

Marin County Health and Human Services' Strategic Planning Process: Designing the Road Map to Change

DEBORAH BRESNICK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marin County Health and Human Services (HHS) embarked on a strategic planning process in late 2015 to develop its first ever strategic plan. Valuing shared leadership and decision-making, strong staff engagement, and a process that is flexible and responsive, Marin County HHS is demonstrating that the process of strategic planning itself can have a significant impact in jump-starting change within an organization. Observing their process and hearing from those leading the journey points to some

key values and replicable components for Santa Cruz County's Human Service Department (HSD), as it embarks on a strategic planning process in the next fiscal year. Using structures within the Planning and Evaluation Division and building on the organizational development work that has been occurring, Santa Cruz County HSD can implement a process that impacts change, using the same values of shared leadership and decision-making, strong staff engagement, and a process that is responsive.

Deborah Bresnick, Quality Improvement Manager,
Human Services Department, Santa Cruz County

Marin County Health and Human Services' Strategic Planning Process: Designing the Road Map to Change

DEBORAH BRESNICK

Introduction

"If you don't know where you're going, you might end up someplace else."—Yogi Berra

Without clear direction, the complexities and competing demands of social services can often lead to a loss of focus. The needs of the day-to-day work can disconnect service providers from the outcomes they are trying to achieve. Short-term and long-term goals are not always in alignment. Strategic planning creates a road map that can be used to guide and coordinate efforts being made so that they all point to the same direction and align with program goals. A strategic plan defines where an organization is, where it wants to go, and how to get there. While there are many models for conducting a strategic planning process, they all have four key aspects:

- **Assessment: Where are we now?** Assessment of your current state is the key to knowing where on the road to start.
- **Direction: Where do we want to go?** Determining priorities and aligning with your mission and values keeps the direction focused and reduces roadside distractions.
- **Implementation: How are we going to get there?** Developing clear drivers and milestones keeps you moving forward and provides a roadmap for getting where you want to go.
- **Monitoring: Are we successfully going where we want to go?** Developing metrics that are measurable and a process to review the plan regularly will ensure the plan remains relevant and on track. Things change and sometimes there are unexpected roadblocks, but with a solid

plan, a course correction should be relatively easy to make.

Strategic Planning: Why Now?

"Establishing a strategic direction for an organization is one of the most important things we can do as elected and appointed leaders."

—Carlos Palacios, CAO, Santa Cruz

In June 2017, Santa Cruz County welcomed its new County Administrative Officer (CAO), Carlos Palacios, who immediately embarked on leading the county in developing its first ever county-wide Strategic Plan. This effort has included internal and external engagement through focus groups and surveys of community members and county employees. The results have culminated into a draft version of a clear vision and mission statement, a meaningful set of values, and the identification of five main focus areas. Input gathered from county staff indicated that employees envision a collaborative, compassionate and equitable community. Additionally, input from both county staff and community participants demonstrated a high level of alignment between the two groups in desiring county services that are accountable, innovative, and transparent, as well as partnerships that are collaborative, respectful and trustworthy.

The Board of Supervisors is expected to finalize and approve the draft plan in June 2018, and it is anticipated that beginning next fiscal year, each county department will be tasked with developing their own strategic plan that aligns with the

county-wide plan. As such, having the opportunity to study Marin County's Health and Human Services (HHS) strategic planning process at this point in time can help inform how Santa Cruz County Human Service Department (HSD) conducts its strategic planning, utilizing areas of strength and lessons learned from Marin County HHS as it completes their assessment and direction phases.

While there are differences between Marin County HHS and Santa Cruz County HSD, the way in which Marin County HHS has structured its process and facilitated the development of their plan is replicable. Their structure of teams and level of staff engagement is feasible and can be duplicated by clearly defining roles within the department and effectively using consultants. The key to success is in the leadership methods used, and allowing the process to be flexible, fluid and responsive.

Marin County HHS: How did they do it?

"To make a difference, we have to do things differently."

—Dr. Grant Colfax, Director, Marin County HHS

Until now, Marin County HHS has never had a comprehensive strategic plan. Being a "super agency" that combines health services and human services, there were a few individual plans that had been developed by different programs, but no single, overarching, coordinated plan existed. Understanding this, Dr. Grant Colfax, who joined Marin County HHS as the department's director in April 2015, made it his priority to develop one. "We had a mission statement no one could remember, values somewhere in the organization that no one knew, and metrics that no one could find. We needed a comprehensive, simple approach," he stated, explaining that the various programs within the department needed to understand their commonalities and develop a shared understanding of what they were trying to achieve overall as a department.

Marin HHS has spent a significant amount of time in their process to date, in both their assessment and direction phases, placing a high priority

on a quality process designed to produce a meaningful and useful plan. Dr. Colfax's leadership in this process has been clear. He believes in being transparent and explains that he is "committed to constantly shifting leadership styles to what is needed in the process." At times he is the one "out in front" making sure that they have high-quality strategies and advocating within the bureaucracy when needed. At other times he finds that he "steps back" when he needs to listen to others and "they need to be the ones to figure it out." He is sometimes a "side leader" and sometimes a "behind leader." Dr. Colfax's strong and flexible style is evident throughout the department's strategic planning process. His staff speak highly of him, echoing his words, and the process itself reflects the shared leadership and responsiveness he models. As one staff person stated, "Dr. Grant is actively engaged, but he lets the process create the decisions and recommendations... once the values were developed, he has been ensuring we stay connected and everything aligns."

Mirroring the value Dr. Colfax places on shared leadership and decision-making, Marin County HHS utilized a team approach to conduct its assessment and design phases. Five internal teams were developed: three core planning teams that facilitated the process, as well as two higher-level oversight teams. The three core planning teams were selected to maximize diversity across staffing hierarchy, expertise, and areas of work. Group membership ranged from small to large (10 to 30) according to need, and leads from each team served as participants on other teams, ensuring cross-pollination and ongoing collaboration. The three core planning teams were as follows:

Strategic Planning Team: This team was tasked with providing oversight and working together to design and navigate all the stages of strategic planning for the organization. The team was diverse in terms of hierarchy, expertise and areas of work across the department.

Data Team: This team was tasked with collecting, organizing, and synthesizing data through all stages

of planning. They provided information needed for key decision-making, and ensured decisions were informed by robust and accurate data. They worked closely with all teams, particularly the Strategic Planning Team.

Community Facilitation Team: This team was tasked with designing and facilitating conversations and focus groups within the organization and the community. They collected and coordinated information and feedback on the future direction of the department and communities served. This team was heavily used by the consultants in planning and implementing of focus groups.

Two additional higher-level teams were developed to provide oversight and accountability and were kept small, with a clearly defined purpose. These teams kept the process moving forward and ensured decisions and products continued to align with intended goals and direction.

Executive Committee Small Group: This team monitored progress and made high-level decisions to move the process along. It was comprised of the HHS director, the social services director, the public health officer, the project manager/policy analyst, and the communications coordinator. They met every other week and attendance was a priority. They also met with consultants throughout the internal and external process.

Strategic Plan Finishing Team: This team was responsible for reviewing final drafts of plans, and ensuring they were reflective of the data gathered, which included feedback from focus groups, as well as the mission and philosophy of the process. The team was comprised of representatives from a cross-section of programs and reported to the executive committee small group.

One example of how Marin County HHS has been responsive and flexible in its process is reflected in the decision to develop two plans: an internal plan and a community plan. During the assessment phase, it became clear that there was a significant amount of

internally focused work that needed to occur to give staff the time they needed so they could feel comfortable being honest and candid. Rather than pushing forward with the original timeline, Marin County HHS slowed down and gave the internal process the time and attention it needed to build a safe and inclusive space. While its planning process has taken longer than anticipated, it is viewed as a strength, due to being responsive and flexible to the needs of their staff. As Dr. Colfax reflected, "It's going to take a lot longer than you think. For [the process] to succeed, you need to talk about the cultural issues. It's about changing the culture of the organizations." Marin County HHS course-corrected, bifurcated their process, and began to develop two plans.

Marin County HHS made a conscious decision to use consultants in their assessment and direction phases, for the benefit of using a neutral facilitator for various engagement strategies and their individual expertise. While they began with just one consultant, upon bifurcating the process, the department hired another consulting team to focus on the community plan due to their skills needed to conduct a community evaluation. They retained the original consultant to complete the internal plan due to his skills related to mobilizing staff. Dr. Colfax explained that it was important to work closely with the consultants to ensure that products were "co-created" with staff. As a result, their products clearly reflect both staff and community voices and are likely to be plans in which everyone can see themselves. Using consultants has been critical to conducting very extensive and intensive staff and community engagement, which would have been difficult to achieve using only internal staff that already have full workloads. The use of consultants has helped Marin County HHS keep its process moving forward and reflects the value placed on meaningful engagement and a process that has the flexibility to be responsive.

The results of Marin County HHS's process to date have been the formulation of four strong core values: Support, Trust, Unity and Excellence. These

values were embedded in both plans and are the foundation for everything they develop. The internal plan is designed to focus on creating a healthy, happy, thriving workforce with the idea being that to serve the community well, staff need to feel supported and connected to the work they do. The community plan is designed to focus on what the community needs and how the department can be responsive to that. Each plan has different focus areas, is clearly tied to the core values, and as such, they are interconnected.

Marin County HHS is aspiring to change its culture internally and transform its relationship with the community and that takes time. The plans the department is developing will guide it towards achieving that end, and they believe in their process. Kari Beuerman, Social Services Director, stated “I really believe that this is not going to just sit on the shelf. I really feel we are using it to spearhead culture change.” These plans will serve as the roadmap for Marin County HHS to begin the process of advancing health and wellness equity over the next five years. They are designed to be living documents that may evolve over time and will be reviewed annually.

Marin County HHS also recognizes that the longer it takes, the more challenging it may be to keep staff engaged and hopeful. Therefore, they recommend identifying “easy wins” and demonstrating how progress is being made, even when the strategies are not complete. As one staff person stated, “It is about showing that culture change isn’t just about the big changes; it is about the small everyday things as that eventually lead to the larger progress.” Along those lines, it is evident that the department is already making progress in shifting its internal culture because of the process itself. As Dr. Colfax noted “We’ve started to see some distinct changes in our culture. There is a large degree of hope about where we are headed.” There is an increase in transparency among leadership with front-line staff, as Dr. Colfax explains, and he, himself, goes to as many front-line staff meetings as he can, where he speaks openly and candidly. He also describes changes in their Leadership Council, a quarterly meeting of all managers

and supervisors, which has shifted from being a time for report-outs to being more interactive and participatory. “We are able to start being more responsive instead of reactive. We are much more strategic at the executive and leadership level now.”

Currently, Marin County HHS is in the process of hiring for a newly-created position, Chief Strategy Officer, whose primary job will be to oversee and manage the strategic plan. Next steps for the process include identifying resources and roles for implementation, establishing baseline metrics, prioritizing actions, and establishing timelines for measuring progress. In taking these next steps, the department will maintain its commitment to actively engaging staff in the process and modeling the value of shared leadership and inclusiveness. “Every interaction I have with staff, I talk about the plan and try to give it life,” stated Ms. Beuerman. She discussed creative ways to keep staff connected to the core values, such as including them in all meeting agendas, as well as the responsibility leadership has in helping all staff see themselves in the plan. “[Staff] don’t have to see themselves in every part of the plan, but should see themselves in some part.”

Santa Cruz County HSD: How Should We Do It?

“The idea that the process is more important than the product... that is key. It’s about culture change.”

—Kari Beuerman, Social Services Director,
Marin County HHS

Using lessons learned from Marin County HHS’s process as well as information gathered in Santa Cruz’s county-wide strategic planning process provides us with a glimpse into how Santa Cruz County may want to design and embark on a strategic planning process. Ultimately, the goal is to have a strategic plan that is aligned with the county-wide plan, and supports the priorities of that plan. Therefore, it is recommended that Santa Cruz County HSD design a strategic planning process that places a high value on shared leadership and decision-making, staff engagement, and the use of continuous quality

improvement (CQI) processes as a practice model for change.

Model shared leadership and decision making:

By developing a structure within the planning process that holds management accountable to practicing shared leadership and decision-making, the county can develop the leadership potential of staff. Developing teams that include representatives from various programs and staffing levels promotes collaboration that not only help move the process forward, but will also help in successful implementation over time. Shared leadership and decision-making can help create a workplace that is collaborative, supportive, and transparent.

Maximize staff engagement: Taking the time needed to ensure meaningful and robust staff engagement in the assessment and development phases of the process will help instill a sense of ownership in the plan. Staff need to be able to see themselves in the plan and feel connected to it. Additionally, engaging staff in this way provides professional development opportunities and reflects the value of being a learning organization.

Incorporate CQI as a practice model for change:

Using CQI as a practice model for creating system change and implementing improvement ideas provides a framework that will promote flexibility and responsiveness to what arises during the process, and what may change over time. Building CQI into the process and the plan will encourage accountability and ensure that Santa Cruz County HSD stays on track with the original goals and objectives, as it requires continuous review, assessment, and modifications as needed.

Logistically, Santa Cruz County HSD already has an infrastructure in place, with the design of the Planning and Evaluation Division as well as the organizational development work that has been occurring. This would lend itself well to utilizing the department's leadership and existing resources to develop a strategic planning structure with teams similar to

that of Marin County HHS. While there are many ways to structure teams and develop our process, the following are some recommendations of key roles for Santa Cruz County HSD:

- Primary leadership: Director and/or Deputy Director
- Project coordinator: Planning & Evaluation Director
- Internal engagement: Organizational development staff
- External engagement: Consultant¹

Lastly, through this process, there is an opportunity for Santa Cruz County HSD to build on and expand its definition of leadership and create a leadership-based group, similar to Marin County HHS's Leadership Council. Developing a collaborative and interactive leadership group that expands the common understanding of leadership to be inclusive of managers and supervisors, across all program and non-program divisions, would be an opportunity to create a new resource to help move department-wide initiatives forward and model the value of shared leadership. Not only would this group have an important role in the strategic planning process, but it could also be utilized to move forward other efforts within the department, such as transforming into a trauma-informed system. Establishing and engaging this group of leaders in a new and meaningful way opens many other possibilities.

Conclusion

"If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."

—Benjamin Franklin

While the intention of strategic planning is to create a document that serves as a roadmap for an organization, the process of strategic planning is critical to the success of the plan. Therefore, the recommendations made for Santa Cruz County HSD are tied to the structure of the planning process and key values related to the process. It is critical that

1. If not fiscally feasible, it is recommended that non-program specific staff are used to keep the external process as neutral as possible

the process be afforded the time to be inclusive of staff and community inputs and flexible to be able to address what comes up along the way. Management and staff must be able to look at themselves honestly and critically. Most importantly, the leadership throughout the process must be clear and consistent, guiding the process but not controlling it. If all staff are engaged in this way, and leadership continues to keep all staff connected to the department's values and the goals of strategic planning, then there is a greater chance of developing a plan that will continue to be meaningful, useful and effective.

Acknowledgements

"Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much."—Helen Keller

Thank you to my Marin County contacts, Alison Sexauer and Alice Kinner, for their responsiveness and openness in helping me understand Marin County's process and to Dr. Grant Colfax and Kari Beuerman, for taking the time to talk with me and provide your perspective. Thank you to my Santa Cruz County leadership, Ellen Timberlake, Emily Bali, Sherra Clinton, and Andrew Stewart, for giving me this opportunity, affording me the time to participate, and offering support and input along the way. Thank you to my Santa Cruz County co-BASSC participant, Najeeb Kamil, who made the experience better by having someone with whom to share it. A very special thank you to my staff, Maryanne Rehberg, Arturo Perez, Kathleen Anzalone, Irene Ruiz, Melinda Kehn, Gabriel Moore, and Sandy Zajdel, who showed interest in what I was learning, allowed me to debrief and explore ideas, and, most importantly, give me the opportunity every day to practice what I have learned.

Bibliography

- Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin. (2017). *Marin County HHS Internal Strategic Plan*. Retrieved from <https://wbrowncreative.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HHS-Internal-Strategic-Plan.pdf>
- Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin. (2018, March 1). *Community Facing Strategic Plan*. Leadership Council Meeting Presentation.
- Department of Health and Human Services, County of Marin. (2018). *Strategic Planning Process FAQs*.
- Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. (2018, February 27). *Agenda Item 51: Presentation of Draft vision, mission, values and focus areas of the Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan* [Streaming video]. Retrieved from <http://santacruzcountyca.iqm2.com/Citizens/SplitView.aspx?Mode=Video&MeetingID=1649&MinutesID=1819&FileFormat=pdf&Format=Minutes&MediaFileFormat=mpeg4>
- Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. (2017, September 19). *Strategic Planning Study Session* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Jy-FlptXu4&feature=youtu.be>
- Vision Santa Cruz. (2018, February 27). *Strategic Plan Draft Elements*. Retrieved from <http://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/VisionSantaCruz/Library.aspx>