

THE ROAD TO S.U.C.C.E.S.S.:
WELFARE REFORM IN SAN MATEO COUNTY
Susan Chestnut*

Websters dictionary defines Success as the accomplishment of an aim or a goal. If the goal is employment, there are many roads to attain that goal, some roads are bumpier than others. Recently, San Mateo County Human Services Agency, completed a restructuring which included adding departments historically not associated with the Welfare Department. While the county completed restructuring within three years, the cultural change continues to evolve. Different management philosophies, styles of thinking, and behavioral habits, all continue to "blend" together to form the new Human Services Agency philosophy. This is a sign of successful transition, and bodes well for the massive changes that welfare reform requires. The next phase of the master plan is the implementation of Welfare Redesign: "Shared Undertaking to Change the Community to Enable Self-Sufficiency, or "S.U.C.C.E.S.S."

SUCCESS, will accelerate the "blending" of departments that formerly kept their distance, Job Training and Economic Development (JTED) and Income Maintenance, with the goal of creating a new category of worker to assess the employability and financial situation of the family. The purpose of this system design of SUCCESS is to maximize the use of limited government resources to help families help themselves to attain "self sufficiency". This is accomplished by maximizing the contributions of the custodial and the non-custodial parents to the family. It allows the family to access the system at approximately 14 entry points within the community, including HSA Service Centers, School Based Centers, Community Based Organizations, and designated Community Centers around the county.

At these entry points, families actively participate in an interview with a Screening and Assessment Specialist (SAS), who will gather demographic data for the purpose of data base development and a wide range of future referrals. A family assessment is then completed by the family head of household and the SAS, in order to develop a broad based evaluation of TANF eligibility and identify potential family strengths to be the basis for the family Action Plan. This mutually agreed upon action plan will be the foundation for the family's road to self sufficiency. Emergent needs are referred to Emergency Services, or Information and Referral, as appropriate. All families with any absent parents interview and cooperate with Family Support.

Families with adults 19 or over, determined to be at risk of TANF or TANF eligible, participate in Work First. The TANF payment is contingent upon attendance and cooperating with Work First and Family Support, if appropriate. Those unable to participate for a wide variety of reasons; dependency problems, temporarily disabled, last trimester of pregnancy, caretakers of disabled persons, are referred to the Family Self Sufficiency Team (FSST) for support services. Any TANF payments approved for this group of non participants are contingent upon cooperation with the FSST Referrals are also made by the SAS for Medical, Food Stamps. and other barriers that may prevent employment.

Once at Work First, the participant attends a three hour orientation and is interviewed by the Work First Team, where an employment/personal responsibility plan is developed and mutually agreed upon for the remainder of the session. All participants attend the five day workshop,

*Susan Chestnut is a Program Manager in the Income Maintenance Department of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

based on the Dean Curtis "confidence building" model, which contains all the "bells and whistles". Concurrent participation with FSST may be part of the employment plan, as cooperation and communication between the FSST worker and the Work First Team is critical. Upon completion of the workshop, the remainder of the employment plan is spent in the Network Center, which provides all necessary tools to secure employment.

If the participant secures employment, a variety of support services are available such as; child care, continuation of child support, Medical, Food Stamps, and the services of an Income/Employment Services Specialist, who develops a "skill development plan" for future employment progress. Much effort has been made in the program design to insure job retention services are available to participants who secure employment. If employment is not secured, many options are open to assist the participant. If a participant obtains a job, then loses it, returning to the Work First is automatic.

The above process should assist the custodial parent to educationally, socially, psychologically, and financially, with demands of daily living, utilizing his/her family and community resources without public assistance. The entire Work First component is also available to assist the unemployed non custodial parent in securing employment, enabling the non custodial parent to contribute to the financial support of their children.

UNIQUE FEATURES

- **In-depth Knowledge of Federal and State Legislation**

This plan and its comprehensive approach to family self-sufficiency, with its thorough research and in-depth analysis, reflects the best of current research of the welfare reform plans nationally. Since county redesign efforts were initiated early, exposure to state legislation and what was happening nationally, best practices were analyzed, modified for local needs, and incorporated into this plan.

- **Inclusion of the Non-Custodial Parent as Responsible for Financial Support**

This plan assists custodial and noncustodial parents. It requires cooperation with Family Support in locating and securing child support from the noncustodial parent. If the noncustodial parent is unemployed, the court order will stipulate participation and cooperation with the Work First Program to secure employment.

- **Blends Two Distinctly Different Roles at the Point of Entry**

The first role of gathering common family data, which will be provided to, and is necessary for, participation in any service-related activity provided to the family, whether the service is provided by a county agency, or a Community Based Organization. Overcoming the barrier of "confidentiality" was truly a challenge.

The second role is the challenge of obtaining information from the family necessary to complete a TANF eligibility assessment, to determine a family's psychological, sociological,

physical strengths and needs, to develop an Action Plan to assist that family in becoming self sufficient. This includes addressing emergency needs and other crisis intervention that are necessary to stabilize the family to progress in the program.

- **TANF Payments Conditional upon Cooperation**

Initial TANF payments are conditional upon cooperation with the Screening and Assessment Plan developed at the entry point, and received upon Work First Workshop attendance. Subsequent payment levels are contingent upon cooperation with the Family Self Sufficiency Team or the Work First Plan.

- **The Concept of Family Self-Sufficiency Team**

This is a unique method to provide the support services necessary to maintain family stability and ensure success in removing the barriers to obtaining and retaining employment. Case management follows the family throughout their participation and ensures appropriate services to enable the participant to take personal responsibility for completing the terms in the Family Action Plan.

Membership on the FSST is as individual as family needs and can range from Social Workers, Juvenile Probation, Public Guardian, Community Workers, Public Health, family members, and Community Based Organizations.

- **The Concept of "Post TANF Support Services"**

This plan provides for child care and Medical post-employment, until family income reaches 200% of the Federal Property Level. The entire subject of retention services and "work skill improvement" services open a new level of services available to families wanting to improve their financial situation and future income levels. This is an exciting concept that is new to most agencies, with definite future potential.

SUGGESTED IDEAS FOR SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Communication Team

An innovative approach to keeping the lines of communication open. separating fact from fiction. and keeping a finger on the pulse of the agency. The Agency Communications Team performs these functions. This group was formed to encourage communications among district offices, different parts of the agency, and management. It has 13 members, ranging from line workers to supervisors and managers. Usually chaired by line staff. all are at the same level when discussing and solving problems. This allows the mood of the agency to surface and be measured by the team members. The affect of recent changes are discussed to facilitate open communication to resolve problems.

Open Executive Team Meetings

San Mateo County, while smaller than some counties, has a diverse population and is geographically spread out. The HSA District Offices are stretched from one end of the county to another, and each office serves a unique population. These characteristics can lead to communication problems, suspicion, and rumors, which can ultimately lead to negativity among staff. One of the innovative ways that this Executive Team has tried to increase communication and mitigate staff negativity is to open and encourage attendance of their meetings to interested managers. In addition, the Executive Team moves the meeting to a different District Office site. Meeting locations, published in advance, allow interested parties time to adjust their schedules accordingly. By making these efforts to keep District Office staff informed and just being physically present in the office, some of the mystique surrounding the Executive Team is reduced.

The Self-Sufficiency Times

This publication highlights services available to participants of the Family Self Sufficiency Program and staff of the Agency. News of coming events, jobs available in the county, upcoming programs, and other current events are published for staff and participants alike. This is another communications tool that encourages change in a positive way.

"S.U.C.C.E.S.S." Coordinating Group

This small Agency group is responsible for the overall implementation of the Agency's Welfare Redesign Pilot. It is composed of executive team members and others with specific assignments related to successful implementation of "S.U.C.C.E.S.S.". Weekly meetings are held to resolve policy and implementation problems that are anticipated to arise when progress on waiver request are charted, and Agency wide changes take place. Problem solving and cooperation rule the day to ensure a smooth transition towards Agency wide implementation of the Family Self Sufficiency Model.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

This innovative program started out as a rehabilitation program for San Mateo County. It has evolved into a true "work experience" program that provides an actual work environment, complete with time cards, "real" work activities, and supportive services to allow "hard to serve" participants in AFDC/GAIN/GA the opportunity to function in an actual work environment. Here, they begin to form "work habits", performing actual assembly line activities, which are contracted with private companies, strive to meet deadlines, as well as maintain consistent attendance.

As I toured this facility, I was impressed with the many different work projects occurring simultaneously with the many different levels of participation. I was also impressed with the positive comments from the participants and supervisors; they were aware this was not "make work", it was real and all participants needed to contribute in order to meet their scheduled deadlines. This interesting program for the "hard to serve" recipients. has shown success through its work environment. While there are plans to make this program revenue-producing in the future, this is one model to consider when determining how to assist our "hard to serve" clients and their function in an employment sheltered workshop environment.

Staff Development Coordination of BASSC Interns Orientation

This year, San Mateo County had six interns from the BASSC Executive Development Program. This is a large number and takes coordination and organization to manage. This effort, coordinated by the Manager of Staff Development, was all of the above. All interns were given an orientation kit, verbal introduction to the HSA, and an introduction to our mentors in the executive team meeting. This gave us all a welcome feeling and a familiarity with our surroundings, which increased our comfort level tremendously. I would definitely suggest this approach for Santa Clara County and all counties participating in the BASK program.

I must, in conclusion, thank the staff of San Mateo Human Services Agency for giving me their time and attention in answering my many questions. The positive "can do" attitude was reflected in the Managers and Supervisors I spoke with, as well as the staff participating in the pilot, who consider themselves missionaries for the "S.U.C.C.E.S.S." center. It is this positive attitude that will assure a smooth road to "S.U.C.C.E.S.S."

The line staff and Supervisors who are participating appear to be at ease in the unstructured "pilot" environment. They are willing to contribute to ensure the success of the pilot, because they believe the department is moving in the right direction of Family Self Sufficiency.

This may be the key to staff understanding and accepting the massive changes about to occur in Santa Clara County. The Family Self Sufficiency Model, like the Employment Support Initiative, are more competitive with today's societal values than the "Financial Assistance Model" we have been utilizing. This fact may assist staff in adopting a positive attitude in the face of change. For both counties, it is this positive attitude that will ensure a smooth road to "S.U.C.C.E.S.S."