

NEW SERVICE INTEGRATION OPPORTUNITIES WITH WELFARE REFORM: THE SAN MATEO COUNTY EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine any County welfare department that is not overwhelmed by the great wave of welfare reform since passage of federal welfare reform in August, 1996. The speed of change has accelerated drastically. The way we provided public cash entitlement programs for over 60 years has become obsolete almost overnight with a deliberate shift towards programs clearly defined as transitional and designed to foster self-sufficiency. The implications for certain vulnerable members of society may be painful; the hope is that for others, this will provide a new approach that may be more helpful. To the extent that supportive resources such as child care and job preparation exist, these changes potentially afford new opportunities for a fresh look at service delivery and its objectives. This may offer new ways to integrate services that previously operated relatively independently with many of the same customers. San Mateo has come up with a plan for moving its welfare recipients into work that integrates economic benefits, employment services, and child welfare/social work services in a multi-disciplinary team approach. It is also occurring in an environment of intense economic development and growth.

San Mateo County provides an almost ideal example of how such a process unfolded. San Mateo differs greatly from Alameda demographically. Alameda County has 1.4 million residents to San Mateo's 696,000. In 1990, Alameda County had 10.6% below poverty whereas San Mateo had 6.3%. Alameda County has about 8% of its population receiving AFDC (TANF) whereas San Mateo has 2%. Nonetheless, San Mateo County's relatively small size, organizational culture and "can do" tradition does give a view into what can happen under almost ideal conditions for a major change process. I was fortunate in being able to observe the planning process as it nears its conclusion and to talk about it with many of the key players in the County. My mentor, Bill Demestihias, was instrumental in guiding me to just the right meetings, contacts, and issues.

SAN MATEO COUNTY

"Well the times, they are a changin' " — Bob Dylan

San Mateo County developed a Strategic Plan in 1992 that was intensely client-focused and prevention oriented. The blueprint that emerged from this process, which occurred both internally and with the community, has served as the basis for planning and reorganization ever since. The Strategic Plan became a shared vision between the agency and the community. A new Agency Director provided leadership in moving the strategic plan into an action plan and an intense planning process was begun in 1994 to revamp services to poor families that integrates economic benefits, employment services and child welfare services in a unique way. The plan was based on many of the same assumptions and values as the new welfare reform laws. This plan is, at last, on the brink of being implemented.

San Mateo has a tradition of being proactive with innovative approaches to social problems. A history of community-ownership of social problems has helped the Human Services Department

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marshal resources across turf and territorial lines. As one top administrator said, "San Mateo has a 'can do' attitude and political culture that really enables us to get things done." The leadership of Director Maureen Borland also permitted no one to withdraw from the process even when turf struggles emerged. The need to re-align resources internally and to actively partner with the economic community and other community resources at the same time required full participation from everyone even when the going got tough.

"Nothing succeeds like SUCCESS — Ange Pitou

San Mateo's plan for SUCCESS Centers are models of integration of services. They are designed to have all clients seeking public benefits walk through one door and be able to receive an array of services that span economic benefits, employment services, and social work services, where these are assessed as necessary. They relink social work services for identified families with welfare services, a concept that once was normal practice. The acronym, SUCCESS, stands for : Shared Undertaking to Change the Community to Enable Self-Sufficiency. What is remarkable about the plan besides its innovative blending of disciplines is that its development occurred with a large number of people and involved representatives from all major agency and community stakeholder groups.

As with most welfare reform re-models, the SUCCESS model de-emphasizes cash benefits and emphasizes job sere ,yes. This is reflected in the requirement that all recipients or would-be recipients are required to participate in Work First, a job search program based on the Dean Curtis model, which San Mateo began using in its GAIN program in 1994. The only people exempted are those with medical excuses that state they cannot work at all. Clients receive an initial screening and assessment that is comprehensive and gathers a wide range of family, substance abuse, mental health, and child welfare history as well as information about family strengths and resources. They are asked to sign a release of information that permits free sharing of information with all involved agencies and providers. Depending on need and their eligibility for various welfare benefits, required paperwork is completed and verifications requested. One innovation by San Mateo is to include the non-custodial parent in many of the services. The County seeks court-ordered child support and then mandates the unemployed non-custodial parent to equivalent job services offered to the custodial parent so that both parents can financially (and hopefully emotionally) contribute to support of the children.

Following the screening, if immediate need exists. emergency payments or other services will be arranged. Every client is then scheduled within 2448 hours for a Work First orientation. The client signs an Action Plan that reflects an understanding of this expectation. Payment of the initial TANF payment is contingent on participation in the Work First orientation and cooperation with the Family Support Division in identifying the father and seeking child support. The process provides for mediation throughout if there is an unresolvable difference between the customer and the agency. The Work First approach is very actively focused on finding a job as quickly as possible and keeping it. Child care and transportation assistance is provided to facilitate participation.

"Good counselors lack no clients"— Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

There are certain customers who are NOT referred directly to Work First or who fail to participate in Work First. These customers are instead referred to the Family Self-Sufficiency Team (FSST). Customers who are disabled, caring for someone disabled, pregnant in the last trimester or 12 weeks postpartum, or who have failed to participate in the Work First program are referred for case management services through the vehicle of what is known as the FSST. FSST is designed to offer supportive services to certain families to address barriers to their ability to become self-sufficient. Customers referred to FSST from Work First will be assigned an Income and Employment Services Specialist (IESS) who will serve as their primary case manager. Customers referred from other routes may have a different primary case manager, depending on their situation, which could include a child welfare worker, a drug & alcohol counselor, a mental health counselor, a public health nurse, a housing resources specialist, a health specialist, an IESS, or someone else. The primary case manager is responsible for arranging, coordinating, monitoring, evaluating, and advocating for a package of multiple services to meet the individual or family needs so that the goal of self-sufficiency can eventually be attained.

The FSST is designed as a multi-disciplinary team involving all key agency and community-based resources involved in a particular family. Since the system involves sanctions for non-compliant families that result in grant cuts, the primary case manager must be trained in some aspects of child welfare assessment to be able to evaluate the impact of less family income and other factors on the welfare of the children. Some child welfare expertise is, thus, required knowledge for all primary case managers in the FSST model. Training in this area is an integral part of the multi-disciplinary training program developed to help in the implementation of this model. The training that is planned in connection with implementation of the SUCCESS model reads like a basic social work text. It includes assessment, collaboration, values and ethics, dealing with change, interviewing and listening skills, customer services, coaching and mentoring, cultural sensitivity and awareness of diversity, drug and alcohol assessment and intervention, communication, and mandated reporter training.

"Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education." — Pudd'nhead Wilson

The challenge of creating multi-disciplinary teams that function well should not be underestimated. To some extent, different institutional cultures exist among the eligibility, employment, and social work groups. The screening and assessment functions as well as the Work First function will largely draw from current eligibility and employment staff. However, the IESS role could potentially draw from any of a number of sources and has been conceived as a role that would encompass a broad base of knowledge about eligibility, employment and social work, including child welfare. Some administrators that I spoke with expressed some reservations about the successful re-orienting or merging of certain staff due to the perceived or real differences in institutional cultures. For instance, the stereotype is that eligibility is largely internal, self-contained, with an identified population, and rulebound. Employment is stereotyped as rule-breaking, spontaneous, "rah rah", minimizing of barriers, and outwardly focused. Child Welfare is stereotyped as focused on protection, barriers, dysfunction and pathology. Dependency and empowerment are themes that undoubtedly run through each discipline. The challenge involves how to transcend these differences, demystify what each does, and move into

a realm of everyone benefiting from the different perspective each has to bring to the table. There were other administrators who dismissed this concern as exaggerated and some who believe that proper training will mitigate these potential problems. Co-location of some eligibility and employment staff has already demonstrated some lessening of these tensions and enhanced appreciation for the different roles.

Redefining roles will entail great upheaval as well as excitement for some about the opportunities it brings. The benefits from this multi-disciplinary approach are many. It draws on the strengths of each discipline, provides for cross-fertilization and appreciation for the orientation and viewpoint of each discipline's contributions, and provides new career opportunities for staff. Ultimately, it will hopefully give the client the experience of receiving services that are less fragmented, more integrated, and better able to respond to a variety of needs at once.

Another innovation in San Mateo County is that, since March 3, 1997, the General Assistance (GA) population is receiving a modified version of the Work First program through a pilot program in Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). San Mateo County began doing all GA intake through

VRS using the same intake process used for all the other aid categories with screening/assessment followed by referral to Work First or FSST Populations served in this way will include noncustodial parents ordered to Work First by Family Court, GA clients, mental health clients, drug & alcohol clients, and State Department of Rehabilitation clients. The modifications in the Work First program for these participants include less emphasis on competition among participants, more team work, and less "cheerleading" type activity. San Mateo has a sheltered workshop that has operated for years for mental health, vocational rehabilitation and drug and alcohol clients. The county is hoping to use this facility to help some percentage of GA clients formerly assessed as unemployable to be able to engage in partial or full employment in exchange for grants.

Since poverty is known to be the single best predictor of involvement by a family with child protection agencies, it is incumbent on child welfare professionals to involve themselves in welfare reform planning that may, for some, appear to be focused solely on the family's financial reality. Since there is a well-known correlation between family dysfunction that comes to the attention of public agencies and poverty, a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to meeting a family's economic needs becomes one of the most important prevention strategies available. In addition, early access to mental health and drug and alcohol services should be enhanced through the FSST. Since these problems account for a significant part of the child welfare caseload, this access may be crucial in identifying "at risk" families before a situation becomes too deteriorated thus requiring more costly child welfare services.

"Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, And Hope without an object cannot live."

— S. T. Coleridge

The SUCCESS program has been developed in an overall environment of economic development throughout San Mateo County. Bill Demestihias as the Director of Job Training and

Economic Development has been actively engaged in the creation of One Stop Centers which focus on job development, bringing employers and job seekers together and enhancing job skill sets for both categorical and general populations of the county. The community colleges, private industries, State Department of Economic Development and labor unions have been drawn in to the county's economic development planning as active partners through participation in the Private Industry Council and other economic development planning vehicles and networks. San Mateo County has a 3% unemployment rate and is actively expanding its pool of jobs. The long-term focus for the county is on help for the working poor. This is to prevent people from recycling back into the welfare system and to raise skill sets for the working poor to enable them to move into better paying jobs.

TRANSLATION FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY

"There is not less wit nor less invention in applying rightly a thought one finds in a book, than in being the first author of that thought." — Pierre Bayle

The current welfare reform planning process in Alameda County actively involves the joint efforts of the eligibility and employment departments. It focuses on the shift of resources from eligibility to employment services, the development of a single intake process, and diversion of families to community based resources where possible. Alameda County is faced with a much more daunting task than San Mateo in that it has more entrenched concentrated pockets of poverty, a more ethnically diverse population, a 5% unemployment rate and a higher percentage of welfare recipients.

However, Alameda can learn from the planning process that San Mateo is about to conclude. Specifically, Alameda County's planning process has not involved child welfare or other communitybased social work staff to help design or access case management strategies for the families for whom the transition to self-sufficiency is more difficult. Since there is such a cross-over between welfare families and child welfare families, it would be useful to include this component. It may also prove to be a crucial piece in addressing the needs of multi-problem families for whom the regular approaches will not work.

Likewise, it is incumbent on child welfare administrators to view welfare reform as an opportunity for prevention and early intervention strategies that have not formerly existed. Integrating knowledge about family systems, the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, drug and alcohol dynamics, mental health issues, and other aspects of basic social work practice into a reformed welfare system seems like the best bet to provide a full array of informed services to clients. In addition, child welfare services have traditionally been provided through case management approaches. This is an expertise that the child welfare field has to offer its colleagues whose expertise is in providing eligibility and employment services.

One example of the benefits of integrating services under welfare reform comes with the Teen Parent Disincentive initiative under AB 908. Since San Mateo County is integrating social work/child welfare services in its welfare reform plan, it will enable the county to use the FSST primary case manager to perform the assessments required by AB 908. It will also enable the

county to use the FSST Child Welfare staff member to provide the family maintenance/case management services required by AB 908.

Ultimately, the payoff for integrated services is for families. To the extent that families can experience a more seamless system of services, the better able they are to respond to services and to have their needs met. While there are many misgivings about the direction of welfare reform, it should be recognized that it does provide some new opportunities for re-looking at service delivery and integration.