

4 Our Families: Contra Costa County's Navigation Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) has addressed the difficulty of navigating through the Social Services system while in crisis or with multiple needs by implementing a Navigator program called 4 Our Families (4OF). This case study assesses the program structure, COVID-19 impacts, performance indicators, and program funding of 4OF. Solano County Health and Social Services (HSS) is

redesigning their Navigator program to best meet the needs of the community and provide resources that promote healthy, safe, and stable lives. This case study aims to inform the Solano County HSS redesign efforts, offering recommendations related to leadership alignment, appropriate staffing and training, and effective communication strategies that are key to implementing a sustainable Navigator program.

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Program Description

According to the Manhattan Strategy Group, “The use of the term navigator emerged in the U.S. in the field of patient care in the early 1990s. From the start, the focus of the navigator role in patient care settings was to reduce disparities and improve access to care for distinct racial and low-income groups.” (Di Biase & Mochel, 2021) This focus aligns with the goals of Health and Social Services (HSS) departments with several divisions offering hundreds of programs to people with lower socioeconomic status. How does a person going through a difficult situation learn about what is offered by each division or if they qualify to be a participant? Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) addresses this issue through a program called 4 Our Families (4OF). Utilizing a holistic approach, the 4OF program assists participants with accessing the targeted supports and services they need through EHSD and Community Partners. The program aims to “break down barriers that many families face when seeking services while empowering them to access resources on their own.” (Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services, 2020) Key services requested by clients that Navigators provide include coaching, linkages to legal resources, and practical daily needs.

The goal of the Contra Costa County 4OF program “is to help participants overcome obstacles to stability by identifying key goals and creating a clear and smooth path to success” (Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services, 2020). Navigators are seasoned staff in the Social Services Program Assistant classification, who have a background in community outreach, employment, and eligibility. Strategically placed at six distinct locations

across the county to serve underserved communities and individuals, Navigators help community residents easily access services at Family Justice Centers, EHSD offices, and Spark Point Contra Costa.

The Navigators complete the same training as an Eligibility Worker, which provides a thorough understanding of the programs offered by the County and the eligibility requirements. Additionally, Navigators spend an extensive amount of time networking with other county divisions or departments and community partners at community events to gain a deep knowledge base of community services available to Contra Costa residents. With eligibility training, relationship building, and knowledge of community supports, Navigators are a valued resource for individuals experiencing stressful situations such as job loss, domestic violence, foster care placement, or immigration. The linkages developed by Navigators enable a warm handoff and temporary wraparound service for individuals and families in crisis. To increase positive outcomes for participants, Navigators follow up with participants between 14 and 90 days after providing the resource or connection to community partners. This model of follow-up is key to assisting the person or family with completing the necessary actions and advocating for their own needs.

In 2018, the 4OF program was launched with Navigators initially receiving participant referrals from outside community partners. Potential participants would complete an opt-in assessment questionnaire that would identify if the individual or family had multiple needs. Navigators meet with participants who opt-in to the program and assist them with outlining objectives and how to best achieve them. With coaching and ongoing support that empowers participants to be their advocates going

forward, Navigators connect them with county programs such as General Assistance, CalFresh, and CalWORKs, then identify other resources that would be able to meet their needs.

The 4OF program evolved as other county Departments began to hear about the referral model and the work being carried out by the Navigators. Referrals began to come in from Children and Family Services, Older and Disabled Adults, and other divisions serving populations in need of assistance for multiple issues. The relationships that Navigators developed during the training phase allowed them to quickly connect individuals and families in need of support with the appropriate county department or community partner. Some of the community partners that have been instrumental in supporting participants include St. Vincent Meals on Wheels, Monument Impact, Central County Crisis Center, Familia Unidas, Lao Family, faith-based churches, Bay Area Rescue Mission, Housing Authority, and DVC Bay Area Legal Aid. Services being provided include free legal assistance, immigration guidance, rental assistance, Section 8, applying for social security, utility and bill payment assistance, food, clothing needs, medical services, and housing. Participants also receive assistance with education, job readiness, and job placement. Navigators initially act as a liaison between the participant and the agency providing the resource by identifying the expert who can provide the support and assisting the participant with completing the necessary paperwork.

COVID-19 Impact

In response to COVID-19, EHSD mobilized the Navigators by creating the Social Services Rapid Response Team (SSRRT). This team was tasked with streamlining the intake process to assess the immediate needs of vulnerable populations throughout the

community (Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services, 2020). Similar to the initial program structure, the targeted needs include housing, food, finances, legal support, children's needs, transportation, medical, immigration assistance, mental health substance abuse help, and more. Although there are other coordinator care teams in EHSD, the SSRRT acts as a supplement to current efforts and supports those clients who are currently not in connection with other systems or providers. Navigators have had to rebuild relationships and create new connections with community partners that established support during the pandemic as some agencies went out of business.

With the eligibility training and experience, some Navigators were also assigned to the immediate need team. This granted them authorization to pull applications for county benefits from individuals and families directly impacted by COVID-19 and assign these cases to themselves for expedited processing. However, Navigators maintain a respectful and collaborative relationship with Eligibility Workers, understanding that the Eligibility Workers are the authority in processing and determining eligibility for county benefits.

During and post-COVID-19, the 4OF program continued to grow through new referrals across the county, expanding the caseload of existing clients. The Board of Supervisors also expressed interest and support for the program by requesting a Navigator be posted at the Lovonya Dejean Middle School in Richmond. In response to the prevalence of families with English as a second language (ESL) (73%), a bilingual Navigator is now embedded in the school every weekday to provide support and resources. The assigned navigator works with the school by reviewing reports of absenteeism, office referrals, and behavioral

referrals, and meeting regularly with the school psychologist, counselor, social worker, mental health worker, and child and family therapist. This group makes up a care team for students with the goal of identifying disparities and solutions to improve outcomes for students. The expanded functions of the Navigator during COVID-19, and now as an embedded school resource, are different from the original Navigator model, demonstrating the program's ability to evolve with the communities' changing needs.

Performance Indicators

As of March 2023, the number of services that have been provided through the 4OF program since its inception is 8,660: 1,320 COVID-related services and 7,340 non-COVID related services due to some other adversity. At least 90% of all clients referred to the 4OF program are eligible to participate with more than one identified need. 90% of all needs identified are met. Furthermore, the number of participants served each month continues to increase (Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services, 2023).

Table 1. Contra Costa County EHSD 4OF Performance

Year	Average monthly Participant
2020	99.65
2021	107.50
2022	142.58
2023	166.25

Demographics

The program serves a diverse group of people with varying family sizes, immigration status, and ages. The top six referral sources remain the same, whether COVID-19-related or not. It is worth noting that referrals directly related to COVID-19 predominantly originated from health centers, whereas self-referrals are most prominent for non-COVID-19 cases.

Table 2. Contra Costa County EHSD 4OF Demographics

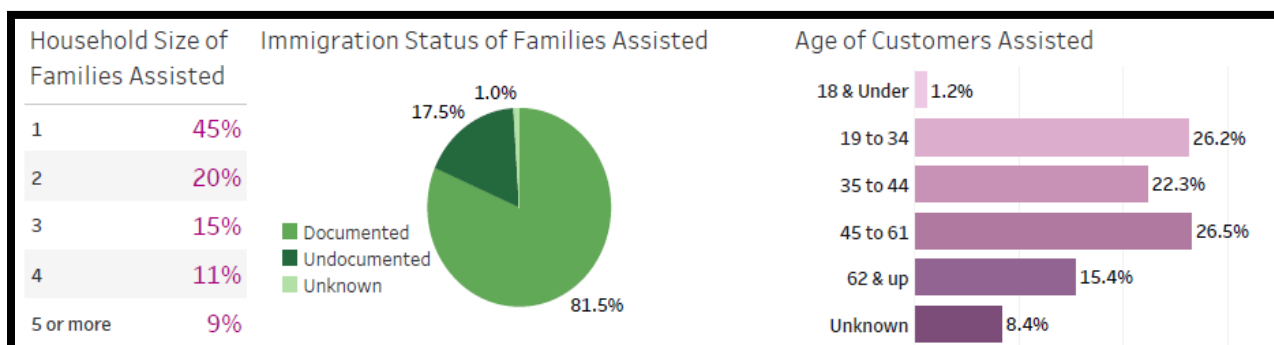
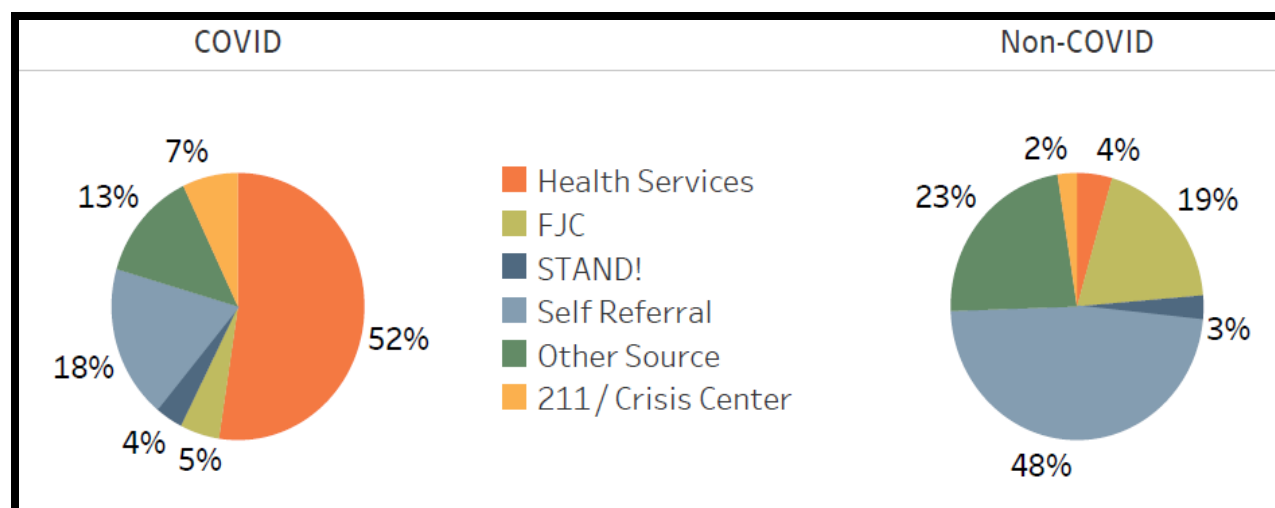


Table 3. Contra Costa County EHSD 4OF COVID-19 Referrals



Program Funding

The 4OF program was originally funded in the fiscal year 2017-2018 by the CalWORKs Single Allocation. The program has an annual cost of \$514,574 which supports four Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) serving as Navigators. With the success of the 4OF program, the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors has approved the expansion of the program by adding 5 additional FTEs. These positions will be funded by Measure X, a countywide 20-year, ½ cent sales tax approved by Contra Costa County voters (Contra Costa County, 2022).

Solano County Review and Recommendation

Solano County Health and Social Services (HSS) embarked on creating a Navigator program toward the end of 2019. Several months later, COVID-19 hit, causing the program operations to be reevaluated and restructured. Challenges that were identified within the first few months of the initial program related to (1) leadership perspectives, (2) classification decisions to the Navigator role, such as Public Health Nurse and Social Worker II with different

training and skill sets, and (3) insufficient communication to unify and educate the department about the program and need for information sharing. HSS is in the process of reimagining the Navigator program. To resolve the challenges that arose in the first iteration of the program the following recommendations should be considered.

Recommendation # 1: Leadership Perspective

Key to the program's success is aligned leadership that is responsive to the HSS Director's overall goal of meeting the immediate needs of a client. 35% of Solano County residents are served by the Employment and Eligibility Division (E&E) which allows the division the greatest opportunity to identify clients with multiple needs who could be referred to the Navigator Program. Although Solano County HSS is considered a mid-size county, the number of services E&E provides places their operations in the large county category and is similar to Contra Costa County. Housing the Navigator program within E&E allows for

accountability with congruence amongst the team and operations.

Recommendation #2: Classification and Training

Mirroring the 4OF program and assigning a single classification to the Navigator role is vital to creating synergy and partnership amongst the team. The classification that has been selected for the HSS reimagined Navigator role is the Social Services Worker. This is the appropriate classification because all necessary skills to be an effective liaison, coach, and support to clients are written into the scope of work for this job classification. When selecting the appropriate candidates for this position, the following skill sets should be assessed: (1) Self-Starter, (2) Strong verbal and written communicator, (3) Detail-oriented, (4) Empathetic, (5) Organized, and (6) People person. Identifying these skill sets, in addition to the base experience for Social Services Workers, will ensure the selected candidates are capable of implementing and building a successful and sustainable program. Furthermore, implementing a training program and networking requirement similar to those instituted in the 4OF program will provide the selected staff with the tools and support they need to best meet the needs of the clients.

Recommendation # 3: Communication

Establishing an effective communication strategy to ensure smooth coordination and collaboration among team members is vital when implementing a new program. Although there are several communication models to choose from, effective strategies and approaches for a Social Services organization include:

1. **Stakeholder engagement:** It is important to identify and engage relevant stakeholders, including internal H&SS divisions, division liaisons, other government agencies, non-profits, community members, and other community service providers. Networking and establishing regular communication with stakeholders through email, site visits, community forums, surveys, and resource fairs, will help with developing trusting working relationships and ensuring program support.
2. **Community Outreach and Education:** Considering that 10% of the Solano County population is living in poverty and 7% lack broadband Internet access, it is crucial to carefully choose a suitable marketing channel to effectively advertise the program to the most vulnerable population (United States Census Bureau, 2022). Developing communication materials and campaigns that include phone calls, client events, mailshots, or print media, to raise awareness about the program and its services will increase utilization resulting in better outcomes. To support the additional cost added with print marketing, Navigators can research funding opportunities that support the program and client needs.
3. **Partnership and Collaborations:** To foster partnerships and collaboration throughout the department, executive leadership can provide clear expectations and support for the program by communicating a concise vision at management meetings, emailing updates to the

department, and announcing the program in monthly or quarterly newsletters. Additionally, the Navigator should leverage existing networks within the department and community-based organizations (CBOs). By coordinating efforts, sharing information, and attending or participating in community events, a wraparound system providing comprehensive support that avoids duplication of service to a client can be created. This level of collaboration can help align efforts and address emerging needs.

Conclusion

The 4OF Navigator program has been a unique program that created a highly customized respondent for the person or family in crisis or experiencing a difficult situation. Navigators work with the individual or family to problem solve, identify resources, empowerment toward self-sufficiency, and positive outcomes. The Solano County community will benefit from the redesigned Navigator program and implementation of the recommendations.

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