

Improving the Readiness of New APS Social Workers in Sonoma County for the Essential Task of Home Visitation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The home visit is the primary vehicle through which county programs, such as Adult Protective Services (APS), interact with clients and deliver services. APS is mandated by law to investigate reports of elder and dependent adult abuse. The home visit is a particularly critical step in the investigation process for APS social workers. APS home visits are unannounced and services are generally voluntary. In order to fulfill the mandate, APS social workers must quickly establish trust and cooperation at the client's door; otherwise, the investigation is stopped before it can truly begin. While on the surface the home visit may appear to be a straightforward process, in reality it is actually a complex endeavor. First, the social worker must gain client consent to enter his/her home. Then, once inside the client's home, the social worker must address the abuse allegations and client risk factors that can impact health and safety as well as monitor for the worker's own physical safety. Specialized training is needed to prepare social workers to effectively manage the process of the home visit so that they can be successful in fulfilling their legal mandate to investigate reports, provide vulnerable clients with high quality services and ultimately reduce risk.

The use of simulation training has been recognized as a very effective training method in many fields, such as social work, medicine and law enforcement. In acknowledgement of the need for increased training in this area, Alameda County has implemented a Simulation Lab, or Sim Lab, to provide new social workers with a training experience where they can learn how to conduct

home visits. The Sim Lab provides a mock home setting where new workers engage with others acting as clients and participate in scenarios based on actual client situations. The new social workers are filmed and provided real-time feedback from trainers and peers.

Research in social work education has demonstrated that simulation training can provide excellent opportunities for social workers to learn to navigate the complexities of home visitation in a safe environment. Sonoma County has a similar commitment to excellence in training for new social workers. It is in the best interests of Sonoma County to consider adopting Alameda County's approach of simulation training for APS social workers and for social workers of any other social services program that complete home visits. The addition of Simulation Lab to the social worker training regimen will enhance the skills of social workers in Sonoma County and in the long term result in the provision of improved services for the community.

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Introduction

One of the most important aspects in delivering high quality social services is the interaction that occurs between the client and the social worker. ⁽¹⁾ Whatever the nature of the social services being delivered, the level of trust the client has in the social worker heavily influences the success of those services. This is particularly true when social workers are providing services within the client's home. Many social service programs, such as Adult Protective Services (APS), conduct most in-person client contact within the context of the home visit. During home visits, social workers are expected to perform a myriad of essential tasks, such as represent the agency, build client rapport, perform excellent customer service, collect information necessary for the implementation of services, complete a thorough assessment of the client and monitor the situation for worker safety—all within a limited amount of time. By nature, the home visit is a complex and critical task. Social workers must be properly trained on how to perform a home visit before going out into the field. Thorough social worker training and orientation on home visits benefits the social workers, the social service program, and, most importantly, the clients served.

The County of Alameda has acknowledged the importance of training social workers in the practice of home visits by investing time and resources in the establishment of a Simulation Lab, or Sim Lab. This approach is widely recognized in social work education as a highly valuable

and effective teaching tool to achieve positive outcomes in supporting new social workers to build their professional skills and apply classroom concepts to real life.

Home Visits in Sonoma County Adult Protective Services

The complexity of home visits is magnified in APS for visits that are generally unannounced, or in other words, surprise visits for clients and other members of the household. The APS social worker represents the county's social services programs and is also a representative of the government. The APS social worker is expected to address abuse allegations, conduct a thorough interview in order to inform a risk assessment, and create a service plan. Typically an APS social worker appears on a client's doorstep asking private questions, such as issues related to health, finances and family. The reaction from clients to having a government representative asking these types of questions can range from welcoming, to fearful, to even hostile. The APS mandate is to investigate reports of abuse and neglect among elders over the age of 65 and dependent adults between the ages of 18 and 64.⁽²⁾ Except under specific circumstances, APS services are generally voluntary and clients can refuse to cooperate. In order for APS to fulfill its mandate to investigate, the social worker must quickly assuage fears by establishing trust and rapport with the client.

Sonoma County APS has developed a robust classroom training and orientation program for new social workers, which lasts approximately one month. After completing this training program new social workers begin to have cases assigned to them. During the second month, new staff continues to receive additional classroom trainings which are designed to build on their field experiences. The goal of this training program is to prepare social workers with the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary to investigate reports of abuse and neglect and appropriately

represent the agency in the community. Having the confidence to knock on a client's door who does not expect you and having the skills to think quickly and critically in order to engage with that client is essential to a successful APS social worker. Once an APS social worker is inside a client's home, those critical thinking and assessment skills must continue to be functioning at a high level. Sonoma County APS home visit training currently consists of the following: shadowing experienced social workers during their home visits and classroom discussions. Once a new social worker is assigned their first investigation, his/her supervisor accompanies them on the home visit to provide observation and feedback. New social workers are not released to do home visits independently until the supervisor is confident in the worker's performance. This naturally raises anxiety for the new social worker who is not only going on the first assigned case, but who is also doing so with a supervisor assessing the performance. Shadowing and classroom training are valuable steps to prepare social workers for home visits. However, this process can be improved further by implementing the Sim Lab.

Simulation Training as a Training Tool

Simulation is an effective means to provide real-life skill-building opportunities to social workers. In simulation training, a mock client's home setting is created, with individuals playing the part of the clients. The simulation setting helps to sharpen the social worker's observation skills as a great deal of valuable information can be ascertained through observations of a client as well as the interview. Scenarios are based on real client stories. New social workers are filmed as they engage with an individual playing the role of the client. Feedback is provided to the social worker by the trainers as well as by other new social worker peers. New social workers have an opportunity to complete an investigation and debrief in a safe setting. The anxiety typically felt by new workers conducting home visits is also channeled here in the Sim

Lab as they are under the eye of the camera. The difference, however, is that the Sim Lab is a safe, learning environment where mistakes are expected to be made and skills expected to be strengthened without any harm to the client or worker. While there are similarities in simulation to role play, simulation takes the practice further by recreating a home environment.⁽⁵⁾ This added realism allows for the worker to practice assessing the whole person including their environment as is needed for a truly accurate risk assessment. Simulation training has been shown to be a highly effective training practice in child welfare, medicine, law enforcement and other fields.⁽³⁾⁽⁴⁾

One of the challenges in training staff is how to confirm if the concepts presented are truly understood and put into practice. In other words, is the transfer of learning actually taking place? Adults learn and retain information in different ways. Simply conveying instruction and information is not sufficient for adult learners. These principles of adult learning theory should be followed while training social workers in order to achieve success:

1. Adult learners need to be self-directed, that is, they need to be able to make choices related to their objectives.
2. Adults take what they are learning now and connect those to past experiences, knowledge and opinions.
3. Adults are goal-oriented and seek to determine how the subject matter is relevant to them given the learning objectives.
4. Adults want to learn information that they can apply to their lives. They need to be given tasks that directly relate to the learning objectives and reinforce learning.
5. Adult learners want to know why information is worth learning and how they can use it.
6. Adult learners thrive in collaborative settings with their trainers and peers.⁽⁶⁾

In simulation training, one can see quickly if the new worker understands and can apply the concept being presented. Immediate feedback is possible; in fact, feedback can be given during the simulation so that the new worker can change his/her approach or start over. The simulation lab establishes a safe and supportive environment for new staff to hone their skills. They can make mistakes, learn and try again. The simulation environments allows for new workers to learn from observing other new workers, listening to feedback given and apply that knowledge to improve their own performance.

Alameda County Program Implementation and Development

In 2016, Larry Sanchez, Staff Development Manager for the Alameda County Training and Consulting Team (TACT) program, attended a conference where the Simulation approach to training was explored. Orange and Los Angeles counties were already using simulation as part of their training curriculums so Mr. Sanchez reached out to them to learn more about how they had implemented this tool. After receiving support from his executive team, Mr. Sanchez moved forward to bring simulation training to Alameda County. The Alameda program is currently in the beginning stages of implementation. In March 2017, the county began using the Simulation Lab for the first time to train four new child welfare social workers. TACT already had teams of trainers who provide orientation and training to new social workers in Medi-Cal, child welfare, adult protective services and in home supportive services. Each training team is attached to a specific program. For example, the team for APS only trains APS workers. The introduction of the Sim Lab is considered an additional tool for training and has been incorporated into standard training protocols. TACT plans to roll out the use of Sim Lab as a training tool to all of its social service programs but is starting with child welfare at this time.

Alameda County constructed a Sim Lab by remodeling a vacant office into an apartment setting complete with a couch, kitchen table and other everyday household items. A home security camera system was installed in various areas of the lab to provide four different angles of the room. TACT has all new social workers participating in the Sim Lab sign a release authorization to consent to be videoed and that this video can be viewed in a training setting by others. After being shown, it is deleted. An inventory list of the props used is maintained in the Sim Lab. All the props are to remain in the room so that the items can be tracked and kept secure. TACT recommends the simulations are kept between two and five minutes in order to facilitate a targeted classroom discussion around specific training objectives. The costs associated with the creation of the Sim Lab were minimal. TACT received donated household items from staff and other items needed, such as furniture, were bought through thrift or discount stores. The Sim Lab was funded by TACT out of its training budget for approximately \$2,000 total. This cost included the closed circuit camera system which was about \$400. TACT members were able to install the system themselves for additional savings.

Alameda County Program Outcomes

Alameda County's use of the simulation tool for training purposes is new; therefore, the impact of this new tool has not been fully assessed. However, TACT child welfare trainers, Kelly Wood and Bonnie Mencher, who used this tool for the first time in March with four new child welfare social workers, reported positive results. Ms. Wood and Ms. Mencher indicated that at least three out of four new social workers could identify areas of improvement after viewing their recordings. At trainers, Ms. Wood and Ms. Mencher also found it informative to note the fourth worker did not demonstrate insight into his/her performance issues after viewing the recording. Another potential benefit of the Sim Lab tool is to identify knowledge/skill deficits in new staff.

Trainers can establish training objectives specifically tailored to address these deficits. TACT has all of its training participants complete class evaluations. It is unknown at this time if specific questions related to the Sim Lab experience will be added to the evaluations but all evaluations measure transfer of learning based on defined learning objectives. The goal is that the addition of the Sim Lab will enhance transfer of learning.

Overall, the challenges associated with implementing the Sim Lab so far have been relatively minor. Alameda County has found these challenges to be primarily technological in nature. For example, the camera system selected by the county does not have the ability to rewind, fast forward, or zoom; resyncing the multiples camera times is problematic; and, the audio quality is mediocre. These technological challenges added to the time and effort that the training team needed to invest in order to master the use of the camera equipment.

Implications for Sonoma County

The Simulation Lab as a training tool is a proven method of training new social workers. While Alameda County is just beginning to utilize this tool, it is based on substantial social work educational research that shows it is an effective method of transferring knowledge and skills to social workers. The model implemented in Alameda could be easily replicated in Sonoma County. Alameda County plans to use its Sim Lab as a training tool for multiple programs across its Human Services Agency. The goal is to establish a process whereby programs can reserve the Sim Lab for individual program training needs. TACT will develop scenarios and “kits” to help support those scenarios with specialized props matching the specifics of that scenario. For example, a kit for APS based on a scenario where an elder is medically self-neglecting their care may include a walker, empty wine bottles, and an insulin syringe on a table.

Using the Lab in this way provides the benefit of training support for a large number of programs for a minimal investment. Sonoma County could also replicate this approach by having this tool available for training any social work program that conducts home visits such as APS, In Home Supportive Services and Child Welfare.

Fiscal Impact

The financial impact of a Sim Lab would be similar to that of Alameda County. Alameda County created its Sim Lab for about \$2,000. The funding required is limited to start-up costs associated with the camera system and props. The introduction of a Sim Lab into Sonoma County will require the county to provide an office space with a door. Ideally the office space is large enough to accommodate furniture so as to recreate a home setting as realistically as possible, and the door is set in a private area away from staff so that new social workers can practice engaging with the client at the door. The available space allows for increased realism as multiple rooms such as kitchen or bathroom could be added. A training classroom where the filmed activity can be viewed is also needed. As space is limited in many HSD offices, this may be the biggest challenge to creating such a lab.

Inexpensive furniture and props for the Sim Lab could be acquired through staff donation and discount or thrift store purchase. The most expensive individual item to this Sim Lab would likely be the security camera system. Based on Alameda County's experiences, it is recommended that Sonoma County purchase a system that allows for increased audio control and has camera zoom capabilities. A higher quality security camera system that includes these features costs approximately \$600 but this is a reasonable investment as it is a one-time cost. It is recommended that Sonoma County Staff Development leads this project to establish and

maintain the Sim Lab and coordinate trainings between the various Human Services programs. It is proposed that funding for this initiative come out of the Staff Development budget; however, another option is for each HSD program who elects to use the Sim Lab to contribute equally to its funding.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Alameda County's experience with developing a Simulation Lab has shown that it can be achieved with minimal resources and is a tool that can be designed to provide training opportunities to multiple programs. By making a relatively small investment, the county realized significant benefits for a large group of staff. Home visits are a core activity in many county social service programs. In order to provide high quality services to clients, it is necessary that social workers are trained using the most effective, evidenced based methods available. It is therefore recommended that the Sonoma County Staff Development team implement a Simulation Lab in order to develop social workers who are confident and competent to provide excellent client services and represent Sonoma County in the most professional manner possible. In order to maximize the benefits of this lab, it is also recommended that Staff Development ensure that those who are training new staff are skilled in the use of the Simulation Lab as a training tool.

Conclusion

The home visit is at the core of many social service programs, such as APS, IHSS and child welfare. Simulation training has been proven to be an effective approach in training social workers for this task. Sonoma County Human Services Department is guided by the vision of "meeting the needs of our community and empowering our clients through accessible and

responsive services” and its priorities include “provide quality services to protect vulnerable children and adults.”⁽⁷⁾ The provision of quality services begins with ensuring social workers charged with carrying out that vision have the most comprehensive and up-to-date training available. The addition of Simulation Lab to the social worker training regimen will enhance the skills of social workers in Sonoma County and result in improved service delivery to the community.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Larry Sanchez, Staff Development Manager, for his support and orientation to the Alameda County Sim Lab. I also sincerely thank Mary Shean, Staff Development Supervisor, as well as Kelly Wood and Bonnie Mencher, Child Welfare Trainers with the Alameda County Training and Consulting Team (TACT), for sharing their time, support and knowledge with me. I am grateful for the honor of participating in the BASSC program and wish to thank the Sonoma County Executive Team with special thanks to Karen Fies, Diane Kaljian, Gary Fontenot and Eric Glentzer for their support throughout the process.

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