

An Analysis of Alameda County's E-Studio Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, the population of youth under 18 in the county of Marin was 45,611.¹ Over the course of that year, there were 1,113 referrals made to Children and Family Services (CFS), 414 of which required a response from the agency. By December 31, 2022, CFS opened 199 cases and took 85 youths into care. Those numbers may seem small when compared to other larger, more populous counties, but imagine for a moment that it was your son or daughter who was just removed from your home. Your brother or sister. Your niece or nephew. Besides doing everything in your power to reunify the family, one would also hope that the social workers engaging with your household have had the finest training to prepare them for the challenges and complexities of working with not only families, but schools, community agencies, and the court system. In March 2020, states began lockdown procedures in response to a novel coronavirus. Many things changed over the next several months. Actions taken

to safeguard the public, such as sheltering in place and the closure of some community-based facilities that families depended on for services, increased individuals' stress levels and heightened the risk for burnout amongst parents.² Parental burnout can increase the risk of child abuse and neglect over time.³ Additionally, child welfare agencies had to find a new way of ensuring that their staff were adequately trained during this time. Alameda County was in a unique position to address this event due to the prior development of its E-Studio program.

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¹ California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP), University of California, Berkeley, extracted April 18, 2023, 2022<https://ccwip.berkeley.edu/childwelfare/reports/Population/MTSG/r/rts/s>

² Campbell, Andrew M. "An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives." *Forensic science international: reports* 2 (2020): 100089.

³ Griffith, Annette K. "Parental burnout and child maltreatment during the COVID-19 pandemic." *Journal of family violence* 37.5 (2022): 725-731.

Introduction

Training for new and existing Child Welfare Workers (CWWs) is critical to developing and maintaining a competent workforce that can successfully and efficiently work toward safety and permanency for youth involved in the child welfare system. Proper training can help CWWs better navigate the ambiguity and complexities of working with families dealing with any number of social problems, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. It can also be argued that adequate training can cut down on staff turnover by increasing the number of tools a worker has available to them and increasing their confidence in their own skills and abilities.

There are advantages to having in-person trainings, such as increased collaboration and more opportunities for teaming. However, being flexible enough to adjust the training modality can benefit both staff and families.

In late 2014, the Training and Consulting Team (TACT) of the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) created the E-Studio. It was created to deliver modern, efficient, and original forms of training. With the production of training videos and e-modules, the E-Studio contributes informative, engaging, and artistic resources to Alameda's portfolio of training methods. Through the E-Studio, Alameda County has been able to utilize the knowledge and talents of its staff members to record fun, informative, and innovative training videos geared toward both new and more seasoned staff. In addition to filming training videos, the team can use the recorded video format to disseminate information to staff both office- and county-wide. The TACT team also uses the E-Studio for testing new training innovations, including various

services and subscriptions, testing new camera/video equipment, and recording B-roll (i.e., supplemental footage that is often interspersed with the main footage to create dramatic tension or further illuminate a point) for projects.

Since its inception, the TACT team has produced training content for almost all their departments, including Adult and Aging Services (AAS), Children and Family Services (CFS), Government and Community Relations (GCR), and Workforce and Benefits Administration (WBA). They have also evolved past just producing training content. They have developed monthly testimonials for CFS's Children and Family Teams and created promotional job announcement videos for both WBA and AAS. They have also created talk shows for both TACT trainers (Tea with Charo) and for AAS (This Is How We Do It). For GCR, they created commercials for their Annual Legislative Breakfast which were displayed on social media channels. The team has also created many Public Service Announcements that have aired both during the recent Olympics and on Xfinity, and they are currently working on a few PSAs to be aired in June on Xfinity. The Agency Director also uses video addresses developed in partnership with the TACT team to engage staff at all levels in new and unique ways. The team has also produced videos for their Public Relations Department and created a radio broadcast (TACT Radio). While most of their content is only available to Alameda County staff, they do provide guidance to other Counties and agencies who want to create their own version of an E-Studio.

Analysis

The E-Studio functions essentially like a TV production studio. It is a place where the

TACT team takes ideas from concept development all the way through to distribution. This process generally begins with an idea or a problem that needs to be addressed. Ideas can come from members of the TACT team, themselves, or any other staff person. The team starts by meeting amongst themselves to discuss which idea or training they need to work on next and who the audience for the training would be. The team would then meet with subject matter experts (SMEs) and gather information to flesh out the idea and decide which training modality would be best suited to address it. If necessary, the team also evaluates the project for any initial costs and funding sources, thereby developing a budget. Script ideas are then proposed and developed. Scripts can be built out and amended throughout a project and do not necessarily have to be completed before moving on to the next step. Supervisors and Program Managers are usually in charge of script creation, but any team member can contribute to that portion of the process.

Preproduction is the next step in the process. By this point, the original idea has started to take on a more tangible form. Now, while members of the TACT team collaborate with the person in charge of the script on refining it, they also begin considering who they want to bring in to act in the video. This has generally taken the form of county staff who have expressed interest. To make their videos more engaging, the team spends time researching types of music that would work with the script and topic as well as any pictures or videos they may need to use in the overall production. They plan out and shoot B-Roll footage as well. Locations are also scouted at this time. While a lot of filming takes place in the office, there are times when the team feels that filming outdoors or at another site would be the most beneficial for their needs. Some time is also spent visiting other SSA offices and

filming those locations to show the person participating in the training something familiar to them. They have found this results in increased levels of engagement for the trainee. In reviewing the script, the team would also determine whether they will need props during filming and if they already have the required props or will need to purchase them. Lighting is also considered during this phase; Decisions need to be made regarding whether the filming will take place indoors or outside and whether they will use natural or artificial light or a combination of both.

Prepping the actor(s) and shooting the actual training comprises much of the next step. Part of the prep work consists of table reads in which the TACT team sits with the actor(s), SMEs, and scriptwriter to read through the script to ensure it flows properly and provides the audience with the correct information. Some script editing can also happen here. During the actual shoot, the team works with one to two cameras and has at least one microphone per person with a backup mic. This is important as it allows each person to have a mic either in closer proximity or attached to them instead of having to share one mic, which would, by design, be farther away from each speaker. Having multiple mics also limits cross-contamination of sound, meaning each personal mic would be less likely to pick up ambient sounds. As complex as the project sounds so far, the TACT team tries to keep things as simple as possible for the shoots, and upfront work during the pre-production phase helps with this.

Once filming is finished, there is still some more work to be done before the project is complete. The TACT team takes this time to edit and clean up the work before distributing it to staff. The film is reviewed and spliced with B-roll when appropriate. Depending on the size of the project, the

team works with multiple video editing programs, which either come with a cost or are free and open-source. If it is being used, music is also inserted during the editing process. The team currently uses free and open-source editing software for this purpose. After editing is completed, the team schedules testers from different departments who will view the video or take the course to ensure there are no discrepancies and that the training runs as it should. Sometimes, the department which requested the training has additional edits as well. After final approval, the team distributes the training to the hosting site or learning management system, where the training is made available to staff. Depending on the size and scope of the project, production time varies between a few weeks for smaller projects to several months for larger ones. It is essential that deadlines are established and adhered to throughout the project to prevent time and cost overruns.

Simply uploading a video to a hosting site is not always the most appropriate way to conduct a training; Sometimes, documenting attendees or quizzing training participants is needed. The TACT team also utilizes two authoring tool programs to personalize the trainings depending on department-specific needs. Both programs have costs attached, however they allow the development of professional content containing rich visual elements and the ability to include well-designed quizzes to keep the learner engaged.

The TACT team also gathers metrics on the trainings to obtain staff feedback and ensure that the services they provide are beneficial. A Learning Management System (LMS) allows them to review who has taken the trainings, the date and time the training was taken, and the amount of time the trainee has spent on a course. Because the trainings are

saved and accessible online, staff can, and have, returned to courses after completion as a reference tool.

Producing content, whether a short 5-minute training or a series of multiple trainings of varying lengths, can be a complex process. However, the TACT team has built up its knowledge base over time. The experiences gained over the past nine years have helped TACT grow from one person using a phone to record the video to a team of four and a studio full of lights, cameras, microphones, video recorders, and drones. TACT leads the way in innovative training in the Bay Area, including actively working on how to incorporate virtual reality (VR) into their training services. TACT team members relayed receiving great feedback throughout the agency and from various levels of management.

Even though it has been almost a decade since their launch, the members of the TACT team believe that they still have room to grow and expand their reach. Among their plans for the future is a desire to use developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics to create services to provide staff with personalized learning paths tailored to their individual needs, interests, and learning styles. Along with VR technology, the team is also looking into incorporating augmented reality (AR) into their in-person trainings so that participants can use a device to walk around a room and search for information that would pop up on a screen. They also have an eye toward creating their own app that would use short-form video content to provide useful information to staff with a limited amount of time.

Recommendations

One of the roles I hold at Marin County Children and Family Services is Manager over training and staff development. Upon

learning of Alameda County's E-Studio program, I was immediately intrigued and wanted to know more about how the program worked and how we may be able to implement some of what they do into how we train our staff in Marin. Currently, we partner with Bay Area Academy to provide for most of our training needs. They handle the larger items such as CORE training for new workers as well as continuing training for all workers, such as the use of Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessments and Trauma Informed Practice in our everyday work. However, there are several opportunities for training that we handle in-house. Such smaller trainings include familiarizing new workers with the intricacies of each unit and providing more in-depth information on court and visitation processes. We believe that taking a cue from Alameda and using some of the ideas they have developed with their E-Studio program can assist us in streamlining our training services.

Marin County Children and Family Services may be able to strengthen its training and staff development program by lessons learned from Alameda's TACT Team. Currently, Bay Area Academy provides most training, such as CORE training for new workers as well as continuing training for all workers, such as the use of Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessments and Trauma Informed Practice. However, there are several opportunities for training that are handled internally, such as familiarizing new workers with the intricacies of each unit and providing more in-depth information on court and visitation processes. Some ideas from Alameda's E-Studio program can assist in streamlining Marin's training services, such as creating short-form training e-modules to reduce the load of already overburdened staff while still producing training by a familiar face. This concept would allow for the creation of

more personalized trainings that can be easily updated when the need arises. Additionally, with pre-recorded online trainings, staff would have greater flexibility to view at their convenience. This flexibility could potentially free up time for other learning opportunities, especially for newer staff.

Furthermore, as the Division of Children and Family Services is relatively small when compared to some neighboring counties, starting small and following lessons learned by Alameda makes sense. Operating a complex program such as the E-Studio does come with its share of challenges. Among the first of those is gaining leadership approval of the project and locating a funding source. Using a new method to solve a problem can come with some level of discomfort, and money is not always easy to find for new and untested programs. Arguably, the best way to build toward leadership alignment is to be open and communicative about the project's goals and how the project aligns with the mission and values of the agency overall. This will help those in leadership positions better understand how the project will benefit the agency, whether through an enhanced workforce, savings in time or money, or a combination of all of the above. Regarding accessing funding, having a working demonstration to display is crucial. Words alone can only go so far in demonstrating to others why this project deserves to be funded. Showing how the project will operate and having a working budget will help better communicate the endeavor's advantages.

Another complication that can arise is the technical expertise needed to produce high-quality content. The TACT team's advice was to start small and go slowly. Many of the team's skills were self-taught over time, often through intelligent use of

Google and YouTube searches. Starting small also allows better control over the budget, as often, one must prove an idea works before being granted funding for it.

Even after the project is launched, it is vitally important to consistently gather feedback from as many involved parties as possible, including one's own team, leadership team, funding source, and those participating in the training. Open communication is valuable for not only getting people initially on board with the project but also ensuring team members remain aligned throughout the life of the project.

Conclusion

In 2014, Alameda created a production studio with the hope that it would complement, enhance, and make the way their staff are trained more effective. In addition to training, they have provided a wealth of information to several different divisions throughout their agency. Some of their content has even reached the public through public services announcements aired during the most recent Olympics and on Xfinity. Over the past nine years, they have built a highly effective program that has successfully attained their goals. Marin County is well placed to learn from Alameda, but staff at all levels will need to embrace a new way of accessing training before it can become widely accepted. Fortunately, Marin County Health and Human Services leadership is forward-looking and willing to listen to different ideas. Additionally, the Division of CFS is a relatively small division that has recently hired a new Training and Staff Development Supervisor and Manager who expressed interest in learning methods other counties have successfully used to train their staff.

Using low-cost equipment or equipment already available, this team can start developing a framework for an E-Studio that will serve the staff of Marin County. Marin CFS has space adequate for filming and developing short descriptive videos for new staff. Staff and leadership have also already expressed interest in starting a program like the E-Studio in Marin. There is potential for it to grow from short videos for new staff to producing full training videos for all CFS staff and beyond.

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