

# Continuous Quality Improvement & Innovation: A Case Study of How Innovation is Vital to a Successful CQI Model

EDWARD JUÁREZ-LEFÈVRE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order for Monterey County Family & Children's Services to implement a successful model of continuous quality improvement (CQI), innovation must play a key role. Through studying the strategies and methods used by the Innovation Office of San Francisco's Human Services Agency, Monterey

will be able to foster an organizational culture that promotes continuous learning. In doing so, we will enhance the way we deliver services and ensure efficient processes beneficial to stakeholders at every level. This process will in turn support our mission of keeping children and families safe.

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The Innovation Office within San Francisco's Human Services Agency (SFHSA) provides an integral service that helps to enhance both the agency's mission and overall service delivery model. Based around human-centered design, this approach supports a larger system infrastructure that mirrors current continuous quality improvement (CQI) models. With Monterey County's Family & Children Services (FCS) in the initial stages of implementing CQI as both a system and service design, SFHSA's Innovation Office provides invaluable insight to how innovation is vital to the planning and implementation of a successful CQI model. Founded on a diverse array of principles in line with SFHSA's mission, the Innovation Office provides necessary space for ideas around services and service delivery to be created and developed. This 'innovation space' has been a vital component to a successful strategy in which social services remain accessible to both the public at large and to the most vulnerable. In order for a system to continuously improve, and to improve through quality insights, innovation is not only hoped for—it is required.

In January of 2014, San Francisco's Human Services Agency embarked on a new endeavor to enhance the experience of customers and staff accessing and implementing public services. Initially dubbed the Learning Lab, this venture would be guided by principles of "meeting the needs of the public and employees, and understanding that those needs are shaped by a historical context of privilege, power, discrimination, trauma, and inequity." For

a jurisdiction as diverse as San Francisco, with a population representing a vast spectrum of needs, this all-encompassing approach is standard. Tapped to lead this ambitious enterprise was anthropologist and innovation specialist Marc Hébert. Hébert specializes in what he calls design anthropology, defined as services and spaces. Through his professional experience of transforming this science into practice, the Learning Lab was created. Its purpose: to provide a guided space where program stakeholders could come together not only to problem-solve service delivery issues, but to actually design entirely new systems that would meet the needs of all stakeholders. From addressing CalFresh service delivery needs to streamlining Adult & Aging intake processes, this undertaking proved successful, and by August of the same year, the Learning Lab officially became the Innovation Office.

Since its inception, the Innovation Office has incorporated a variety of methods to ensure its diverse and all-encompassing principles are fully met. Among these principles, Human-Centered Design sits at the core. Human-Centered Design, or HCD, is an approach to problem-solving that develops solutions to problems by involving the human perspective in every step of the problem-solving process, with an emphasis on the psychosocial impact of all participants. In other words, HCD actively includes every stakeholder in the conversation, letting collective experiences and knowledge guide the solution. While initial efforts to implement HCD began only with HSA employees, the Innovation

Office has expanded and now ensures that all voices and perspectives are heard when designing or redesigning services. Viewpoints considered include individuals receiving public assistance, service providers, and community partners. Innovation Office staff learned early on that HCD would not be effective on its own, and needed additional tools to provide their team with a balanced set of tools. Staff members sought a modality that would enable voices to be heard, but would also allow a streamlined development process.

Luckily, the team discovered “lean.” The lean approach to problem solving was adopted by Toyota as a way for their workers to better utilize process improvement strategies. This was then adapted by the city of Denver local government in 2011. The “lean” concept cuts unwanted or unnecessary processes out, in order to create more efficient standardization and enhance customer experience. According to the Mayor of Denver’s website, their Peak Academy, which widely incorporates the ‘lean’ approach, “... trains and coaches employees at all levels to improve the way government works. Through innovation, employees do more with less and enhance the Denver city experience.” Through this program, employees learn techniques and strategies for implementing the city’s continuous improvement initiatives. In other words, employees play a direct role in the design of their CQI model. With the HCD and lean strategies combined, San Francisco’s Innovation team had the framework they needed to actively engage participants and foster the kind of innovation sought by agency leadership.

These techniques vary depending on the problem at hand, but the team’s goal remains the same: helping stakeholders find solutions beneficial to everyone involved. As a result, the SFHSA has seen increased engagement amongst CalFresh participants, decreased wait times at the agency’s service center, and streamlined onboarding of providers within In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS). By establishing within the Innovation Office a space where ideas are developed, collaboration nurtured, and agency goals met, SFHSA has become a true

epicenter of innovation in social services provision. SFHSA’s Innovation office serves as an example of what a successful CQI model looks like. As part of SFHSA’s holistic system design, the incorporation of the Office enables the agency to continuously embark on improvement strategies across its programs, a process which in turn improves service delivery experiences and outcomes both internally and externally so as to have a robust CQI model with innovation as a key element. According to the San Francisco Administration for Children and Families’ Children’s Bureau, “Continuous quality improvement is the complete process of identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and revising solutions. It relies on an organizational and/or system culture that is proactive and supports continuous learning.” Through the establishment of the Office of Innovation, SFHSA has shown not only a commitment to CQI methodology but also to embedding a dynamic process of continuous learning into their service and system design.

For Monterey County Family & Children Services (FCS), the establishment of a CQI process is still in its initial stages. Currently based around measures from the Children and Family Services Review, quality improvement efforts are primarily focused on federal case review outcomes rather than agency-focused or internal outcomes. And while the current case review process does offer some insight into service design, such as practice procedures and policy implementation, it does not provide the tools needed to support a system design reflecting continuous quality improvement. CQI has now been recognized by California’s Department of Social Services (CDSS) as a promising practice, and over the past couple of years, CDSS has made great strides in offering CQI-related guidance and technical assistance to county welfare agencies. This CQI guidance, paired with the existing foundation in federal case review, has provided FCS with the components necessary to design a system that improves not only statistical outcome measures, but also the lives of children and families that are served every day.

The state's CQI model emphasizes leadership action steps, staff feedback, the importance of data, and the implementation of change and feedback loops. All these elements have not only been supported by Monterey FCS leadership but have also led to the creation of a CQI Unit. The unit's stated purpose is "... to support the creation of a 'learning organization,' in which managers, employees, and stakeholders work collaboratively to improve practice, systems, and outcomes." Although still currently in the planning stages, this new system design and vision of a modern child welfare system will elevate FCS' mission to keep children safe and support families. In order to accomplish these goals, innovation must be a guiding factor.

In adapting the same approach to innovation as San Francisco, Monterey County's FCS will benefit immensely by involving stakeholders from every level into the solution process child welfare—children and families. Recently FCS has made tremendous strides in creating these spaces needed to enhance services. Workgroups use the same problem solving techniques, however with a few modifications, they can function as their own epicenters of innovation. By incorporating San Francisco County's HCD and "lean" innovation strategies into existing quality improvement models and into the emerging CQI design, innovation automatically becomes part of the service and system design process for Monterey FCS. Here in California, child welfare has shifted practice to focus on an integrated approach to social service provision, acknowledging that in order for services to be successful, systems cannot operate in silos. In other words, what happens in behavioral health affects what happens in education. This ripple effect between systems of care has repercussions not only for child welfare, but all other public services as well. Collaboration across agencies in Monterey has existed for years, one piece that continues to be left out is the involvement of youth and family voices. If innovation requires everyone at the table, then it is time these voices take their seat, and with leadership support.

## Conclusion

Although Monterey Family & Children's Services may not have the resources to establish an independent innovation office, the tools and information provided by the San Francisco Human Services Agency can make fostering innovation with a CQI model possible. Whether through policy implementation, community partnerships, or in workgroups (re)designing services, developing a space for shared ideas and experiences is crucial. Training facilitation staff to incorporate these innovation-supporting strategies into their work will enhance across other departments. As FCS leadership looks ahead, navigating these unprecedented times, innovation will be an invaluable asset. FCS must continue to promote an organizational culture that supports continuous learning and proactively provides spaces for learning to occur that will also reflect a commitment to innovation.

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