

COMMUNITY-BASED SAFETY NET SERVICES IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

*Paul Ward**

Government can't do it alone. That's why the Agency is creating new partnerships in every area, and strengthening those we've long valued. This includes relying on community organizations to do what they do best in serving our mutual customers. –

Yolanda Lerner Rinaldo,

Director. Santa Clara County Social Service Agency¹

INTRODUCTION:

Based on my experience as a Welfare Reform Planner, I believe that Contra Costa County Social Service Department, like many other welfare agencies across the state, in addition to providing all the services required by federal and state regulation, now has the challenge of meeting the basic needs of families when larger systems cannot provide benefits. Local communities and the welfare agencies that serve them, are faced with the task of developing minimum or "safety-net" services for families that are not eligible to benefits from the larger federal and state systems due to welfare reform. As noted by Director Rinaldo, government agencies cannot accomplish this task alone; community organizations must participate. When looking at the progress made by Santa Clara County in this area, I have identified several issues that I believe can impact safety-net program development and implementation, including:

- The use of existing services provided by community-based organizations as a foundation on which to build safety net programs.
- The willingness of local elected officials to exert their political will and provide financial support so that services are provided.
- The need for strong, and sometimes charismatic, leadership by SSA staff.
- The effect of burnout on sustained welfare reform efforts. A condition I view as the result of a limited number of organizations always in the forefront with reliance on a core group of individuals from those organizations doing the majority of the work.

BACKGROUND:

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act² made several major changes to the face of welfare in the United States. One of the goals of these changes is to reduce the federal budget deficit by several billion dollars over the life of the law. Cost-savings are to be realized by: Limiting the availability of certain benefits to legal non-citizens; no longer making cash assistance to families an entitlement; and limiting the length of time a family can receive

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¹ "Agency in Change," Santa Clara County Social Service Agency 1998 Annual Report

² Federal welfare reform legislation enacted in August, 1996

benefits. This shift in philosophy at the federal level immediately creates the need for safety-net services on a local level. Early in 1996, in anticipation of federal welfare reform, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors adopted a local action plan called the Employment Support Initiative (ESI). In part, this plan calls for the creation of safety-net benefits for those legal county residents not eligible for aid under federal and state law. Particular circumstances or conditions present in Santa Clara County that shaped this response include:

- The County is the third largest refugee resettlement center in the nation, with over 40 different languages being spoken, requiring additional attention to the creation of culturally diverse services. The potential ineligibility to federal and state programs by this population was a major driving force behind the development of current safety net services.
- The current CalWORKs caseload is approximately 15,000 families, with potentially 11,000 adults from those families needing employment and training services.³ Of this 11,000, approximately 3,000 are employed; however, they have not reached a wage level that allows the family to be fully self-sufficient.
- There is a deficit of low-cost housing. A studio apartment can rent for \$1,000 per month. Additionally, families on assistance are in competition with Silicon Valley professionals (who earn \$50,000 to 880,000+ per year) for the same housing. Compounding the issue is a housing vacancy rate of 1%.
- The availability of grant money, most notably from the Packard Foundation.
- The proactive way in which the United Way and other community-based organizations came forward to help address the new issues and needs created by welfare reform. A major asset in Santa Clara County is the very involved larger community. Faced with numerous challenges and given some major opportunities. Santa Clara County Social Service Agency is working hard to create and nurture the partnerships necessary to provide all the services, including safety-net services, needed by their customers. The success of this effort requires ongoing discussion and strategizing with partner organizations along with the financial support and political will of the elected leadership.

OBSERVATIONS:

Before starting this project I outlined certain learning goals which I discussed with my director, John Cullen. We agreed on these goals, which included: Observing how to define safety net services; how to select which organizations could contribute to meeting the identified need; how to make incentives available; how to connect with Children's Services around safety-net issues; and the collaborative process. Based on these goals, Alette Lundeberg, project facilitator from Santa Clara, and I agreed that I would gather the most insight about the activities in Santa Clara County by participating in various meetings, allowing me to get a feel for the partnerships and collaborations that have been developed as well as to see work being done to strengthen these connections. The Employment Support Initiative involves a wide range of activities and groups.

³ "Quarterly Statistical Data of Public Assistance Families In the County Of Santa Clara By Cities," Jan. 1. 1999

Considering my project-focus on safety net, the following groups and their related topics of discussion provided the most valuable information:

- United Way Safety Net/ Diversion/ Retention Committee
- Safety Net Food Subcommittee and the
- Community Accessibility Plan for Food Programs
- Community Orientation Steering Committee
- CalWORKs Advisory Committee
- Family Conference Institute and Employment Support Initiative Planning Day for Family Group Decision Making implementation with CalWORKS
- Client Retention Support Team (CREST)

Additionally, I conducted interviews with Agency staff, which provided supplemental information to my observations of safety net activities. Through my participation in these various meetings and interviewing staff, four strategies that are reflected in Santa Clara County's response to safety net concerns surfaced. Further discussion of those strategies follows:

Strategy One:

Build safety net services on existing services provided by community-based organizations.

Observation:

One of the major precepts of welfare reform is to avoid reinventing the wheel. An excellent example of this philosophy in action is found in Santa Clara County. The Social Service Agency's relationship with the United Way began before Welfare Reform through the Employment Support Initiative. The United Way took the lead in establishing this relationship primarily to better serve the refugee community. Though not focused entirely on safety-net issues, it was expected the refugee population would be severely impacted by proposed cuts in food assistance programs, necessitating additional services and programs that would provide families with food. This gave rise to the development of food-focused safety net services. Santa Clara County did not necessarily have to select community partners; the partners approached the county. Therefore, a strategy for getting the right organizations involved is to be willing to respond affirmatively when the CBOs approach with an offer of help! Funding for the collaboration is a combination (not a blend) of United Way, CHARITech, Civic Venture Fund, SSA General Fund and SSA Refugee Funding. SSA staffs report there has been a lot of give-and-take in dealing with community partners. Some projects lend themselves better to a particular funding source over another. Especially difficult to administer are federal refugee programs that have restrictions on the use of funds. One staff member notes that it is difficult to establish service systems that allow SSA staff and community partners to work "in sync" for the

benefit of their common customers. Another staff member commented that being allowed to "blend" funding would facilitate efforts to create innovative services and collaborations. Additionally, much of the success of these projects and collaborations is attributed to various agreements and Memorandum of understanding that have been developed and put in place. That and the ongoing relationships with the resulting "good will" are what have sustained these collaborations.

Another area where the SSA is working to build on existing services is the use of the Family Group Decision-Making process with CalWORKS families. Through funding from the County General Fund and support from the Packard Foundation, the Family Conference Institute was formed. The Institute provides facilitation to families referred for family decision-making services. Currently, families involved with the Agency's Department of Families and Children's Services (DFCS) -can request the use of Family Group Decision Making for the resolution of issues involving children's protection. The next area of focus for the Institute will be serving families who receive CalWORKs benefits and could use the Family Group Decision Making process to help overcome barriers to achieving effective employment⁴. Examples of some barriers include: Conflicting requirements of Children's Services and CalWORKs when a family is involved with both systems: lack of personal support systems for the newly employed; and the availability of needed child care and transportation. Family Group Decision Making, through its strength-focused process supports individuals in reaching their goals.

Impression:

Clearly, safety net services are about collaboration between departments within the Agency and with CBOs. Expanding the availability of the family conferencing model will help build such collaboration.

Strategy Two:

The fiscal backing by local elected officials enabled enhanced services to be provided.

Observation:

In addition to the adoption of the Employment Support Initiative, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors created a Welfare Reform Set-Aside. This is money from the County General Fund designed to supplement other revenue sources for the provision of services needed for the self-sufficiency of families as they transition from assistance to employment. Food accessibility is one example of safety net service enhancement. The activities currently funded by set-aside dollars include:

- Purchase of refrigerator/freezer equipment for food distribution sites, enabling the sites to make otherwise perishable foods available.
- Upgrading electrical and structural capacity of some sites to enable acceptance of the refrigeration equipment.

⁴ See Attachment A. "Brainstorming session, CalWORKs Services for Family Conference model Implementaion"

- Purchase of culturally sensitive foods for distribution by food banks. This is particularly important considering Santa Clara County's ethnically and culturally diverse population. Some typically "American" foods are not eaten by portions of the population resulting in their experiencing nutritional deficits.
- Purchase of small handcarts for loan to food bank users for the transport of food items to their homes.

Other projects funded in part by the "Set Aside Funds" include the Family Loan Fund and Citizenship Services. The Family Loan Fund was first conceived as a means for CalWORKs families to borrow money for a down payment on a vehicle. The primary use, in fact, has been for first and last month's rent helping to secure shelter, another safety net need. Citizenship services addresses an initial safety net issue by assisting immigrants to become citizens and thereby able to fully participate in federal and state programs.

Impression:

The large immigrant population and the mandate to serve them with local programs dictates much of how Santa Clara County has responded to safety net issues.

Strategy Three:

Strong and sometimes charismatic, leadership is necessary.

Observation:

This observation is difficult to substantiate with example and is based on my observing a number of meetings. However, one instance involving the United Way Safety Net meeting may help illustrate. It is the responsibility of a United Way director to chair this meeting. In this instance, due to a reduction in management staff, a new chair was assigned who was unfamiliar with the history of this group's work. My observation was that a SSA person co-chaired the meeting, providing most of the leadership with the majority of reports being given by SSA staff.

Impression:

At the United Way Safety Net meeting without the strong leadership by SSA a vital safety net meeting would not have been as effective. My sense is that at times the progress made with diverse groups, such as the Agency and its community partners, often relies on the personality and strength of one or two individuals who are in leadership roles. I cannot be sure if the groups simply defer to these leaders or if, without their involvement the project or at least movement forward, would slow or stop. The magnitude, complexity, urgency and newness of concepts involved with welfare reform in general and safety net services specifically seem to dictate the single-minded vision on the part of an individual or core group in order to ensure success.

Strategy Four:

Recognizing the need to plan for the effect of burnout.

Observation:

The unfortunate reality of any Herculean effort, such as welfare reform, is the potential for burnout of staff or projects. In the case of providing safety net services in Santa Clara County, I observed that there are a limited number of organizations involved in doing social service-type work with a heavy reliance on a core group of individuals from within those organizations. One example of this issue involved the United Way Safety Net Food Subcommittee. Members of the committee illustrated their concern about sustaining continued interest and participation in their ongoing efforts. Their concern is such that they plan to recommend to the larger United Way committee that once the outreach project they have developed is underway that this subgroup be disbanded.

Impressions:

Burnout is not a new phenomenon and certainly not one that is restricted to Santa Clara County or the provision of safety net services. The issue of burnout is particularly thorny. On the one hand the work is vital and needs to be done in the most expeditious way possible. At the same time the individuals doing the work have value and bring many valuable resources with them, which are risked if they succumb to burnout. Though not easily addressed, I believe the issue of burnout will only intensify as welfare reform progresses, particularly in the area of safety net services where potentially more individuals will need service due to time limits.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

I believe there are a number of ways we in Contra Costa County can benefit from my experiences and observations in Santa Clara County. Below are several recommendations on ways to enhance safety net services along with possible action steps. This list is not meant to be all-inclusive, but rather is intended to offer some possibilities worth further investigation.

Work to develop funding that will allow augmentation of the services currently provided by our local community-based organizations as well as the creation of new services

- Evaluate through a survey process the capacity of local CBOs to provide safety net services.
- Determine how best to increase CBO capacity. Funding may not be the only issue; training and other management skill enhancements may be appropriate as well.
- Based on a need assessment, suggest to the Board that we create a Welfare Reform Setaside, similar to Santa Clara County's. This fund could be used to augment other resources or to purchase capital items such as refrigeration equipment for food distribution sites.
- Assist our CBO partners as they explore possible grants or foundation sponsorship.
- Use a portion of the CalWORKs allocation for service enhancement. based on competitive bid.

Work to create a Family Conference Institute and include Cal WORKs families as potential users of those services. This would be particularly valuable for families that are involved with both Children's Services and CalWORKs.

- Seek the support and backing of the Board of Supervisors.
- Seek foundation support. citing the success of the Santa Clara County model.
- Ask the Santa Clara Family Conference Institute to share their procedures, protocols and processes
- Investigate possible training for our staff by Santa Clara Family Conference Institute staff.

Work to lift the restrictions placed on the blending of various funding sources.

- Identify which programs/ funding streams can be used to provide various services.
- Identify conflicts between funding sources; such as possible duplication, required separate administration, or restrictions on the populations who can be served.
- Identify if the conflicts are based in law or are administrative. If administrative, determine at what level changes can be made to allow the blending of funds.
- Pursue administrative change, if feasible.
- Pursue legislative action if necessary to allow the blending of funds .