

Creating an Agency Workforce Development System that Links Pre-Service and In-Service Learning: A Teaching/Learning Case

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Introduction

Students greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn from an experienced agency-based practitioner. Agencies in turn hope to hire talented students as full-time employees after completing their field placements. However, a gap exists within public human service agencies wherein agencies do not have a system in place for promoting life-long learning that builds upon linking pre-service training with in-service training. This teaching case describes the development of the Family & Children's Services (FCS) Workforce Development System launched in 2015-16 in the San Francisco Human Service Agency (SF-HSA). It features the innovative practices associated with building a workforce development system in order to improve child welfare workforce retention and development as well as foster the development of a learning organization.¹

CONTEXT

The FCS Division of SF-HSA provides the full range of child protection activities, including the child abuse hotline, emergency response assessments and investigations, family reunification and family maintenance services, and adoption and foster care. Prior to development of the Workforce Development System, staff in these units provided learning opportunities each year for MSW students from local universities. The stipend-supported MSW interns are enrolled in specialized child welfare preparation MSW programs at local schools of social work and complete their second-year fieldwork internship with a county child

welfare agency during the academic year from September through May. California Social Work Education Center's (CalSWEC) Title IV-E Stipend Program, a federally funded program is intended to provide professional education and financial support to undergraduate and graduate social work students who wish to pursue a career in the field of public child welfare.² Participating students receive a stipend while in school and in exchange they agree to work as a child welfare social worker at a public child welfare agency for 2 years after graduation. Despite this effort to engage students in future careers in child welfare, research evidence underscores turnover as one of the biggest challenges facing child welfare social workers largely related to workload and supervision. Other issues include successful recruiting of qualified candidates, developing staff's skills in critical areas related to child welfare practice, and facilitating a healthy organizational environment that supports quality practice. To address these issues, the FCS developed a multi-level competency-based Workforce Development System through data-informed practices, training and coaching.

The FCS Workforce Development System was designed to address the linkage between pre-service and in-service for a continuum of learning by drawing upon the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model (CPM) and Safety Organized Practice (SOP). The CPM is a multi-level model that guides child welfare practice, service delivery,

2. <https://calswec.berkeley.edu/programs-and-services/title-iv-e-stipend-program>

1. Information is presented here by a researcher, who conducted eight interviews across different levels of management—the program director and workforce development manager (upper management), the training coordinator and internal practice coach (middle management) and an FCS team supervisor and front-line child welfare social workers (lower management). Besides interviews, the researcher also collected case-relevant material from the agency. The case was developed with the support of the Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services at the University of California, Berkeley. The author wishes to acknowledge the guidance of Michael J. Austin, Mack Professor and Director of the Mack Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

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and decision-making in order to help professionals become more effective in their roles.³ SOP is a set of strategies and tools that supports the CPM. The CPM and SOP both emphasize the importance of teamwork in child welfare and utilize strategies and techniques that align with the belief that a child and their family are the central focus, and that the partnership exists in an effort to find solutions that ensure safety, permanency, and well-being for children.⁴ The CPM and SOP are embedded in the Workforce Development System in order to assist with learning about practice during pre-service preparation. The goal is to support career development and enhance professional commitment of workers and further enable agency retention efforts. Orienting students to county policies and procedures takes time when combined with the transfer of social work knowledge and skills from the classroom into agency practice. Given that FCS was a part of a California effort to develop and implement the CPM, the FCS workforce development team began to explore the role of various methods of training and workforce development, including coaching and leadership development, for implementing CPM and SOP. Therefore, supervision and leadership play a critical role in creating a hospitable environment for building a competent, confident and stable workforce in child welfare.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED PLANNING

To implement this learning framework, the FCS Workforce Development Team utilized the findings from the 2014 Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) developed by the National Child Welfare Workforce Initiative. This assessment identified critical workforce strengths and challenges that provided the foundation for the design of integrated interventions needed to support organizational development in the form of targeted workforce developments. The COHA used a mixed-methods design that included an online survey administered to staff, as well as focus groups and interviews with agency directors, managers, supervisors, and workers across three FCS offices at SFHSA. Data from the COHA were used to advance and integrate the multiple, complementary change initiatives with the end goal that FCS would more effectively meet its practice objectives and achieve better outcomes for families. A 2018 COHA follow-up study assessed the changes

3. The California Child Welfare Core Practice Model is a project of the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) of California(link is external) with support from the California Department of Social Services(link is external), the Child and Family Policy Institute of California(link is external), CalSWEC, and the Regional Training Academies.

4. <https://theacademy.sdsu.edu/programs/cwds/sop/>

TABLE 1
FCS Evidence-informed Planning and Design

Baseline COHA 2014
Identify critical workforce strengths and challenges to create a learning organization and eliminate barriers while assisting families
Build structures based on an implementation science framework to streamline the development of a compliance oriented, accountable strengths-based learning organization
Develop a logic model connecting pre-service preparation to in-service training
Devise a coaching program for coaches to mentor FCS team supervisors since supervisors play a critical role in staff retention and learning
Create Training Unit Logic Model that supports the training of Title IV-E students from partner universities and continues their structured learning support as child welfare social workers leading to the creation of a skilled workforce in order to provide better services and outcomes for families
Follow-up COHA 2018
Identified 5 key priority areas for action teams within FCS (bias, workload, retention, morale and communication)

in organizational health as a result of various interventions. *Table 1* showcases the evidence-informed planning and design that came out of the COHAs.

A logic model, noted in *Appendix A*, was created by drawing upon the core practice competencies to reflect three major activities (domains, activities and outputs) related to coordination of pre-service preparation with in-service training and coaching. In addition, the logic model incorporates aspects of recruitment, career development, performance management and accountability, and improving the overall organizational culture and climate. As specified coaching and leadership are a central to the FCS Workforce Development system and is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

COACHING TO SUPPORT A STRENGTHS-BASED LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Coaching is often viewed as a parallel process in which senior managers can coach managers, managers can coach supervisors, supervisors can coach social workers, and workers can coach families involved with the child welfare

system. Specifically designated internal and external coaches are also used in order to build these skills in staff, supervisors and managers. The coaching process includes creating a structured, focused interaction with learners and uses intentional strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the learner, making a positive impact on the organization (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010)⁵. Through coaching, individuals can gain a clear sense of direction and purpose, self-confidence, increased motivation, and enhanced skills and knowledge. Coaching at all levels is designed to improve competence and success in working with families and colleagues. This success can lead to improved outcomes related to safety, permanence, and well-being for children and youth as well as improved staff retention. The culture of the organization is also impacted and becomes more creative, engaging, effective, satisfying, and accountable.

San Francisco invested in three designated coaching positions, primarily focused on building the skills of supervisors to coach staff to build skills related to the CPM. In contrast to the required Statewide Common Core Training for new social workers related to gaining knowledge, practice skills, and transfer of learning⁶, coaching sessions with the designated coaches are generally voluntary and confidential and cannot be used for disciplinary purposes. Program Directors and Managers can refer staff for coaching as a method to build their skills, but participation is ultimately voluntary and goals are established by the coach and learner. Coaches and supervisors were also integrated into the design and implementation of a cohort-based model for both interns currently in an MSW program and newly hired line staff. The cohort training model focuses on skill building, knowledge development and team building exercises in order to enhance the development of supportive cohorts of interns and cohorts of newly hired staff.

Coaching and supervision training is carried out through accessing and building multiple training resources across all levels of management. These resources include the Leadership Academy for Supervisors and Middle Managers sponsored by the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, and the Bay Area Academy with its regional training contracts with each county that features the Art

of Coaching, and the statewide core training for supervisors. Besides these formal training resources, FCS coaches and Workforce Development Team members also conduct in-house training sessions, skills labs, and group coaching sessions that provide creative learning opportunities for units or groups of supervisors. The skills labs are customized to focus on a particular skill or new practice, and include such topics as reflections on bias related to race and equity within the agency, using critical thinking to develop effective safety plans, and other topics identified by supervisors and managers. Additional learning activities focus on professional growth, such as exploring ways to develop yourself professionally and setting goals in relation to interviews or applications linked to promotional opportunities.

Bay Area Academy also provides train the trainer opportunities, curriculum development, and advanced coaching support for the supervisors and staff assigned to the Workforce Development Team, in order for them to build skills at facilitating trainings, skills labs and other custom learning activities. Internal practice coaches receive professional development coaching from mentors who are under contract with the regional child welfare training academy on building a coaching relationship, group facilitation and curriculum development

PROGRAM STAFFING STRUCTURE

There are multiple staff roles and associated activities related to the FCS workforce development staffing structure. As noted in *Table 2*, the program director has overall leadership responsibility, followed by the program manager who is responsible for the entire workforce development team. The program manager oversees the internal practice coaches, the training coordinators (who also serve as unit supervisors) child welfare social workers (who also serve as MSW Field Instructors), MSW interns and newly hired child welfare social workers.

Under the supervision of the program manager there are six supervisor level staff; three of them function as training coordinators with assigned tasks of training and onboarding MSW interns and new child welfare social work hires as well as coordinating ongoing training for the full FCS workforce; and the other three work as internal practice coaches who assist with the implementation and refinement of practice skills for supervisors and child welfare social workers. The training coordinators ensure continuity of training and onboarding. For example, the training coordinator in charge of the internship program also serves as the training coordinator of the newly hired child welfare social workers. As one of the training coordinators noted:

5. Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck (2010). *Coaching Toolkit for Child Welfare Practice* produced by the Northern Training Academy in partnership with Casey Family Programs, Adapted from Mink, Owen, & Mink, 1993.

6. <https://calswec.berkeley.edu/programs-and-services/child-welfare-service-training-program/common-core-30>

TABLE 2
FCS Program Staffing Structure

FCS Personnel	Role	Activities
Program Director (1)	Executer and implementer of program development and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Program development, outcomes and accountability activities across FCS workforce development, policy, data, contracted services oversight, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), HR and IT Liaison
Program Manager (1)	Supervision of FCS workforce development team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training, coaching, recruitment, retention and organizational development activities for all FCS staff
Internal Practice Coaches (3)	Implementation & refinement of practice skills for supervisors, child welfare social workers and other classifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engage with supervisors to build a coaching relationship ▪ Facilitation and curriculum development ▪ Individual and skill-based group coaching for supervisors and their units ▪ Practice skills coaching on SOP and CPM for child welfare social workers
Training Coordinator 1: MSW Internship Program	Training, onboarding and supervision of FCS workforce including child welfare social worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coordination with Schools of Social Work ▪ Coordinate weekly case consultations with all stakeholders ▪ Cohort model team building exercises (such as developing healing circles) and training on engagement, interviewing and structured decision making, SOP, behaviorally based case management
Training Coordinator 2: Child Welfare Social Worker Onboarding	Training, onboarding and supervision of child welfare social worker hires and their supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coordinates Onboarding training + State wide Common Core mandated training ▪ Build support groups (continuation of healing circles) and regular cohort check-in's ▪ Program assignment and shadowing opportunities ▪ Probation evaluation
Training Coordinator 3: All Child Welfare Social Workers training	Training for all staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training past probation for child welfare social worker hires, at least 20 hours of training annually ▪ Onboarding assistance for other classifications ▪ Ongoing training for all FCS staff
Service Unit Supervisors	Leadership skill development in program development and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voluntary outreach to coaches for assistance ▪ Supervision of child welfare social workers: Response to a case, honing their assessment skills, gaining familiarity and execution appropriate protocols/tools, writing case notes, court reports + Professional Development activities
Child Welfare Social Workers (4) in the Training Unit	Train and onboard MSW interns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Carry FSU and ERU caseloads ▪ Serve as MSW field instructors to the MSW interns ▪ Provide key onboarding training and shadowing opportunities
Child Welfare Social Work Interns (Pre-Service)	Work under the direction of the training unit field instructors and work directly with families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voluntary outreach to coaches, training coordinators and supervisors for assistance ▪ Weekly case consultations with all stakeholders ▪ Shadowing opportunities across FCS units ▪ Conduct assessments and provide services to families
Child welfare social worker Hires (In-Service)	Work under the direction of the service unit supervisors as they gradually build up their caseloads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Voluntary outreach to coaches, training coordinators and supervisors for assistance ▪ Completion of Common Core Training, ▪ Weekly case consultations with all stakeholders ▪ Shadowing opportunities within assigned FCS unit

FIGURE 1
Competencies Related to Building an Employee Success Roadmap

ORGANIZATIONAL CORE COMPETENCIES			
PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS	COMMUNICATION	WORK EFFECTIVENESS	INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscientiousness • Continuous Learning • Ethics & Integrity • Personal Accountability • Stress Management & Resilience • Team Oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal Communication • Written Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Skills • Learning New Tools and Work Processes • Adaptability • Problem Solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal Skills • Collaboration • Service Focus • Respecting Diversity • Conflict Management

JOB SERIES CORE COMPETENCIES	
PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE	PEOPLE MANAGEMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical Knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Knowledge of Child Welfare Regulations ○ Knowledge of Family and Children’s Services Program Policies and Procedures ○ Knowledge of tools used in Assessment and consultations (SOP, SDM, SafeMeasures, etc.) ○ Advocacy • Data Gathering and Analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Management • Developing Others • Change Management

The idea is that these interns that we have right now will then become our employees, and she is overseeing that program right now, and she will continue to support them. Yes. So, instead of becoming just knowing them for those nine months, I have been with these guys for like the last year and a half. They know me, I know them. I’m their support

TRANSLATION OF LEARNING THROUGH COACHING & TRAINING

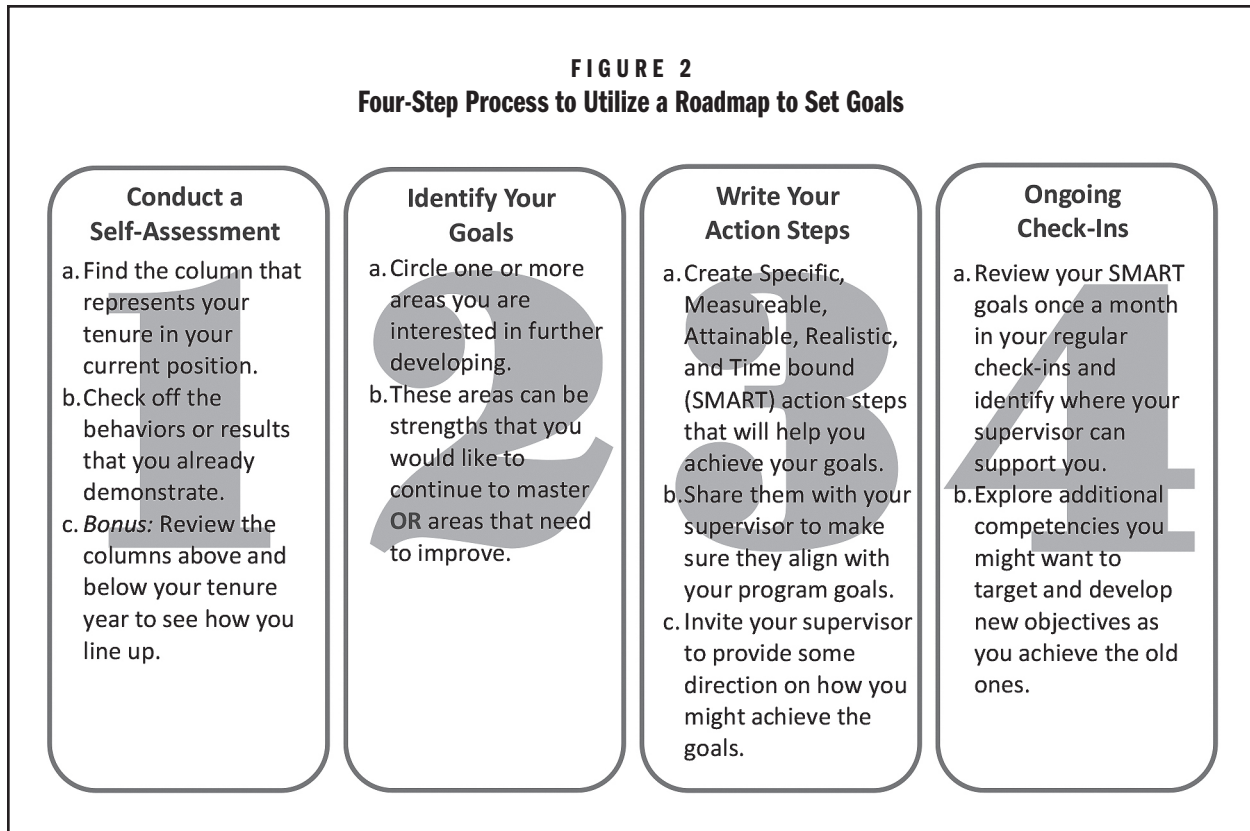
All case carrying and non-case carrying child welfare social workers and supervisors engage in a self-assessment review process of their respective competencies. They begin with the development of a personal success roadmap comprised of competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics) that identify the characteristics of successful performance for each job class. These competencies serve as the foundation for employee development, and also

drive the staff selection process, the learning and development curriculum, and performance management process. The rationale and intent of a roadmap is designed to, 1) align employee and supervisor expectations by providing a standardized map of successful performance in a job class by length of service, 2) help guide professional development conversations, and 3) provide clear guideposts for maximizing employee potential to move up a career ladder.

The two major core competencies used in employee evaluations relate to organizational and job series competencies. Organizational competencies are essential for supporting the mission, vision, and values of the agency. The job series competencies are required for success within a particular job series described as specific technical expertise needed to perform effectively. Examples of these two sets of competencies are illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Employees and supervisors utilize a specific roadmap to clarify job expectations and identify strengths and

FIGURE 2
Four-Step Process to Utilize a Roadmap to Set Goals



coaching opportunities. Goal-setting is a process used to develop competencies that includes the following four steps: Step 1 involves conducting a self-assessment of the behaviors or results that the employee already demonstrates for the job class, Step 2 includes identifying one’s goals and areas for improvement. Step 3 involves the development of specific action steps based on the use of SMART goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time Bound and are reviewed by one’s supervisor to see how the implementation plan relates to the program’ service goals, and Step 4 comprises ongoing check-in’s wherein the employee reviews their SMART goals on a monthly basis with their supervisor and also explores additional competencies based on existing goal attainment. The details of the four-step process are captured in *Figure 2*.

Setting up SMART goals using the success roadmap is a completed as part of the annual performance evaluation process between the child welfare social workers and their supervisors, the supervisors and their managers, and the managers and their program directors. It is designed to improve upon an existing competency and promote one’s career development. In addition, employees who are not meeting performance standards will be involved in a work plan or a performance improvement plan involving the

agency’s HR staff to ensure a closer monitoring of ongoing professional development as well as meeting the basic requirements of the job. According to the FCS program manager, being accountable towards the learning objectives of the workforce development plan is key, as she states:

It’s really intended to be an accountability process. We want you to be accountable for meeting these competencies and showing professional development in these competencies. Your rating includes such questions as: is this an emerging skill. Is this a skill that illustrates mastery of all of the competencies and reflects continuing professional growth? And if you’re not showing growth, then we would either set a smart goal for you or an actual performance improvement plan or work plan for you. A smart goal is definitely more voluntary, more something that you and your supervisor develop. The other goals are still worth addressing. A work plan or a performance improvement plan is where we’ve identified there’s a deficit and then it’s more closely and frequently monitored.

In addition to individual employee assessment and evaluation, an ongoing formative evaluation is underway to evaluate the impact of coaching on child welfare practice.

Continuing Challenges

Despite the considerable progress made by the FCS workforce development team towards creating a strength-based learning organization, this work-in-progress has identified continuing challenges.

COMPETING TIME PRESSURES

Given the nature and intensity of child welfare work as caseload demands rise, the feasibility of scheduling ongoing workforce development training has become increasingly challenging. As new hires transition from the training unit to their eventual program assignment over the first six months of employment, their capacity to attend training diminishes. As a consequence, the training cohort model becomes more difficult to sustain when child welfare social workers try to balance caseload dynamics with training and coaching needs.

IMPACT OF CIVIL SERVICE HIRING PRACTICES

The FCS workforce development system operates on the premise of ensuring continuity of learning and training from pre-service preparation to in-service training as Title IV-E MSW interns become child welfare social work hires. However, seeking full-time employment in this county calls for all MSW interns to complete a child welfare social work application and exam process. There have been instances where the specially-trained Title IV-E child welfare interns did not score high enough on the exam and were not hired as new child welfare social workers in SF county (although they were hired in other Bay Area counties). The skill level and competencies of interns vary and further study could reveal that the exam process results in hiring of those most promising interns over interns who did not gain as much knowledge and skill through the process.

There can be tension between civil service policies and practices and the FCS hiring preferences. For interns who do pass the civil service requirements, they are joined by new co-workers who did not participate in the agency's pre-service experiences. As a consequence, the former interns repeat some aspects of the ongoing training courses and thereby experience redundancy from the repetition. One of the training coordinators highlights the challenges associated with civil service hiring practices:

Since San Francisco is a civil service city, all the MSW interns have to interview and apply just like everybody else who is applying. We don't just open it up to them. So, they're hired based on how high they score. And so, you have to rank in the top in order to be offered a job. And some of our interns, like last time, ranked a little lower... So we got other new workers. Onboarding is for all new workers... it would be great if we only hired our interns, because they are a part of that onboarding, we could eliminate some of the repetitive training content.

INCORPORATING TRUST AND SAFETY INTO SUPERVISION

Since coaching and supervision are part of a voluntary process, the burden of seeking self-improvement is placed on staff to seek out training areas for improvement and mentoring. In addition, supervisors are often hesitant to be candid about their own supervisory and coaching competencies given their seniority and experience level. As a consequence, there is a lack of trust in supervision when subordinates do not feel safe with disclosing their areas for improvement, especially when a disclosure could affect their long-term career prospects. For example, one of the internal practice coaches (and FCS supervisor) noted concerns about the level of trust in coaching and supervision amongst supervisors:

I found some supervisors find it hard to say I need help in this area. A lot of my work has been continuing to sort of reassure them that they're okay pointing out the areas where they're really doing well, and noting that I am here to help them along their journey. I found that staff find it hard to say that they have been making these mistakes. They need to feel safe enough to say it, and only those people that feel 100 percent safe with you will share with you instead of admitting it to a colleague.

In addition, child welfare social workers called for more intentional, reflective supervision beyond discussing cases and referrals. Most references to supervision by child welfare social workers focus on confirming that they had completed the core training rather than critically reflecting on one's own practice and talking about how one can grow and improve in certain areas. Learning and growth within the organization is related to the ability to apply one's learning and then reflecting on it with a supervisor as indicated by one of the child welfare social workers:

Just applying it, I think, is the key. I think you could go to hundreds of hours of training, but if they are not actually applying, and thinking about how to apply it, and reflecting on it, and talking to someone about it, then what good is it?

Conclusion

The case of the FCS Workforce Development System illustrates how a system can be designed and implemented utilizing evidence-informed planning to build a strengths-based learning organization. The goal is to ensure a continuum of learning from pre-service to in-service training and address workforce retention and development within public welfare agencies. A cascading vertical parallel process of coaching and supervision at multiple levels in the organization was established in order to ensure accountability and translation of learning, skills and competencies across the FCS workforce. Organizational change projects usually create a few ongoing challenges and this case is no different, especially regarding the issues of competing time pressures, complex civil service hiring practices and the need to create trust and safety within the supervisory process. Addressing future implications and identifying problem-solving strategies can be explored, in part, by answering the discussion question below.

Discussion Questions

1. Implementation of the FCS Workforce Development System reveal that workload demands tend to compete with time for supervision and coaching. How would you give higher priority to the workforce development activity of coaching that underlies professional development?
2. We observe a tension between civil service hiring policies and practices which tend to undermine the workforce development cohort model of moving from student to practitioner and potentially creates training redundancies by mixing pre-service grads with newly-hired practitioners with no experience in the agency. How would you address this systems issue?
3. Given the goal of encouraging supervisors to assume leadership roles associated with coaching differentially-prepared staff, how would you encourage supervisors to request coaching services for themselves to improve upon their existing competencies without threatening their job security?
4. How could experienced supervisors acquire a greater trust in the coaching process (something they never experienced in their career advancement process) when there may be limited candor or insight into their own capabilities?

APPENDIX A
FCS Workforce Development Logic Model

FCS Workforce Development System

