

# Linkages: Coordinating Service Delivery for Child Welfare Families in Alameda County

BILL HARVEN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The link between poverty and families with children at-risk is noted across research circles. A family struggling with poverty and unemployment faces increased chances of facing child welfare interventions. The last thing on the mind of the adults in the family might be “Could my public assistance be affected?” In fact, in California, the eligibility rules could discontinue cash aid with removal of a child from the home.

Dual system families—families caught in the dual snare of child welfare intervention while on public assistance—confront the significant challenges of trying to restore family unity while gaining some stability. Fortunately, an innovative program in California attempts to restore these families by continuing the supportive services available through the CalWORKs Welfare-to-Work (WTW) program. *Linkages* represents a collaborative response to a family’s concrete psycho-social and preservation needs.

The Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) participates in the statewide Linkages initiative to serve WTW families receiving reunification services from child welfare services. Since 2001, the ACSSA has developed key strategies reflecting an integrated services approach for service delivery. Coordinated activities, like case planning, not only improve continuity and direction for dual systems families, but can improve the internal organization through open communication, information sharing, and mutual learning. Agency directors reaffirmed support following a program review in 2010.

San Mateo County has past experience with a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach to welfare services interventions. There should be interest in addressing the needs of dual systems populations. This case study inspects the structures and delivery mechanisms for administering a Linkages program, and recommends a framework to guide implementation.

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## Introduction

Families enter the child welfare system (CWS) because their home situation has been found unsuitable for child safety and well-being. The path to reunification can be arduous over a long period of time. The caretakers will be subjected to assessments, court proceedings, meetings to create case plans, and participation in required activities. When the family has already experienced levels of deprivation because of unemployment or underemployment, lack of financial means, and basic needs of shelter or medical care, then the challenges can be multiplied exponentially.

Some of these same families have already entered another system of welfare, CalWORKs, that delivers income maintenance and supportive services. Program requirements can impose different assessments, case planning and participation in work-related activities. However, the intention of the basic assistance and supportive services is meant to help a needy family function adequately through transitory hardships. The disruption caused by a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigated incident of neglect or maltreatment not only affects the family unity, but can impact the eligibility for continued CalWORKs services.

Because there is a strong link between poverty and at-risk families, it makes sense to look for innovative practices that provide a coordinated response to families' concrete, psycho-social and medical needs. Welfare reform ushered in a host of changes

that have precipitated approaches for an integrated services model. Demonstration projects funded by federal grants are paving the way for developing collaborative programs aimed at attending to combined family strengthening, child reunification and economic self sufficiency. One such program attempting to deliver integrated services is called Linkages.

## Background

Opposing opinions regarded welfare reform (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, 1996) as either having detrimental effects on child welfare or ameliorating barriers to family security. The new rules for eligibility required work participation, imposed sanctions for non-participation, and limited the client's time on aid. These additional stressors could shift more families into risk situations. On the other hand, block grants to states gave more flexibility in developing services as long as assistance was directed to self-sufficiency. Research got underway and uncovered some interesting conclusions about welfare participation and child welfare interventions. Anecdotal data suggested that the client's background and pre-disposition to work determines the consequences on child welfare outcomes (Frame & Berrick, 2003). Another study conducted on out-of-home placements presented likely predictors in the new welfare era: having multi-child households, being on welfare for an extended time, and having work requirements while living on welfare (Geen, Kortenkamp & Stagner, 2002).

The concern for struggling families raised a desire for an integrated service model. Its basic purpose would be to prevent welfare staff from working at cross-purposes with families (Frame, 1999). In this regard, a key component in the framework of integrated services is collaborative service planning.

During a time when many attempts were made to redesign service delivery, the State of Tennessee became the center of focus for research that documented outcomes related to processes and organizational characteristics (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). This relevant study defined the components of coordinated service delivery: to reduce duplication of effort, facilitate access to information, facilitate placements and services, and establish mechanisms for ensuring accountability. Strategies for coordinated service delivery began taking shape in different ways. Case teams, dual-service units, service coordinators, unified case plans—all try to bridge the unique program requirements for child welfare and CalWORKs to improve outcomes for family preservation and self sufficiency.

### **Tracking the Linkages Project in Alameda County**

Seventeen counties participated in the first phase of the state sponsored Linkages initiative. Assembly Bill (AB) 429 (Aroner, 2001) amended the CalWORKs regulations by allowing for continuation of CalWORKs services under specified circumstances when a child has been removed from the home and is receiving out of home care. Access to Welfare-to-Work (WTW) activities, such as mental health and substance abuse treatment, can be provided during the family reunification process. Beginning in 2007, a five-year discretionary federal grant from the Administration for Children and Families to the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) supplied funding for a demonstration of the Linkages Project. Counties have joined to discuss practices, gain technical support, and conduct workgroups. Each county completes a state work-plan, and reports performance results to CDSS.

Alameda County ranks as one of the pioneers in Linkages implementation in California. However,

initial implementation was limited to integrating Employment Counselors in to the Children and Family Services (CFS) department. During the intervening years, several changes occurred that began a full-fledged commitment to renew Linkages practice:

- Labor agreements allowed CFS Linkages liaisons to absorb more work at the start of the case.
- Coordination encompassed five departments: CFS, Economics Benefits Department (EBD), Employment Development Services (EDS), Training, and Research and Evaluation
- A new policy resolved conflicts of dual cash aid benefits
- Investment in an integrated reporting system defined business logic to identify Linkages candidates

The leadership team of the agency executives affirmed their support of the continued deployment of resources and Statewide Linkages Project participation. Improvements in Linkages coordination, training and development, and governance have established a collaborative culture for Linkages to flourish while the demand for social services has risen. From July 2010 to August 2011, 95 families received Linkages services. The average monthly intake reported by a recent case count is five cases.

In Alameda County, the Linkages Liaison plays a critical role in communication between CFS and EBD. The following are key tasks:

- Monitor Team Decision Making (TDM) schedules and clear CalWORKs cases for CPS referrals;
- Attend the TDM and inform the family about Linkages services;
- Obtain consent from caregivers to share information;
- Initiate request for Employment Counselor case assignment; and
- Upon final Family Reunification (FR) disposition, send notification for service plan coordination

In addition, the Linkages Liaison is the secondary social worker on the case during the investigation.

Engagement with families occurs at the coordinated case planning conference. The FR social worker and employment counselor review the court mandated activities and priorities. Agreements are captured on the WTW plan and CFS coordinated plan. Monthly status checks between case workers address family progress and case revisions.

Alameda County has incorporated the Linkages approach for Family Maintenance (FM) cases as well. However, after the family re-applies for CalWORKs, the parents must meet the participation levels in approved WTW activities. Coordinated case planning is still a key to facilitating participation and access to available resources.

In Alameda County, the Linkages Steering Committee meets monthly to discuss issues regarding coordination and evaluation. The Steering Committee provides a level of governance that allows cross-department communication and decision-making. Each member accepts a role and responsibility for actions if required. The recommendations from the committee have defined data report requirements, case processing expectations, mutual learning and program knowledge, and policy development.

**Internal Benefits of Linkages**

Feedback from staff who have been involved in Linkages reveals strong perceptions about organizational effectiveness and increased accountability. The statewide evaluation of participating counties captured survey responses and comments from liaisons and staff in line positions. Overall, workers have been

able to draw upon more resources; collaborative planning fosters family engagement; information flows on both sides about the families they serve; and timely actions often reduce duplication when the workers can easily communicate with each other (The Linkages Project Statewide Evaluation Final Report, Harder + Co, 2011).

**Coordinated Case Planning Strategies in San Mateo County**

San Mateo County has implemented two strategies with coordinated approaches: Team Decision-Making (TDM) and Family Self-Sufficiency Teams (FSST). TDM invites the active involvement of families, extended family and community members, caregivers, service providers, and child welfare staff. TDM figures prominently as a core strategy for placement decisions where children are at risk. As such, case planning is subordinate to the effort to reach a placement decision. However, the case carrying social worker reaches new insights about the complex situation of the family, and how factors of deprivation, inadequate resources, and lack of skills contribute to the risk.

Up until 2009, San Mateo also conducted FSSTs. As the name denotes, the objective was to assist the family to regain stability and self sufficiency. Clients were referred to the FSST Coordinator by either the CFS or the Economic Self Sufficiency (ESS) divisions. The FSST component was included in the CFS differential response system to coordinate community services for Path 2 families. In practice, the FSST aligns

**TABLE 1**  
**Linkages Steering Committee Membership**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CFS Division Director—Co-Coordinator</li> <li>▪ Welfare Benefits Division Director</li> <li>▪ Welfare Benefits Program Manager</li> <li>▪ Welfare Benefits Program Specialist</li> <li>▪ Training Department Managers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ CFS Mgt Analyst—Co-Coordinator</li> <li>▪ CFS Program Managers</li> <li>▪ CFS Supervisor—Linkages Liaison</li> <li>▪ Social Services Policy Director</li> <li>▪ Information Systems Manager</li> <li>▪ Information Systems Analyst</li> </ul>
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with the framework for Linkages in the following ways:

- resolves an acute need for services,
- resolves conflicts in case plans and minimizes overlaps,
- streamlines the participants schedule to meet requirements,
- shares information about client history, barriers, preferences, etc., and
- defines an FSST action plan and reconvenes in 6 months.

The FSST action plan supplemented welfare aid and gave the client concrete assistance for a specific need. In a format similar to TDMS, the meeting had a facilitator to moderate the discussions and record decisions. However, the FSST model collapsed when budget reductions in mental health and substance abuse services limited the scope of benefits and resources. Until its final year, the program provided one-time financial assistance for safety net services and basic needs.

## Next Steps

Linkages relates to key objectives in San Mateo's System Improvement Plan (SIP) for

carrying out the vision for child safety, stability, permanency and well-being. The recent SIP identified re-entry rates as showing slight upward trends. Proposed strategies to address the re-entry outcomes included assurance to match community-based services with needs and the provision of family reunification services with children in placement.

The foundational elements for incorporating Linkages are present within the CFS and Employment Services divisions. As mentioned previously, TDMS approach all placement decisions with a group focus on workable options for placement. Community representatives will already have familiarity with the case, and connections through joint case planning with these providers will build continuity through the reunification process.

The Linkages initiative will need to establish solutions for governance, communication protocols,

joint case planning processes, system modifications for ensuring that services receive the appropriate claiming, and program targets. I recommend that child welfare and employment services programs consider an implementation framework utilizing the following elements:

- Leverage the Statewide Linkages Initiative for resources and support. The Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC) maintains guides and planning toolkits for interested counties.
- Identify transferable best practices such as processes and procedures, position descriptions, and training materials. We should wisely invest the time to find out what worked in counties like Alameda, and also find out why other counties discontinued their formal programs.
- Develop and recruit the Linkages liaison position. The role requires a connection to the front end of child protective services, and should have a familiarity with parent engagement.
- Manage the initiative through joint communication and employee forums. Begin to foster the interdepartmental communication skills by holding presentations and information fairs. Service coordination should be matched with service orientation.
- Phase in implementation by assisting eligible FR families. This conforms to the amended CalWORKs provisions, and properly attaches a funding stream to the services. A second phase could service FM families, and look to grants and matching fund mechanisms for obtaining resources and benefits.

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# An Evaluation of Contra Costa County's Parent Partner Program: Why it Works

BRANDI MOORE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Introduction**

Contra Costa County Children's and Family Services has a goal to improve outcomes for families and reduce recidivism. In 2005, Contra Costa County rolled out the Parent Partner program to assist with this goal. The Parent Partner program is an advocate program made up of previous clients that have successfully navigated the child welfare system. The goal is to provide new parent clients with support, empathy and hope.

### **Findings**

In 2009, the Center for Social Services Research at the School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley completed a study on Contra Costa County's Parent Partner program. The data indicated approximately 60% of children with a Parent Partner reunified with their parents within 12 months of

removal compared to 26% of children whose parents were not served. Parent clients felt they could relate to Parent Partners and viewed them as a source of support. Parent clients also indicated Parent Partners offered hope that they too could be successful at reunifying with their children.

### **Recommendations for Solano County**

The positive outcomes from the Parent Partner program cannot be ignored. Solano County should attempt to model Contra Costa County's success on a smaller scale by implementing a one-year pilot Parent Partner Project. At the conclusion of the pilot, Solano County can assess if the program is a good fit, and at this time the county will have hopefully accessed a funding stream to maintain the program long term.

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