

Reducing Social Workers' Transitions: Lessons from Santa Cruz County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most counties in California, including San Francisco County, have traditionally divided up their Family and Children's Services (FCS) social workers by function. In San Francisco, when a report of child abuse or neglect comes in, the call is handled by a hotline worker. If the call comes at night, an after-hours worker might go out to meet with a family. If an investigation is warranted, the case is passed to an emergency response worker, and then, if necessary, to a court dependency worker, who files a petition to make the child a dependent of the court. After a disposition hearing to determine if a child will become a dependent, cases are transferred to workers who specialize in family maintenance or family reunification, and eventually, if needed, to workers in permanent placement or adoption units. This approach has allowed social workers to develop expertise in specific legal issues and best practices in specialized areas; but research indicates that frequent transitions

from one social worker to another may have a negative impact on client outcomes. Over the past several years, a number of counties have tried to reduce the number of such transitions. Since 2010, San Francisco's Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) has commissioned several studies about worker organization and assignment. As a result of those analyses, SF-HSA has implemented some structural changes, but functions remain separate, and clients typically continue to progress through four to five protective services workers.

In 2012, Santa Cruz County combined its Emergency Response (ER) and Dependency Investigations (DI) groups into one group: Investigations. Two years later, the county also integrated its previously specialized post-disposition units. This case study explores the changes Santa Cruz County made and makes recommendations for San Francisco.

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Background

Santa Cruz County had customarily divided its child welfare workers into three functions:

- **Emergency Response (ER):** These workers conducted an immediate assessment of risk with a family and held the referral until a petition was filed in court (or the case was closed).
- **Dependency Investigations (DI):** These workers handled cases from the petition filing up to the jurisdiction hearing/disposition hearing (typically 15 days). They were responsible for filing detailed court reports and also providing case management (engaging families, setting up visits, and referring clients for services).
- **Ongoing Services:** These social workers handled cases after disposition. The workers were grouped in specialized units: Family Maintenance, Family Reunification, Teens/Permanency Planning, and Adoptions.

Santa Cruz County staff had concerns for many years about frequent worker transitions. The county knew that families involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) could often have three to four primary workers within a span of one month, and those frequent changes could leave families confused and frustrated.

In 2010, the agency was also struggling with a severe backlog of referrals. CPS is required to act on and close every referral of potential child abuse and neglect within 30 days, but by late 2010 Santa Cruz had almost 700 cases that had gone over 30 days.

These referrals had been investigated, but social workers were having difficulty keeping up with the paperwork to close them officially. ER workers were regularly assigned 15-17 referrals in a month. DI workers were also struggling; they often ended up with responsibility for one to two detailed court reports per week (30-40 pages each) while also trying to provide clients with services and case management. Workers frequently asked the court to continue cases, frustrating the court officers. In addition, workers felt they had little time for the needs of the children and families. Workers were often unable to engage families in the case planning process; some social workers reported they were developing case-plan documents an hour before the report was due in court. In an attempt to get at the referral backlog, Santa Cruz County tried pulling in staff from other programs and authorizing extensive overtime. It also engaged County Counsel in attempts to streamline the reports. None of these steps had much of an effect. Ultimately, management decided a larger change was necessary.

A Decision to Change

Starting in 2011, Santa Cruz County began to investigate how it might redistribute the assignment of social work tasks. Using training days from the Bay Area Academy, the county hired a consultant, Mary Garrison, who was familiar with similar efforts underway in other counties. On her recommendation, Santa Cruz County managers read a study produced by San Francisco HSA's Planning division that

reviewed intake processes in eight California counties. The Santa Cruz County managers also went to Riverside County to see how it had integrated its front-end units.

Mary Garrison was experienced in organizational change, and advised Santa Cruz County to bring staff along gradually with any proposed plans for change. The county surveyed social workers to better understand their values and goals and formed a steering committee with managers and supervisors from each of the three functional areas. As Abby Wexler, Assistant Division Director, explained, the management then held a “road show,” presenting possible models to the steering committee and to units, carefully choosing the language to explain how these changes fit with worker values and hopes for the agency. Management asked workers to provide their feedback on the different models, at the same time, management made it clear that the division director would make the final decision about any redistribution of tasks.

Santa Cruz County decided to combine ER workers and DI workers into one group, to be known simply as Investigations. Joining the 14 ER workers with the six dedicated DI workers meant that a team of 20 would investigate referrals and craft court reports. Santa Cruz County also shifted case management duties that had been part of the DI workers’ responsibilities to Ongoing Services, asking them to engage clients at detention hearings and act as second caseworkers alongside the Investigations worker until the disposition hearing (after which the case would shift to Ongoing Services entirely). Santa Cruz County also increased its contract with a non-profit service provider to take on more of the work setting up parent visits. While no new social workers were added to the division, county managers hoped that a larger, more flexible pool of workers and the removal of case management and visitation duties would allow referrals and court reports to be distributed more evenly and help workers reduce the backlog.

The First Redistribution of Tasks: A (Mostly) Well-Planned Transition

As Santa Cruz County planned for the redistribution of social work tasks on the front-end in 2012, child welfare managers wanted a careful implementation. Since workers would be taking on new tasks, management created extensive training programs and instruction manuals. The attractive, color-coded manuals included flow charts on how to handle cases, screening tools to use with clients, checklists of the tasks needed at each juncture in a case, and other forms and tools. The manuals also provided clear instructions on proper format for a jurisdiction/disposition report. Santa Cruz managers also created shadowing opportunities where ER workers learned how to write court reports from seasoned veterans and also share their own best practices with the former DI workers.

As Santa Cruz County implemented this change, management wrote broad policy guidelines, but left latitude for supervisors to determine details and refine policies as they implemented the new arrangements and saw how they worked on the ground. The supervisors also developed a set of supervision techniques to ensure that workloads remained steady and manageable. Supervisors reviewed individual reports of abuse or neglect as they assigned them and made assessments to prevent any one ER worker from ending up with a lot of referrals that were likely to become open cases or have a child removed (as those cases are more labor-intensive). Investigation’s supervisors decided to meet weekly and review each worker’s cases, including referrals assigned, referrals that had gone beyond 30 days without disposition, and court reports that needed to be written. They also chose to give workers protected time to devote to writing court reports; supervisors also made sure not to assign immediate referrals to workers on their protected days.

While implementation of the first redistribution of tasks was not always easy, Santa Cruz County managers considered it a success. It was able to get the number of referrals per worker down from 15-17 a

month to 10 a month (all workers now also get about one court report to write per month as well). Because the two groups of workers had both done investigative work (with ER coming in earlier and DI coming in a bit later), it was fairly easy to merge the two groups. Santa Cruz County was also able to show an immediate win as the referral backlog was cleared and workers felt their work was more predictable. The court was pleased to find fewer continued cases. Some post-disposition workers struggled with the new work shifted to them as they came onto cases at the detention hearing. For some, it was a shift to a different pace of work; used to working with clients over six month periods or longer, they now had to drop everything when assigned to a new case in its early phases. Some workers also found it challenging to provide services earlier to teens when youth might be placed out of county—an earlier introduction to the case meant additional months of visits to youth who might be far from Santa Cruz. There were also obstacles along the way in relations with union representatives; in retrospect, Santa Cruz County management now believes they should have consulted with union staff much earlier. Despite these challenges, it appears the first redistribution of tasks was largely successful.

Redistribution of Post-Disposition Tasks: A Rockier Implementation

Once the first redistribution of tasks was complete, Santa Cruz County turned to a second challenge: redistributing social work tasks among the post-disposition units. Under the former model, Ongoing Services workers were supposed to be engaging in concurrent planning around family reunification and permanency. However, because they needed to focus on immediate services to families, they often found it hard to also work on permanency. The second redistribution of tasks was designed to reduce the number of worker transitions and also improve concurrent planning. This second phase, implemented in 2014, combined the previously separate units (Ongoing Services, Teen, Permanent Placement, and Adoptions). Ideally, after the second redistribution

of tasks, clients would have only two workers from the beginning of their case to the end: an Investigations worker for the first 30 days and a Post-Disposition worker until reunification or permanency.

Because of all the groundwork that had been laid with the first redistribution of tasks, management chose to act quickly. The management team has since realized now that quick action may have been a mistake. The second redistribution of tasks came at a time when the county was down some staff and caseloads were growing, which left staff coping with process changes while also handling an increased workload. While management had been banking on caseloads of about 20, workers were ending up with caseloads in the mid-to-high 20's, or even higher. It also became clear during implementation that the nature of some of the work being combined was not compatible. While most of the family reunification and family maintenance work focused on case management, Adoptions and work related to AB 12 (funding to support extended foster care for youth 18-21) required keen understanding of complicated legal requirements. The pace of the work also led to complications with training. With front-end tasks, Santa Cruz County staff found it was possible to train workers on a new practice area (e.g., writing court reports) and have workers use their new skills immediately, reinforcing the training. For post-disposition tasks, all workers received training on technical topics like adoptions, but then found they might not have a chance to put those skills into action for six or eight months, because the cases going to adoptions were now spread out among all of the Post-Disposition workers. Workers felt frustrated and unprepared.

According to Abby Wexler, the rockier implementation of the second redistribution of tasks drove home the importance of the careful implementation the agency had employed with the first redistribution. In early spring 2015, Santa Cruz County reconsidered its strategy. The management team recreated the steering committee that had worked so well with the first redistribution of tasks. In March 2015, management presented the steering committee

with five new possible models for the distribution of tasks among post-disposition workers, and had steering committee members solicit feedback from supervisors and workers. In April 2015, Judy Yokel, the FCS Director, decided on a model that is a slight adjustment. Some workers will return to specialized Adoptions and Permanent Placement functions, although with greater coordination with the Ongoing Services than before the redistribution. As of this case study, Santa Cruz County staff are figuring out the details of this new model. County managers acknowledge the next step is to begin examining data about whether these changes have had an effect on client outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations for San Francisco County

By redistributing social worker tasks, Santa Cruz County was able to reduce a substantial backlog of open cases and create a new model for serving clients. San Francisco's Family & Children's Services (FCS) division might also benefit from a similar redistribution of tasks. San Francisco County, though, is currently implementing a number of major initiatives and undergoing several structural changes. As such, it may not be the ideal time for a substantial change such as the kind Santa Cruz County implemented. That being said, one of the changes FCS is embarking on is an effort to become a more data-driven child welfare organization. As FCS digs into data about client outcomes and permanency over the next six months to a year, it would be wise for the agency to pay special attention to data about social worker transitions. It is also suggested that the SF-HSA revisit the 2012 report from the agency's Planning Division and reconsiders some of the models described in that analysis.

If SF-HSA decides to adopt a new model to reduce the number of worker transitions, Santa Cruz County's experience offers some critical lessons:

- Make sure workers are involved in discussions of different models from the beginning but also

that they understand who ultimately holds decision-making power;

- Engage with union leadership from the start;
- Be clear about desired outcomes and measurements that will be used to evaluate changes;
- If something is not working, do not hesitate to take a step back, re-evaluate, learn from mistakes, and make necessary changes.

It seems like the recently-formed Implementation Committee might be a good venue to discuss different models for change. The new Analyst position recently created to manage data about client outcomes could also be extremely helpful. In addition, as San Francisco works on existing efforts to develop clearer policies and desk guides for social workers, it might be helpful to review some of the instruction manuals Santa Cruz County have designed.

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