

Contra Costa County's 4OurFamilies Service Rapid Response Team (SSRRT)

PATRICIA PEREZ

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When community members are in need of the social service benefits administered by Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD), they must use various traditional channels to apply for services. In 2018, a client-focused service was launched to assist community members as they explore the services available to them and seek additional resources for their

next steps. With COVID-19 and the Shelter-in-Place Public Health Order, the 4OurFamilies Navigator Program took the additional step of forming the Social Service Rapid Response team, quickly mobilizing a service to expedite eligibility determinations while maintaining the client-focused care of the 4OurFamilies Navigator Program.

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Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) comprises four bureaus that deliver direct services to specific populations in the community. The Aging and Adult Services Bureau (AAS) assists older adults, disabled individuals, and families toward self-sufficiency, safety, and health. The Children and Family Services Bureau (CFS) protects children from neglect and abuse while promoting holistic child and family well-being. In the Community Services Bureau (CSB), dedicated staff serve over 2,000 children and their families in Early Head Start, Head Start, and other child development programs. In addition to helping job seekers, businesses, workers meet their employment needs, the Workforce Services Bureau (WFS) provides vital benefits including Medi-Cal, CalFresh, and CalWORKs to the county's residents.

In a proactive response to the need for increased service coordination amongst the bureaus, EHSD formed the 4OurFamilies unit in 2018. Managed by a Workforce Services Specialist, with oversight from the WFS Deputy Director, the 4OurFamilies unit has been staffed by four to five high-level eligibility staff in the Social Service Program Assistant (SSPA) classification. Dedicated clerical staff assist in gathering vital data for the team's robust ongoing efforts to identify services that have opportunities for streamlining and improvement.

Referred to as "navigators" in this role, the SSPA's commitment to identifying and addressing client access barriers allows the team to provide effective coordination of services and personalized

resource referral from the initial meeting with a client. This endeavor to create, expand, and support cross-bureau communication has proved effective and has been well-received by clients, community members, and staff. The early efforts of the navigators and their management staff to engage with community partners, other county departments, and community-based organizations (CBOs) established a solid foundation and collaborative spirit amongst this newly formed team, which facilitated their efforts toward integrating client-focused resource and service delivery. Regular check-in meetings identify gaps and improvement needs early on. If the team is unable to resolve a specific client need, the team engages with their network to come together and establish a solution. This had led to a solid resource and referral base that is able to meet the diverse needs of clients in unique situations.

Before the Shelter-In-Place order occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 4OurFamilies Navigators received client referrals from partnerships they had established in the community and county departments, from EHSD staff, and from self-referred individuals interested in the service. An initial meeting would take place in one of several possible locations including at EHSD offices, at a partner CBO or county department, or at another agreed upon location. During this initial meeting, the navigator would perform an in-depth, constructive conversation to identify the client's current situation, needs, and barriers. An individualized plan would be established that would include resource delivery and any necessary guidance to

assist the customer initiating benefit applications within EHSD. Clients would be left with detailed literature customized to their identified needs, community guides pamphlets, donated toiletries, and other items neatly nestled in a tote for the client. A follow-up conversation with the client would later take place so any additional questions or concerns could be addressed by the family's assigned navigator. The navigators served 42 clients between the months of February and March 2020 alone.

Then an unprecedented event hit the world: the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. Alongside other EHSD staff, the navigators quickly responded to the unique and ever-changing needs of the community. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the directors and their staff perceived the emergent need to provide rapid and streamlined connections to EHSD benefits and resources. To assist in their planning efforts, a division manager in the EHSD Policy and Planning Division contributed insights from their extensive experience with multidisciplinary teams and community partnerships. Under the leadership of the WFS Deputy Director, and in partnership with the EHSD Deputy Director and management staff, the 4OurFamilies team took on new roles as the Social Services Rapid Response Team (SSRRT). Through the hard work and foundations established by the 4OurFamilies team, the SSRRT was created.

In addition to the 4OurFamilies navigators' pre-pandemic responsibilities, the SSRRT now encompassed a holistic social service effort that included: on-the-spot assistance applying for and receiving an eligibility determination for Medi-Cal, CalFresh, or both; a warm hand-off to other EHSD-administered benefits programs; and assistance with completing other applications such as unemployment benefits through the Employment and Development Department (EDD). The unit was split into focused roles, in which two team members were able to provide this expanded level of service and the others served clients who had an immediate need for services or determinations. With an established referral process now in

place, SSRRT team-members engaged in end-to-end commitment with clients. They facilitated and coordinated access to housing, food, financial assistance services, legal support, children's needs, transportation, medical assistance, immigration assistance, mental health services, substance abuse services and support, and many other programs that augment the services EHSD provides.

Whenever possible, this streamlined and expedited process connected a client with an SSRRT team member by the end of the workday. Clients not reached on the same day were connected the following business day. Notifications on referrals that came in or clients who made contact after hours or on the weekend arrived either via email or voicemail. The voicemail messages received were transcribed and transmitted to the SSRRT team's lead Workforce Services Specialist and designated clerical support staff for appropriate routing and assignment, to facilitate a response and contact from an SSRRT team member to the client.

Nowadays, video calls via Zoom have become common across many contexts both personal and professional. For SSRRT clients who either elect not to use or do not have the technological requirements to participate in a video call, a regular phone call takes place. The interaction is the same as a face-to-face meeting and follow-ups still take place, either by video calls or by phone contact. One of the SSRRT team members is bilingual and able to provide full service in Spanish. All other language needs are addressed either by using the language line service customarily used in EHSD district offices. Subsequent personalized materials and literature may be mailed to the customer, addressing their specific needs and barriers.

The safe space provided for clients during an SSRRT meeting not only provides a tailored approach to meeting individual and family needs; the service also fosters empowerment of the client by providing education and knowledge of supportive services that could help them on their journey towards self-sufficiency. With regard to benefits to

administration of essential social services, SSRRT team members can emphasize the importance of providing caseworkers with accurate information, providing timely verifications, and compliance with required reporting responsibilities. Explaining the need for the detailed information and that it could be useful later in the process is helpful. The client is then prepared and aware of the importance of actively participating and complying in future inquiries and requests from EHSD representatives. Additionally, this element of benefits education helps dispel rumors or misinterpretations of the department and program requirements.

Making a connection to county services through the SSRRT program promotes positive relationships between EHSD, its clients, community-based organizations, other county departments, and the community at large. This key service reinforces the department's holistic, all-inclusive approach to providing information and facilitating access to resources and services for its clients. SSRRT staff handle each client meeting with cultural awareness and diverse needs in mind as they identify and establish each client's plan. All SSRRT staff are trained and are equipped with the tools to provide assistance with care, concern, and sensitivity.

During this unique time, with a pandemic and with our country at a critical social crossroads, it is imperative that the departmental response is one of awareness, acknowledgment and inclusivity. The SSRRT team has created a process that fulfills that goal. During his BASSC presentation, Dwayne S. Marsh discussed the importance of government entities creating inclusive approaches. He discussed the process of "product" development, or in this case, service delivery development, and how to deliberately address racial equity in the decision-making process.

The development of the 4OurFamilies initiative was based on the vision statement: "To empower families and individuals to create their own paths to healthy interdependence. Using a 'whole person' approach, our navigators will create a warm, welcoming environment to enable participants to be their

own advocates going forward, ultimately streamlining access to resources." The administrative staff in EHSD has taken a proactive approach to network with community and county partners to solidify a focused and dynamic new approach to the needs of diverse communities in Contra Costa County. Furthermore, open dialogue continues today within the 4OurFamilies and SSRRT models, channeling feedback and current data to management staff in hopes of establishing a permanent 4OurFamilies/SSRRT effort within the department.

During Marsh's presentation "Advancing Racial Equality: The Role of Government in Pandemic Times," he discussed how the cumulative impacts of smaller choices can have impacts as significant as those caused by big decisions. This wisdom reflects the county's choice to transform the 4OurFamilies team into the SSRRT response team. By offering a well-rounded, real-time social service and public benefits response to the crisis, clients are being served with almost immediate benefit delivery during the shelter-in place order. The SSRRT team members' training, community connections, and robust multidisciplinary network, tied in with their individual personal and professional experience, enables the diverse team to effectively serve clients with cultural awareness and competence during this challenging time.

4OurFamilies and SSRRT engagement with the community establishes client confidence with EHSD as a county department. The positive experience by the client alongside the resources and knowledge gained can then be shared within the family and community of the client who was served, solidifying EHSD's local presence and making visible the department's commitment to the most vulnerable members of the community. The SSRRT team continues their commitment by engaging the client after the initial contact and service delivery. This assures that the client's needs have been met, providing all of the resources or connections they may need and allowing the space and opportunity to address any new needs or concerns that may arise. Since

the beginning of the pandemic and launch of the SSRRT, the 4OurFamilies/SSRRT team has served 330 COVID-19-related clients (defined as clients whose needs are a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic) and 383 non-COVID-related clients. The team continues to expeditiously serve the communities of Contra Costa County during unprecedented times with unmatched dignity, respect, urgency, and commitment.

Acknowledgments

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