

Assessment and Outreach to Noncompliant and Sanctioned CalWORKS Participants **A Two-County Comparison Study**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Intensive outreach engagement teams can successfully re-engage sanctioned CalWORKS participants, particularly those who have proven extremely difficult to engage in the past. Sanctioned families, even those who have been disengaged from county services for several years, often welcome re-engagement when offered. Research shows that sanctioned participants have multiple barriers to participation which require intensive case management, often over a period of time that is longer than currently as-

sumed. Some combination of social work casework skills and team fieldwork, along with database management and client tracking expertise, appears to work, but which combination is most cost effective is not established by this report. Further outcome studies are required. However, team-based intensive outreach appears to be a useful tool for re-engaging participants and maintaining required TANF work participation rates.

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Background

Changes in federal welfare regulations following the 2006 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Reauthorization Act have resulted in increased pressure on state governments to increase the number of TANF participants who are meeting TANF's work-related activity requirements, known as the Work Participation Rate (WPR). States that fail to do so will face financial penalty. Under TANF Reauthorization, families that are sanctioned (i.e., subject to cash grant reduction) are now counted for WPR purposes. California counties that fail to meet the required WPR face the prospect of large and potentially crippling fines that may further reduce the services they are able to offer to the vulnerable and needy populations they serve.

Characteristics of Sanctioned Families

The research indicates that families that face sanctions under TANF differ in important ways from non-sanctioned families. Studies have reported that sanctioned families are more likely to report multiple barriers to employment, including mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence.¹ They are also more likely to be African-American, young, lack significant work history, and lack adequate transportation.²

¹Wilkins, Andrea (2002) Strategies for Hard to Serve TANF Recipients. Retrieved April 29, 2008 from www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/hardtoserve.pdf

²Lower-Basch, Elizabeth (2003) Review of Sanction Policies and Research Studies. Retrieved April 30, 2008 from www.spdp.org/tanf/sanctions/sanctions_findings

Several Bay Area counties have developed new programs in an attempt to re-engage these families, end their sanctions, and help them transition successfully into sustained employment. This paper will examine two sanction outreach programs—one located in San Mateo County and the other in the City and County of San Francisco.

San Mateo County CASH (Creative Avenues to Successful Hires)

San Mateo County's outreach unit, known as CASH (Creative Avenues to Successful Hires) was launched in May 2007 as a pilot program. The program name was chosen in order to be consistent with the county's "Work Pays" theme which seeks to motivate participants toward employment by emphasizing the economic benefits of work. The CASH program accepted referrals of cases with long or short-term sanctions, cases at risk for sanction, cases classified as medically exempt, and cases where the participant was timed out for cash aid.

Program Design

The CASH unit consists of two workers designated as Income Employment Services Specialists (IESS), two designated Employment Services Specialists (ESS), and one clerical aid/data management worker, under the direction of one social work supervisor.

Case Assignment and Work Flow

Cases are referred to the unit from field supervisors throughout San Mateo County. Caseload size

is limited to twenty cases per case manager to allow for intensive case management services, including home and community visits. Each case is assigned to an IESS-ES team who makes joint home visits. ESS workers are designated as primary case managers, in charge of developing the participant's employment plan and assigning any supportive services (mental health counseling, housing aid, etc.) needed to maintain it. ESS workers manage the cash grant, focusing on the "curing" or releasing of sanctions and restoring cash aid to participants. In day-to-day practice, however, there is significant flexibility in work roles between the IESS and ESS workers, with considerable sharing of case management and employment services functions. If either worker is found to have greater rapport with a particular participant, that worker might take the lead in regard to case management. Both workers assigned to the case are responsible for case documentation in the CalWIN database system.

Cases remain in the unit until the participant is re-engaged and meeting the required work activity hours for at least one month. Cases are expected to remain in the unit for a maximum of three months; however, the decision regarding when to transfer cases back is made by the unit supervisor.

Outcomes

San Mateo County had not completed outcomes analysis at the time of this writing, so only limited outcome information was available. CASH workers report that 90 percent of participants generally welcome home visits, and they are interested in receiving services once effective contact is made. However participants had multiple needs, with significant numbers reporting domestic violence, mental health, and/or medical issues which impeded their full participation in required work activities. These participant cases often required more than a three month stay within the unit.

San Francisco Outreach Project

The City and County of San Francisco Sanction Outreach Project began in August of 2007 with the

goal of re-engaging CalWORKS participants who were on long-term or short-term sanction.

Program Design

The Sanction Outreach team consists of two social workers and two outreach workers. They are jointly supervised by a social work supervisor and an employment services supervisor. Sanctioned cases are identified through the CalWIN data system. Cases are pulled for referral, starting with sanctioned cases which have been in the system for the longest period of time. These cases are reviewed to ensure that they are still sanctioned and then referred to the Sanction Outreach team.

Case Assignment and Work Flow

Social workers are paired with outreach workers to do outreach fieldwork, with all home visits conducted jointly. Participants are automatically scheduled for home visits, though they are informed that they may come into the office for the appointment if they wish to do so. Only 25 percent of participants chose to have office visits.

A strict division of roles is maintained within the team. The outreach workers focus on the employment services/cash benefits aspect of the case, and are responsible for doing all CalWIN documentation. Social workers focus solely on social work issues and conduct a complete social assessment of all participants.

Cases remain in Sanction Outreach until the participant maintains 30 days of compliance or completes the required activity. Social workers do not close their cases until after the outreach worker assigned to the case has closed it. If participants fail to engage in or refuse services, cases are closed after a minimum of three months of engagement effort.

Outcomes

Sanction Outreach workers have been able to locate 75 percent of referred participants. Of those located, 71 percent have accepted services. Workers report that many participants have issues related to physical and/or mental health. School-related issues involv-

ing children are also frequently found. Participants re-engaged through Sanction Outreach efforts have a high rate of maintained engagement over time (93 percent).

Program Comparison and Analysis

The two programs share many features, including a team-based approach with aggressive community outreach, cash incentives for participation, small worker caseloads and a short-term brokerage case management service model. They differ most significantly in terms of line staff make-up (social worker vs. eligibility worker), role flexibility (strict vs. loose role adherence) and CalWIN usage (eligibility worker only vs. all worker documentation).

In San Francisco County, the outreach program is supervised jointly by two supervisors who each oversaw larger units. This model might be considered by counties that want to provide a specialized work team at reduced cost. The shared supervisory duties lessen the load on each individual supervisor while still allowing for effective staff supervision. Clerical support can be provided by the larger, already existing units, resulting in further cost savings.

Because these programs were newly launched during the period covered by this report, the available outcomes data were minimal. As more extensive data become available, additional questions may be asked, including:

- Is it beneficial in terms of participant outcomes to have sanctioned family's assigned social workers who conduct extensive social work assessments? Social worker salaries add to program costs,
- However, if more extensive social work services result in increased program compliance, resulting in an increased county WPR, it may prove to be worth the additional cost.
- How much worker time, on average, is required to enter case documentation into CalWIN, and would it be beneficial in terms of worker efficiency to have only one worker responsible for CalWIN documentation, given the case management-intensive nature of these cases?

It appears the sanctioned families served by these outreach programs often needed intensive case management services over an extended period of time. While counties might be able to provide these services on a short-term basis (4–6 months), providing them over the long-term may present significant budget challenges. It might be useful to explore partnerships with community-based and faith-based organizations that might be able to provide ongoing services to participants once they have moved past the initial engagement phase. In this scenario, counties would provide 3–4 months of intensive outreach services, with community nonprofits providing an additional 9 months of community-based support as participants' transition toward sustained employment.

Recommendations for Contra Costa County

Based on this analysis of these two excellent county programs, recommendations for Contra Costa County would include the following:

- 1 Continue to support the county's existing client engagement outreach teams as a means to increase Contra Costa County's WPR.
- 2 Consider engaging community-based and faith-based organizations as a means to provide the extended case management time that appears to be effective in encouraging participation, while reducing over all costs by allowing the county to maintain a shorter county worker engagement period.
- 3 Conduct pilot studies to ascertain whether dividing the CalWIN documentation function from the social work assessment function leads to more efficient practice and increased rates of participant engagement.