

INDUCTION TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR ELIGIBILITY WORKERS IN CONTRA COSTA AND SAN FRANCISCO COUNTIES

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

As a Program Manager of Staff Development, I am interested in studying the induction training programs of large counties to identify best practices for the improvement of induction training of eligibility workers of Alameda County. I selected Contra Costa County and the City and County of San Francisco for my case study.

FINDINGS

Both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties have a Staff Development Section to conduct induction training for new eligibility workers. Both counties train workers mostly by separate service programs. Both training programs consist of two basic components: classroom training and practice on processing cases. The duration of the course in Contra Costa County is 12 weeks, while the one in San Francisco lasts from 10 to 13 weeks. San Francisco has implemented a new approach for CaIWORKS training in order to train new workers more effectively within a shorter period of nine weeks. In Contra Costa, different trainers are responsible for classroom training and practice. In San Francisco, the same trainers follow through the whole period of training except for Medi-Cal trainees who are assigned to On-the-Job Units up on completion of classroom training.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

I make the following recommendations based on the comparison of my findings of best practices and implications with Alameda County's induction training program:

- More flexibility needs to be built into the structure of the induction training program.
- Agency policy classes need to be arranged separate from the induction class schedule.
- A progress report form on trainees needs to be completed by the Staff Development Specialists.
- Increased active class participation needs to be planned.
- Mock cases need to be developed for trainees to practice processing on the computer system.

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INTRODUCTION

Induction training of new eligibility workers is an integral part of staff development of social services agencies in all counties. As a Program Manager for Staff Development in the Alameda County Department of Social Services, I am interested in learning about the induction training

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programs in large counties to identify best practices for the improvement of induction training of eligibility workers for my own county. Both Contra Costa County and the City and County of San Francisco were selected to identify the implications for Alameda County.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Induction Training

The Staff Development Section conducts training of new eligibility workers. There are two teams of trainers, each headed by a Staff Development Supervisor.

An Eligibility Worker Training Unit (EWTU) is established for each training class. The maximum size of class is designed to be 20. An EWTU is either a Medi-Cal class or a CalWORKS/FOOD Stamp class. All trainees are trained in processing district cases. The duration of training is 12 weeks.

The EWTU's curriculum and training schedule is decided at a meeting attended by the Division Manager (Medi-Cal/Food Stamp), the Staff Development Supervisor, the Eligibility Supervisor of EWTU and the Staff Development Specialists. The two main components of the training program are classroom training and practice.

Classroom training covers the basic knowledge of the service program and the skills to process cases. It also includes essential agency policies, such as civil rights and sexual harassment, and soft skills, such as effective learning tools and professionalism. Usually, two Staff Development Specialists are assigned to conduct classroom training. Classroom training plans are well prepared and contain both details of the subject and practical examples to illustrate the subject. However, speakers are invited from other sections of the department to address agency policies and from outside to address practice skills. Most of the first three weeks of the training schedule is devoted to classroom training.

Practice sessions, which are known as desk time, are scheduled frequently in the afternoon starting in the fourth week of training. Three lead workers are assigned by the supervisor of EWTU to conduct the desk time training for the trainees. These workers carry an active caseload and assign part of their cases to the trainees. They focus the training on case processing, document filing, and telephone skills. All work completed by the trainees is submitted to and reviewed by the lead workers before entering data into the computer.

The Supervisor of EWTU monitors the progress and makes assessment of the trainees. He does this by having conferences with trainees, looking into their case processing records, and receiving reports from the lead workers. At the start of the training, every trainee is given a copy of the goals and expectations. The progress of the trainees' classroom performance is conveyed to the lead workers weekly by the Staff Development Specialists who complete a weekly Classroom Participation report on aspects including preparation, participation, supporting co-trainee's learning experience, and class assignments (see Attachment 1). The lead workers forward this report together with the trainees' desk time performance to the Supervisor of EWTU. In addition to classroom and desk time performance, the trainees complete three tests

that are called case action exercises. These exercises are case scenarios compiled and administered by Staff Development Specialists to assess the trainees' ability to apply the knowledge they have learned for processing cases. They are expected to pass the tests with a minimum score of 70% before moving on to the next stage of training. However, as a result of a court case, trainees are allowed to move on even if they fail to achieve 70% in the tests. There needs to be a combination of failure in the test and other performance problems to initiate action of termination of employment. The supervisor of EWTU does not recall any incidence of such action. At the end of the training period, the supervisor completes an evaluation report on every trainee.

Upon graduation, the CalWORKS/Food Stamp trainees are assigned to regular service units. The trainees of the Medi-Cal Class are placed in one of the three On-the-Job Training Units (OJT Unit) for three months. Each unit has five trainees under a supervisor who is assisted by a lead worker. The purpose of the OJT Unit is to allow the trainees to consolidate their learning in a more protective work environment than a regular Medi-Cal District Unit. The trainees are given fewer cases than regular workers. The supervisor maintains weekly conferences with every trainee to monitor the work performance and progress. On completion of on-the-job training, the trainees are assigned to regular Medi-Cal units.

BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

There are three best practices identified in the Induction Training Program.

- (1) There is a great deal of flexibility in the arrangement of the classes in accordance with the needs of the trainees. The Staff Development Specialists are always able to use the desk time to arrange additional training classes for the trainees to meet their training needs. Sometimes, such classes are arranged after graduation.
- (2) The classroom participation report is an effective tool to monitor the progress of trainees. It contains 15 behavioral assessment criteria grouped under four main categories as follows:
 - (a) Preparation - brings required material, appears to have completed assignment, arrives on time.
 - (b) Participation - returns on time, participates in class discussions, asks appropriate questions, understands answers, answers question if asked, stays focused/alert, takes notes.
 - (c) Supports co-trainee's learning experience - allows others to participate, respects others, minimizes side conversation.
 - (d) Class assignments - follows instructions, completes classroom assignments.

The categories and assessment criteria are clearly defined and made known to both trainers and trainees. It enables the Staff Development Specialist to convey a weekly record of the performance of the trainees in the classroom.

- (3) The establishment of OJT Unit enables the graduate trainees to consolidate their learning from the training course. It lengthens the learning environment and facilitates the trainees to

transition to the actual work environment. Feedback from the management on this arrangement has been very positive, and the same approach for the CalWORKS/ Food Stamp class is being considered.

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Induction Training

The Staff Development Section is responsible for the induction training of new workers. There are two training teams, each led by a Training Supervisor.

Separate training classes are organized for different four social service programs: CalWORKS, Food Stamp, Medi-Cal, and County Adult Assistance Programs (CAAP). The size of class ranges from 20 to less than 10 trainees. Two or three Training Officers are assigned to each training class. Prior to the start of induction, the Training Supervisor meets with the Training Officers to plan and develop the curriculum and training schedule. Each induction course consists of classroom training and practice.

For Medi-Cal, Food Stamp, and CARP, the duration of classroom training is four to five weeks. The training contains the basic knowledge of the service programs and the skills to process cases, while the essential agency policies are covered in a separate new employee orientation program. The classroom training incorporates exercises and practical case examples. Up to three assessments are conducted during and at the end of the training course. Although the pass mark on the exams is set to be 70%, trainees are allowed to move on to the next stage even if they fail to make that score. Upon completion of classroom training, the trainees of Food Stamp and CRAP continue the second part of training course known as desk training, which lasts from six to eight weeks. They are assigned cases to work on under the supervision of the Training Officers. The Medi-Cal trainees are assigned to an On-the-Job Training Unit in the Medi-Cal Section where they are supervised by an Eligibility Worker Supervisor and assigned both intake and carrying cases. The Supervisor has two experienced Eligibility Workers to assist her in on-the-job training.

The Training Supervisors are responsible for monitoring the progress and the assessment of performance of the trainees during the induction courses. At the start of induction training, each trainee is given a copy of the training goals and expectations. The attendance policy is also prescribed in the Departmental Staff Development Policy. Throughout the induction class, the Training Supervisors hold conferences with the trainees, assess their case records, consider their examination results, and receive feedback from the Training Officers. They complete an evaluation report on every trainee at the end of the course, except for Medi-Cal trainees whose evaluation reports are completed by the Supervisor of the On-the-Job Training Unit.

For the induction of CalWORKS trainees, the section has implemented a new approach to train new workers more effectively in a shorter period of time. The total duration of the training course is nine weeks. Three Training Officers are assigned to follow through the whole training period. Classroom teaching is conducted in the first five weeks. The emphasis is placed on active participation. In addition to learning rules and procedures, the trainers have developed several

mock cases to process on the computer system. Upon completion of classroom training, the trainees are placed in a CalWORKS unit for on-the-job training for four weeks. During this period, each trainee is assigned five cases. Although they are under direct supervision of the Training Officers, the Eligibility Worker Supervisor of the CalWORKS unit also meets with them to review the progress of each case.

BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

The following three best practices have been identified.

- (1) The placing of essential agency policies in the new employee orientation program is very helpful. It allows the classroom training to concentrate on the essential elements of the service program, and therefore enhances the smooth running and effectiveness of training.
- (2) Based on observations, the active interaction between the trainees and the Training Officers is impressive. This is achieved by frequently involving the trainees in hands-on tasks in learning the program. These tasks include searching the handbook, using the composition table, and studying the regulations before training.
- (3) The use of mock cases to allow the trainees to work on the computer system is an effective training method. It enables them to practice processing cases in a simulated work situation. This is very helpful in preparing them for on-the-job training and subsequently going to the line.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

The comparison between the induction training systems of the three counties is designed to identify implications for Alameda County.

The Staff Development Section of the Welfare to Work Department conducts induction training of eligibility workers in Alameda County. The team is composed of seven Staff Development Specialists and four On-the-Job Training (OJT) Supervisors. The three Specialists and four Supervisors are assigned to do induction training. The Specialists are responsible for classroom training and the Supervisors for on-the-job training.

STRENGTHS

In terms of recruitment and selection, Alameda County has more flexibility in the deployment of new eligibility workers. The need for new workers is identified at the departmental level. In the recruitment of new workers, the type of eligibility work is not specified. The number of workers assigned to attend training in different service programs is determined at a joint meeting of the Program Managers of the service programs who presented the most updated statistics of case distribution.

The number in the induction class was larger than that of both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties. A class has a maximum of forty trainees at present. Having a large class is necessary to meet the shortage of first line eligibility workers.

The induction class lasts for five months. All trainees are trained on two service programs.

The training starts with the Food Stamp Program, which is mandatory because eligibility workers are required to process Food Stamp applications when combined with applications for other service programs. Food Stamp training comprises three weeks' classroom training and four weeks of on-the-job training. After completion of Food Stamp training, the class is divided into two to three groups for attending CalWORKS, Medi-Cal or General Assistance training in accordance with the needs identified by the Program Managers. For those continuing with CalWORKS and MediCal Programs, they will attend four more weeks of classroom training and ten weeks of on-the-job training. Those who attend General Assistance training receive classroom training for one week because the program is much less complicated than the other programs. The total duration for induction training for them is eight weeks.

Similar to Contra Costa and San Francisco, Alameda County makes clear to every trainee the goals and expectations of induction training at the beginning. There are two examinations during the training course, and trainees are required to pass with a minimum score of 70%. The county has adhered to these standards in the monitoring and assessment of the performance of the trainees, and terminated the employment of trainees who fail to attain the standards.

When considering recruitment, the training on two service programs, the structuring of the classes according to the needs of service, and the adherence to performance standards, Alameda County's induction training is considered to be a cost-effective approach. However, it can benefit from the best practices of both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Because of the need to train staff for two service programs as well as the limitation of manpower, Alameda County can afford only to devote one Staff Development Specialist to training for a service program except for the Medi-Cal Program. As a result, the training schedule has to be followed as closely as possible. There is less flexibility in changing the schedule of classes and in allowing more time for the trainees to learn a certain subject when needed.

Flexibility in changing the class schedules can also be further restricted by the inclusion of essential agency policies and practice skills classes in the schedule. San Francisco County's organization of a separate new employee's orientation program covering the policies is a good example to follow, as it enables the trainees to concentrate on the knowledge and skills of the service program.

There is a logical sequencing of on-the-job training followed by classroom training and OJT Supervisors' final evaluation reports of the trainees. The current practice in Alameda County is that the OJT Supervisors base the evaluation largely on the performance of the trainees during the on-the-job training period and consult the Staff Development Specialists on their progress

during classroom training. Although the Specialists are able to convey their opinions, there is a time lapse between classroom and on-the-job training. The completion of a report form similar to that of Contra Costa County by the Specialists helps to fill this gap, because it gives a timely record on the class performance of trainees.

It will be interesting to see the results of the innovative approach of CalWORKS induction training by San Francisco County. However, Alameda County can benefit from two best practices identified from this new training approach. Firstly, the active class participation and interaction between the trainer and trainees represents a constructive area for the improvement of the induction training. Secondly, Alameda County does not have mock cases developed for trainees to practice with the computer system. The development of such cases for trainees could be helpful for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis of the findings and their implications, the following recommendations are made for Alameda County.

- (1) More flexibility needs to be built into the structure of the induction training program. Staff Development Specialists should be more flexible in adjusting the class schedule to account for the progress being made by class members and the feedback from both the trainees and the OJT Supervisors. If necessary, additional classes need to be arranged during on-the-job training.
- (2) Agency policy classes need to be arranged separately from the induction class schedule. The Human Resources Department needs to be contacted to make such an adjustment. Preferably these classes will be arranged prior to the start of the induction training.
- (3) A progress report form on trainees to be completed by the Staff Development Specialists is needed. The Staff Development Specialists and the OJT Supervisors need to work together to develop a form that contains essential performance categories.
- (4) Increased active class participation needs to be planned. Staff Development Specialists need to review and revise their classroom training plans and materials to include increased class participation.
- (5) Mock cases need to be developed for trainees to practice processing on the computer. Both Staff Development Specialists and OJT Supervisors need to work together to develop these mock cases. The Information Services Department needs to be involved to provide the necessary technical support.

I have begun to pave the way for the implementation of these recommendations. Staff Development Specialists and OJT Supervisors have been requested to be more flexible in conducting training and to arrange make-up classes during OJT training if necessary. They are encouraged to have more communication with each other on the progress of the course and the trainees. We shall work on the other recommendations when the current induction class is completed in July 2002.

CONCLUSION

Induction training of new workers is an essential task of every public organization. It represents a major organizational investment in preparing a workforce to effectively and efficiently serve social service customers. Therefore, staff development personnel needs to constantly review the induction training programs and make improvements according to the needs of the service and trainees. This BASSC Project has given me an invaluable opportunity to observe the induction training programs of two other counties in order to make improvements in the Alameda County system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my appreciation to my liaisons and facilitators, Lynn Yaney and Karen Bridges of Contra Costa County, and Daniel Kim and Mary Peters of the City and County of San Francisco, for all their arrangements and for making this internship a gratifying and memorable experience for me. I would also like to specially thank Chris Czapla, Division Director of Alameda County Social Services Agency, for supporting me throughout the BASSC Program.

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