

MONTEREY COUNTY'S MOBILE OUTREACH SERVICE TEAM: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Much to my delight my host county was Monterey. It is a rural community similar to the one within which I am currently assigned to and live. To take advantage of the views of Monterey Bay, I drove into Salinas, the County seat, through scenic Highway One. Unfortunately, the first few days that I spent in my host county, we were in the midst of "El Nino." I had to check that the route was not under sea water due to a combination of high tides and pounding rain. It was none the less worth it.

My original learning objective was to study Adult Protective Services (APS) in a rural setting. APS is an area of which I know very little. Upon meeting with the facilitator in my host county and a group of her staff, I decided to focus on Monterey County's Mobile Outreach Service Team (MOST). The Department of Aging and Adult Services had operated the program.

MOST had been in operation for the past three years, and served the homeless population within Monterey County. Their focus changed into an emphasis on "street homeless" as needing this type of service. I choose this area because my job assignment had been in General Assistance, and I was anxious to see how the program could potentially benefit this population.

Interacting with MOST staff, going out with the Team, reviewing the original and subsequent grant proposals and extracting information, participating

in meetings, and interviewing the current and prior supervisors of the team fueled My experiences. The former supervisor and initial participant of MOST is currently an analyst whose assignment includes MOST. As a secondary benefit I observed and learned the intricacies of funding such a program. Recently, I was transferred to CalWORKS, and as we face the challenges of Welfare Reform, my secondary education will undoubtedly be useful.

Fortunately, I observed MOST at a critical stage when the program's existence was in question. HUD had just denied the program a new grant, and the Department of Social Service (DSS) was trying to decide how to proceed. Some very interesting questions were on the table:

- Should the program continue?
- How would they fund the program?
- Should they make changes to the service delivery?
- Who should administer the program?

As with any analysis, these questions must be laden with emotion. The Board of Supervisors and the community supported the effort and saw its benefit to the community. No matter which view one had, the community having an obligation to help the homeless or the homeless being an unwanted plight in the community, the program filled a need and the community felt supportive. Another underlying fac-

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tor was the stress involved with project changes.

BACKGROUND

Monterey County incorporates the Monterey bay with two major urban areas, Salinas and Monterey Peninsula. It encompasses an area of approximately 3322 square miles, has approximately 375,000 residents, and extends from Pajaro in the North to Big Sur in the South. Two major industries drive the economy, agriculture and tourism.

The Program

MOST was created as the result of a focus on the high rate of homelessness and the tragic death of a homeless man in the county back in 1988. The County Board of Supervisors allocated funding to conduct a homeless study. Northcutt and Associates of Bakersfield, California conducted the study. Their findings, "A Study of Homelessness in Monterey County," were released in March of 1989. The study estimated the homeless population to be 4500 in Monterey County including a mixture of women and children, single male and female, and farm labor. By September of that year, the Board had appointed a Homeless Task Force under the lead of the Department of Social Services (DSS). The Task Force created a five-year plan for delivery of service to the homeless in the County.

The Plan utilized a continuum of care model of Prevention, Emergency Response, Transitional Housing Programs, and Permanent Affordable Housing. It not only identified gaps, but also established a method for filling them. That is where MOST came in. The intent was for MOST to provide outreach, assessment, referral and supportive services. They saw it as a link between the customers and the available services with the view that it was

very either difficult for customers or they were reluctant to reach services.

Around this time base closures were impacting the nation. Fort Ord was one base which fell victim, and this led to the formation of the Fort Ord Homeless Providers Coalition. The thought was to place homeless individuals and families into emergency and transitional housing at Fort Ord. Additionally, the Coalition would provide other supportive services. The goal was to have MOST link customers to these services, and thus get people off the streets.

Funding

DSS and the United Way joined forces and applied for a HUD grant. DSS needed an intermediary fiscal agent to administer the grant. DSS had made several attempts to obtain funding for a similar program before refocusing and applying for the HUD grant. After receiving the HUD grant, DSS in collaboration with Monterey County Health Department (HD) staffed MOST with a Social Work Supervisor (DSS), an Alcohol and Drug Counselor (HD), and Public Health Nurse (HD). Day to day operations was handled by DSS, and HD supported their staff with overall administration and training.

Administering the program was challenging for DSS. They purchased a van that did not meet their needs and had to be refurbished afterwards. The HUD grant was a difficult fit for MOST because HUD funding is generally connected to shelters. Other hurdles included lack of adequate communication between DSS and the United Way. DSS thought that funding was due for renewal in 1998, and accidentally learned that the proposal for renewal was due in 1997. Also, DSS had to apply as part of the Continuum of Care through the

Homeless Coalition. This meant that the Coalition would rank all of their grant requests, and MOST needed to be among the Coalition's top three priorities to be considered for funding.

In the Field

The highlight of my project was the two days that I spent out "in the field" with the Team. They went out three days a week to designated sites at scheduled times. They frequently had people "ride along," and were most gracious and helpful to me. Once the ice was broken, they gave me lots of information and prepared me for each stop. The first day I went to sites in Salinas known as areas where the homeless congregate. At our first stop, I was able to experience the process first hand. Under their guidance and direction, I assisted with completion of forms, translated as needed, and referred customers for services. I had been concerned about my reception both from the Team and from the homeless customers. Thankfully, my fears were unwarranted. Both accepted me. The Team introduced me to some "regulars" and I began to interact with ease. Because I spoke the language, I was well received by the Spanish-speaking customers. Some of the other customers were a little more reserved, but also responded well. It was raining and some regular sites (around the fairgrounds and back sections of stores) were empty. The second ride along was on the Monterey Peninsula where they have three regular stops, the Salvation Army in Sand City, the Wharf in Monterey, and the Kmart shopping center in Seaside. On this ride along, the Drug and Alcohol Counselor was able to connect one homeless customer with an Alcohol Treatment Center, and the Nurse gave spot medical care.

The street homeless are leery of a society that for the most part has rejected them, and they are slow

to trust. We develop trust over time. To develop that rapport, MOST handed out basic personal necessities that many of us take for granted (ie. soap, deodorant, toothpaste, etc.), clean clothing, and backpacks to store belongings. They obtained small grants to purchase items and accepted donations. This enabled the street homeless to present themselves for job interviews and to the public with a sense of confidence. Better hygiene also promotes better health and establishes a connection to society.

CHALLENGES

The Program found itself at a decisive point. It had not met initial outcomes due to various reasons outside their sphere of influence. The homeless population was not what the study had projected. Some of the homeless population were self-sufficient specifically in North and South County sections. They had projected a third of the homeless population to be farm labor families, and MOST spent their first six months of operation looking for them. They did not materialize. The reality was that many families found their own shelter by: staying with families, camping out close to work area, using existing programs, staying in labor camps, and accessing services only when convenient. Shelters and support services were not in place as originally anticipated. The Homeless Coalition transitional housing was focused on families. MOST found the majority of their clients were homeless adults without children, and transitional housing was not available to support their outreach efforts. The accuracy of the original homeless data became questionable.

MOST found that people are homeless for reasons such as mental incapacity, substance abuse, and related illnesses. Also, they learned that most of the homeless lost their infrastructure after the first six

months on the street. They no longer had documentation (ie. ID, SSN, BC) needed for jobs and other services, and were much more difficult to connect to services. After six months, they begin to adapt and learn to survive on the streets making it difficult to get them off the streets.

Over the course of three years MOST changed focus thus creating another issue for DSS. HUD required annual reports, and changes to the initial proposal meant amendments must be filed. An existing concern was whether DSS might be financially liable for areas where the parameters were not specifically followed.

During the interim, DSS explored the idea of retaining the Program. The question then became how would the Program be funded. Joint exploration by DSS and the representatives from the Homeless Coalition led to a proposal for a Packard Foundation grant. DSS was attempting to obtain bridge funding to maintain the Program if a HUD renewal grant came through in January 1999. Funding sources were speculative, and DSS had to decide what course of action to take if no outside sources of funding were found.

CONCLUSION

Although I attended several meetings, in which the issue of whether to retain MOST was discussed I missed the last two critical meetings where they made final decisions. Gratefully, Andy Williams and Kathy Whilden, updated me on the results of the meetings. The first of the two final meetings involved key representatives from HD, the Homeless Coalition and DSS. In the meetings they explored various responses to the questions on the table. The group had mixed feelings about the value of the Program. HD saw HUD as an obstacle

because of funding limitations and requirements. They reached no conclusion at this meeting.

Essentially the same group met again for the final critical meeting. This time however a proposal was on the table by the nonprofit organization, Peninsula Outreach and Shelter Plus. They wanted to assume full responsibility for MOST. The group had a three-year HUD grant to provide outreach services. Two years of the grant remained and the funds needed to be used. This proposal was opportune for DSS. A program that had been taxing to administer could end favorably. Everyone at the table agreed to the proposal and Peninsula Outreach will be assuming control of MOST effective May 1, 1998.

Hopefully, they will have a better infrastructure to support the program. A plus is the fact that housing for single adults without children is closer to being established. This will provide a transition point for customers. Also DSS, will be transferring The MOST van to Peninsula Outreach. Peninsula Outreach staff will be observing and learning from existing MOST staff although the Program will have a different service delivery. It will assume the role of transporting clients to shelter services, and will not be taking over the health related component of the Program. Peninsula Outreach was not yet sure who would staff the van, and had been thinking of having a Social Worker and a driver to go in the field.

Unfortunately, I was unable to personally speak with the MOST staff. All were out on the last day that I was there, however, their supervisor informed me that they were not really surprised. The Drug and Alcohol Counselor had been with the Program since its inception, and the other two staff members had been with MOST between seven and nine

months. Although they had been prepared to see this, it was still difficult.

The Public Health Nurse will be going back to HD and will be assigned to another area. The Drug and Alcohol Counselor will also return to HD and displace an existing Counselor, and they will reassign the Social Worker within DSS. As I was there the day after they had accepted the proposal, none of their assignments had been clearly determined.

This happened approximately one week after a grant proposal had been submitted to the Packard Foundation. They had requested money for a program DSS no longer administered. They decided to contact the Packard Foundation and apprise them of the situation, and to explore with Peninsula Outreach about the feasibility of providing medical services and then attempt to revise the proposal accordingly.

In conclusion, I always find that experiences are enriched by the people with whom I interact, and this was no exception. I want especially to thank Carmen Domingo, Assistant Director of Monterey County Department of Social Services, and her staff, Andy Williams, Kathy Whilden, and the members of MOST, Bobby Jaurigue, Linda Kimberly, and Barbara Valador for making my project rewarding.

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a preface to my subsequent comments about lessons learned, I want to point out that Santa Clara County and Monterey County differ in size and economy. Except for our South County area which

share's commonalities with my host county, our economy is driven by the high tech industry and the cost of living is very high.

To educate myself about my county's endeavors concerning homeless, I contacted several people who were in APS, involved with the homeless or both. I learned that similar efforts have occurred in Santa Clara County although our Agency does not administer those programs. Therefore, I am not going to recommend that this program be implemented in its entirety. Rather, I will be pointing out lessons learned and making recommendations based on those. Perhaps one key lesson for Santa Clara County is to remember the connection between single adults without children and homelessness. They need as much assistance with transitional housing and supportive services as any other homeless person.

Another lesson learned is that open communication with community partners is critical. In Santa Clara County Social Service Agency, we have been collaborating extensively with the community for the past couple of years. Providing the best service and moving the customers to self sufficiency is the ultimate goal for everyone involved in the process. Our Agency, as a leader in this area, has a responsibility to keep the message clear and in the forefront. In our quest to achieve this goal, sharing our resources and eliminating individual agenda is fundamental. Monterey County DSS found a solution to their problem because they achieved this. The entire community benefitted when a local Community-based Organization (CBO) assumed responsibility for MOST. I recommend that we continue striving for community interaction.

As we become immersed in Welfare Reform, we will need to seek outside resources to initiate and

administer programs and support services. I recommend that we dedicate staff specifically in the Department of Employment and Benefit Services to explore and appropriately pursue outside funding. More than ever matching the funding source to the program is crucial. No matter how much research and forethought is put into a program, achieving results requires flexibility. With shrinking budgets, counties cannot be liable each time programs have to be adapted midstream. This was the looming possibility for Monterey County with the HUD grant.

Our Agency is currently going through a restructuring process, and recently had a two-day “large group intervention” session focused on service delivery. At the session, one group came up with the idea of having a mobile team consisting of an Eligibility Worker, a Social Worker, and an Employment Technician. The concept is similar to MOST. This mobile team would be accessible to the community by taking services to the customers. The team could serve designated areas across the county. As we help customers become self sufficient, they have less time available and need us to be easily reached. I believe that this is an excellent option, and recommend further exploration.

A final lesson learned is the possibility of applying features of MOST to enhance SSI Advocacy in our county. Monterey County recently focused on SSI Advocacy, and had begun to have MOST and SSI Advocacy interact. I see possibilities of a mobile team to connect with SSI Advocacy customers. Currently, a local CBO provides escort services for our customers. It would benefit all if we developed more fully our relationship into one of mutual support. One thought is collocation with SSI Advocacy to fully use the CBO for transportation to various doctor and hearing appointments and to provide other supportive services. SSI Advocacy could con-

centrate entirely on case development with quicker results. I recommend further cultivation of this relationship. Keeping options open and partnering within the community produce the best overall results. Together we can accomplish more.