

## **SOCIAL WORK SERVICES IN A CALWORKS WORLD: THE SANTA CRUZ APPROACH**

Lisle Smith Cohen\*

As the saying goes, *"If you don't know where your going, you'll end up someplace else."*

The Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency knew where they wanted to go when the CalWORKs legislation was first implemented. The Agency began planning for intensive case management services which would be provided by social workers to assist families toward their goal of self sufficiency. Santa Cruz County was one of the first counties to begin planning for the implementation of a social work supportive service unit which would be located in their JOBS Division. I had the opportunity to study this program under the direction of Elizabeth Lopez, who is the Assistant Director of the JOBS Division.

There was a recognition early on that there needed to be more involvement up front in order to provide services that would remove barriers of participants from obtaining and retaining employment. The approach that Santa Cruz County has developed is a team-work approach which involves eligibility workers, employment training specialists, and social workers working together as a team to provide supportive services to CalWORKs participants.

This approach is continually being revised in their program service delivery design. The primary focus of my analysis was to look at how the CalWORKs social workers, employment and training specialists, and eligibility workers developed their new roles and responsibilities and continue to learn

from their experience in this fairly new arena. This redesign called for eligibility workers to assume primary responsibility for the enrollment and case monitoring of Welfare to Work recipients. The employment training specialist would then be available for assessment and the Welfare to Work plan and also to provide counseling and information regarding community resources to participants.

My interest in studying this unit was heightened as I was interested in developing a model for service delivery in my role as a Co-Manager of the DFCS/CalWORKs Domestic Violence Services Unit in Santa Clara County, which was in the initial planning phase of development.

### **BACKGROUND**

The social worker unit was established and known as the Intensive Services Unit in April of 1998. At that time, one social worker was hired to provide services and work with a committee in designing the role and function of the unit. The second social worker was hired in May of 1998. Two additional social workers were hired in December of 1998. A social work supervisor was hired in October of 1998 and in early 1999, two additional social workers from the Families In Transition program also joined the unit. At the current time, there are six social workers in the social work services unit of CalWORKS and one supervisor.

The Families In Transition program, a contracted community agency, has a waiting list of 170 families. Out of the 170 families, 145 are CalWORKs eligible participants. The outcome for the

\* Lisle Smith Cohen is a Social Services Program Manager in the Department of Family and Children's Services of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

FIT model is that 90% of their participants are housed and off cash assistance. The Families In Transition model includes providing longer term case management services relating to housing and other issues. The FIT program has eight units of transitional housing and in those units, they serve fourteen people a year. The average case load is 50 to 60 people and they continue working with them until they no longer receive cash assistance. They also have an eligibility worker that is outstationed or co-located at the FIT off-site who coordinates with the employment training specialist. The FIT clients have to have had a minimum three months clean and sober and be involved in a treatment program. They do not accept one-third of the persons they assess.

Many of the first areas looked at was the role clarification for each discipline of the team. This process, referred to as the redesign has, in fact, been continual since the onset of the unit. There was also much time spent developing the Release of Information form which would be able to be used for several purposes between the divisions. The Release of Information needed to meet the requirements for the Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health divisions as well as the Human Resources Agency.

An analysis of the CaIWORKs unit which was completed by an analyst in April of 1999 found some very interesting data. Since the onset of the program in April of 1998. 380 participants were referred by EW and ETS staff for social work intervention services. This is out of a current total Population of 1,500 CaIWORKS participants.

A review of the referrals to the social work unit illustrates the types of issues that have been addressed. thus far, listed in highest to lowest incidence:

- Mental Health
- Substance Abuse
- Domestic Violence
- Parenting Issues
- Housing
- Noncompliance
- School Attendance
- Other

However, when you look at the interventions that were actually provided by the social work unit, they are much higher in the area of substance abuse and domestic violence after the referrals had been evaluated by the social workers. In other words, the participants may have been initially referred for other reasons but these issues are uncovered as the relationship is established with the social worker. Each of the four social workers are assigned to a team made up of eligibility workers and employment training specialists (ETS). The social workers are co-located in the CaIWORKs offices.

Santa Cruz County is a much smaller county in comparison to Santa Clara County. The Human Resources Agency divides the County into two areas, North County and South County, for the provision of services.

In the South County area, 70% of the Welfare to Work population is Latino, with 20% having less than a fifth grade education, and a large amount of seasonal employment. In the North County area, the welfare to work population tends to have a higher educational level, but also a higher level of behavioral health issues which prevent employment.

Social workers receive between 35 to 40 referrals a month . They can work with these families on average from two weeks to six months time. In a review of referrals during a three month period, the analyst discovered that up to 25% of incoming referrals could have been directed to another member of the team other than the Social Worker. The analyst indicated that these referrals included:

- 9% SSI
- 8% school attendance
- 3% undocumented
- 3% already receiving services from FIT
- 2% other issues

## **CROSSOVER CASES**

When a CalWORKs participant is also involved with the Child Welfare Services Division, that is known as a "crossover" case, or case in common. It has been difficult to accurately calculate the number of cases that are crossover, due to nebulous definitions as to how to define the data. For example, in CWS is it the number of child cases, or family cases, that are being compared to CalWORKs cases of adults? Currently, 60% of Family Maintenance cases are also CalWORKs. The process of "identifying" cases that are in common has also been a time consuming process. In the CalWORKs Services Unit, it has been the social worker who does the screening of a referral on the CWS system to see if Child Welfare is involved. On the Child Welfare side, the clerical in the initial ER screening unit is doing a search on the CDS system for CalWORKs involvement. According to a CalWORKs social worker, it is more likely that they will contact Child Welfare first regarding a crossover case, rather than being contacted by CPS staff first.

Crossover cases are presented at MDT staffings, . which alternate between North County and South County. Information is shared between all parties involved regarding how best to coordinate resources, services, and case plans for the family. It appears that CPS is predominately the primary initiator of cases being presented at the MDT The CPS manager will also identify CalWORKs crossover cases when the CPS case is being staffed during the transition from Dependency Investigation on to the Continuing Services. The confidentiality issues do not present a problem at the MDT staffings, but the question continues to arise as to how to share information between the eligibility worker and CPS when there is no MDT staffing. In crossover, sometimes an MDT is called if child welfare and other members of the team have not been able to communicate with each other. Often there is no need for an MDT if communication has been established. The social worker indicated it would be helpful to have more informal communication between the JOBS division, Child Welfare, and FIT

The eligibility worker and social worker should meet ahead of the MDT and should be clear regarding the expectations of crossover meetings. There is also a philosophical difference that

needs to be looked at as to who is the client. Is it the child or the adult? There was some fear on the eligibility side as to information that they give to Child Welfare may be used against the client. There is fear on the child welfare side that information they share with eligibility may lead to a fraud referral or sanction.

In crossover cases, the main cases in CalWORKs that will be found to also have a common case in child welfare are Family Maintenance, Family Reunification cases where the parents have other non-dependent children, parents looking at relinquishment, and relatives providing care who are on cash assistance themselves. There are CalWORKs resource dollars available for services that are reasonable and necessary for the crossover cases.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

During interviews with various staff representing different job functions, I posed the question as to what they might have done differently if they were setting up the social work unit now.

- Language was cited as one area to be aware of. The need to communicate with a recognition that each representative needs to understand each other's definitions and terms. For example, case management means something different to an eligibility worker than to a CalWORKs social worker.
- Communication needs to be discussed at the division level, with eligibility worker, employment and training specialist, and social worker involvement. The participants need to be informed that CalWORKs and CPS are working together to coordinate the provision of services, and integrate the various case plans.
- Role clarification of the various team members helps to provide efficient and effective services to participants.
- The need to have written policies and guidelines established first so that clear communication can occur regarding roles and expectations.

The strategic planning by Santa Cruz for the implementation of their intensive services unit included first going through a cultural change which led to organizational development issues which involve philosophical differences. The social work unit was set up in order to assist CalWORKs families in their goal of self sufficiency through the prevention, identification, and removal of barriers which would prevent participants from obtaining or retaining employment.

The social worker receives a referral from the eligibility worker, and provides services until the participant is stabilized and they are connected to services. The social worker may become involved in this process in several ways including direct contact with participants, collaboration with the eligibility and employment team members, coordinating with other services in the agency, and also connecting with the community based treatment providers. The interventions include conducting assessments, providing counseling, referrals to community providers, and case management. There is a behavioral health specialist who works with the CalWORKs social work unit whose salary is paid for by Health Services. The behavioral health assessment specialist is co-located within the JOBS division and works closely with the social worker unit. The role of the specialist includes providing immediate onsite expertise and mental health and substance abuse assessment to CalWORKs participants, and consultation to members of the

team. The specialists can also provide immediate access to mental health and substance abuse treatment and also provide mental health exemption for participants if needed. The Agency contracts with the Mental Health department for a mental health psychiatrist for 4 hours per week for CalWORKs participants.

In an interview with an employment training specialist, she cited several areas where she saw current gaps in resources. One includes CalWORKs participants who have ADD and learning disabilities. There is also a need to establish life skills workshops in order to provide relapse prevention. A new position is being created called Community Resource Specialist. They will have one in North County and one in South County. Each ETS has a case load of 50 to 60 participants. Many of the participants that ETS has seen are in need of mental health services relating to PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

In an interview with a CalWORKs social worker, she indicated her expectations of the unit were different when she joined. The expectation was that the social worker position would be involved mainly in assessment and referral, but has come to discover that there is more case management and more long term involvement. There was a strong indication that it is valuable to be co-located with the JOBS division. There is much work in helping participants deal with the anxiety and stress of their perception of CalWORKs requirements.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY**

### **Liaisons**

Crossover cases involves a philosophy or an approach to working together between divisions. There needs to be a single point of contact within each area. One of the questions on crossover cases and child welfare is tracking the emergency response cases once they close since they have very brief short term contact with the child welfare system.

### **Training**

There is a need for Staff Development to provide a course such as CalWORKs 101 to Child Welfare staff, as well as a need to set up a brief Child Welfare 101 course for the CalWORKS staff so that the goal of being able to connect with each other quickly will be achieved. CalWORKs induction training is conducted four times a year for new social work staff. A component on CalWORKs should be incorporated into this training.

### **Confidentiality**

Create an all staff memo from the Director, so that all the questions and various regulations relating to the sharing of information between divisions could be addressed.

### **Resource Guide**

Develop a resource guide of CalWORKS resources that could be shared with child welfare staff that indicated in what kinds of situations CalWORKS resources may be available for the mutual families that we have in common.

### **Internships**

Develop student internships through San Jose State College of Social Work for "case-aide" experience to support the CalWORKS Social Work unit.

### **CalWORKS Eligibility**

Limit the referrals to the social work unit to only Welfare to Work eligible participants, while developing alternative resources to meet the needs of non-eligible participants.

### **Co-Location**

Co-locate social workers in the CalWORKS offices to foster team development leading to greater cooperation and more cohesiveness in service delivery.

### **Family Conferencing**

Utilize the Family Strength-based model in developing a coordinated case plan for the family.

### **Administration**

Administration needs to support creative thinking on effective implementation. Divisions must work together so that gaps in service do not occur.

In conclusion, clearly the CalWORKS Social Work unit has had a major impact on improving the lives of families who are struggling to overcome obstacles and reach their goal of self-sufficiency.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues at the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency who helped guide me during the case study process, and for providing such a stimulating environment for an exchange of information.