

DISTRICT OFFICE OPERATIONS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Claudine Wildman*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Service delivery is at the heart of the mission of every social services agency. The continual improvement of our operations is directly related to the quality of our service provided. The purpose of this case study was to research district office operations in the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency in order to learn effective district office management and service delivery tools that could be utilized by the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency (HRA).

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) is one of the largest public agencies in the County with a mission to “provide life protecting, life sustaining and life enhancing services to adults, children, families, elder and economically dependent individuals.” 2,600 staff provide services to approximately 140,000 individuals in at least 20 different languages. Though set in the midst of Silicon Valley’s greatest economic boom the income gap between those on the high and low ends continues to grow putting increasing pressures on the SSA and the people they serve.

My internship focused on the district offices within the Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS). There are a variety of components that contribute to the successful operations of a district office. This case study examines the following areas as they relate to district office operations:

- Staffing
- Communication
- Staff Development
- Employee Recognition
- Decision Making
- Budget Development
- Technical Support

Each of the four district offices visited has a distinct function and atmosphere. The San Jose Senter Road and Gilroy offices provide intake eligibility services. The Gilroy office also serves as a One Stop Center. The San Martin and Santa Clara offices process continuing cases for Medi-Cal, Food Stamps and/or CalWORKs.

While I learned a great deal in each of the focus areas, a tremendous amount was learned about other areas as well. The most impressive lessons learned are outlined as recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a new Program/Site Manager studying district operations provided a wonderful opportunity not only to learn new methods of operations but also to confirm the use of methods currently in use in my own County and to understand that many of the frustrating problems encountered are not unique to one county. The following are some recommendations for Santa Cruz County:

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1. Review support staff levels for district offices with possibility of increased funding for a position to assist Program/Site Manager with clerical and facility duties.
2. Establish the position of lead eligibility worker to ready staff for the position of supervisor.
3. Develop a pilot project for EWs to carry a combined Medi-Cal and Food Stamp caseload.
4. Institute All Staff Meetings at the district office level, facilitated by the Program/Site Manager.
5. Develop district office goals related to the mission.
6. Increase HRAs utilization of the Intranet for publication of program handbooks.

CONCLUSION

After visiting and learning about Santa Clara County district office operations, I realize how much counties have in common regardless of their size. While there are logistical differences due to size, we share a common desire to provide life-enhancing services to the individuals and families in our respective communities. The continual improvement of our operations is directly related to the quality of our service delivery. Program/Site Managers become advocates and as such have a pivotal role in ensuring that both our internal and external customers have opportunities to enhance their professional and personal lives.

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INTRODUCTION

“If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you always got.” This quote reminds us to examine the desired outcomes in any given situation, and the changes that may be necessary to achieve those outcomes. Continuing the status quo has not been an option for social service agencies since the advent of welfare reform.

Just prior to my selection as a BASSC participant, the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency (HRA) underwent reorganization, and I was promoted to Site Benefits/Program Manager. The focus of my BASSC internship quickly became clear—district office operations—the in’s and out’s of managing a district office. This research will help guide the development of district office operations in Santa Cruz County. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency graciously provided the opportunity to learn about district office operations.

BACKGROUND

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) is one of the largest public agencies in the County with a mission to “provide life protecting, life sustaining and life enhancing services to adults, children, families, elders and economically dependent individuals.” 2,600 staff provide services to approximately 140,000 individuals in at least 20 different languages. Though set in the midst of Silicon Valley’s greatest economic boom the income gap between those on the high and low ends continues to grow putting increasing pressures on the SSA and the people they serve.

PURPOSE

The purpose of my case study was to research district office operations in Santa Clara County in order to learn the fundamentals of operating an effective district office. My internship focused on the district offices within the Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS). During my internship, I was able to visit four of the DEBS thirteen district offices. Visits to the offices in Santa Clara, San Jose, San Martin, and Gilroy included office tours, interviews with various staff and attending bureau and administrative meetings.

Each of the district offices has a distinct function and atmosphere. The San Jose Senter Road and Gilroy offices provide intake eligibility services. The San Martin and Santa Clara offices process continuing cases for Medi-Cal, Food Stamps and/or CalWORKs.

There are a variety of components that contribute to the successful operations of a district office. This case study examines the following areas as they relate to district office operations:

- Staffing
- Communication
- Staff Development
- Employee Recognition
- Decision Making
- Budget Development
- Technical Support

In addition, comparisons will be made to Santa Cruz County, conclusions will be drawn and recom-

mendations to the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency will be made.

STAFFING

Staffing patterns appear to be the greatest area of difference between the agencies. Heading district offices in both counties are Program/Site Managers. Social Service Program Managers (SSPMs) in Santa Clara County and Program/Site Managers in Santa Cruz County are both entrusted with the smooth and effective running of their offices with a primary focus on service delivery. In addition, both act as a liaison to the community, working with the community based organizations in their area. Clearly, to be an effective SSPM and/or Program/Site Manager one must assume the role of advocate for the office's internal and external customers.

SSPMs have a secretary, a resource not available to Program/Site Managers in Santa Clara County. In Santa Cruz County, the clerical supervisor provides clerical support to the Program/Site Manager and the Departmental Analyst.

The position of Assistant SSPM does not exist in Santa Cruz County, however, some of the duties of an Assistant SSPM appear to be incorporated into the Departmental Analyst position in Santa Cruz County. Similar tasks for the two positions would include such things as drafting security procedures for the site, reviewing caseload counts, and attending meetings in the absence of the Program Manager. The Assistant SSPM provides a two-year opportunity for a line supervisor to work out of class and gain additional work experience.

The Office Management Coordinator (OMC) handles the facility issues at each Santa Clara County district office. This includes phones, furniture,

cleaning, and maintenance problems. In addition, the OMC supervises the clerical supervisor. In Santa Cruz County, these duties are incorporated into the role of the Program/Site Manager.

Program Coordinators in Santa Clara County are most closely aligned with the position of Departmental Analyst in Santa Cruz County. Both of these positions are responsible for policy and procedure development, writing handbooks and working on special projects for the various social service agency programs. The majority of the Program Coordinators are currently located at SSA administrative offices while Departmental Analysts are physically located in a district office. Santa Clara County is considering a plan to move the Program Coordinators to the district offices.

Santa Cruz County does not have the classification of Lead Eligibility Worker. In Santa Clara County Lead Eligibility Workers serve as a resource for less experienced eligibility workers. In addition, they often serve as acting supervisors. This position serves as a training ground for future supervisors.

Other positions in the district offices are relatively similar including clerical staff, eligibility workers, employment specialists, social workers, etc. However, in Santa Clara County program intake is generic and eligibility workers may carry combined caseloads—such as Medi-Cal and Food Stamp cases. In Santa Cruz County intake and caseloads are program specific.

COMMUNICATIONS

As in any effective organization, communication in Santa Clara County occurs in a variety of ways and across all levels. The descriptions provided in this paper focus primarily on how district offices receive

and pass along information. Many other forms of communication exist within the SSA.

DEBS SSPMs meet weekly as a group. Three times a month this meeting is with the Director. One of these meetings includes the Assistant SSPMs and the OMCs. The fourth meeting held by the SSPMs is called the “secret meeting.”

Although the holding of the secret meeting is not a secret, it is an opportunity for the SSPMs to meet privately as a group to discuss and problem solve common issues, receive guidance from other SSPMs regarding particular situations in their own offices and to vent about various topics of concern. The SSPMs graciously allowed me to attend this meeting after promising confidentiality. Although, I am able to draw some parallels to situations in Santa Cruz County for use in this paper, I believe I do so without violating the trust and confidentiality agreed to.

At the district office site, SSPMs conduct All Staff Meetings once a month. Attendance is voluntary or mandatory depending on the district office. Agenda items include kudos, committee reports, meeting reports, facility updates, rumor control and agency news. Occasionally guest speakers are invited. The DEBS Director is committed to visiting an all staff meeting at each district office twice during the year. I was able to attend an All Staff Meeting at the San Martin office. This appeared to be an effective and valued means of communication.

Common to both counties are supervisor meetings and unit meetings. Each SSPM conducts regular meetings with the supervisors that report to them. In turn each, supervisor holds a unit meeting that includes those staff that directly report to them. I attended supervisor meetings in the Santa Clara

office. SSMP Louise Mitchell manages two sites, the Santa Clara office and the Valley Medical office. She conducts three supervisor meetings, one in the late morning with the Santa Clara supervisors, followed by a joint meeting with supervisors of both offices and then a meeting with just the supervisors from the Valley Medical Center office. This involves three agendas—one to address the needs of each office and the third with issues common to both offices.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

One place where the difference in county size was most evident was in Staff Development. For example, maximum enrollment in a Santa Cruz County induction class is 9; it is not unusual in Santa Clara County to have an induction class of 40. Since Santa Cruz County does not have generic intake, induction training is program specific and thus is much shorter in duration than in Santa Clara County where multiple programs are trained. Although, the magnitude of training is significantly greater in Santa Clara County, how to deliver staff training is a challenge faced by both counties. Several common questions to be answered include:

- Under what circumstances can staff development trainers travel to district office sites to provide training?
- What trainings require that they be delivered by staff development trainers and what trainings supervisors can deliver?
- Can induction classes provide more training on how to manage a caseload?
- Can the induction training provide a more real world experience by transferring cases that have work to be done and may not be perfectly clean?

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Each district office handles employee recognition slightly differently. While there is a formal agency recognition program, each district office has unique methods of recognizing its staff. At the Santa Clara Office, for example the SSPM created business size recognition cards that can be used by anyone in the building to acknowledge the good work of another. This method of recognition is designed to provide instant recognition when catching people doing something good. In San Martin/Gilroy, the SSPM selects an employee of the quarter through a nomination process. Santa Clara County provides each SSPM with a small stipend to fund staff recognition.

DECISION MAKING

The DEBS Director, Patrick Duterte, has been on the job approximately eight months and has set a new tone for the Department. He believes that a hierarchical decision making system slows down the bureaucracy and he encourages staff to make decisions related to their area of expertise. Staff is then held accountable for the decision. The leadership role is to support the decision-makers by removing the obstacles that may interfere with their ability to do their job. Empowering staff in this manner utilizes staff expertise, creates buy in for the decision and assists with professional development of staff. He encourages the SSPMs to use the same model, much of which can be found in the book *Flight of the Buffalo*.

BUDGET DEVELOPMENT

DEBS is participating in a performance based budgeting pilot in Santa Clara County for fiscal year 2000/2001. Performance-based budgeting is based on developing a budget based on the mission of the

organization, and the established goals to achieve the mission.

Components within each goal include key strategies, measures/indicators and conditions affecting service performance and costs. Each component may have more than one strategy, measure or condition related to the goal. Common goals and accountability at all levels for those goals improve the chance of success in realizing the mission. Performance-based budgeting measures performance related to the mission of an organization and/or department through established goals. Success is tied to the belief that individuals will perform to what they are measured on or held accountable for.

DEBS held an offsite, facilitated retreat with the DEBS Director and SSMPs to develop goals related to the DEBS mission statement. Once the goals were established, key strategies and measurements were developed. Conditions affecting service performance and costs outline unforeseen changes that may effect the fulfillment of the goals.

Each SSPM will be held accountable for their contribution toward the achievement of the overall DEBS goals. SSPMs will work within their district office (Bureau) on their contribution.

Performance based budgeting in Santa Clara County is a work in progress. A steering group is being formed that will include union representatives, the DEBS Director, SSPMs and the Administrator of Employment and Benefit Services. However, these initial steps demonstrate the integral part that the budget plays in strategic planning.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

There are several issues and concerns that both counties are trying to address. Due to the proliferation of the high tech industry in the greater Bay Area, qualified technical assistance staff is difficult to hire and retain. Providing and training staff to utilize personal computers rather than terminals is another common issue.

Currently, in Santa Clara County technical support is provided through a centralized system. Outstationing technicians in regions were district offices are located is under consideration. It is believed that this will speed up technician response time.

Information Services in Santa Clara County provides a tremendous amount of online services to staff. Appointment scheduling is computerized. Handbooks for all programs, charts, and general operating procedures on the Intranet. Immediate need checks can be issued at the district office sites. Information Services is continually evaluating their services in their efforts to best serve their customers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

As a new Program/Site Manager studying district operations provided a wonderful opportunity not only to learn new methods of operations but also to confirm the use of methods currently in use in my own County and to understand that many of the frustrating problems encountered are not unique to one county. The following are some recommendations for Santa Cruz County:

1. Review support staff levels for district offices with possibility of increased funding for an addi-

tional position to assist Program/Site Manager with clerical and facility duties.

2. Establish the position of lead eligibility worker to ready staff for the position of supervisor.
3. Develop a pilot project for EWs to carry a combined Medi-Cal and Food Stamp caseload.
4. Institute All Staff Meetings at the district office level, facilitated by the Program/Site Manager.
5. Develop district office goals related to the Agency and Division mission.
6. Increase HRAs utilization of the Intranet for publication of program handbooks.

Recommendation #3 has been implemented in the district office I manage. Recommendation #6 is currently under development by the Medi-Cal program. The remaining recommendations require the approval of administrative staff and will be presented at a future date for their consideration.

CONCLUSION

After visiting and learning about Santa Clara County district office operations, I realize how much counties have in common regardless of their size. While there are logistical differences due to size, we share a common desire to provide life-enhancing services to the individuals and families in our respective communities. The continual improvement of our operations is directly related to the quality of our service delivery. Program/Site Managers serve as advocates and as such have a pivotal role in ensuring that our customers both internal and external have opportunities to enhance their professional and personal lives.

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I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the staff of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, and particularly those in the Department of Employment and Benefit Services, who gave so generously of their time to provide me with the information needed to have a successful BASSC internship experience.