

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE Ca1WORKS LEARNING NEEDS SCREENING PROTOCOL

Kristin Cornuelle*
Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

In October 2001, an All County Letter (ACL) #0170 was distributed throughout California, outlining the protocols for screening and providing resources to CalWORKS individuals with learning needs. The protocol mandates learning needs screening for all CalWORKS participants beginning September 1, 2002. In an effort to design the screening implementation process and develop resources for San Mateo County, I visited both Contra Costa County and the City and County of San Francisco.

SCREENING PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

The following research paper outlines each stage of the screening process and recommendations for San Mateo County formulated during my research.

Screening

It is recommended that the long-term case manager or Income and Employment Services Specialist administer the screen.

Training

Training is critical to ensure that staff is informed, knowledgeable and sensitive to this population. San Mateo County is currently partnering with the College of San Mateo to provide an on-site class for County employees on learning disabilities, and should continue the provision of this course in addition to the training module.

Vocational Assessment

Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) should expand their current services to provide assessments to individuals identified with learning disabilities following the learning needs screen.

Evaluation/Ld Specialist

It seems critical that an LD Specialist is hired to build internal capacity and offer an in-house resource for evaluations. This position is cost-effective as well. In addition the county can utilize the community colleges to provide evaluations for students.

Accommodations/FSST

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It is recommended that San Mateo County build on existing resources and incorporate the discussion of the evaluation and the accommodations into the Family Self-Sufficiency Team (FSST) meetings. FSST is an existing multi-disciplinary team that meets regionally to provide resources and referrals to clients in need. This team is already serving CalWORKS participants, and can provide a forum to assist those with learning disabilities as well.

Summer Pilot

San Mateo County should implement a "Summer Pilot" of the learning needs screen to further assess the designed customer flow process and develop additional resources if needed.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, despite the challenges, the implementation of the learning needs screen will take a much-needed step in identifying individuals with learning disabilities and providing them with the resources they need to live successful and productive lives.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CALWORKS LEARNING NEEDS SCREENING PROTOCOL

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BACKGROUND

Two years ago the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) established an Advisory Work-group on Learning Disabilities to find ways of identifying CalWORKS participants with learning differences and provide them with appropriate services and accommodations. In October 2001, an All County Letter (ACL) #0170 was distributed throughout California, outlining the protocols for screening and providing resources to CalWORKS individuals with learning needs. The protocol mandated learning needs screening for all CalWORKS participants beginning May 15, 2002.

In an effort to design a screening implementation process for San Mateo County, I visited the City and County of San Francisco and Contra Costa County. Through these visits, I was able to compare and contrast the counties at varying stages of implementation, identify the challenges and determine best practices. At the same time, I was able to share information with the San Mateo County LD Workgroup, a team of staff and partners designated to develop an implementation plan for San Mateo County.

The following summary outlines each stage of the screening process and recommendations for San Mateo County formulated during my research. This proposal should assist San Mateo County as they begin to provide services for individuals with learning disabilities, allowing them to achieve employment and self-sufficiency.

INTRODUCTION

People with learning disabilities are the largest segment of the disability population, and growing numbers of college students identify themselves as having LD (Gerber and Reiff, 1994). Almost 30 million adults in the US are estimated to have learning disabilities. Individuals such as Charles Schwab, Albert Einstein and John Chambers of Cisco Systems have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. It is clear in these cases that their learning differences did not impair their abilities to become successful and contributing members of society. Despite the aforementioned examples, many CalWORKS participants have not had the resources or treatment available to achieve this type of success. It is estimated that up to 40% of the CalWORKS caseload has some type of learning disability-a condition that clearly contributes to the difficulties many participants face in finding and retaining employment. Despite the prevalence of learning disabilities, counties have been relatively ill equipped in working with this population. The recent LD screening mandate for all cases is compelling counties to strengthen their resources for individuals with learning needs - people who previously may have gone untreated or undiagnosed. Thus CalWORKS participants with learning needs can access the services they need to re-enter the workforce and reach self-sufficiency.

SCREENING

The All County Letter (ACL) #01-70 outlines the screening, evaluation, accommodation and diagnosis protocols for all new and existing CalWORKS participants. The first step in identifying individuals with learning disabilities is the Learning Needs (LN) screen. The ACL mandates that all participants be offered the screen at appraisal. The screen must also be administered to current participants that seem to have difficulty processing information, fail to progress in welfare-to-work activities or are suspected of having a learning disability. The screen was developed by Payne and Associates, and is a question and answer, self-report tool. It must be administered to individuals in their native language. At this time, there is no screen available for limited or non-English speakers. San Francisco is one of the Counties piloting a Spanish-speaking LD screening tool, and results should be available later this year. At this time, limited or non-English speakers must be referred directly for an evaluation until a validated screening tool is provided by the state.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE SCREEN

The first decision in the screening process is identifying which staff will administer the screen. Both Contra Costa and San Francisco assigned this task to the Employment Specialist. This individual is the continuing or long-term case manager, and has direct case management responsibility throughout the participant's lifetime in the CalWORKS program. In addition, they develop the welfare-to-work plan with the participant. The Employment Specialist is also the most logical party to provide referrals, resources and accommodations as part of the plan.

For these reasons, it seems appropriate that San Mateo County designate similar staff to administer the screen. It is recommended that the equivalent position in San Mateo County, the Income and Employment Services Specialist, perform the screen for San Mateo County CalWORKS participants.

TRAINING NEEDS

The ACL also mandates that employees be properly trained. The worker who administers the tool has to be knowledgeable, sensitive and able to ask difficult questions addressing a client's educational background and work history. A worker's attitude and comfort level with the subject matter may influence the outcome of the screen. In addition, the way the screen is presented to the customer may have an impact on the answers reported.

Recently CDSS held train-the-trainer workshops for CalWORKS Program Specialists and other county-designated staff, providing information on learning disabilities as well as the screening protocol. Nonetheless, both counties recognize the need for a more comprehensive training, including disability awareness and sensitivity components as well. San Francisco has developed a role-play based Discussion Survey Training for workers in their Personal Assisted Employment Services program, and may look into refining this module for CalWORKS staff. San Mateo County is currently partnering with the College of San Mateo to provide an on-site learning disabilities course for County employees. The class has been tremendously successful, covering the LD screen as well as other critical techniques in working with individuals with learning disabilities. The feedback from Contra

Costa and San Francisco in regard to training reinforces the need for San Mateo to continue providing this course for staff, as well as training covering the administration of the screen itself.

SPECIALIZED STAFF

Another interesting observation is Contra Costa and San Francisco's designated Employment Services staff who provide services to the "hardest to serve" or most intensive cases. These workers tend to be more knowledgeable and sensitive with participants that have multiple issues or severe disabilities. Contra Costa has a special job title called a Senior Employment Specialist, which has a slightly different role than the other long-term caseworkers. Senior Employment Specialists currently provide vocational assessments and other intensive services for CalWORKS participants that have multiple barriers. These long-term caseworkers may have more success with administering the screen and the additional resources that follow.

San Francisco has an entire team of staff called Vocational Assessors that provide vocational assessments and learning needs inventories (more detailed and lengthier evaluations following the LD screen). These individuals have Master's level degrees and provide detailed information and recommendations to the Employment Specialist regarding referred cases.

Both Counties provide assessments to many participants (San Francisco administers assessments to all participants), utilizing PCbased (PESCO), read-free (RAVEN) and paperbased (CAPS, CASAS) tools. Contra Costa and San Francisco counties recognize that the expertise of these specialized workers is a tremendous resource as they refine their screening implementation plans. It seems critical that San Mateo County tap into a similar in-house resource.

VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

It is recommended that County of San Mateo Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) expand their current services to provide assessments to individuals identified with learning disabilities, following the learning needs screen. Currently, VRS administers assessments to CalWORKS participants identified as having multiple barriers to employment - similar to the vocational assessments given in San Francisco and Contra Costa counties. Following the assessment, the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor submits a written report to the Income and Employment Services Specialist, outlining accommodations and suggested referrals. In addition, VRS currently works with County of San Mateo Mental Health Services and the Department of Rehabilitation, and makes immediate connections with these resources as appropriate. Following LD screening, CalWORKS participants with potential learning disabilities would be referred to VRS for further assessment. An assessment would have a shorter turnaround time than the evaluation, and enable the individual to make an immediate connection to disability resources and accommodations if needed. Even though it is not explicitly outlined in the ACL, the assessment seems a logical step in the customer flow process, especially after witnessing the roles of similar staff in neighboring counties.

EVALUATION

Ultimately, the most important part of the entire screening process is the evaluation. If the score on the LN screen indicates a potential learning disability, individuals must be referred for an evaluation. The ACL requires that "validated testing instruments" are used in the evaluation, and that it is performed by "county designated professionals who have the necessary training as an LD specialist or qualified professional who can administer and interpret the recommended LD tests." A significant challenge for counties is locating these professionals, not to mention the high costs involved in evaluations - most contractors charge between \$600-\$1200 per client for a comprehensive evaluation.

Contra Costa County had the foresight to hire two licensed psychologists on staff to provide evaluations for CalWORKS participants, again capitalizing on their in-house resources. San Francisco has recently formed a relationship with the UC Berkeley Extension New Learning Clinic. The clinic is located in San Francisco and willing to provide evaluations for \$800 per participant. Unfortunately, Counties are not receiving any new funding to compensate for these services, and, it is clear that the costs of mandated evaluations will add up quickly.

LD SPECIALIST

Like Contra Costa and San Francisco, it would be prudent for San Mateo County to capitalize on existing community resources as well. Currently, the community colleges have LD Specialists that provide learning disability evaluation classes during the school year (September through June) for enrolled students. However, the classes are unavailable during the summer months, and the clients served must be students enrolled in the community colleges. In addition, the evaluation course can take eight weeks or more. It seems critical that San Mateo County hire an LD Specialist to build capacity for the summer months, and offer an in-house resource for evaluations as well. The LD Specialist can work more directly with the Income and Employment Services Specialist in order to provide recommendations for the welfare-to-work plan. This position can also provide on-site learning needs classes to assist individuals with selfadvocacy,

job accommodations and understanding/awareness of learning disabilities. The cost-benefit analysis clearly demonstrates a significant savings by hiring a full-time staff person versus contracting out the evaluations:

	LD Specialist Hire	Contractor
# of CalWORKS clients per month	15	15
Cost per month	\$56,000 (one month salary and benefits)	\$12,000 (\$800 per session x 15 clients)

ACCOMMODATIONS

The evaluation is critical to both the case manager and the participant because it includes the recommended accommodations for the welfare-to-work plan. Accommodations enable individuals with learning disabilities to develop compensatory strategies and techniques to assist them in their vocational and educational activities. These accommodations must be discussed with the participant and incorporated into the welfare-to-work plan. Any modifications to work activities must be mutually agreed upon by the county and the participant. Accommodations can include reduced hours/work activities, extended time, use of a Word processor/PC or spell checker, training, education, software, alternative formats or remediation. One county is investigating the hiring of an Accommodations Coach to assist in developing and incorporating these recommendations into the welfare-to-work plan. San Francisco may utilize the expertise of its Vocational Assessors to assist the Employment Specialists with incorporating accommodations or recommendations from the evaluation into the participant's plan.

FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY TEAM

It is recommended that San Mateo County build on existing resources and incorporate the discussion of the evaluation and accommodations into the Family Self-Sufficiency Team (FSST) meetings. FSST is an existing multi-disciplinary team that meets regionally to provide resources and referrals to clients in need. The case manager and client are invited to the meeting, as well as representatives from Alcohol and Other Drug Services, Housing, Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation Services and others. The goals of the team are to bring the various county resources together to assist the client in achieving self-sufficiency. This team is already serving CalWORKS participants, and can provide a forum to assist those with learning disabilities as well. The evaluator (whether it be an internal LD Specialist, a contractor or the community colleges) can utilize FSST to create an open dialogue with the participant and make an immediate connection to resources or providers at the meeting. Accommodations and referrals can also be incorporated into the plan with all parties present. In addition, FSST has a small

source of associated funding for client needs, and these monies could be used to purchase assistive technology or other materials for participants with learning needs.

DIAGNOSIS

The ACL indicates that in some instances, a diagnosis may be required. For example, a formal diagnosis is needed for individuals taking their GED (if reasonable accommodations are requested). The ACL suggests if formal documentation of a learning disability is needed, or the participant presents multiple and significant barriers to employment, that a diagnosis is performed by a licensed psychologist (Ph.D.) or psychiatrist. Some counties perceive that many individuals identified by the learning needs screen will likely present multiple impairments and should thus be referred directly for a diagnosis (bypassing the evaluation). For counties with Ph.D. resources on hand, like Contra Costa, this approach may work well. Counties with more limited resources may have an easier time referring participants to an evaluation first.

San Mateo County's recommended customer flow design takes into consideration both of these points, and addresses them at the assessment stage. If the assessment indicates a severe learning disability or multiple impairments, VRS already has an existing relationship with Department of Rehabilitation and can refer individuals directly for a diagnosis. The Department of Rehabilitation has one PhD on staff to provide psychological testing at no charge to the county or the participant. However, the demand for testing may far outweigh the supply of skilled professionals once the LD screen begins. Participating in the evaluation and taking advantage of existing resources may better serve many individuals who are capable of self-accommodation and advocacy through education, training, etc.

SUMMER PILOT

Recently, CDSS postponed the LD screening implementation date for all counties, moving it back to September 1, 2002. The additional time provides San Mateo County with an opportunity to pursue a "Summer Pilot" of the LN screen, to further assess the designed customer flow process and develop additional resources if needed. The

County can pilot the screening protocol with one of the CalWORKS units beginning June 1, 2002. During this time, evaluations can be referred to a contractor to better determine capacity needs for the rest of the calendar year, prior to hiring a fulltime LD Specialist. Some caseworkers in this unit have already attended the on-site College of San Mateo class on learning disabilities, and are capable of beginning the screen. In addition, the Unit Supervisor has been a member of the LD Workgroup and involved in all of the discussions surrounding implementation. Prior to the September 1, 2002 implementation date, the current recommended protocol and customer flow system (see attached) could be evaluated based on the outcomes of the pilot group.

CONCLUSION

Implementing the LD screening protocol for all CalWORKS participants is a massive project for all Counties, and will be even more challenging

considering the lack of funding available to develop the required resources in this area. There are two key practices observed by Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties that may assist other Counties as they move forward in this endeavor. First, it is clear that identification of key personnel who are trained and knowledgeable is of great importance to the outcome of this project. Training goes beyond simply educating staff on how to administer the screen. Each area must understand the need to develop a heightened awareness and sensitivity around individuals with disabilities. The second critical piece is building internal capacity and collaborating with existing programs and services. Both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties assessed their local strengths and areas of expertise, and then focused on creating partnerships with private and public entities to enhance their services. Partnerships are especially important in this time of limited State and County funding, as all areas must find creative ways of leveraging financial resources to maintain mandated programs. Ultimately, despite the obvious challenges, implementation of the learning needs screen will take a much-needed step in identifying individuals with learning disabilities and providing them with the resources they need to live successful and productive lives.

A big thanks to all the CalWORKS, Employment Services and associated staff in Contra Costa County and the City and County of San Francisco who assisted me with this project - I hope we continue to share our wisdom on this and other projects in the future. O

Learning Disabilities Screening: CalWORKS (ACL #01-70)

