

**DON'T LET URGENCY CROWD OUT PRIORITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE SAN  
FRANCISCO HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY'S INNOVATION OFFICE**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

San Francisco County's Human Services Agency is committed to facilitating change and innovation through its Innovation Office. The office provides a vehicle for innovative decision-making and problem-solving. It allows employees too freely and safely brainstorm and test ideas that make small to major improvements in their customer service for internal and public clients. The office blends Human-Centered Design, Lean Process Improvement, and behavioral economics into service design to work with staff to "fix the system, not people." This paper discusses the underpinnings of the Innovation Office, the mixed experiences of some participants, and recommends that Alameda County's Social Services Agency widen existing opportunities for employees to identify and address challenges that impede the experience and outcomes for clients served. This can be done by 1) appointing SMART plan ambassadors to shepherd ideas and improvements from brainstorming through implementation and 2) training management staff on facilitation tools that guide change management.

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**Introduction**

The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) Innovation Office developed, integrated and refined tools to enable thinkers in its agency to explore and clarify institutional problems and map out solutions through intentional decision-making. A foundational tool guiding this process is the *Guide to Design a Better Experience/Process/System*. The sections of this case study are organized around the important **steps** the Guide would make toward recommendations for the Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA).

**Step 1. Clarify the problem. ACSSA**

In government, much of the work is mandated by funding, state and local regulations, and unions; also, is too often guided by the sentiment: “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”. In an era and geography where the dominating technology industry has changed the cultural expectations of the workplace, the public sector is adapting to those mores. The Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) is no exception, evolving towards formalized processes for generating good ideas that can be heard and then implemented. According to employees who have been involved in change management processes, ACSSA has implemented some inclusive procedures to facilitate large-scale change; however, there are still opportunities for ACSSA to improve how it fosters and captures good problem-solving ideas from employees and clients, and

to then formalize the mechanisms that carry them to fruition for the betterment of service delivery.

**Step 2. Describe the problem's roots. Get feedback from coworkers and/or clients. ACSSA**

ACSSA has established some valuable procedures by which change is managed in the agency. Examples include: implementation science trainings for senior managers that resulted in work teams to guide large scale implementation, an online Suggestion Slot for the Director, State of the Agency town hall meetings, and the harnessing of analysts' skills to facilitate major initiatives with clear goals. However, through discussions with some employees who have experience with change management, two major themes emerged: ACSSA has a hierarchical system where decisions must be signed off at the top, and large scale procedural improvement initiatives are effective only when there is dire urgency around them. For instance, a lawsuit or a mandate, or as the HSA Innovation Office would describe, the "pain" is great enough to catalyze action.

As perceived by employees, the primary obstacles to effecting change at ACSSA are slow labor negotiations that limit staff function flexibility in direct service, state mandates that hinder latitude in how programs function, and overburdened caseloads that "crowd out" strategic planning from being seen as a priority for staff time. Additional challenges are that some analysts are considered "outsiders" to program operations and therefore are less trusted. On the other hand, when someone on the "inside" has been looking at a problem for so long, his/her view is narrowed and it is difficult to see new solutions to old problems without help.

### **Step 3. Develop Project Goals based on employee feedback and customer feedback. ACSSA**

When information on the SFHSA Innovation Office was shared with some ACSSA staff for feedback on its applicability in Alameda County, one employee said, “I really wish that as an agency we had better processes for this...I hear so many colleagues with a clear understanding of what system barriers are out there, but no clear idea or process about how to lift them up and make the needed policy or culture changes.” In ACSSA, there is a desire to improve culture by expanding opportunity and commitment to more effective work strategies and production. The current culture and practice primes it for the type of change that SFHSA employs.

### **Step 4. Research the current situation. SFHSA**

In 2013, Code for America teamed up with the SFHSA to develop solutions to problems affecting service delivery to clients. They developed the mobile app promptly, which provides CalFresh recipients with reminders to resubmit eligibility documents in order to reduce “churn”: when clients lose their benefits and have to reapply. The Executive Director of SFHSA and the former Deputy Director of Policy and Planning invited Code for America team member Marc Hebert, a design anthropologist (study of the ways in which we create things, services and spaces), to establish an internal mechanism to support ongoing evaluation, innovation and process improvement *with* employees, clients and community partners, not only *for* them. He was hired as a staff member by HSA and the Innovation Office was born.

The framework for this office is “service design” which blends several schools of thought: Lean Process Improvement as implemented by the city of Denver’s Peak Academy, human-centered design popularized by the Stanford Business School, and behavioral economics used by the

White House and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The result is the double diamond process. This process establishes the steps that the Innovation Office facilitates for HSA employees to improve services for clients, they include: 1. Obtaining a deeper understanding of the problem through *Discovery*, 2. *Defining* the problem, 3. *Developing* possible solutions/prototypes, and testing those solutions by 4. *Delivering* them, while ideating along the way.

The purpose of the Innovation Office is to curate ideas and provide platforms upon which they can be built. The work of the office is predicated on the assumption that a diverse group of employees and clients experience the “pain” felt by an identified problem and are therefore insightful on how to reduce or eliminate it. Service design empowers stakeholders to align ideas with core values and principles, and to test those ideas by capturing the voices of those affected by it then piloting/prototyping solutions quickly and cheaply.

*SFHSA Innovation = empathy + experimentation + evaluation*

#### **Step 5. Show the current situation. SFHSA**

The HSA Innovation Office has one staff member, who has contributed to the completion of more than 130 improvements in over 2 years. The staff person is prolific and energetic, aided by support from the highest levels of management which enables the Innovation Office not only to exist but to be more effective in its work. The Innovation Office Director reports to the Deputy Director of Policy and Planning. Projects for the Innovation Office have developed in various ways, from executive staff meetings to employees approaching the office for assistance with facilitation, mediation, problem identification, solution implementation, and strategic planning.

From there, the Innovation Office Director follows up with the Deputy Director to authorize next steps.

The SFHSA has worked with employees through two major vehicles: Rapid Improvement Events (RIEs) and Service Center Improvement Projects (SCIPs). Rapid Improvement Events are multi-day workshops that convene major stakeholders around a problem or “pain” with the goal of making measurable change in a process. Once convened, participants scope the RIE and set goals for creating solutions. Lean Process Improvement and Human-Centered Design work together through exercises and facilitated conversations that get to the root of the problem, which often is different from how the problem was initially articulated. There is evaluation of participants, supervisors, and program managers along the way to optimize the effectiveness of the RIE.

In its first iteration, 1.0, SCIP involved almost 50 SFHSA employees from a dozen departments in regular meetings to devise, execute, and report back on small, fast improvements to their processes. They were intentionally comprised of managers and non-managers, including seven classifications overall. This group implemented more than 80 Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Time-bound, or SMART, plans in six months. These were then tested within their agencies and reported back on in regular meetings. This forum provided the tools and the “person-power” necessary to focus on innovative work that was carried to the end of SCIP’s meeting. SCIP is in 2.0 phase and the work is primarily executed by SMART ambassadors. The ambassadors have all been trained in SCIP and are embedded in their respective departments. They are the point persons for employees who have SMART ideas; they help compile and track those ideas, carry them up to management for authorization, and shepherd the employees through

the process of execution. One current SCIP 2.0 ambassador was interviewed. He was nominated by his CalWORKs department and trained alongside representatives from other parts of the agency. He was selected because he initiated an express lane for clients and had the energy and experience to help mentor others to create their own change. He reflected on the importance for SCIP volunteers to feel supported by management and to have authorization on the time it takes to carry out a SMART plan. In their case, they experienced no union pushback, likely because the advocates for SCIP had personality and respect in their department. Notably, he thought that change was more successful due to an influx of new staff.

Former participants from a RIE and a SCIP in the Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS) were also interviewed. DAAS underwent dramatic reorganization in intake and the manager invited the Innovation Office in to help. Employees participated in a RIE to improve communication among a rapidly growing team with scattered geographic placements. They found the RIE process to be helpful. It institutionalized a method of updating their procedure manual and upgraded their technology so that staff could stay abreast of changes in expectations of service while minimizing miscommunication and gaps in service delivery. Feedback on the SCIP was mixed. Many acknowledged the importance of fostering creativity among employees, but sighted the tendency of projects to be seen as extracurricular, like kudos boards or birthday clubs, that then fall on the hands of a few volunteers. There need to be larger scale mental and cultural shifts to foster the belief that change is possible and that one can use a small amount of effort and energy to make little improvements. Overall, participants developed a number of products and procedures to improve work efficacy, bridges to other parts of the agency to share

successes and challenges that they were having, and engrained the practice of sharing ideas and projects with colleagues who have the potential to offer help.

### **Step 6. Create and test assumptions. Lessons learned. SFHSA**

The Innovation Office Director chronicles the progress of the Innovation Office and its functions through the HSA Innovation blog, which is accessible to the public. The blog holds the institutional knowledge of the projects and provides insight into opportunities for self-evaluation and process improvement. The work of the Innovation Office continues to evolve. There are many takeaways about the value of this project, and the themes and mantras that verbalize and actionize around cultural change within a government agency. The emphasis on documented evaluation allows the office to learn quickly from its mistakes and commit to constant review and improvement with employees and clients serving as collaborators and customers. Major takeaways:

- Many managers did not prioritize or see inherent value in SCIP 1.0, whereas non-managers appreciated its value but felt unsupported by supervisors and peers in the time they needed to focus on making improvements.
- Innovation has to be seen as integral to getting work done in order for folks to buy-in, not as something adding to the work already being done. Include middle management.
- You have to ask people about “why” something is happening and combine a campaign for change with subtle, more cultural progression of change
- It is critical to have leadership identify “rock stars” who should participate in design and change management. People with a successful track record of solving problems.

- There must be someone with the energy to promote a culture of creativity and time to leave the cubicle and hold space for this work for people entrenched in programs.
- Prototyping/piloting is visualizing your idea and showing it to other people in mini-tests.

Moving forward, the Innovation Office may grow. The Director of Policy and Planning is asking for more FTEs to grow the staff of the SFHSA Innovation Office. The newly developed Organizational Development Group in the central Human Resources department will be a natural partner for the improving the work environment of the agency. There is a vision to include innovation language and training in the onboarding of new SFHSA employees.

#### **Step 7. Implement and sustain improvements. Recommendations. ACSSA**

ACSSA, and Alameda County, have already shown commitments to innovation and change in its agency through online suggestion portals and implementation of science and work teams. Also, it has a history of large scale campaigns to change culture and practice in service delivery that were rooted in unavoidable problems plaguing the agency. However, there are opportunities to further grow the capacity of staff to experiment with creative improvements to regular practice. It is recommended that ACSSA implement a SMART Ambassadors Program throughout its departments, and complement it with robust training for analysts, program specialists, managers and supervisors in Process Improvement facilitation tools and service design. The costs would be in the staff time dedicated to developing and receiving training through the Policy Department, Training and Consulting Team or a work team of facilitators and the time outside of day to day work to execute prototypes. Implementation would take approximately six months to establish training and deliver to chosen staff. The exchange is for more efficient service delivery.

**Premortem.** In an effort to uncover potentially overlooked components of a change strategy, the HSA Innovation Office often runs premortem exercises on proposed initiatives, asking coworkers to imagine whatever solution they are proposing has already been implemented. In the first scenario, implementation is an “epic failure” and participants are asked to list all the reasons why this happened. In the second scenario, it is an “amazing success” and participants are again identifying the reasons why. This exercise is designed to unearth less obvious critical elements that need to be involved in implementing the proposed change. Below is a Premortem for implementing a SMART ambassadors initiative at SSA and training staff on facilitation tools that encourage a culture of innovation in decision-making:

<b>Why was this initiative an epic failure?</b>	<b>Why was this initiative a success?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff improperly trained on facilitation tools</li> <li>• Staff see analysts/Policy Department as “outsiders” and do not want to engage</li> <li>• No buy-in to manage innovative change from middle management and other levels.</li> <li>• Not enough staff time for SMART projects</li> <li>• A culture of fear in proposing new ideas</li> <li>• Management did not enable idea to implementation, faith lost in the process</li> <li>• No evaluation process</li> <li>• No one took responsibility for the work</li> <li>• Ideas were generated without guidance or realistic ways of implementing changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All levels of management support staff time for making improvements</li> <li>• Clear, publicized changes initiated by staff at various levels</li> <li>• Many avenues to recommend changes with consistent outcomes</li> <li>• A unit/department/classification is committed to being a resource for SMART ambassadors and facilitators</li> <li>• A unit/department/classification responsible for rigorous evaluation</li> <li>• Vocabulary reflects a collective understanding of innovation as a core</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urgency crowded out priority</li> <li>• No one wants to take leadership roles</li> <li>• Not all levels of staff understand the freedom and commitment to creativity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cultural value of ACSSA</li> <li>• Endorsement and promotion from Director/Executive Team</li> <li>• SMART ambassadors are hubs for their network and everyone has access</li> </ul>
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Alameda County is not void of great ideas or opportunities for implementation. The opportunity from this case study is to formalize open channels through which employees can bring ideas, and incubate them. Employees can be equipped with tools for good decision-making and planning and can safely test out small interventions to avoid major initiatives from which it is hard to retreat if things aren't going well. The SFHSA Innovation Office provides a blueprint for how this work of creativity can be accomplished in a major government agency in tandem with the work that is mandated to ensure quality services can be provided to our community members in need.

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