

FROM CASH ASSISTANCE TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING BRIDGES FOR CHANGE IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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Bridges build a living span from what we wish to what we can. Arnold Marzo.

This quote came to me from my program Manager, Zonia Sandoval Waldon at last year's bureau picnic. I have kept it on my office wall ever since because I thought it was so applicable to everything I hope to accomplish as supervisor in a relatively new, community based, Child Welfare District office. It has helped me to remember that change does not happen just because we have a vision of how something should be. Rather, it comes from building a bridge. First there is a dream or vision, then come architects, planners, builders, building materials, tools and all the people and resources which are necessary to make it a reality. In facing the challenge of welfare reform. each county's social services agency must build bridges (create services) which move AFDC families from dependence on the welfare system to self sufficiency. They cannot do this alone. They must forge partnerships with other human service agencies, community based organizations and even private employers.

I spent my BASSC Internship in the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency learning about Welfare Reform implementation. Although I have worked in Child Welfare for eleven years, implementation of the new Welfare Reform legislation is important to me because of its nationwide impact on service delivery, and particularly, how it will impact Child Welfare services. I was also interested in Santa Cruz County because of the similarities I perceived between South Santa Clara County and South Santa Cruz County.

I work in a more rural area of Santa Clara County, the city of Gilroy. which is a lot like the city of Watsonville. Both are small rural cities mostly involved in agriculture. with a largely Latino population. Many new immigrants are monolingual Spanish speaking and work in the fields as farm workers

The manager to whom I was assigned for my internship in the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency was Elizabeth Lopez, Assistant Division Director of Income Maintenance. She is also responsible for the development of One Stop Success Centers in Watsonville and in Santa Cruz. She is involved with the proposal to establish a Mobile Family Support Team, which was funded through the Packard foundation in mid April. The team will provide job search/life skills workshops to remote and underserved communities within Santa Cruz County.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency started its family centered welfare reform activities almost three years ago under the leadership of Director Will Lightbourne. In 1994-95 they began their "welfare to work" activities with a pilot self sufficiency program which later was followed by the Curtiss and Associates "Work First" model. Santa Cruz was also given a grant from the state for a Welfare to Work pilot program and a One Stop Career Center System. Around these activities HRA organized a "Coalition for Workforce Development". with participation from local colleges and adult education programs, the Employment Development

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Department, non profit human services agencies and private employers. It was this coalition which partnered with HRA in planning the effort to take Welfare Reform to the community, in a series of four Welfare Reform planning meetings held during my internship at the HRA.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

The HRA and other members of the Coalition were involved in collecting extensive data for the community meetings which began in March and continued every two weeks through April, for the four 1/2 Saturday meetings. I was impressed by the thoroughness with which the partners in the Coalition participated in the gathering of pertinent information.

Meeting # 1-The first community meeting which was held involved two panels. One was HRA doing an overview of welfare reform. They also were conducting a 100% survey of their AFDC caseloads, talking to all AFDC clients by phone or in person to develop a TANF client profile. There were some very interesting results. They found, for instance, that there were some big differences between the AFDC population in North Santa Cruz County and South County (Watsonville). While the North county population was higher in education level, the south county group had a stronger connection to the labor market. They also found that the monolingual Spanish speaking clients more often had a recent work history than those who could speak English. I had always thought that the lack of education and language were barriers to obtaining work. It was important to note that the jobs held by the monolingual Spanish-speaking clients were mostly seasonal jobs in agriculture and very often low paying, and that these may not be the best to bring people to the desired goal of self sufficiency.

Also on the panel were Community Based Organizations which presented statistics about the numbers of clients who are not likely to succeed at first, such as the multi-problem families. These clients will not be the ones who qualify for a waiver of the requirement to have to participate in work related activities. There may be 25% or more of the families currently on AFDC who will need much more than basic skills training to be successful in getting off of cash assistance. The concern is that no family should be allowed to fall through the cracks and that the community must take responsibility to provide or advocate politically for adequate safety, nets which seem to be less available than ever.

Meeting #2-This meeting focused on data collected by the EDD on available jobs, economic conditions, the job market in Santa Cruz and surrounding counties. It also focused on entry level jobs and those which had opportunities to lead people to increasing self sufficiency. It was a thorough and well thought out presentation. The panel also included non profit agencies and private sector employers. Some of the issues, I noticed, brought out discussion which showed a deep historical mistrust by private employers of government agencies. These people care enough about their community, however, to spend four beautiful sunny Saturday mornings collaborating on how they can help implement welfare reform.

Meeting #3-This time the panel covered the subject of child care needed and profiled the ages of children on TANF, their ethnicity and language needs. They also outlined existing child care resources. Then they identified possible problems, like the fact HRA only issues payment to child care providers for the service, after the service is received, which create disincentives for

providers to accept TANF clients. There were also the cultural differences between north and south county and the possibility that some families might opt for child care by extended family. There were quite a few people in this meeting who felt strongly that for preschool age children day care should include preschool type learning activities. Studies were cited that show children who attend Head Start type programs do better academically than those who do not.

One of the panelists, who directs a homeless shelter in Santa Cruz County stated that we need to stop defining a person or group of people by their problems. She said, "We need to realize we are talking about complex human beings with dreams, aspirations and a variety of life experiences". During my discussion group a private non profit employer commented on how inconvenient it was to have an employee leave to care for a sick child. The point was that he felt we need child care resources or TANF recipients need providers, to care for sick children. I asked him what happens if his wife calls him saying their child is sick at school? He responded that, of course in his position he has the "flexibility" to go pick up his sick child. I was struck by the inequity of the expectations we place on people in "entry" level positions versus those on professionals or managers.

Meeting #4-I was unable to attend the last session which was to present a synthesis of the ideas generated in sessions 1 to 3 and solicit input to develop recommendations to the Board of Supervisors. The plan was to have a recommendation involving, not only local strategies for economic development, but advocacy for change in state or federal legislative, if needed.

All of the Saturday sessions included breaking into small groups for discussion. Then the smaller groups presented their ideas to the larger one.. All suggestions will be incorporated in HRA's recommendation to the Board of Supervisors in May.

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

How does an agency go from a primary focus on cash assistance eligibility determination to become a workforce development agency? This was the most opportune time for me to be involved in observing change at all levels of the HRA. Will Lightbourne, HRA Director, left Santa Cruz County two weeks before I started my internship. Cecilia Espinola took over as Acting Director of HRA. Prior to this she had been Will's Assistant Director. In my meeting with Cecilia she described her style and Will's as being different, yet complimentary to each other. Where Will was the visionary, Cecilia dealt with the details, the process to get to the ultimate goal. At one meeting I heard her say to managers that Will had hand picked them all for a reason, that each one of them shared his vision for the future. She said this in a manner which left no doubt that the agency was on course with the same goals as before Will left. As Acting Director, Cecilia Espinola presented with an easy going style which at the same time was confident and in charge. I never sensed any confusion or lack of leadership in this agency, instead the managers and mid managers seemed to pull together in an effort to make the new program a success.

I was able to see at meetings with Eligibility and Gain Staff that it was hard for Eligibility Workers to visualize what their jobs might be like if they were doing workforce development and providing support for clients to become self sufficient rather than doing eligibility determinations with specific guidelines and complex regulations. It was clear that there needs to

be quite a bit of leadership and training to bring workers from a place where it was their job to know and implement all new state and federal policies and regulations, to more of an assessment and support role for the client to be successful in the workplace.

Managers and mid managers struggled with redefining roles of Eligibility Intake workers, TANF Workers, Workshop Facilitators, (there won't be any GAIN workers) and even Social Workers in the new TANF system. The struggle for them was not just in dealing with change, but the actual implementation date of the new program regulations still had not been determined. The state has yet to decide on a plan for implementing TANF, and the state's guidelines will be critical in planning their program and training staff.

I participated in a managers' offsite where they discussed how to redesign their whole intake and case management process. It was interesting to see that the managers seemed to be able to work well together without any well defined, structured process. This indicated to me that there is a high level of trust in HRA. Managers seemed willing to work out many issues through meetings in subcommittees with one or two of the key players. The same atmosphere of trust and good will was in evidence at every planning meeting where the management team was involved. Few, if any, personal agendas were advocated and I saw a cooperative team relationship when this group would tackle a problem. They simply rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

The Integrated Services Committee was another meeting I attended. It consisted of managers from Income Maintenance, EDD, GAIN and JTPA who meet monthly with CeciliaEspinola, Acting Director of HRA. The change this group faced is the integration of four previously separate programs. EDD, GAIN, JTPA and Income Maintenance are involved in this Welfare to Work Pilot project. Although GAIN and JTPA are both under HRA, they would also soon be fully integrated into one program with the other two agencies at the various One Stop Success Centers. The One Stop Success Center concept had been researched and site visits were made by Santa Cruz Staff to various successful programs. The centers will be designed, not only for TANF recipients, but to provide universal access to employment services for everyone. Many things were unclear to me and may be decided when the programs are closer to being implemented, such as who would administer the programs on site? EDD or HRA or both? Currently the 'Welfare to Work Pilot Program is being jointly administered by JTPA, Income Maintenance and EDD staff.

I observed how, sometimes, local politics has to be taken into consideration in the decisions that are being made. For example, the staff recommended in a One Stop Site Planning meeting that the agency choose a particular site for the Watsonville One Stop Success Center. It was one which was already identified in the community with employment activities. Another site was preferred by city planners to help rejuvenate the downtown area. Still another site was available as an option near the County Mental Health services. The decision ended up not to be either the one preferred by the planning team or the one preferred by the city but the one closest to Mental Health.

I was fortunate enough to be able to do a walk through of one of the sites, which was an old historical building called "Jepson" in downtown Watsonville. It was an old hotel which, at the time we walked through, was still boarded up. The building would have to maintain it's interior

design to preserve the Historical integrity and it had a fireplace in every room. It was hard to visualize it as a One Stop Success center.

One of the planning committee's tasks was to look at the original requests for space needed for GAIN/ TANF (Workshop Facilitators), JTPA and EDD staff. Many traditional assumptions were questioned by the group such as supervisors needing private offices versus having them closer to their workers. Office sharing was also considered as an option. Whatever hard choices they make, it is clear that they will need to be very creative in their use of space. The most important activities such as workshops, classes, the computer lab and library have to be given the first priority and have adequate space. These decisions may later determine how the program will be implemented, such as: should there be a children's waiting room? Child care areas?

The Curtiss Model workshops, "Work First" which were recently implemented as well as the workshops started previously in 94-95 have been very successful. The challenge now is to triple the number of Self Sufficiency workshops being conducted under a now voluntary GAIN program to meet the required TANF caseload reductions and timelines. This will mean 6 workshops per month and 1,460 TANF participants, which must result in 75% employment of those who complete the workshop. Partial and full employment and finally self sufficiency, will be necessary for participants to realize success and for the county not to be penalized by reductions in funding for TANF.

I spent one day at a monolingual Spanish speaking workshop group on its sixth day. After the sixth day participants begin their job search activities. The workshop was conducted in English, with some translation by the facilitator. The Facilitator was a GAIN worker and the cofacilitator was an Eligibility worker. The GAIN worker had received training by Curtiss and Associates on how to do the workshops. The day I was there the class was celebrating its graduation. I was deeply moved by the profound appreciation the participants expressed to their facilitators for believing in them. I never thought just focusing on self esteem and attitude with a few very basic job seeking skills could result in this much reported change. The model emphasizes a "work first" approach with later ongoing skills training and enhancement.

One of the most interesting experiences I had was a visit to the program, FIT-Families In Transition. This is a community based organization which provides housing assistance and intensive case management to homeless families or families at risk of losing their housing. I met with the director of the program, Bill Watt. I listened to Mr. Watt describe many of the things he and his staff were doing and I felt like I had truly met a kindred spirit. His philosophy was common sense, people caring about other members of their community and providing a support system for the "mufti-problem" families who are known to many human service agencies.

Bill Watt described true collaboration as, "I know the names and faces of the staff in another agency and I am able to walk in and have them do favors for my clients. Later when the client has a success I can give that agency and staff the credit". Collaboration in other words is developing relationships with other people, not just agencies contracting for services or attending each other's meetings.

Bill Watt told me that as a CBO he has to collect a lot of data to show the success rate of his program. One of the data collection instruments is a self report survey by the participants in the program. In almost every survey the clients spoke of their relationship to the social worker being the key to their successes. Words used were, "Steve became like a part of my family, I didn't have a support system before he got involved in my family."; and "The people in this program just plain refused to give up on me, even when I was ready to give up they just kept at me." Bill was faced with a loss of funding in the recent past which meant he would either have to cut staff or cut all housing subsidies. Housing subsidies are one of the ways this agency keeps people in crisis from losing their housing. He wondered what to do. Should he believe all the surveys which said the social workers were the magic that made the difference between success and failure? He decided to cut the subsidies and not staff and in tracking the results of that particular time phase the success rate of people making it through the program and "graduating" was just as high as when they had the full funding.

This story illustrates to me a truth I have known from my child welfare work. Case management is not being a "broker" of services as many social workers see the role. It is the relationship between the social worker and that parent, child and family which can make the difference that no amount of hard services can. I don't think we stress enough that the case manager's belief in a family's strengths and desire for them to succeed can do more to motivate and support a family than any number of classes, groups or therapies.

CONCLUSION

The reason I was able to participate in such a wide range of activities is that my assigned manager, Liz Lopez helped me to structure my time and activities so that I would have the broadest range of experience possible over a longer period of time. This allowed me to see the progress of Welfare Reform efforts at HRA from February to beginning April. We decided that rather than shadowing her in the role of manager, I could visit various meetings, HRA sites and community based organizations. to really get a flavor of the community. I am really grateful to Liz Lopez, Lynn Miller, the Director, Cecilia Espinola, and many other HRA staff for making my mentorship in Santa Cruz County a productive and meaningful experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For me to make a meaningful recommendation to my agency, Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, I should know more about what we are doing to implement Welfare Reform. At the risk of possibly recommending actions which may already be happening I will still make an attempt at stating what I would like to see happen in Santa Clara county.

1. I believe we should consider an integrated services model like the One Stop model used in Santa Cruz and many other counties. A truly integrated services model would merge several agencies' staffs and services in locations convenient for clients.
2. I like the idea which Santa Cruz proposed in their Packard grant. HRA will take the 6 day workshops and success center on the road in a mobile unit which will do outreach to

populations which are more isolated. Part of the grant will fund a position for a coordinator of services in these more remote areas.

3. It is hard to recommend we adopt the culture of another agency, but it was so refreshing to sit down with managers who truly know the meaning of teamwork and cooperation. I know Santa Clara County is larger and maybe more diverse, but I believe it is possible to develop a supportive work environment where people can share their best creative ideas. I also think that we need to get input on new ways of providing services from the front line staff and our clients. Much of the change in our agency is developed without meaningful input from line staff and without ever asking, even informally for clients' ideas.
4. The last message I would bring home to my county is that collaboration with others and success with our clients really comes down to relationships between human beings. It's not about how many meetings we go to together or how many contracts we have with other agencies. It's not even about the number of different referral resources we can give clients or how many hard services we can offer. We have got to teach social workers, eligibility/TANF workers, employment technicians, clerks, supervisors and managers how to value other people and develop relationships with them. It is knowing their names and faces, it is mutual support, finding out what we can do for them as well as what they can do for us. It is simply sitting down, rolling up our sleeves and working together.