

WELCOME TO THE SURF
ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN
A NON-CHILD WELFARE PERSPECTIVE

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Richard O'Neil, Director of The Social Services Agency, Santa Clara County. Without his encouragement and support I would not have been able to participate in this exciting program. My deepest appreciation to all my staff and colleagues who took care of business while I attended this program.

Special recognition to the staff of Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency and Mr. Will Lightbourne, Administrator, for giving me a rewarding and memorable internship experience.

Muchas Gracias, to the family in Watsonville for welcoming me to their home and sharing dreams of a better future for their children.

When was the last time you found yourself in a new work setting? It may have been recent and you may have vivid memories of that experience. Or like me, you may have been in the same organization so long your memory of that experience has faded. If so, the everyday ritual of coming to work and settling in have become routine and is done with little thought. It was through my internship experience that I realized how critical it is to get new perspectives when redesigning service delivery systems.

The primary focus of my internship was to look at the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency (HRA) from a non-child welfare perspective. This case study will focus on my observations and experiences as a newcomer to that agency, and implications for redesigning the service delivery system in Santa Clara County, Department of Family & Children's Services (DCFS).

I selected Santa Cruz County for my internship because it afforded me the opportunity to work in a smaller agency. Santa Cruz County has both urban and rural communities with an approximate population of 229,734. The two primary ethnic groups are Anglo (74.5%) and Latino (20.4%). The mission statement of the Santa Cruz HRA is very clearly service oriented. The role of staff is addressed by the following statement:

“As the staff of HRA, we emphasize team-work, a spirit of *si se puede*, and a commitment to mutual respect and support of each other’s dignity. We emphasize shared involvement in decision-making and the responsible delegation of authority to the levels where key tasks are implemented. The most important role in our agency is service to our clients, and all support and management functions are committed to assist staff to perform direct services.”

The inclusion of the Spanish phrase “*si se puede*” which means “yes, it can be done” and the accompanying full Spanish translation of the mission statement acknowledges the Spanish speaking community in Santa Cruz County. In reviewing the mission statement it was apparent there had been a lot of thought given to the needs of agency staff as well as the community they serve.

One of the areas public service administrators are criticized about both from the public and the staff is the lack of response to questions and concerns. We don’t return phone calls and are in meetings and not available to staff when they need us. I realize that some of this is perceived by critics as a lack of caring and mismanagement. Mr. Lightbourne, Administrator, Santa Cruz Human Resource Agency is aware there is little public recognition of the difficult job we have. His sensitivity comes from his own personal experience in the private sector in a community based organization. When making decisions on cutbacks he chose to keep staff who provided direct services to the community. With fewer clerical staff he learned to use the computer and relied on himself to return calls and schedule appointments.

One of the most widely used communication tools in Santa Cruz HRA’s administration section is the “Profs” electronic mail system. Mr. Lightbourne utilizes this mail system on a daily basis and expects everyone else to do so. I found it very helpful and appreciated the accessibility it gave me to staff in the agency. I realized how much Mr. Lightbourne has done to foster good

morale in his agency. He models by returning calls, voice mail messages and answering his electronic mail. Everyone I asked gave positive feedback on utilizing the electronic mail system to give and receive information. I noted the electronic mail addresses were incorporated in the Santa Cruz HRA directory. In the administration area, it was common knowledge that Mr. Lightbourne checked to see if you read your electronic mail and picked up your voice mail messages. I believed his clear expectations contribute to a positive work climate that fosters pride, team work and good morale.

Establishing credibility takes time and commitment. The past four and one half years have been challenging for Mr. Lightbourne as he has guided his agency towards a client-centered approach. The staff changes in his administrative team reflect high standards of integrity, work performance and accountability. Administrative staff are quick to acknowledge staff and give them credit for the difficult work they do. I was particularly impressed with the high regard given to the difficult work performed by front line social workers, supervisory and managerial staff.

The use of telephone voice mail is prevalent in both Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties. As we move away from the personal greeting we must recognize the importance of returning calls in a prompt manner. The policy in Santa Cruz Adult and Children's Services is that all calls to workers, supervisors, managers and the director be answered by the next working day. This policy is incorporated in the greeting message. I was pleasantly surprised to learn this policy is supported by the staff and used in the annual performance evaluation as a measure of job performance for everyone. I spoke with several staff members who felt the expectation was realistic and flexible to the demands of their work schedule. I did not get any sense of resentment from staff to this policy. It was refreshing to see an organization set similar expectations for both its director and line staff. Establishing clear expectations is important when it is time to give employees feedback on their performance and areas they need to work on.

Often times the public evaluates an agency by what is reported in the news. The media has not been kind to human service agencies or providers. I'm sure many of us have cringed at the thought of being interviewed to explain or justify why certain actions were taken in our agencies. Dealing with the media was not a class that was offered in graduate school. Like many of you, most of my knowledge is derived from attending workshops and first hand experience. Publicizing agency policies to the community it serves takes time. It also has an element of risk taking as you allow yourself and the organization to be held accountable to the policies and procedures you publicize. I applaud Mr. Lightbourne for sending a copy of The Family Preservation Family Support Five Year Plan to the editor of the local newspaper and inviting him to meet and discuss the plan.

As new employees, many of us come into this field with the idea of helping others. What a rude awakening it was to find that much of our time is spent on paperwork and meeting the needs of the organization instead of the people it serves. One of the biggest challenges we have is to work smarter and make use of all available resources. As a newcomer to the Santa Cruz HRA I had the opportunity to call upon individuals and visit different work sites. The general atmosphere was one of support and caring. Everyone has more than enough to do as caseloads are high and

staff shortages exist were receptive to ideas and eager to hear how other counties provided services.

There is a strong emphasis on working with community agencies to provide services. As human service agencies face cutbacks, this collaboration will become a necessity instead of a choice. There is a lot to learn from community based agencies that serve the same population we as government agencies serve. Mutual clientele who are not able to tell government agencies how they feel they are being treated or served are more apt to share information with community providers. Understanding each other's service delivery system, program mandates and limitations is going to be critical as funding is reduced and duplication of services is no longer possible or acceptable. Developing and fostering strong working relationships will be necessary to provide the limited services funded by federal, state and county government. Definition of clear and measurable outcomes will be a challenge to all of us. When relationships with community agencies are there can be an open sharing with emphasis on improvement rather than blaming.

One of the areas I have a particular interest in is Family Preservation Family Support Services. The Family Preservation and Support Act of 1993 allocates federal money for five years for states to oversee county planning and implementation. The legislation mandates the State of California to spend at least 50% of its allocation to family support and 25% to family preservation. The remaining 25% may be allocated to either program or both. The goal is to provide a collaborative service delivery system to support families and to find new ways of delivering these services with improved outcomes. During my internship, I was invited to join a family unification team comprised of four individuals representing Santa Cruz HRA and two community agencies on a home visit. The purpose of the home visit was to talk with the parents, children, and extended family members to follow up on agreements made at the previous visit. The family was asked in advance if I could attend the session and assured of confidentiality. The team met before the visit to share information and develop a strategy for getting everyone to participate. The focus was to have the family assess their own progress with the goals of the service plan. I was particularly impressed with the trusting relationship between the team members. Their discussion was centered around the family and possible barriers they may encounter during the visit. I attribute the positive working relationship to inter-agency agreements which must be clear on role definitions and commitment to outcomes. As a manager, I found the home visit to be a rewarding experience. It gave me an opportunity to observe both the family and service providers and participate by entertaining the children during the first part of the visit. This experience helped me think about the importance of self-assessment as we move toward a client-centered approach. When was the last time you had any interaction with clientele served by your agency? Not a reactive interaction but a pro-active one, in which you provided information or a service. This opportunity should be integrated in our daily work and prioritized by allocating time for it to take place.

In reflecting on my internship and what I have described in this case study I thought of the saying "the grass is greener on the other side." In this case, it would be literally "over the hill" since Santa Cruz is located approximately thirty-five miles from San Jose over the Santa Cruz mountains. On a more serious note, the experience gained from the twenty day internship has been priceless. I have gained both professionally and personally in meeting new people and establishing numerous alliances. The opportunity to visit a new agency and come in as a new

employee has been a humbling experience for me. Whether you work in Santa Cruz County or Santa Clara County I have come to the conclusion that as human service providers we entered this field for one common purpose; to help others. When you lose sight of that, its important that you take the time to reflect on your reasons for being in the profession.

In summary, it is important for agencies to define their mission statement and identify the goal of their agency. Staff and community members should play a role in the development of the mission with the ultimate responsibility belonging to the leader of the agency. The promoting of team work is meant to foster positive work relationships and improve productivity not substitute for leadership. The mission statement should be publicized and incorporated into the agency wide service delivery system. As administrators, managers and supervisors, it is our responsibility to advocate for our staff and clients. Too often, we are concerned with consequences to our careers and remain silent when decisions are made that go against the very principles we believe in.

I reflected on how the knowledge gained during my internship in Santa Cruz HRA could be utilized in Santa Clara County Social Services Agency's service delivery system. I came to the conclusion that redesigning the service delivery systems in the Department of Family and Children's Services is not going to be easy. One of the biggest challenges we face in DFCS is team building across the continuum of service. We have found that being bigger is not necessarily better. There is much to learn from smaller agencies like Santa Cruz who have fewer resources and have invited community agencies to assist them in providing services. I plan to share my learning experience with the executive team, managers, supervisors, line staff, community providers, political leaders and clients in Santa Clara county to see what we can do to improve our service delivery system.

Administrative staff from Santa Cruz county have made a commitment to continue to share information and ideas to promote inter-county collaboration. I look forward to this venture and the benefits it will have for those that we serve.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to Mr. Will Lightbourne and all of his staff for making me feel welcome and being so open to having a newcomer join them. I would like to especially acknowledge Ms. Eileen Timberlake, Senior Analyst for all her support and guidance during my internship.

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