
FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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INTRODUCTION

The passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in August 1996, and the California Welfare to Work Act in August 1997, has forever changed the face of public assistance by ending guaranteed cash aid programs for families and children. In their place the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program became effective in January 1998, emphasizing time-limited benefits and workforce preparation and participation in lieu of non-reciprocating financial aid to needy families. The primary objective is to assist the unemployed or underemployed welfare recipient to successfully obtain and sustain employment thereby eliminating the need for public assistance.

In this new world of welfare reform education, training, economic development, and jobs are areas of concern that must be addressed in both the public and private sector. The “end to welfare as we know it” and the shift in the eligibility and delivery of services to needy families has created the unique opportunity for partnerships and collaboration within our communities. Educational institutions, community based organizations, public and private agencies, and the business community need to work together with county welfare departments to identify barriers and strategize how to promote self-sufficiency.

WHY SANTA CRUZ COUNTY?

I chose to do my project in Santa Cruz County based upon my experience working with the Service Integration Teams in Contra Costa County as both an Eligibility Work Specialist and an Eligibility Work Supervisor. As a member of my county’s Income Maintenance/GAIN Redesign Committee and the Welfare Reform Advisory Group, my interest has been how the Social Service Department could successfully engage the community around the issue of Welfare Reform and Employment Services. What could other agencies and partners bring to the table? How could the ownership of Welfare Reform be broadened to include the larger community? Thus I began my adventure in Santa Cruz County.

In the 1980’s, many county departments (including JTPA, childcare programs, Public Guardian, Veteran’s Services, and others) combined with the Department of Social Services to form the Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency. This merger has enabled the county to collaborate more successfully to integrate services both internally and with the larger community.

My experience in Santa Cruz county offered me the wonderful opportunity to work closely with my project facilitator, Lynn Miller, Division Director of the Job Opportunities and Benefits Division (JOBOD). I shadowed Mr. Miller for 2½ weeks and was welcomed by his staff at all levels. I attended a Welfare to Work orientation with applicants, and joined in

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Administrative and mid-management meetings. I was able to participate in Integrated Services meetings, attend Alcohol and Substance Abuse and Mental Health task force meetings. I spent 1½ days in south Santa Cruz County at the One Stop Center in Watsonville, met with staff at Cabrillo Community College, and Families in Transition, a non-profit, community based organization that helps families that are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and attended a meeting sponsored by the United Way, Together for Youth. While grateful for this opportunity, it was almost overwhelming to try and sort my thoughts into some logical framework to accomplish the task I had set out for myself.

I started this project rather idealistically, thinking I could meet with a variety of individuals and partners in the community to discover how working collaboratively with Santa Cruz HRA, families could be best served and moved toward the goals of welfare to work. However, this endeavor proved much larger than I had anticipated and I have had to force myself to narrow my focus.

COLLABORATION WITH CABRILLO COLLEGE

I found the collaborative efforts with Cabrillo Community College and the Human Resources Agency to be thoughtfully and carefully considered around the mission of preparing CalWORKs participants to compete for jobs in Santa Cruz County. There were many issues that had to be addressed prior to the planning and implementation. What is the labor picture in the local area? What kinds of jobs exist? How well or poorly do those jobs match the existing workforce and those people entering the work force from CalWORKs? How successful is the business and not for profit community at creating the kinds of jobs this population will be seeking?

Discussion of jobs cannot be confined to only entry-level jobs but has to include the development of career ladders leading to self-sufficiency wages to support families. While Welfare Reform places emphasis on work first, in order to not create a bottleneck of former welfare recipients stuck in low level jobs, as an agency and community, we need to take responsibility for working people into and supporting them out of low wage jobs. Therefore careful consideration must also be given to the supply of second-tier jobs available beyond the entry level to help insure the CalWORKs participant's success. We need to develop new partnerships that will allow us to promote on-going training and education of CalWORKs participants to provide them with the skills they need to break through the working poor ceiling.

*“Undertake something that is difficult;
It will do you good.
Unless you try to do something beyond
What you have already mastered,
You will never grow.”
Ronald E. Osborn*

Representatives from Cabrillo Community College, the Adult School, the Regional Occupational Program (ROP), the Human Resources Agency, and other workforce preparation providers met to consider a CalWORKs Instructional and Training Plan. This community collaborative came together to monitor education and training resources available in the community, to ensure that existing training programs will prepare CalWORKs participants for jobs that will be in demand locally, and do so within the specified 18-24 month time limits. Career ladders to sustainable wage jobs exist less and less in the modern workplace, which addresses a new role for Cabrillo College – to upgrade skills and increase retraining to move to higher paying jobs

and to effectively provide training to parents while they are already working.

A steering committee of representatives of the Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency and Cabrillo College was convened to work together to build a system that would prepare students for rapid entry into the workforce and would make the most effective use of their collective resources. Cabrillo College and the HRA developed the Fast Track to Work (FTTW) program to provide short-term intensive instruction leading directly to employment. Initially, this program will target serving CalWORKs participants, however the curriculum and supportive services will be offered to all students desiring rapid entry into the workforce. The program was designed to:

1. Launch students on career tracks that combining work and education would over time lead to family-supporting wages.
2. Be flexible enough to respond to the ever-changing opportunities in the labor market. Fast Track to Work would provide a career ladder so that the student can continue to enhance skills, strengthen employability, and engage in lifelong learning.

The Fast Track to Work will be a stand-alone program with the main office located on the Cabrillo campus in Aptos. This will be an instructional program administered by the Dean of Occupation and Community Development with staff funded by Cabrillo CalWORKs and HRA. It will offer a variety of service modules depending upon the type of student (CalWORKs, JTPA, new vs. returning) and eventually it will be an open entry, open exit program. Because the classes are modularized, students could easily enroll in and complete class seg-

ments based upon their schedules. The most important focus will be on ensuring that students have achievable educational plans and providing support to enhance success in school, job placement, promotion, and retention. Cabrillo staff would include a manager and clerical support and a student support services coordinator. HRA would provide an employment and benefits specialist who would be out-stationed at the college campus and an eligibility worker at the One-Stop Center in Watsonville. The caseloads carried by these workers would be dedicated to FTTW students. The hours for the HRA staff would be adjusted according to the number of students enrolled in Fast Track to Work.

All Fast Track to Work students will be able to receive: specialized assessment and orientation; expedited development of the 2-4 semester educational plan; financial aid; cooperative work experience and job placement assistance through the Cabrillo Career Planning and Placement and through the Workforce Santa Cruz One-Stop Centers. Additionally, CalWORKs students are eligible for childcare and Fast Track student employment (CalWORKs work-study) funds that have been allocated to Cabrillo.

In keeping with the spirit of collaboration, students attending Cabrillo College have been invited to serve on the Student Advisory Committee. They will meet on a regular basis to review the implementation of FTTW and make sure it is helping students. Their input will provide the FTTW Steering Committee with recommendations and feedback on appropriate procedures. The Student Advisory Committee will also serve as a valuable conduit of information, communicating with other students and making sure that Cabrillo and HRA work effectively to help the CalWORKs student population.

The Fast Track to Work office will be responsible for keeping case information on each student. The documentation will include case plans, tracking the progress of the students, utilization of financial aid, and job placement and retention services.

Of the approximately 350 students currently attending Cabrillo, 20 have Welfare to Work (formerly GAIN) plans and 60 are working with JTPA. The remaining students are in Self-Initiated Programs (SIPs) and for the first time are subject to the time constraints imposed by CalWORKs regulations. Persons involved in the SIPs will need to sign a Welfare to Work plan, and they will need to have individual assessments made to determine if they are in a program that will be completed and lead to employment within 24 months.

Two hundred twenty-five CalWORKs participant students signed a release of information to participate in the Fast Track to Work program. Counselors will see each student who has a release on information on file on a case by case basis to make an evaluation of the student's educational and occupational plans.

New students will be subjected to an academic assessment administered by Cabrillo for placement purposes. CalWORKs and JTPA will continue to use the CASAS test because this is done early in the process at HRA, prior to a determination being made of whether the participant will end up at Cabrillo.

FTTW students will be assisted in the development of education plans and provided with academic counseling by the Counseling Division. The counselors will be working closely with FTTW staff and students, as each student will need to have a "terminal" educational plan in place immediately upon

enrollment. Additionally, FTTW students will work closely with the Financial Aid office as money issues can play a critical role in the success and retention of CalWORKs students. Childcare needs for FTTW participating students will be assessed by FTTW staff to determine eligibility based on availability of subsidies and funding priorities for CalWORKs. The Cabrillo College Children's Center is working to provide more child care slots in the Watsonville area and the Center is applying for additional slots for toddlers on campus, and seeking to develop a Family Child Care Homes Network for 12 infants in the community.

The job placement component of this endeavor incorporates job development, facilitating placement options, and retention and career advancement. The job development includes identifying job opportunities in the community, internships, and work experience, job shadowing, and mentoring. Facilitating placement options will address the necessity of matching the person to the job. The job retention and career advancement is concerned with the initial placement, post placement support, and ongoing career assistance.

POSSIBLE IMPLEMENTATION IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

When I returned to Contra Costa County after being immersed in the culture of collaboration in Santa Cruz County, I met with Shirley Kalinowski, a former BASSC participant, and one of the Division Managers of the Antioch District office. Shirley is the person instrumental in developing a partnership with Los Medanos Community College. I met with her for an afternoon and reviewed my project with her. We compared and contrasted the plan that Contra Costa Social Service Department and Los Medanos College were preparing to implement. We

continued our conversation at the college with Mr. Peter Garcia, Dean of Economic Development.

Although the goals and anticipated outcomes of the Los Medanos and Social Service collaboration were very similar, (the student population for both projects was nearly the same –350 CalWORKs student participants) they found the idea of out stationing eligibility staff at the college very interesting. The synergy created between the three of us that afternoon was impressive! We envisioned a space on campus where eligibility workers and college staff were readily available to students on a drop in basis. The physical setting would encourage participants to meet with staff from either discipline in a non-threatening, supportive environment. Los Medanos College is located adjacent to the Antioch district office and the plans originally called for an Eligibility Work Supervisor to be the liaison between the college and social service staff. After our discussion about the Cabrillo College and Santa Cruz Human Resources Agency Fast Track to Work plan, it was decided Peter would approach the President of Los Medanos College, Dr. Raul Rodriguez and Shirley would speak with Administration about placing a unit of specialized workers on campus. I am pleased to be able to include in this report that I met with the Assistant Director of our department along with Shirley and Chris Gallagher, Division Manager to present some of the findings of my project in Santa Cruz County. Our Director, John Cullen, was advised of this discussion and I have been told he was very interested in this project. Shirley has informed me that Mr. Cullen asked her to draft a letter soliciting interest to the presidents of the other colleges in the Contra Costa Community College District!

My recommendation based upon my observations and experiences in Santa Cruz County would be to

develop new partnerships that would promote on-going training and life long learning for our CalWORKs participants. Reinventing our welfare system has forced us to think about new roles and opportunities for our staff and participants. Collaborating with the community college districts would not only benefit the participants but also could also pique the educational interest and encourage the professional development of our staff.