

Expanding the Service Center Model to the CalWORKS Program **Challenges That Come With Expansion**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social services agencies at the county level in California are playing catch-up to implement customer service models that have been used in the private industry for over 25 years. Counties began providing access to public benefits and case maintenance services for one or more programs via phone and the Internet at service centers beginning in 2004. Counties are now expanding this service delivery model to include more programs.

As counties have implemented service centers one or two programs at a time, they have realized the benefits for both clients and the county. Counties are now expanding the service delivery model to other programs. This paper will briefly address some of the challenges faced during expansion efforts.

Counties face several challenges as they expand their service center models to include additional programs. These challenges include:

- Program silos and differing program regulations
- Facilities limitations
- Learning curves
- Short timelines
- Resources

The three counties included in this case study are Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and San Francisco. All three initially implemented service centers with one or two programs, and are now experiencing growing pains as they expand the model to include other programs.

My primary recommendation to counties developing the service center model is to take a strategic, cross-program approach. Counties should provide management support to the project at the county-level. Additionally, counties should spend the time necessary to document and standardize business processes, equipment, software, and manual systems across programs. This will allow counties to implement the service center model in all programs at one time, or to more efficiently expand service centers to include other programs.

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Introduction

Over the past 25 years, private industry has been consistently making the move away from providing face-to-face customer service toward providing customer service via the internet and telephone contact. Public service counties are now struggling to catch up and use the same technology so they can provide services to more customers with the dwindling resources available to them. Some counties have made earlier forays into this service delivery model, including Santa Clara with the introduction of its Benefit Services Center for Medi-Cal in 2004, Santa Cruz with its Benefits Call Center for both Medi-Cal and Food Stamps in 2006, and San Francisco with its Food Assistance Service Center (FASC) in 2007. These counties have continued to focus on continuous improvement and expansion of the model to include other programs within their counties. Expansion of online access to government benefits through Benefits CalWIN has increased the number of new applications and strains the available resources.

Background

As noted earlier, San Francisco's Human Services Agency (SF-HSA) implemented the FASC in October 2007 to better serve its non-assistance food stamp applicants and recipients through the Internet and by telephone. SF-HSA has expanded its service center model to include the Medi-Cal program, and is in the planning stage to also expand to CalWORKS and to standardize the model as much as possible across all programs. Other counties that have a solid foundation of existing service center history have also implemented or are in the planning stages of implementing service centers for the CalWORKS program,

with an initial focus on limited case profiles such as child-only cases and later on intake services. This case study will evaluate the challenges of providing quality customer service to CalWORKS participants through the expansion of the service center model and will share the challenges faced by San Francisco, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties.

Challenges

Each of the three counties visited faced some major challenges as they initially implemented a service center and again as they expanded their service center models to include CalWORKS. Some of these challenges are:

- Different program regulations and program silos
- Facilities limitations
- A steep learning curve
- Short development and implementation timelines
- A lack of resources

Some of these challenges are more pronounced than others within each county, though all of the challenges listed above are major barriers to success in San Francisco. There are slight variations between how the three counties mitigate these barriers; however, since all three counties use the same consulting company and the management staff responsible for the service model expansion implementation have peer relationships, the strategies for mitigating barriers are often very similar.

Program Regulations

Each social service program is unique in its regulations and the way services can be delivered. Many counties, including Santa Cruz and San Francisco,

started their service center models with the CalFresh program and expanded to include Medi-Cal. Santa Clara began its service center with Medi-Cal and implemented CalFresh soon after. CalFresh and Medi-Cal are most conducive to the service center model because they have face-to-face waivers available that allow the program to serve clients strictly through the telephone and Internet. The CalWORKS program has some regulations that make its implementation in a service center model challenging. The biggest obstacle to implementing the service center model for CalWORKS' is the strict requirement of face-to-face interviews in the intake process. Although counties have begun doing the case renewal process via mail and telephone, all new CalWORKS applications require a face-to-face interview. Building the in-person interview into a service center model presents a challenge: it requires maintaining the infrastructure and staffing to accommodate this requirement. Both Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties have maintained facilities for walk-in applications and other client appointments, which are separate from the service centers where the main phone and casework takes place.

Facilities

Both Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties have established their phone centers in new locations with the ability to do a build-out to the centers to best suit the work to be done. My initial opinion is that this is the ideal model so workers are strategically located for ease of supervision, cross-training and shifting of staff between roles. This close proximity to the pulse of the operation is helpful for both managers and analysts who are assigned to the service center. Reviews of business processes that may need adjustments and timely implementation of changes are easier when all staff can be gathered together for quick trainings. However, as the service center operation matures and becomes a smoothly functioning machine, counties are able to look to consider having remote phone and case management staff provide services from multiple county sites and off-site locations. Conceptually, when resources, such as CalWIN, elec-

tronic case documents, task assignment software, and phone equipment, are available to staff, the work can be done from virtually anywhere.

San Francisco implemented the FASC at a single location accommodating phone and case management functions as well face-to-face appointments, removing the need to maintain separate facilities or make staff travel to see clients. As San Francisco expands its service center model to include Medi-Cal and CalWORKS, it is beginning a pilot program to test a working-from-home model aimed at enhancing the service center. The concept of providing services to government benefits recipients from virtually anywhere will be put to the test. Neither Santa Clara nor Santa Cruz has begun this particular type of service delivery model expansion.

Learning Curve

Designing and implementing such a complete change in the way of doing business and delivering services is a huge undertaking. It requires redesign of most of the business processes and extensive training in customer service and technical tasks. Eligibility determination and case management of welfare programs have historically been seen as customer unfriendly and resistant to change. The last ten or twelve years have been tumultuous for staff: the implementation of CalWIN was just the beginning of an era of almost constant change or threat of change. Additionally, with the budget reductions of the past few years and the staffing reductions that go with them, county staff are under pressure to be in a continuous learning mode. There is often insufficient time to process and integrate the new information before taking on the next new task assignment, while covering historically high caseloads.

Customer service, while always on the minds of managers, has not been a clearly articulated requirement of many eligibility staff. While there are some gems to be found, (i.e. workers who have both technical and people skills), the focus seems to have always been on making sure the rules are followed and data is entered. This can serve the county well if the staff assigned to case maintenance work have

this perspective and can maintain the attention to detail required for the task; however, finding staff with high quality customer service skills who also maintain the required eligibility knowledge to serve as the phone staff can be challenging. Rotation or combination phone/maintenance positions allow for job variety and help ensure that workers do not get “burned out” when doing repetitive tasks with no challenge. Continuous oversight and customer service training and support must be an integral component of the operational maintenance plan.

Resources

“Do more with less” has been a kind of battle cry inside all governmental agencies during the budget reductions of the past several years. Counties search for systems to implement, such as the service center model, to achieve this. Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Francisco Counties have all been successful at serving the rising number of clients with existing or dropping staffing levels. All three counties have seen, however, that a critical mass of staff must be maintained in order to meet the ever-rising demand for services. Without sufficient staffing, there comes a time when simply maintaining critical case maintenance duties, such as renewal/recertification and periodic reporting, becomes a continuous game of catch-up. In both Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties, when staffing levels are low, tasks such as catching up on overdue renewals become a special project completed by additional staff members who are taken off the line to get caught up on the tasks. In both counties some days are spent with “all hands on deck” focused on the primary, critical task of recording quarterly reports.

Each county must determine the critical number of staff it needs to operate. One important factor is the extent of program consolidation within the service center that the county decides to pursue. Both Santa Clara and Santa Cruz have consolidated Medi-Cal and CalFresh to some degree and have cross-trained workers to handle both programs. While it is unlikely that the very complex CalWORKS program could be fully integrated into this kind of “generic”

or “universal” service center, it certainly is prudent to have phone staff cross-trained and able to handle as many programs as possible. That said, maintaining the level of training required for workers to stay current on regulations and business processes changes for multiple programs is a challenge that I’m not sure any county has fully overcome.

Adequate analytical support to managers and staff in the service center is critical. Both Santa Clara and Santa Cruz have some talented analysts with the background and specialized skills to handle critical tasks, such as detailed staffing schedules (which in itself requires use of special software) and the multitude of reports management and staff need to manage day-to-day operations. The consultant who works with these counties has indicated that an analyst should be at each site to assist staff with schedules, reporting, and business process change and documentation. This is just not possible for San Francisco, with three sites serving CalWORKS.

Short Timelines

Just like funding, no county has the luxury of time any longer. This fact was clearly articulated in Santa Clara where managers and analysts are implementing the expansion of the service center model on a much abbreviated timeline to be able to most effectively utilize consultant services before allocated funding is spent down. When a county has a well-documented implementation plan for the initial programs, which includes consideration for future expansion, the expansion to other programs can be a matter of tweaking the business processes and staffing plans to fit each new program as it goes live. The task of business process review and change, however, requires a great deal of management time. Additionally, staff training on the new business processes, software and equipment is time-consuming and takes staff offline, adding additional stress to the ongoing cases maintenance activities.

Conclusions

San Francisco and Santa Clara Counties both initially implemented the service center model for

single programs and Santa Cruz County got a head start by implementing both CalFresh and Medi-Cal at once. However, all counties are experiencing some growing pains as they expand their models to include additional programs.

The pressure to quickly expand the service center model in a county where the programs are in silos, such as in San Francisco where the service center was created by and for the CalFresh program in isolation from other programs, creates additional challenges as other programs consider how to implement the model. The process is a kind of reinvention of the wheel as each program starts almost from scratch to build a business model that fits its current way of operation.

Recommendation

For counties that are just beginning to consider implementation of a service center for one or more programs, my recommendation is to approach the project at the county level. The county should look strategically at all programs to determine which programs could be redesigned and included in the model, either immediately or as part of an expansion. Using this approach, counties could begin to identify possible standardization of business processes across programs and service delivery sites early in the planning process. Full documentation of decisions and the reasons for decisions, the development of basic business process models that can be fleshed out later, and the standardization of equipment, software and manual systems across programs will allow the county to expand the service center model more efficiently.

For those counties that have already implemented service center models for different programs and are expanding to include more programs, my recommendation is to take a step back and approach the expansion at the full county level. Take the opportunity to be more strategic about cross-program activity, standardization and the potential for consolidation of service center activities now and in the future.

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