

Alameda County's Simulation Lab: An Innovative Learning Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Simulation Lab is an innovative training tool designed to enable social work staff to practice in mock situations that resemble real life. Trainees are able to practice navigating through difficult conversations and potentially dangerous situations in a scripted, realistic environment that is different from traditional impromptu classroom role-plays. The simulation experience is recognized as a highly effective training method in various fields, including healthcare, law enforcement, aviation, and social work. During the comprehensive de-briefing section, trainees are provided honest feedback in a

non-judgmental, safe environment, which enhances their ability to gain insight into areas of growth, in preparation for an actual home visit. Recommendations for Monterey County include creating a Simulation Lab within Cherish Too, as the visitation center is already designed as a home environment and fully equipped with a camera system. The recommendation for facilitating the learning experience would be to partner with the Bay Area Academy, as there is a training contract in place and additional activities could be added, such as teaming to develop curriculum and simulation scenarios.

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Introduction

An essential component for high-quality service delivery resulting in positive outcomes for children and families is competent, confident staff that are able to consistently adapt to unpredictable situations. The California State Division 31 Regulations require that a county respond to all referrals for service which allege that a child is endangered by neglect, abuse or exploitation. In fulfilling the investigation mandate, the child welfare worker responds to the child's home to assess for safety while honoring the family's civil rights. The challenging gap for child welfare departments to address is how to equip the workforce to competently, consistently, and effectively engage families, while assessing the safety capacities in the home environment (Hitchcock). While conducting safety assessments, which typically occur in the home environment, the worker must perform essential functions, such as client engagement and rapport building, interact with genuine cultural humility, gather relevant information, utilize problem-solving techniques, and also be keenly aware of the environment.

Simulation Lab: An Innovative Approach to Developing Child Welfare Skills

The Simulation Lab is an innovative training tool designed to enable social work staff to practice in a mock situation that resembles real life. Simulations provide the trainee with the opportunity to face fears of the unknown by practicing in a realistic environment. Staff are also able to practice navigating through difficult conversations and potentially dangerous situations in a scripted, realistic environment

that is different from an impromptu classroom role-play. Simulated learning experiences allow trainees to demonstrate acquired knowledge of how to respond to a complex, stress-inducing situation in a safe learning environment. Simulation training has been recognized as a highly effective training method in various fields, such as healthcare, law enforcement, aviation, and social work (Mind the Gap).

There are two important parts of the Simulation Lab learning process: the Scenario and the De-brief. Scenarios are designed to allow for trainees to experience and practice challenging and highly emotionally charged discussions before they actually occur. In a simulation session, each trainee encounters the exact same information and experience; the only difference is the trainees' response during the scenario (Hitchcock). The most effective simulation experiences stem from actual situations that recently took place, and may not have had a positive outcome. These real-life situations can be turned into a simulation learning opportunity that will result in better client outcomes (Hitchcock).

The De-brief section is essential for learning, as the trainees receive vital feedback from their peers and trainer, allowing them to retain more of what they learn to effectively utilize during the actual home visit. The debrief covers areas of the trainees' competency and areas of needed growth in a non-judgmental environment allowing for the trainee to gain insight into the probing questions that should have been asked, or actions that should have been taken. Simulation learning also allows for deeper self-awareness regarding bias and jumping to conclusions, and teaches trainees how to work with the

family and gather relevant facts to formulate a sound decision. Simulation Labs also incorporate props throughout the simulation. The props demonstrate to the trainee the types of items they may encounter when walking through a client's home (Hitchcock). The Simulation Lab learning experience's impact on client outcomes and staff retention rates is yet to be determined. Currently, California State University Los Angeles instructors are working to develop an evaluation method for outcome measures (Mind the Gap).

Alameda County's Simulation Lab

Mr. Larry Sanchez, Alameda County Social Service Agency Staff Development Manager, attended a conference in Southern California in 2016 in which the Simulation Lab was presented to the participants. During the conference, Mr. Sanchez envisioned a Simulation Lab in Alameda County. Mr. Sanchez consulted with Los Angeles County and Orange County staff to gain further knowledge and implementation strategies. In 2017, Alameda County's state-of-the-art Simulation Lab was created. The Simulation Lab is housed within the Training and Consulting Team Department (TACT) office building in Hayward, California. The Simulation Lab is 10-x-12 feet, and was converted from an office to a studio apartment. The Simulation Lab is furnished with a couch, coffee table, wall decorations, lamp, kitchen table, and a draw-down material wall panel. The Simulation Lab includes props that are locked and stored in the Lab; these props are utilized as learning components during a simulation. Alameda County training staff specifically select particular props for a simulation to allow for the mock situation to appear real. These props include (fake) weapons, knives, needles, pill bottles, drugs, large sum of cash and sounds of dogs barking. The Simulation Lab can smoothly convert from a studio apartment to a courtroom environment, as the kitchen table converts to a judge's bench. The material wall panel reverses into a courtroom background. In the courtroom scenario, Alameda County Counsel plays the role of the judge and TACT staff play the roles of the

Department's Counsel and parent's attorney. A camera system is in place which is in constant recording mode.

Alameda County TACT includes Simulation Lab training in the twelve-week child welfare induction training for all new child welfare staff. Prior to participating in Simulation Lab training, staff sign a form indicating they agree to being recorded for training purposes. The recordings are deleted at the end of the Simulation Lab learning sessions. During the learning session, each trainee goes through the recorded three to five minute simulation one person at a time. After the trainee returns to the classroom, the recording is played back for the purpose of feedback given by peers and trainer. Currently, TACT has four simulation scenarios and are working on a hoarder's environment scenario.

Alameda County's staff feedback to the TACT team has been positive. 100% of the participants thought it was a valuable training exercise, because it helped them in their daily duties and responsibilities. Social Work staff report feeling more confident in the home visit environment and are not afraid to participate in court hearings. In addition, county counsel supports the Simulation Lab, and observe that workers are well-prepared for court.

The creation of the Alameda County Simulation Lab cost the county a total of \$4,000. This amount included the purchase of furniture, two sets of cameras, assorted cables, microphones, curtain and curtain rods. TACT staff conduct the simulation trainings as part of their job classification; therefore, there is no staff training overhead. The initial challenges to the Simulation Lab included the outside traffic noise and the fact that the Simulation Lab studio is located next to a large training classroom.

Impact for Monterey County

Monterey County is a medium-sized county in which the Department of Family and Children's Services has sixty-nine social work staff positions. The department has one training supervisor. The social work staff are dynamic individuals who are dedicated to ensuring child safety and well-being,

while providing excellent service to the community. Due to the workforce size and vacancies at any given time, new staff are typically hired two-to-three at a time throughout the department. Training of new Emergency Response staff consists of the new staff member being paired with an experienced unit member as a mentor. For the first six weeks, the new Emergency Response (ER) worker shadows the mentor on all aspects of the investigative process, which includes home visits, collateral contacts, conjoint investigations with law enforcement, collaboration with community partners, and documenting in the CWS/CMS database. In addition, the new ER worker participates in the Division 31 Regulation training provided by the Program Manager or ER Supervisors, which provides the new employee with a foundational understanding of the state requirements for the specific role within the child welfare department. During this time period, the new ER worker meets weekly with their immediate supervisor for training. New employees also attend the Bay Area Academy CORE 2.0 training, which is offered annually. In addition, the department partners with the Bay Area Academy to provide trainings that broaden all staff's knowledge and skill in the areas of safety and risk assessment, safety planning, engagement skills, incorporating Safety Organized Practice, accurate use of Structured Decision-Making Tools, and interweaving Cultural Humility and Trauma-Informed Practice.

Creating a Simulation Lab in Monterey County would greatly benefit the training program, as new workers would have the opportunity to develop necessary skills while gaining confidence, and experienced workers could refine their investigative technique in a safe, learning environment. Monterey County has space available for a Simulation Lab in the Cherish Too Visitation Center. The Cherish Too building is leased by the Department of Family and Children's Services and is available for staff trainings Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM – 11:30 AM. Cherish Too is 5,000 square feet, including a front and back door. Cherish Too is designed as a home environment with five fully-furnished visitation

rooms resembling living rooms. Cherish Too also has a kitchen, bathroom, dining room, and indoor playroom area. Cherish Too could serve as a Simulation Lab easily due to the home environment design in place that is equipped with a camera system in each room, hallways and entrances. Simulation scenarios could occur such as the door knock, entry into the home, home walk through including the bathroom area and kitchen area with cupboards and refrigerator. In addition, with the various rooms throughout Cherish Too, a scenario could likely include someone entering from a back room unexpectedly, which could happen at any time during a real home visit.

Regarding a recording device that is essential to the Simulation Lab environment, Cherish Too has a camera room equipped with five separate viewing monitors/workstations. If the Cherish Too were to be utilized as a Simulation Lab, staff could engage in the scenario with peers watching on the monitors in the camera room. The de-briefing sessions, including recording playback, could occur in the dining room or kitchen area due to the adequate space in each room. Regarding use of Simulation Lab for simulation of court hearings, the dining room could be changed into a courtroom by using the table as the judge's bench and purchasing a material pull-down wall to resemble a courtroom similar to Alameda County's courtroom simulation setting.

Recommendations for Monterey County

Due to space within the Cherish Too Visitation Center, there would be no additional cost for Simulation Lab space. There would be a minimal one-time cost for props to make the scenario realistic, such as a crib or toddler bed, empty alcohol and pill bottles, (fake) weapons, drugs, and paraphernalia. The challenge in creating a Simulation Lab would be in the training component, specifically the training staff needed to facilitate the learning process. To strengthen the department's training program and meet individual training needs, a training unit is recommended, which could be comprised of a training supervisor and two experienced Social Worker V's. One of the Social Worker V's would be from ER or

prevention services and the other Social Worker V from the on-going or court services area. The fiscal impact of this recommendation would be an additional \$145,332 per year for the two social work positions, including benefits. Due to budget limitations within the department for the unforeseeable future, this recommendation is a long-term vision, which would include reaching out to California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) Child Welfare Title IV-E Program for a Simulation Lab learning collaborative.

Another recommendation would be for the department to collaborate with the Bay Area Academy to create and facilitate the Simulation Lab learning experience. As employees throughout the department frequently participate in training and coaching with Bay Area Academy trainers, rapport and trust has been developed between staff and trainers, which has benefits when creating the safe, learning environment where mistakes can be made and professional growth can flourish. The fiscal implications for this recommendation would most likely have a minimal impact, and initial planning and development could begin fiscal year 2018–2019. The contract for fiscal year 2018–2019 is \$174,294; this includes ten days of classroom training, two half-days of all staff trainings, thirty-one days of field-based training and coaching, and a flat fee of \$3,000 for curriculum development. Each training day costs the department \$3,853. Simulation Lab learning days could be incorporated into the ten days of classroom training, and developing the scenarios could be a collaboration between the Bay Area Academy and the department's training supervisor, unit supervisors, experienced social work staff, and program managers. Another consideration in developing the Simulation Lab would be initiating discussions with the employee labor union regarding recording employees for training purposes.

Conclusion

Through learning about Alameda County's Simulation Lab, Monterey County can create a Simulation Lab unique to the Department of Family and

Children's Services staffing size and training needs. The Simulation Lab would be a valuable learning tool to equip social work staff with the practical skills necessary to conduct accurate safety assessments while providing high quality service to the community.

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