data to identify available vacant applications slots and balance the workload across all divisions.

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### Introduction

Over the decades, human service program administrators have expressed an interest in developing service delivery systems that meet the needs of the populations social services programs were designed to serve. With the implementation of the 1996 Welfare-to-Work program, counties are compelled to redesign and streamline client processes. The "Intake Integration Human Services" concept was explored as part of such efforts. This case study sought to learn major aspects of Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services' current intake process. The goal is to see which Contra Costa County "Quick Wins" could be of benefit to the Alameda County intake business process, and to make recommendations for enhancing program access for our customers.

### Background

In Contra Costa County, two main factors have contributed to the county budget problems: the excessive guaranteed health and retirement benefits for staff led to predictable high costs, and the unexpected collapse of the "housing bubble" reduced the county revenue collected on property assessment taxes by half. Job loss, particularly in new housing construction, has increased the need for various social services. Contra Costa County, as well as other California counties, did not get a lot of financial support from the California State Government. The state faces a structural deficit of \$26.6 billion for Fiscal Year 2011–2012. In response to the increasing needs of low-income families, federal and state regulations mandate all counties to expand their outreach services to provide more program access. This requirement resulted in a new statewide web-based application known as Benefits CalWIN. To prepare

for Benefits CalWIN, Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHS) embarked on a journey in July 2009 to revisit its Intake internal structures and business process.

### Project Planning

Under the leadership of Ms. Wendy Therrian, Director of Workforce Services Department, Division Managers, Ms. Roxane Foster and Mr. Chris Gallagher, are charged with taking the lead in the Intake Integration Business Change project. The Contra Costa County EHS Department Intake Integration Business Change project consists of two main phases:

**Phase I** A review of current internal structures, data trends, information services resources and the formation of workgroups and sub-committees to analyze data outcomes and identify potential challenges or obstacles to service delivery. During Phase I in early 2010, committees and sub-workgroups took form. Key stakeholders provided insights into public assistance programs, data collection, and technology resources that are invaluable to the project. Objectives included the development and categorization of recommendations, which resulted in a "Quick Wins" list.

**Phase II** Implementation of a 9-month pilot at various district offices using Phase I "Quick Wins" recommendations.

### Contra Costa County EHS Workforce Services Department Regional Organization Map

There are a total of six district offices located across the east, central and west counties where applicants stop by to apply for public assistance. Individuals can also apply via internet, phone or mail.

- East County has two district offices (Antioch, Brentwood)
- Central County has one district office (Pleasant Hill)
- West County has three district offices (2 in Richmond, 1 in Hercules)

## Current EHS Internal Intake Structure and Business Process

### BENEFITS SELF-SCREEN TOOL

Contra Costa County EHS launched its web-based Benefits Self-Screen tool in July 2009. The tool, hosted by GoDaddy.com, allows an applicant to see if they potentially qualify for assistance before applying. In January 2010, the tool was enhanced to allow forms to be filled out and printed. This new feature helps intake workers because the applications are easier to read. The Benefits Self-Screen tool allows applicants to print out forms prior to coming to the office and reduces the amount of time an applicant spends in an office.

### MEDI-CAL MAIL-IN-UNIT

Applicants to the Medi-Cal program do not need an appointment. The majority of the applications for Medi-Cal come to the county via phone or mail: applicants can request Medi-Cal by simply calling a toll-free number (1-800-709-8348) and a packet will be mailed out to customers at their address. All Medi-Cal applications are received by the Medi-Cal Mail-In-Unit (MMIU) located in Antioch. The MMIU uses a Mail-In Assignment Log to balance the applications assigned to Eligibility Workers (EW) or Medi-Cal Program Assistants (MPA) in each district office. MPA's have no cap on their caseloads. According to the number of vacations taken, foreseen time off, and bilingual positions, applications are assigned based on the previous two-week period cycle. Unit supervisors in each district office report their staff's data (attendance, scheduled time off and total applications taken) via a Mail-In Assignment Log posted on the public drive known as P:drive. The Mail-In Assignment Log has built-in formulas to calculate the highest number of applications that a single MPA

**TABLE 1**  
**Workload Balancing Based on "The Peak" Number**

|  |   |                                       |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Worker A</b>  | 56 applications                             | Highest # of applications=<br>Peak 56 |
| <b>Worker B</b><br>(no scheduled time off, monolingual)  | 43 applications                             | 56-43=<br>13 assigned from MMIU       |
| <b>Worker C</b><br>(bilingual)<br>10% caseload reduction | 26 applications over the previous two weeks | [56×90%]-26=<br>24 assigned from MMIU |

took over the previous two weeks. This highest number of applications taken is called "The Peak". The MMIU will use "the Peak" to calculate the difference of applications that other MPA's should take for a period of two weeks. (See Table 1.)

### NON-ASSISTANCE CALFRESH AND GENERAL ASSISTANCE GROUP INTAKES

The district offices located in East County offer group intakes for General Assistance and Non-Assistance CalFresh (NACF). The NACF group intake appointments are scheduled on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings at 9:00. There is also a Tuesday group intake for Spanish-speaking and bilingual-speaking customers. When customers apply for CalFresh, they are screened for expedited services. If the customers qualify for expedited services, they are scheduled for the next day's group intake. Applications are registered and cleared prior to the group session day. The supervisor, assisted by a clerical worker, checks clients in, hands out a small paper that lists a phone number for ESFS applicants to call the following day to follow-up on the expedited services status and for an Electronic Benefits Transfer card pick-up if emergency benefits are issued. The eligibility worker starts the orientation with rights and responsibilities and the quarterly reporting process, and goes over all sections of the application forms step-by-step. The supervisor and two MPAs assist

with paperwork and questions during the group session. The group intake process takes approximately one and a half hours. The supervisor reviews and assigns expedited services to eligibility workers for processing. All no-show applicants are sent Notice of Missed Interview letters. All other regular applications are forwarded to eligibility workers across district offices via inter-office mail. Interviews are then conducted at these offices. The supervisor enters daily assignment data for the period of two weeks and posts it on the P: drive, available for viewing by all other supervisors and by the MMIU located in Antioch. The data helps the MMIU determine “the peak.” A total of up to 30 applicants are scheduled for each group intake session. East County has next day appointments.

#### **BENEFITS CALWIN UNIT**

The unit consists of one clerical supervisor and three clerks. The unit is located in Pleasant Hill in Central County. The clerks retrieve applications from the website, conduct clearances, and assign applications across district offices. When it is determined that a customer is eligible for expedited services, the clerk will fax the application to an office and forward the packet via inter-office mail. The applications are tracked on a document for statistics and for workload balancing purposes.

#### **CALWORKS INTAKE**

There is no group intake for CalWORKS applicants. The CalWORKS district offices located in Central and East County have units of workers who conduct individual interviews. Customers are provided with a phone number to call and set up an appointment. A CalWORKS unit can consist of both intake and field (on-going maintenance) workers.

#### **Current Process Challenges**

- Different programs are assigned to different workers, and it is cumbersome for applicants to remember whom to call to report changes.
- Information is not shared between workers of different programs who may have the same customer.
- There is some delay in scheduling appointments because of backlogs and staff shortages.
- Staff are not getting enough training on multiple programs; therefore, they are not prepared to tackle more complex case issues.
- Staff do not feel safe when dealing with irate customers.

#### **Phase I “Quick Wins” Recommendations**

- Embrace the concept of a “Multi Program Worker” (MPW) versus a “Single Program Worker” for federal programs such as CalWORKS, Medi-Cal and CalFresh.
- Temporarily keep “Single Program Workers” for General Assistance program, but move toward an MPW later also, who will process GA, Medi-Cal and/or CalFresh.
- Expand on-line training (Power Point, DVD) of all programs to EW to increase flexibility and program knowledge, allowing eligibility workers to tackle more complex case issues.
- Provide same day interviews to meet timeframe processing and reduce backlogs.
- Increase accessibility to programs by enabling customers to self-screen via kiosk or a computer in the lobby (model after Stanislaus County).
- Improve case management: staff should share information and communicate regularly so they can better understand and address the clients’ needs.
- Implement a 24-hour cooling period (model after San Francisco County). This allows staff to feel they are working in a safe and protected environment.

#### **Lessons Learned/Recommendations**

**Self-Screen Tool** I would recommend that Alameda County have a similar self-screen tool on its website. The tool requires low-cost maintenance. It helps customers select the potential assistance programs they may be eligible for, thereby expanding program access. I also recommend getting kiosks in the lobby for customers to self-screen for potential programs. Installing kiosks would involve costs.

**Multi-Program Worker Concept** Alameda County uses the Multi-Program Worker model since we attach companion programs to caseloads of eligibility technician (ET) workers in the main program a customer applies to. However, unlike the Contra Costa County EW who has no cap caseload, our ET2 have a caseload cap that is defined by each main program.

**Group Intake Process** I would recommend exploring this model to maximize workers' productivity. In the past when Workforce and Economic departments were merged into one, Alameda County did have a similar group orientation that was conducted by employment counselors for new applicants. This process was replaced by individual interactive interviews when both departments became separate. Besides the Medi-Cal Division that houses most of the Medi-Cal intake and Outreach applications, Alameda County Social Services Agency has three main Self-Sufficiency Centers (North, East and South County) where intake workers conduct interactive interviews in separate sessions. In East and South County offices, there are three sessions for applicants to have interviews with the EW. The first session starts at 9:00 am, the second at 1:30 pm and the last one at 3:30 pm. Due to "Quiet Time", the worker conducts two sessions per day. In an average of 3 hours spent in the lobby, a worker conducts 6 interviews per day. Let's look at Unit X with 8 workers. Unit X handles a total of 48 interviews/applications per day or 24 applications per morning or afternoon session. During the 3 hours spent in the waiting room, workers in Unit X are not able to handle other tasks such as returning phone calls, seeing drop-ins or rescheduled clients, or conducting phone interviews. Workers have a window of one hour (from 11:00 am–12:00 pm) to do these tasks, plus use of the Quiet Time window (2 hours) for paperwork and processing applications in CalWIN. Now, imagine having a group intake session scheduled for Unit X. During the one and a half hour session, less than four workers are needed to conduct the morning group session. The remaining workers in the unit then process the previous day's expedited services requests or backlog. The workers who had not con-

ducted the morning session take turns for the afternoon session, while the remaining workers in the unit process the morning's daily emergency requests. In one day for the same amount of time (3 hours), we could register a total of 60 applications through two sessions, compared with a total of 48 applications in Unit X. The 3:30 pm–5:00 pm time window that a worker normally spends in the waiting room to conduct interviews can now be left free for processing emergency interviews. The same concept applies to two units as buddy teams. On days that the amount of daily requests received does not warrant a second group session, workers would have a "cooling off" period—one of Contra Costa "Quick Wins" recommendations—to do paperwork and process regular applications. With counties moving toward fewer face-to-face interviews and more phone interviews, we could expand this concept into a group phone interview session once every two weeks. For this change to be effective, it is essential that the intake function be assumed by ET3 instead of ET2. ET3 security access permits the worker to process backlogs in the unit and across division offices. Labor negotiation is needed. Concurrently, district (on-going) cases will be assumed by ET2's and Medi-Cal cases will be banked at our Medi-Cal Division office, using the Adult and Aging Qualified Medicare Beneficiary or Long-Term Care unit models.

#### *Advantages of a Group Intake Session*

- Time is saved effectively. Capacity is achieved. Each session accommodates up to 30 applicants rather than having 24 applicants seen by workers within one and a half hours worth of time.
- Information flow is steady. I would suggest use of a Power Point presentation that explains client rights and responsibilities and the quarterly reporting process. This presentation would help all applicants to hear the same information.
- Teamwork is enhanced. Productivity is maximized. Workers take turns conducting group sessions, and have the so-called "cooling off" period for working on expedited services requests. There is less risk of stress.

### *Disadvantages of a Group Intake Session*

- It may be inconvenient for a client who does not want to ask personal questions in a group setting.
- It may require rooms for sessions to take place; however, this issue could be resolved by alternating group sessions in scheduling (e.g., one day for CalWORKS, the following day for CalFresh — use the Contra Costa County “cooling off day” concept).

### **Conclusions**

With on going challenges created by budget cuts, counties are obliged to deliver better customer service at a lower cost. Contra Costa County “Quick Wins” are the results of such a quest for cost-effective human service delivery services. Recommendations include: making changes to the way we intake welfare clients by using productive group intake appointments; implementing a self-screen tool and kiosks to allow clients to self-screen their potential eligibility; and, using real-time Social Services Integrated Report System data to assign mail-in applications across offices to fill in vacant slots and help Alameda County maximize its efficiency with more time left for workers to process applications or see clients.

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