

Contra Costa County's Clerical Assistant Trainee Program

DANA CASTILLO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contra Costa County's Community Services Bureau has put great effort into providing Head Start and Early Head Start parents that are income-eligible Contra Costa County residents with employment, training and mentorship services within the field of administrative and support services and clerical support. The program encourages effective work habits and skills that will lead to future employment.

The purpose of this case study was to distinguish what was different from what is done in Alameda County Social Services and to assess if the Clerical Assistance Trainee (CAT) program, or any part of it, could be replicated in Alameda County as a strategy to improve the work participation rate. The study concludes that Alameda County's Welfare to Work (WTW) department offer most of the same opportunities with the exception of the on-the-job employment as part of WTW.

**Dana Castillo, WBA Program Manager,
Alameda County Social Services Agency.**

Contra Costa County's Clerical Assistant Trainee Program

DANA CASTILLO

Background

Counties throughout California are looking for new strategies to improve their work participation rates (WPR) to avoid fiscal penalties that can be imposed if WPR is not met. With the current budget crisis and the threat of Welfare to Work Employment Services funding being cut even more, counties will need to employ new strategies to promote WPR by engagement and new funding.

History

The Clerical Assistant Trainee program (CAT) was developed to provide Head Start and Early Head Start parents and residents of Contra Costa County (CCC) with meaningful employment opportunities and to support them in becoming self-sufficient. Originally funded by the Community Services Block Grant American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant (CSBG ARRA), Contra Costa County's Community Services Bureau's CAT program provides employment training and on-the-job experience to CSBG-eligible, low-income residents of Contra Costa County whose children are enrolled in Head Start. The program has been so successful that the Community Services Bureau has elected to sustain the program beyond the end of the ARRA grant using funds from the annual CSBG allocation and Head Start funds.

CAT is a 12 month program. The program starts January 1st and runs through the end of December. It is sometimes extended based on the discretion of the program manager. The CAT program is currently in its third year and has been modeled after the Contra Costa County's Teachers Assistant Training Program (TAT) which started in 2002. Bulletins

and applications are posted at Head Start Centers in Contra Costa County. Interested applicants are submitted to the Community Services Bureau and screened by the program manager. The program has an average of 16 trainees yearly.

Program Design

The Contra Costa County Community Services Bureau CAT program was created to provide income-eligible Contra Costa County residents with employment, training and mentorship services within the field of administrative support services and clerical support. The program assists participants with establishing career advancement objectives and goals that can lead to future employment opportunities. Trainees build on their "soft skills", such as effective listening, communication, team work and work etiquette, as well as "hard skills" or occupational requirements and activities on the job. Activities and work experience are designed to:

- Provide work experience in clerical and administrative service support through on-the-job training;
- Provide guidance and mentorship to encourage effective work habits and skills;
- Support the academic advancement of participants by providing the opportunity to complete courses at a local community college or university; and
- Support the professional growth and development of participants by offering specialized training on current office practices and procedures.

Trainees work about 30 hours a week. They are assigned to a Head Start Child Care Center or the

CSB administrative offices to provide clerical support. They are compensated on an hourly basis for hours worked, as well as for hours of attendance at the scheduled required training. They are paid under Contra Costa County's Student Worker-Deep Class classification. This extended-range classification is designed for employment on a limited-term, hourly basis of students to perform a variety of unskilled manual tasks, office support activities, or technical assignments in public service occupations commensurate with their interest, aptitudes and education. The appointment to an hourly salary level is dependent upon the qualifications of the person hired, and the nature and complexity of the work to be performed.

Trainees receive direct supervision and mentorship by a site supervisor, program manager and/or support staff. They are assigned a mentor supervisor who is usually the person responsible for the direct supervision. They assist participants with establishing career advancement objectives and goals that will lead to future employment opportunities. They meet regularly with their mentor supervisor to ensure they are receiving useful experience and applying appropriate practices. Every six months, the trainee completes a self-evaluation and is given a performance evaluation by the mentor supervisor.

Trainees are required to maintain enrollment at a local community college or university during the duration of the program. They must take at least one course per semester. They are required to notify the CAT program coordinator if they know that they are at risk of not passing a course. If a class is dropped or the trainee does not successfully pass the course, it is at the discretion of the Community Services Bureau (CSB) to reinstate the participant into CAT.

Program participants must attend and participate in all mandatory training offered by CSB. They are compensated for attending training at their regular hourly rate. The training hours are included in the 30 hour work week.

If a program participant fails to cooperate and participate in all program components and comply with all program requirements, they may be

terminated from employment and separated from the CAT program.

Grants

In Contra Costa County, key senior managers and subject matter experts write the grant. Depending on the grant, a senior manager with expertise in the particular grant's subject is selected to lead the efforts and write the actual grant proposal. This person selects individual managers and content area experts who are assigned specific parts of the grant. The leader (grant writer), develops timelines for completion of the project and holds clarification meetings with the individual members of the grant-writing team. She/he collects all parts, puts them together in one document and presents the draft to the director and selected key managers for review, feedback and approval. If needed, she/he collects additional information from the team members and edits the grant proposal. This person is responsible to prepare the final proposal, present it to the entire senior management team and submit the document within the timelines of the grant application process.

Challenges

As stated earlier, the program is funded through a Community Services Block Grant. The program manager must apply for the grant allotment yearly and wait to find out if the program is still eligible to receive the award. This sometimes holds up starting the program at the January 1st start date. In previous years the program has started as late as February.

Comparison to Alameda County

Although the CAT program is run by the Contra Costa County's Community Service Bureau, Alameda County has similar programs through the Social Services Agency's Workforce and Benefits Administration's (WBA) Welfare to Work (WTW) program. Both programs serve similar populations where the goal is promote the economic and social well-being to enable low-income families to become fully self-sufficient.

The CAT program's participants are parents that have children enrolled in the Head Start program, whereas the WTW participants are clients that have applied for CalWORKs and are mandatory participants or volunteers.

WTW participants start the program by attending an orientation which consists of an overview of the program and any supportive services available in WTW. The participant also completes the Comprehension Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) test which measures the participant's math and reading skills.

The next scheduled activity is an appraisal. The Appraisal is a mini-assessment conducted by an Employment Counselor to identify a participant's education, work history, job skills, employment goals, need for supportive services, and CASAS results. The goal of this activity is to identify the most beneficial path for the participant towards obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment. After the appraisal, a participant can be assigned to Job Club/Job Search, Case Management, a Self-initiated Program (SIP) or Assessment.

Job Club/Job Search consist of an intense 5-day job club program that prepares participants to identify their job skills, job preferences, set career goals, develop job search tools, prepare for job interviews and gain an understanding of employer expectations.

Job Search is the second component where participants work with staff to conduct job search.

Case Management is for participants already working full-time or those who have a WTW plan on file.

SIP is a program that the participant was enrolled in before or by the appraisal date and is an undergraduate degree or a certificate program that can lead to employment.

Assessment is the WTW activity which includes obtaining the participant's work history and inventory of employment skills, knowledge and abilities, education history and current level; need for supportive services; local labor market information; physical or mental limitations and identification of resources needed to complete the WTW Plan.

Lastly, WTW activities after assessment are scheduled. Participation requirements include the following:

- Two parent households are required to participate in WTW activities at least 35 hours per week.
- Other families are required to participate at least 32 hours per week.
- Participation must be for a minimum average of 20 hours per week in one or more core activities and the remaining hours in non-core activities. (See Table 1 below.)

TABLE 1
Core and Non-Core Activities

Core Activities—20 hours/week	Non-Core Activities—12-15 hours/week
Unsubsidized Employment	Adult Basic Education
Subsidized Employment	English as a second language (ESL)
On-the-job training	GED
Work-study	Job skills training related to employment
Self-employment	Mental Health Services
Community Service	Substance Abuse Services
Work Experience	Domestic Violence Services
Vocational education or training (limited to 12 months only)	Vocational education or training (after 12 months only)
Job Search/Job Club	Parent participation at child's school to ensure child's attendance.

If a WTW program participant fails to cooperate and participate with the program requirements and good cause has not been established, they can be sanctioned. A sanction is a decrease in the CalWORKs cash grant amount. The sanction lasts until the participant performs the activities that were previously not done.

Why should Alameda County WTW program try a similar approach as Contra Costa County's CAT program?

Alameda County is making strides to improve its WPR. In addition to finding new ways to improve WPR, it would be sensible to look at successful programs that can be adopted into WTW, such as the CAT program.

Adopting something similar to the CAT program ensures that Alameda County will meet its WPR requirements in core and non-core activities since participants are employed at least 30 hours a week plus enrolled in school. The participants are provided with a meaningful work experience in clerical support or administrative support services which is a marketable skill. They are provided guidance and mentorship to foster effective work habits and skills, such as:

- Wearing appropriate work attire
- Learning to work cooperatively with other staff members
- Understanding confidentiality, policies and procedures
- Accepting supervision and guidance
- Demonstrating responsibility in performance and completing assignments thoroughly and professionally.
- Developing reliability by reporting to work and returning from breaks on time and notifying the supervisor of absences in a timely manner.

These are skills and behaviors needed to be successful in the world of employment.

Recommendation & Conclusion

As part of this case study, I had the opportunity to talk to a participant in the CAT program. It was apparent from our discussion and my observations that the participant was engaged and satisfied with the program. Not only was she acquiring technical skills, she also expressed a feeling that she had learned and was continuing to learn how to understand and handle conflict in an employment setting. She felt very confident that she would be successful in finding and keeping employment because of the many valuable skills she had learned in the program.

I would expect that implementing a similar program in WTW would result in improved outcomes although there would be definite challenges as well that include but are not limited to labor, funding and a commitment of a qualified pool of mentors. Alameda County would need a workgroup that would be tasked with identifying the criteria for selecting program participants, as well as developing the job description and looking at the current WTW offerings to determine how to best fit this type of program into what is already offered.

Management and labor would have to be involved to ensure that any changes to current employee's jobs are agreed upon. Management would also have to be clear with labor that the purpose of the classification is to provide practical and meaningful work experience for the program participants and would not be used in lieu of hiring regular county employees.

Implementing a program of this nature requires staff participation and commitment. Managers that supervise the trainee would need to ensure that they carve out time to provide a more formal type of mentoring. This can be difficult because staff at all agency levels have immense workloads. They would need to be fully committed to the program.

Finding funding is always a challenge. For WTW work, Alameda County could look into using AB98 funds for wages. The department is currently subsidizing eligible CalWORKs client placements for six

months. The department can also utilize its grant writer to find other types of funding available.

In conclusion, The CAT program should be seen as a strategy to not only improve WPR by increasing the WTW mandatory participants hours, but it should also be seen as a vital instrument in the process of helping families move into self-sufficiency.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Janissa Rowley, Assistant Director at Contra Costa County's Community Services Bureau, for your time, expertise and patience. Thanks also to Reni Radeva who answered my questions when Janissa was unavailable. From Alameda County, thanks to Amy Thompson who in the spur of the moment willingly answered my finance questions. Special thanks to my peer, Rosa Beaver, for editing assistance and support. I would also like to extend my thanks to my former manager, Amanda Robles, for recommending my participation in the BASSC Executive Development Training Program.

References

- 93 710-ARRA-Community Services Block Grant-CDEA: Programs. <https://www.cfda.gov/index>
- County of Contra Costa-Class Specification Bulletin *Student Worker Deep Class*, December 1st, 1985
- County of Contra Costa, Community Services Bureau. *Clerical Assistant Trainee Orientation Manual*, 2012
- County of Contra Costa, Community Services Bureau. *Clerical Assistant Trainee Program*, PowerPoint, 2012

