

# Work Participation Strategies: Santa Clara County Model

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welfare Reform brought many changes to entitlement programs in 1996. Work focused programs were implemented with accountability measures related to the percentage of clients who were engaged in work related activities. One such measure is the work participation rate (WPR). The WPR is a percentage benchmark that states (and counties) are expected to meet. Failure to meet the WPR standards can result in fiscal penalties. As a result, many counties throughout California are striving to utilize strategies that will result in meeting the WPR. Contra Costa County should implement the strategies currently used in Santa Clara County in order to ensure the WPR is met.

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## Background

Welfare Reform law and the implementation of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) passed in 1996, drastically changing the previous offered welfare programs from limitless entitlement programs to “work first,” five year lifetime maximum programs. This change was also accompanied by an accountability structure that required states to achieve specified work participation rates.

Currently, states are required to maintain a minimum work participation rate (WPR) of 50% for all families and 90% for all two parent families. The states not achieving these standards are at risk of losing a portion of their TANF allocation through assessed financial sanctions. Each state’s WPR is derived from the WPR achieved by each of the counties in that state. California has struggled to meet the WPR standards and as a result, those counties not achieving the WPR requirements are at risk of receiving an assessed portion of the state’s potential financial sanction.

The Great Recession has brought many challenges to the achievement of the WPR requirements. With unprecedented numbers of families seeking assistance and the skyrocketing of unemployment rates starting in 2008, many counties in California found their WPR plummeting. Bay Area counties were no exception. Since 2008, Contra Costa County has experienced an unemployment rate ranging from 8% to 12% as recorded by the State of California Employment Development Department. As a result, Contra Costa County has experienced difficulty meeting the WPR requirements. In an effort to increase the WPR in Contra Costa County,

strategies currently utilized by Santa Clara County were reviewed for potential implementation as Santa Clara is currently meeting the WPR requirement.

## Strategies for Meeting the WPR (Santa Clara County Model)

### *Development of a Unified Staff Team with a Common Goal*

In challenging times where resources are limited, it is often difficult to manage the ever increasing case-loads and myriad of tasks demanding attention in the social services arena. The resolution often lies in team-work with a recalibration of vision bringing the agency’s goals clearly into perspective. In September 2007, Santa Clara County began this process with the implementation of a WPR Strategic Plan.

The WPR Strategic Plan started with the provision of information for eligibility and employment workers alike. An education process was launched leading to a change in the mindset of each eligibility and employment worker, with a focus on employment services. The ongoing messaging was about how each team member has the opportunity to make a difference in meeting the WPR. For eligibility workers, training and reminders regarding the registration and referral of clients to employment services, running and updating exemptions, updating and entering employment information, applying or lifting sanctions, and referring clients to agency partners for needed services were provided. For employment workers, training and reminders regarding client engagement in Welfare-to-Work activities, helping clients find employment, monitoring attendance and progress, processing supportive service payments,

running and updating exemptions, applying or lifting sanctions, addressing barriers, and referring for needed services were all provided.

To further team unification, cross-departmental work groups were established to bring eligibility services, employment services and CalWIN systems together with a focus on:

- Initiating a specialized team to provide customized services to those clients in the WPR Sample,
- Redesigning intake/orientation with employment staff in attendance,
- Identifying centralized staff to coordinate Welfare-to-Work exemptions,
- Pilot the re-engagement strategy in two units,
- Simplifying and enhance information gathering tools,
- Evaluating incentive programs for CalWORKs clients, and
- Implementing expanded outreach to and monitor the success of Timed Out clients who are a part of a specialized pilot.

The work groups collaborated to enhance their successful connection with the clients, resulting in obtaining needed information from, and engaging the clients in, the activities needed to meet the WPR. The progress and efforts of these workgroups were evaluated each quarter to determine where adjustments were needed and to further explore areas of success.

Currently, Santa Clara County continues the model of eligibility and employment services staff in conjunction with CalWIN systems staff meeting regularly to identify best practices and to further collaboration opportunities in order to sustain a unified effort in meeting the WPR.

### *Client Engagement*

The WPR is determined by the number of clients who are in the identified monthly state sample and the number of hours they are required to engage in determined by the TANF guidelines. There are many variations and circumstances that determine the numbers of hours required by each participant. Meeting the

required hours is an all or nothing process with no consideration for partial credit.

In the sample, a variety of cases are included due to random sampling. There are clients who are fully engaged and meeting their required hours. There are clients who are engaged but not fully completing the number of hours needed. Both sanctioned clients and clients who have exceeded their time limits on aid can be a part of the sample as well. There are times when exempt cases are included in the sample, but if the case meets the TANF definition of an exempt case it can be dropped from the sample.

With the variety of case scenarios that exist in any given sample month, client engagement strategies are a must to assist the identified clients in meeting their required hours of participation in order to reach the required WPR.

There are common activities such as employment, educational and volunteer involvement, but providing additional, creative activity options has been a key to Santa Clara County's success. The following are a few tools currently used by Santa Clara County to fully engage their clients included in the monthly sample:

- i-Pod Modules
- Typing Tutorials
- Online Classes
- Self-Paced Modules

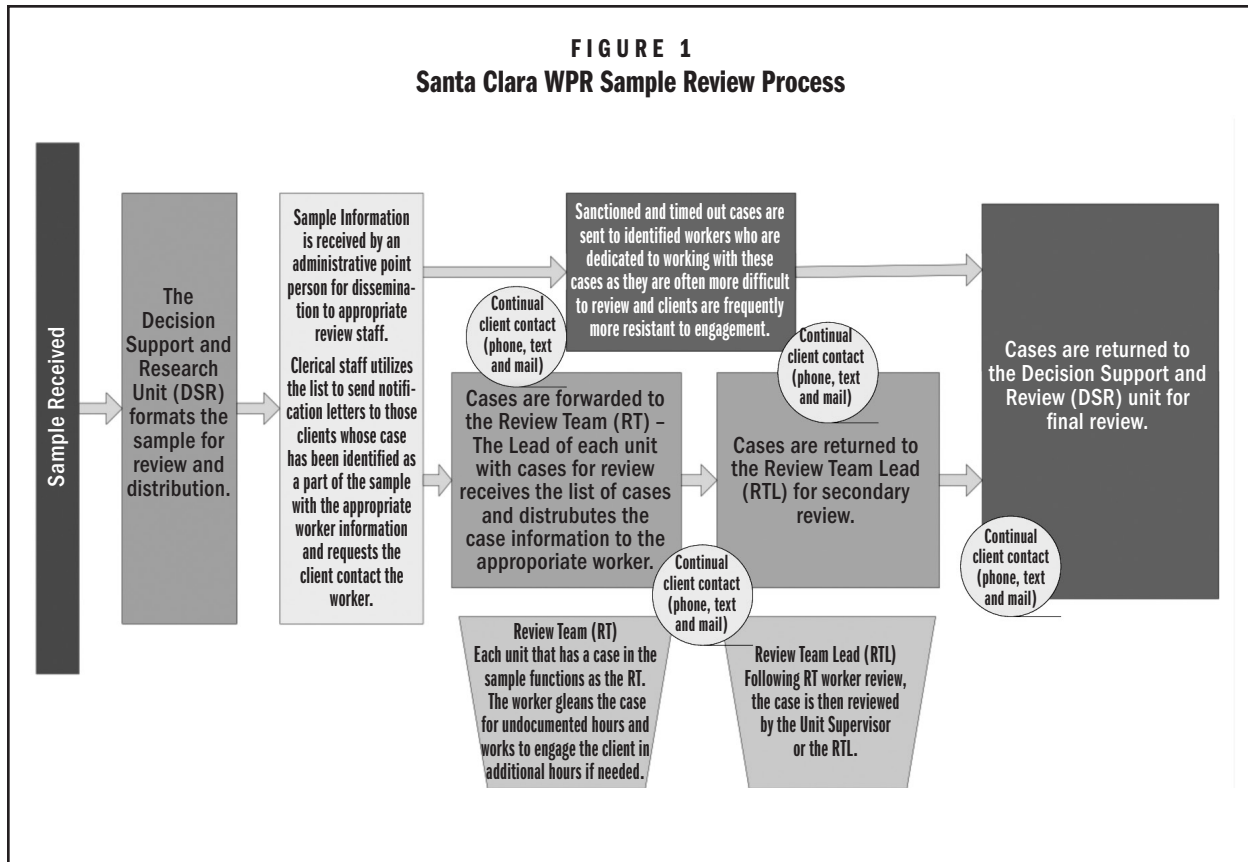
### *WPR Sample Review Process*

Santa Clara County follows a process that involves a variety of staff, ensuring that each sample case is thoroughly reviewed. The flow chart (*Figure 1, next page*) provides an overview of this process:

### **Recommendations for Contra Costa County**

It is recommended that Contra Costa County take steps to implement the strategies currently utilized by Santa Clara County.

Unification of staff with a common goal and focus of increasing the WPR can be achieved in Contra Costa County with the commitment of the Workforce Services Management Team. Team



strategies and tools can be identified, developed and utilized with consistent messaging to staff about the importance of the WPR.

Client engagement tools are currently being explored in Contra Costa County and efforts to duplicate the options that are currently available in Santa Clara County are under-way. It is recommended that the processes followed by Santa Clara County for documenting hours of participation also be implemented when utilizing these engagement tools.

The review process is critical to Santa Clara County's success, and duplicating their staffing model is strongly recommended. Specialized staff, such as those working in Santa Clara County's Decision Support and Research Unit, are needed to closely review the cases and assist the reviewing workers to ensure the hours are accurately counted and documented. Without this component, the

strategies of staff unification and client engagement will be far less impactful.

## References

The State of California Employment Development Department Labor Market Information <http://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov>

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