

Developing and Tracking Skill Sets for Child Welfare Workers in Santa Clara County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child welfare is a complex system that works with families experiencing major issues that contribute to child maltreatment. Dependency child welfare social workers must understand how child welfare policies, protocols, and laws interrelate in their work with families. For social workers the skill sets they need to develop and maintain are multi-faceted and highly complex. Their areas of knowledge and skill sets need to be extensive as they orchestrate numerous activities to help parents progress in their case plan. An effective child welfare social worker masters a unique blend of skills to obtain positive outcomes in child

welfare. Without a uniform guide for supervisors to track the development of their social workers' skill sets in a complex system like dependency child welfare, the acquisition of some needed skills can be overlooked.

Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's services would benefit from creating uniformity in defining and tracking the development of expected skill sets for its child welfare social workers. This type of project can be implemented through extensive collaboration across the social services' agency departments.

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Introduction

Child welfare's purpose is to maintain the safety, well-being, and permanency of children while adhering to complex child welfare laws and policy mandates. Due to the complexity of child welfare, this case study focuses on dependency child welfare social work specializing in family maintenance, family reunification, and permanency planning. This focus is used to illustrate the importance of having consensus and uniformity around defined core skill sets. In Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (SCDFCS), social workers managing these types of cases are referred to as continuing social workers.

Dependency child welfare is a complex system that works with families dealing with major clinical issues, such as mental health, poverty, trauma, discrimination, and substance abuse, which contribute to the maltreatment of children. It is essential for dependency child welfare social workers to understand how child welfare policies and protocols interrelate in their work with families experiencing these types of clinical issues. Additionally, knowledge of the Juvenile Dependency Court and how to effectively convey assessments and recommendations to court is needed. Therefore, the skill sets continuing social workers must develop and maintain need to be multi-faceted and highly complex in order to effectively work with parents and children.

New social workers in SCDFCS begin learning about child welfare through the formal Social Work Induction Training coordinated by Staff

Development. It is then through case management activities these skill sets are attained and mastered. In SCDFCS, the social work supervisor position oversees the social workers' daily activities with families. Social work supervisors are responsible for assessing, developing, and maintaining their social workers' skills. However, little exists for connecting the social workers' curricula of learned objectives in induction training to showing proficiency in the field. Existing online policies and procedures explain current processes and generic job specifications, limited to describing general qualifications. Without a uniform guide for supervisors to track the development of necessary skill sets in a complex system like dependency child welfare, some essential skills can be overlooked.

Santa Cruz County Human Services Department's (SCHSD) Performance Expectations project defines acceptable performance levels to assist Eligibility Benefits Division employees to become fully competent in their job classifications and standardized performance management. Santa Clara County DFCS can reference Santa Cruz County's project to help create uniformity in defining expected skill sets for its child welfare social workers' professional development, as well as uniformity in performance management documentation.

Dependency Social Worker Core Skill Sets

In Santa Clara County DFCS there are different service bureaus specializing in the various aspects of child welfare such as child protective services hot line

screening, emergency response, dependency investigation, continuing dependency, and placement. Once a family enters the child welfare dependency system, the longest duration of services received will be in the continuing service bureau. At this stage in the child welfare dependency system the court has taken jurisdiction over the child and made dispositional orders for the case plan parents must complete. Hearings are scheduled at six-month intervals to review case plan progress. The parents' clock has started running, especially if reunification with their child is the goal.

The families spend the most amount of time working with child welfare social workers to make progress on their case plans during these timelines dictated by the court hearings scheduled at six-month intervals. Therefore, the social workers' areas of knowledge and skill sets need to be extensive as they orchestrate numerous activities focused on helping parents progress with their case plans. Below are descriptions of the core skills set an effective continuing social worker managing dependency cases must have knowledge on:

Clinical – understand complex social issues, theories of social behavior, human development and growth, the ability to engage with clients, and the have the ability to implement this knowledge with clients. Also develop keen assessment skills to identify risk of child well-being, and understanding of the effects of child maltreatment.

Case Management – addresses accessibility of resources based on the assessed clinical issues and the timeliness for accessing them while at the same time maneuvering within the department's bureaucracy and adhering to policies and procedures. These tasks deal with placement, case planning, contacts, health and mental health, education, family teaming, staffing, and case closure.

Court Work – knowing Juvenile Dependency Court policies and procedures and have forensic writing skills of court reports to the Juvenile

Dependency Court requiring the translation of case management and clinical work that shows reasonable efforts. This entails the understanding of child welfare law, legal timelines, recommendations, and how they interrelate with the case management duties.

While some skills are easily defined; others are not as tangible such as engagement skills. An example of this is when social workers are able to maintain good working relationships with parents and children despite needing to submit recommendations to the court contrary to their clients' wishes. These social workers have developed their engagement skills to maintain working relationships with their families despite what could be seen as a setback.

Furthermore, a social worker must have the necessary skills to develop and maintain relationships with internal and external people who provide or dispense resources. These people are generally the gatekeepers of highly sought after, sparse resources. Not having the skills required to create relationships with such gatekeepers cripples a social worker's ability to perform case management services and, in turn, affects parents connecting successfully to services to make case plan progress.

The overarching skill sets needed most are time management, prioritization, and organization. Even with knowledge and understanding of the above areas, without these skills delays can affect the families' progress. Courts are unable to make rulings because information is not being provided in a timely manner or resources are provided late. An effective child welfare social worker has to master a unique blend of skill sets to obtain positive outcomes in child welfare.

Santa Clara County DFCS has made some progress creating uniformity by identifying its Child and Family Practice Model. This approach incorporates a Coaching Services Delivery Model for managers and supervisors to perform, which is then documented in a service log. Though this service log is being developed specifically for the activity of coaching, it is not expected to be used for evaluating performance. The

how, what, and where of performance management documentation varies greatly among supervisors.

Recommendation

Santa Clara County DFCS can reference Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (HSD) Performance Expectations project, which has helped to standardize performance documentation and job-specific expectations. In this project, personnel created a Supervisors Desk folder to maintain and standardize supervisors' performance management documentation. This folder contains attendance tracking calendars and performance narrative sheets. Their supervisors now maintain documentation on performance management discussions and issues in these folders.

Something similar could be developed by Santa Clara County DFCS staff to standardize performance management documentation for both managers and supervisors; however, instead of using a hard paper file, it could be an electronic version. A Microsoft Word folder containing files of templates and guides could easily be developed and placed into a shared drive. Managers and supervisors could easily access the files to copy and save into their personal documents drive when they have new social workers starting with them. Such a folder would be helpful in creating uniformity for supervisors and knowing how, what, and where to document performance management.

Another part of the Santa Cruz County HSD project creates a better understanding of job-performance expectations needed to be successful within their different generic job specifications. Santa Clara County DFCS can develop something similar for tracking and fostering skill sets for social workers in each of its different service bureaus.

The resources needed for a Santa Clara County Social Services Agency to implement a similar project do exist. An extensive collaboration across the agency's departments would need to happen. There is existing staff from DFCS (managers, supervisors, and social workers) as well as information systems

staff, staff development, and other personnel who can be a part of their collaboration. Existing curricula from the Social Work Induction Training and Bay Area's Academy Foundations of Supervision can be used as a springboard from where the project can start defining skill sets and performance management documentation.

Implementation Challenges

Some challenges are familiar and known for affecting implementation of agency-wide projects such as committed project leaders and staff time. The great challenge is DFCS is a large department with seven services bureaus and three sites. Some bureaus have social workers performing multiple service types that necessitate specialized skill sets.

As performance management documentation is an all-agency need, it may be easier to start here. Deciding what performance management documentation to maintain would require input from personnel, managers and supervisors. This would be a collaborative project comprised of managers, supervisors, personnel, staff development, and possibly labor.

Conclusion

This project has highlighted the paramount need for the agency to build a bridge between social work induction training and the practice element of case management. Through the creation of a learning agreement between supervisor and social worker, skill sets needing to be developed can be identified. Further, through standardized performance management documentation, at least some of the professional growth in these skills can be tracked. This incorporates a hands-on process of identifying and training basic skill sets for social workers to effectively work with families. The ultimate goal is the development of competent skill sets for social workers in order to work with families more effectively and accomplish child welfare's purpose to keep families together whenever possible while ensuring that children are safe from abuse and maltreatment.

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