

# ***Santa Cruz County's Use of Data in a Learning Organization: Lessons for San Francisco County***

**CANDACE GRAY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

There is an increased expectation that social service programs will measure outcomes. This expectation is rooted in the belief that associating specific efforts with desired outcomes can improve the impact of social service agencies' efforts. Santa Cruz County has experienced positive results by utilizing an integrated data system that assists line staff and management in making data-supported decisions to improve CalWORKs/Welfare-to-Work (WTW) performance measures. There is a shared vision among the stakeholders that the county will succeed in improving its work participation rate. Stakeholders are constantly engaging in dialogue and discussion to ensure that the knowledge management structures in place are distributing information throughout the organization. This engagement leads to an enhanced level of transparency and collaboration.

### **Santa Cruz County Strengths**

Utilizing its data system, Santa Cruz County has made great strides over the past year towards keeping staff informed about participation rate goal progress

and towards providing an important tool for program managers to address non-participation quickly. The end result has been increased accountability for both case workers and administration to increase the work participation rate of CalWORKs recipients. Key strategies utilized by Santa Cruz County include, but are not limited to:

- The creation of an Integrated Data System
- Staff meetings, including the Engagement Forum and the Steering Committee, that utilize their data system and promote a shared vision and team learning
- Workforce Participation Rate Staff Performance Incentives

### **Recommendations for San Francisco County**

It is recommended that San Francisco County consider implementing the following measures:

- Restructure staff meetings,(e.g. the Engagement Forum).
- Institute a staff performance incentive program.
- Create staff trainings based on data and staff input.

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### **Background**

Since the enactment of PRWORA (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) in 1996, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) has focused on employment and has been mindful of the necessity for individualized activities that help stabilize families, promote full engagement in work or employment training activities, and support job retention. The federal TANF Program was created as a result of welfare reform and replaced what was then commonly known as “welfare”: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

TANF was reauthorized in February 2006 under the Deficit Reduction Act (DRA); this created significant changes to CalWORKS (California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids). The most significant change, as it relates to Workforce Participation Rate, was the recalculating of the caseload reduction credit. Previously, most states’ required federal WPR was reduced from the required minimum of 50 percent to single-digit percentages due to the substantial caseload reductions of the late 1990s. Under TANF reauthorization, California is now required to meet a substantially higher federal WPR.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) work participation requirement of 50 percent for single-parent families and 90

percent for two-parent families is a significant legislative mandate for San Francisco and other California counties. States that do not meet the mandates face financial penalties of up to 5 percent of their federal TANF block grants. For California, the 5 percent penalty is equivalent to approximately \$140 million per year, with potential growth of up to \$70 million per year. Any reduction to California’s TANF block will make it increasingly difficult for counties to finance programs that could help families move from poverty to self-sufficiency. There is an urgent need to create new strategies to increase work participation rates. One such strategy that has shown success across the country is the implementation of systems that utilize program data to monitor program performance and increase participation in work activities.

### **Reflections on WPR in San Francisco County**

A major complaint in many organizations is that there is an overload of information. While the sharing of information throughout an organization is extremely important, it is also critical that information shared is useful to employees. As our agency strives to maintain internal transparency, it is crucial that information is shared in a way that allows employees to utilize the data to improve their performance. The question for management becomes: how do we make sense out of all the data coming in, and how do we use it to make a difference? It is apparent that an abundance of information, rather than better en-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, California’s adjusted minimum overall WPR for federal fiscal year 2007–2008 was 29.0 percent.

abling people to do their job, threatens to engulf and diminish their control over the situation. We can unwittingly allow information technology to become the driver, rather than simply a tool to enhance our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Work participation rates (WPR) measure the degree to which work-eligible parents in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are engaged in work activities leading to self-sufficiency. It is important to create a data system that can not only provide accurate information for meeting mandates, but that can also create outputs to keep staff abreast of their own individual performance. This is one step the San Francisco Human Services Agency can take towards becoming more of a learning organization.

I have met with various individuals and groups within the agency who contribute to the goal of increasing work participation rates in San Francisco County. There is a talented IT staff that is able to extract data from various sources and create management reports and programs that help make sense of all the data related to work participation rates. In my opinion, an important area that the county can focus on is the dissemination and implementation of our WPR knowledge within the organization.

### Introduction: A Tale of Two Cities

San Francisco, which has a population of 808,977, is composed primarily of minority populations with non-Hispanic whites comprising less than half of the population. The median family income is \$81,136. Following a national trend, an emigration of middle-class families has contributed to the widening income disparity and has left the city with a lower proportion of children. The city's poverty rate is 11.8 percent; 7.4 percent of families are living in poverty.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, in 2009 Santa Cruz had an estimated population size of 256,218 people, with 65.5 percent

of the population reporting as non-Hispanic white. In 2009, the median family income for a household was \$61,941, and about 6.7 percent of families had incomes below the poverty line.

For the federal fiscal year 2008, the Federal Data Reporting and Analysis Bureau at California Department of Social Services lists the work participation rate data provided in the Table 1.

Today, after progressively implementing WPR data projects over the last two years (to be further explained below), Santa Cruz County is now averaging a 32% WPR for FFY 2009–2010.<sup>4</sup> This significant increase is a great accomplishment given that the county has dealt with reduced work hours over the past year due to county furloughs, in addition to the same poor economic conditions as other California counties.

### Santa Cruz County Best Practices

#### INTEGRATED DATA SYSTEM

The Planning and Evaluation Unit of the Human Services Department of Santa Cruz County has been developing infrastructure for an integrated data system that will assist line staff and management in making data-supported decisions to improve CalWORKS/WTW (Welfare-to-Work) performance measures (e.g. TANF Work Participation Rates (WPR), client self sufficiency). outcomes. The data and reporting structure is outcome-driven in design and includes the following features:

- CalWORKS data mart, which is loaded through E2Lite from CalWIN CIS
- SQL Server reporting interface, that produces operational and management reports
- WPR Data Collection & Reporting Tool (Access Database), which was created in-house to perform quality assurance case reviews and to complete WPR (E2Lite) reports
- Exemplar Engagement Reports & Case Alerts Reports, an online reporting tool that creates individualized Excel reports for workers

<sup>2</sup> Ann H. Barbagallo, Acting Director Office of Family Assistance, to S. Kimberly Belshe, California Secretary of Health and Human Services, 30 March 2010. Edmunds, A & Morris, A. (2000). The Problem of information overload in business organizations: a review of literature. *International Journal of Information Management*, 20, 18–19. Retrieved from <http://static.scribd.com/docs/hjk3i0k36gwjr.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau. 2010. 16 April 2010. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06075.html>.

<sup>4</sup> This is the unweighted WPR based on results of the WPR reviews of the E2Lite monthly samples through January 2010.

**TABLE 1**  
**All Family County Work Participation Rates**  
**Federal Fiscal Year 2008**

Santa Cruz	21.2%
San Francisco	18.8%

Source: County Work Participation Rate database for Federal Fiscal Year 2008 (October 2007–September 2008) as of 10/5/2009.

Their agency's mission is to utilize the data and reports generated from these systems to accomplish:

- The facilitation of work prioritization for case managers
- Improved management of staff, unit, and office performance
- The presentation of meaningful information to the organization that can be used for tracking and improving program and client outcomes
- The creation of evidence to identify and support best practices in Welfare-to-Work case and program management

#### THE ENGAGEMENT FORUM

Once the county's data system was in place with the ability to measure performance, the proper forum to share this data was crucial. Performance measurements can only be meaningful when they are the basis for strategic and operational decision-making. In my observation of their Engagement forum, I quickly understood that these meetings were where major decision-making was occurring: as the old saying goes, the forums were "where the rubber meets the road."

The Santa Cruz Engagement forum is composed of approximately twelve members. During these meetings, high-level issues are discussed, such as trends and progress toward targets. In addition, (and probably most important for their county WPR rate), these meetings are host to the review of the Engagement reports and unit performance. The reports are viewed presentation-style utilizing a laptop and overhead projector. The laptop has CalWIN access so the group can view a case in real-time to determine

if errors have been made in data entry. Supervisors are responsible for collecting information from their staff regarding specific cases prior to the meeting to be able to share the case's current status, and are held accountable for reporting the plan for getting a case into compliance. The small amount of attendees at the meeting encourages participation and effective communication. When supervisors leave the meetings, they leave with a clear understanding of:

- The agreed outcomes, actions and responsibilities for addressing their unit's cases on the E2Lite report
- Pending and new task assignments and performance goals for the next meeting
- Accountability for their assigned actions

In collaboration with the Engagement forum, Santa Cruz County has a WTW Steering Group. This is a larger group that allows for the creation of breakout groups to focus on specific issues, such as training or policy formulation.

#### STAFF PERFORMANCE INCENTIVES

To encourage and reward staff for increased performance and work participation rates, a range of meaningful recognition incentives were developed by managers, supervisors, and line staff. Monthly awards are then presented at unit and team meetings, and award criteria are rotated to allow for participation by all units. Examples of possible award criteria include employment rates, the most referrals to work experience, and the highest percentage of plans completed within a 90-day limit.

#### Recommendations for San Francisco County

San Francisco County's areas of focus should include strategies to:

##### Optimize utilization of program evaluation data.

- This includes, but is not limited to, the use of longitudinal analysis and comparison reports for individual staff and annual performance evaluations. It can be useful for employees to track their progress toward goals over a specific period of time.

- This will have minimal cost implications as we have IT staff who can use our current software to create reports.

#### **Restructure the WPR Forum.**

- Smaller can be better. Ensure that all participants attending the WPR forum truly need to be there. For example, would participants' subject matter knowledge be better utilized in a breakout group?
- Ensure that any procedural or policy issues addressed at the meeting are shared with line staff through training classes and/or desk reference training handouts.
- There are no cost implications for this adaptation.

#### **Provide on-going staff training to improve CalWIN knowledge, engagement, strength-based social work and motivational interviewing communication.**

- Based on the WTW Steering Groups and WTW forum, administration can easily identify training gaps in the organization. Training classes and procedural memorandums should be created from information gathered in these two groups. Additionally, staff should be able to submit requests for training topics to the group.
- Provide regular short training sessions to staff.
- Consider purchasing software such as Adobe Captivate to utilize self-paced e-learning.
- There will be minimal costs if we utilize current staff, such as senior eligibility workers and program specialists to conduct the trainings. Once we have an identified group of in-house trainers, we can look into purchasing e-learning software. It can cost up to \$800 to purchase a full license for Adobe Captivate; however, the purchase of this software is not necessary to reach our training goals.

#### **Establish a staff incentive program to celebrate work-related accomplishments.**

- Utilize unit meetings and section meetings as an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of individual staff.

## **Conclusion**

San Francisco CalWORKs employees are dedicated to working hard, in collaboration with their internal and external peers, to successfully engage participants and move them into meaningful employment opportunities. The federal requirement for counties of increasing CalWORKs work participation rates to 50 percent for all families and 90 percent for two-parent families continues to pose a significant challenge for San Francisco County; however, San Francisco is not alone in their struggle.

California achieved an overall work participation rate of 25.1 percent for FY 2008. This deficit of almost 25 percent less than the required 50 percent overall participation rate represents a penalty amount of \$47,664, 514 for California. In my opinion, it is imperative that the county utilize as many strategies as are economically feasible to increase its WPR. I don't think it is likely to meet the 50 percent requirement in the immediate future, but every percentage increase attained is a victory for a client and means that the county is coming closer to meeting TANF's goal of reducing poverty and helping clients and their families achieve self-sufficiency.

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