

THE BLENDING OF ELIGIBILITY AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES THE SAN FRANCISCO WAY

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INTRODUCTION

The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKS) program became effective in January 1998. The implementation of the CalWORKS program created a window of opportunity for California counties to make dramatic changes in service delivery.

WHY SAN FRANCISCO

A county survey conducted by Merit System Services indicates that San Francisco County is one of nine counties in California that utilizes the blended employment and eligibility worker model for employable CalWORKS participants. The report also indicates that forty-two counties continue to utilize a model that includes separate eligibility and employment classifications, while the remaining counties utilize a derivative of these two models.

I chose San Francisco County for my project to gain a greater understanding of how eligibility and employment services were blended. Prior to CalWORKS, the County utilized the eligibility and social worker classifications for administration of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Monterey County, my home county, continues to utilize separate eligibility and employment services classifications.

BACKGROUND

After careful study, San Francisco County, with direction from the Mayor's Welfare Reform Task Force, created an Employment Specialist classification to provide blended employment and eligibility services. This insures that the participant has one point of contact and facilitates a more efficient model of service delivery. The new positions were filled beginning April 1998. A competitive hiring process was used to insure that the most highly qualified individuals were hired for these new positions.

The county continues to utilize the following employment services classifications: vocational assessor, job developer and employment counselor-trainer. These individuals work in tandem with the Employment Specialist. The new classification is compensated at approximately 5% greater than the social worker and 6.77% greater than the eligibility worker journey positions.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EMPLOYMENT SPECIALIST

The primary role of the Employment Specialist is that of a case manager. Duties include enrolling CalWORKS participants in the program and completing participant assessments for the development of a Job Search strategy and as a basis for an Employment Plan. Ongoing case management is discussed further below. Specialized Employment Specialists conduct orientation and Appraisal Workshops.

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ONGOING CASE MANAGEMENT

The Employment Specialist provides all necessary support to assist participants in fulfilling their employment plans, in addition to management of their cash aid and Food Stamp cases. The Employment Specialist works with the Participant to identify the services necessary for carrying out the employment plan. Case management tasks include:

- Coordination with designated staff of partner agencies providing services to the Participant (e.g., supportive services, monitoring progress, and reporting outcomes);
- Assisting the Participant in managing overlapping case-management-type relationships among the various agencies that are involved with the Participant, e.g., Housing Authority, Child Protective Services (CPS), courts, Public Health;
- Authorization of child care subsidies, hours, transportation expenses and other support services;
- Development of a plan to address any issues that create the need to approve a temporary exemption from participating in the Welfare-to-Work Activities specified in the plan;
- Working with the Child Welfare Worker if there is an active CPS case;
- Adjustment of the plan and contract if necessary;
- Maintaining regular contact with the Participant to support and monitor progress;
- Carrying the case until the participant no longer receives CalWORKS;
- Providing Job Retention Services for a minimum of one year after aid has been discontinued.

The Employment Specialist is responsible for case management of approximately sixty CalWORKS participants. The majority of participants are mandatory welfare-to-work participants with a minimal number of temporarily exempt participants in the caseload. I observed participant interviews and discovered that the Employment Specialist is an integral part of establishing a successful employment plan. The process is very interactive and meaningful for both the participant and the Employment Specialist.

SUMMARY

It should be noted that even though this operational design is heavily dependent on the Employment Specialist, s/he is actually part of two teams: an onsite team which includes a Vocational Assessor, Child Care Program Specialist, Substance Abuse Specialist, and Mental Health Specialist. Another team, for example, might include training program staff, CalWORKS counselors at City College, and others in the Participant's immediate support network.

Two weeks of training were provided to the new Employment Specialists. The training provided the basic information necessary to get started. Supplemental training is provided as needed. Employment Specialists expressed concern, when interviewed, that the initial training was insufficient for the magnitude of their new assignment.

Employment Specialists were initially assigned sixty welfare-to-work cases; however, they found it difficult to complete all required tasks. Efforts are underway to reduce caseloads to approximately fifty **SOME NEXT STEPS FOR SAN FRANCISCO**: cases to provide additional time to conduct case management functions. Those interviewed indicate that a great deal of time is spent handling eligibility issues, thereby reducing the amount of time available to provide welfare-to-work activities. This creates a sense of feeling overwhelmed that results in frustration among staff. Some Employment Specialists believe that the blended eligibility and employment services worker with a reduced caseload is the best approach. Others believe that separation of the two functions will result in increased customer service and will allow staff to be expert in a particular area. The majority of the Employment Specialists interviewed indicated that the ideal caseload should average thirty-five to forty cases with mandatory welfare-to-work participants, based upon their experience over the past year.

OUTCOMES:

These outcomes are based upon my observations while in San Francisco County:

- Successful staff interactions with participants, both on the telephone and in person, indicate that the Employment Specialists are very knowledgeable about the requirements of CalWORKs.
- The welfare to work message has become a part of the day to day language of the staff.
- Employment Specialists are able to speak confidently about the requirements and advantages of CalWORKs.
- Participants generally respond favorably to the Employment Specialist and view the Employment Specialist as someone who is there to help them.

SOME NEXT STEPS FOR SAN FRANCISCO:

- Development of strategies for participant job retention and career advancement.
- Continuation of planning for additional training for the Employment Specialists. Counseling skills, program regulations and procedures for use of the GAIN Information System were identified as areas to focus upon.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MONTEREY COUNTY:

Based on the successes and experiences of San Francisco County, it would seem prudent to further study the potential benefits of establishing a blended eligibility and employment services

classification. This is quite a departure from Monterey County's current model of separate eligibility and employment services and will require careful consideration.

Some critical areas to consider:

1. How successful is our current model (i.e., work participation rates, etc.)?
2. How closely is staff able to monitor customer employment plans?
3. Is the message of welfare-to-work prevalent in both the eligibility and employment services sections of the department?
4. How has the implementation of CalWORKs impacted error rates and employee turnover?
5. How might the blending of classifications impact employees and customers? What issues will labor have with the blended model?
6. Are there sufficient training and staff development resources to support a transition of this magnitude?
7. What is the appropriate caseload size for a blended eligibility and employment services case manager?

RECOMMENDATION:

Establish a multi-disciplinary team to evaluate the concept of creating an employment and eligibility blended classification. This team should have representation from all stakeholders to insure that all aspects are evaluated. Team members could include representatives from the community, customers, agencies/county departments, community-based organizations and department staff.

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