Napa County Health and Human Service Agency's Community Links Program: Investing in Comprehensive System Navigation for Solano County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many health care systems, patients are burdened daily with figuring out which aspect of the larger health entity will fulfill their needs. This becomes further complicated when individuals have multiple needs that must be met by different agencies within one entity.

During a time when socio-economic conditions have led to more individuals needing assistance from county health systems to help with multiple issues, it is critical for these systems to explore ways to improve the system navigation experience. In 2014, Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) started to pilot a model of service navigation that would have a positive impact on their community and assist more individuals in getting the help they needed. This model, known as Community Links, formerly known as The Hub, continues to be a transformative fixture in the Napa County HSSA client experience.

This case study explores the foundation of Community Links' successes and potential implementation strategies for Solano County. An investigation into the program structure, evolution through the years, and financial impacts will help explain how this model has transformed Napa County HSSA into a seamless health care entity providing positive results for the community.

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Introduction

The goal set forth by Napa County HHSA for Community Links was to create a multi-disciplinary approach, through the creation of a work unit dedicated to providing assessment, navigation, and referral services to clients. As part of the initial development of Community Links, Napa County HHSA conducted a two-week survey of clients in the divisions of Self Sufficiency, Public Health, and Child Welfare Services to assess the overall need of clients utilizing HHSA services, and the effectiveness of asking clients to complete a survey as a tool for gathering this information. The results of the survey identified that approximately three out of four (n=381) respondents needed two or more services from Napa County HHSA. Nearly half of respondents needed four or more services from Napa County HHSA. These data exhibited further proof that Napa County clients were regularly in need of multiple services at any given time from HHSA. Understanding that Napa County HHSA's services are spread over ten divisions, with six providing direct services to individuals and families, supports the need to provide a more simplistic approach to the navigation of services for clients.

In 2014, the Community Links program was launched by Napa County HHSA and the staffing included a Mental Health Supervisor, Mental Health Clinician, and two bilingual Community Aides. The staffing structure has remained consistent and these positions are still at the core of Community Links. In 2016, with funding by the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) for Whole Person Care Pilots, Napa County HHSA gained the ability to expand the housing component of the program by contracting with Abode Services (Abode). Abode brings to the Community Links team four Housing Navigators, four Housing Specialists, and three Housing Service Coordinators. The housing staff work to provide clients with options for temporary and permanent housing, while at the same time providing the client with supportive services.
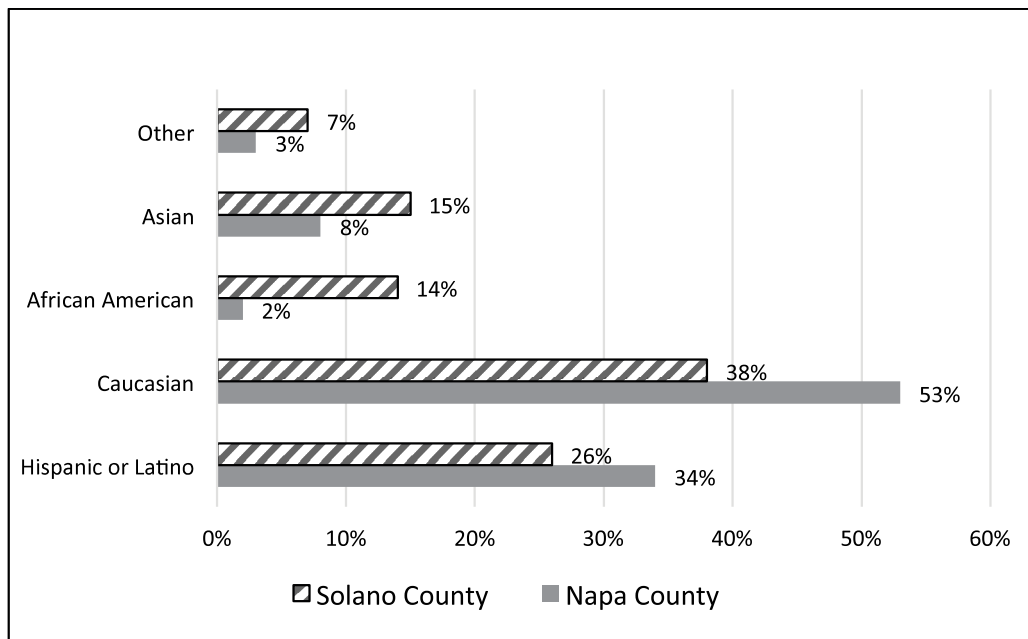
Community Demographics

Napa and Solano Counties are both classified as "medium-sized" counties. Despite this grouping, Solano County has a population three times larger than Napa County. In addition, Solano County has more diversity among race/ethnicity categories than Napa County, as shown in *Figure 1* on next page.

There is not much difference in the median income for Napa and Solano Counties. Solano County has a slightly higher percentage of residents living below the poverty line and who are unemployed (*Table 1*). Due to the larger population in

TABLE 1
2016 County Demographics

	Napa	Solano
Population	142,166	440,207
Median Income	$75,077	$73,900
% Below Poverty	4%	9%
Unemployment Rate	5%	7%

FIGURE 1
Demographics Race/Ethnicity (2016)

Other	7% / 3%
Asian	15% / 8%
African American	14% / 2%
Caucasian	38% / 53%
Hispanic or Latino	26% / 34%

☐ Solano County   ■ Napa County

Solano, there could be more need for the navigation of services.

It is predicted that the population and service needs within Solano County will continue to increase due to the trend of upward migration for families relocating from Bay Area cities like San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley. The cost of living in the Bay Area has forced many families to make the decision to move towards areas that are considered more affordable. The downside as this continues to happen is that the cost of living, including housing costs in Solano County, will continue to rise as well, due to the implications of supply and demand.

The end result will be more families in need, seeking county services to help with basic survival. For many families, this could be the first time seeking county services and the help of system navigation is fundamental. *Figure 2* on next page shows the trend of children living in poverty for Solano County. This is another factor to consider when assessing the need

for navigation services, as there is fear these rates will start increasing again in Solano County.
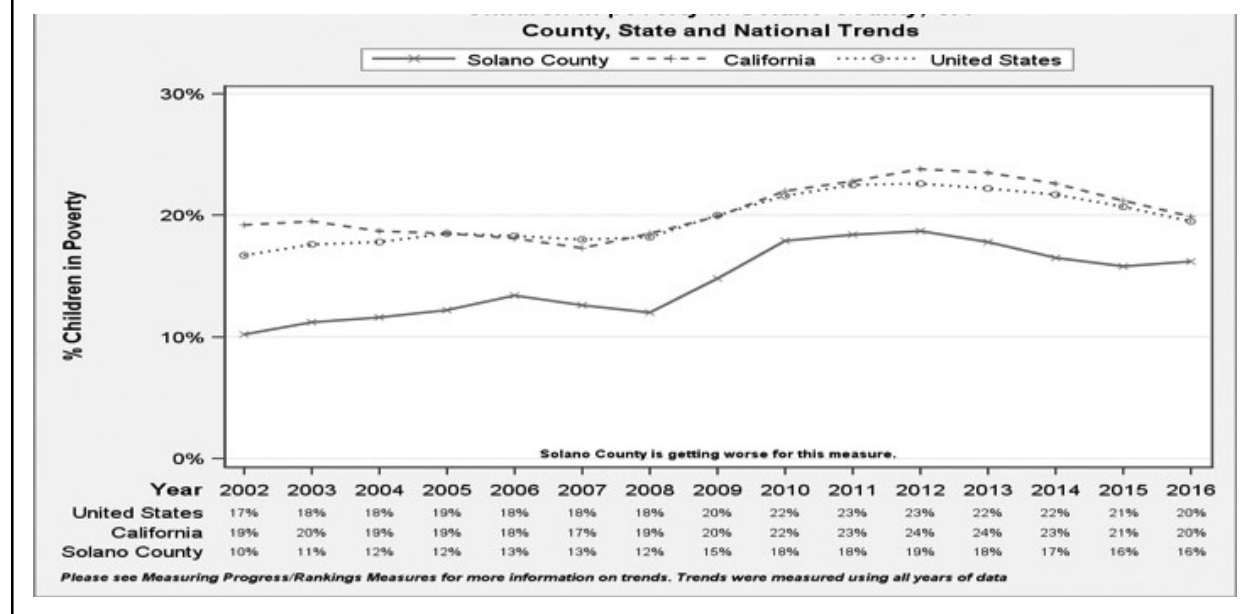
Navigation Services

Community Links helps clients navigate a variety of services. Some of the services include, but are not limited to, education, employment training, physical health, mental health, and child care. After each client completes the initial needs survey and a referral is submitted to the Community Links team, the Community Aides begin working to figure out how best to connect the client to the identified services. A client can be supported by the Community Aides for up to 60 days, if needed. This gives a good window of time to assist clients with high needs on multiple systems that can be very complex.

Outreach Services

Another invaluable component to Community Links is the outreach services provided through co-location at various sites in Napa County. The South

FIGURE 2
Children in Poverty in Solano County, CA

County, State and National Trends

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
United States	17%	18%	18%	19%	18%	18%	18%	20%	22%	23%	23%	22%	22%	21%	20%
California	19%	20%	19%	19%	18%	17%	19%	20%	22%	23%	24%	24%	23%	21%	20%
Solano County	10%	11%	12%	12%	13%	13%	12%	15%	18%	18%	19%	18%	17%	16%	16%

Solano County is getting worse for this measure.

Please see Measuring Progress/Rankings Measures for more information on trends. Trends were measured using all years of data

Napa Shelter, HOPE Center, and Winter Shelter (seasonal), serve as co-locations for further connecting with residents and connecting them to services. Due to having a mental health clinician on staff, there can be brief case management for clients, while they wait for services to get approved. Another outreach connection with Community Links is the collaboration with the McAlister Institute. The McAlister Institute offers inpatient treatment for individuals recovering from alcohol and/or substance abuse addiction. Taking on the philosophy of "meeting people where they are" instead of only dealing with those individuals that make it to the front door of Napa County HHSA, has helped broaden the reach and get more individuals signed up for benefits.

Financial Landscape

Funding for the Napa County Community Links program comes from multiple sources. For the primary functions of Community Links, including staffing for navigation, outreach, and case management services, funding is provided by Intergovernmental Transfer (IGT) Funds. In California, IGT is a method in which local governments, such as counties and public hospitals can transfer funds to DHCS, and in turn, DHCS can help draw down additional funds from the federal government. Those leveraged funds can then be used for Medicaid programs on the local level. For the 2017-2018 Fiscal Year, the Community Links budget for primary functions of the program is $431,529, which is sourced by IGT and supports 3.0 staff full-time equivalent (FTE). Supportive Housing Services by Abode are funded through DHCS and the Whole Person Care pilot funding.

Since Solano County has a population three times the size of Napa County, the financial implications of sustaining a similar model in Solano County could be three times the cost of Napa County's program. This would mean an annual investment of approximately $1.3 million for Solano County, if utilizing the same staffing system. This would also equate to using 9.0 FTE's to staff the project versus the 3.0 FTE used in Napa County.

Recommendations for Solano County

Understanding the Needs of the Community

A baseline to establish the need for navigation services within the Solano County community must be determined by conducting a brief survey for at least one month. The survey should ask questions that assess how many services clients utilize, or would utilize if easier, from Solano County. In addition, the survey can ask questions to help understand barriers to service the community may be facing. It is recommended the survey be available in all client interfacing divisions of Solano County Health and Social Services, which would include Employment and Eligibility, Behavioral Health, Medical Services, and Public Health. It is also important the survey is available in multiple languages and written in a way that clients at varying educational levels feel comfortable with, when responding.

Piloting the Concept

Assuming the survey results determine there is some level of need in the Solano County community for navigation services, the next step would be to develop the framework for entering a pilot phase of the project. Details such as staffing, expenses, and measured outcomes should be identified in the framework. One suggestion to minimize costs of the program would be to re-assign at least one employee from each division to develop the team for piloting of the program. Using this method eliminates the investment of hiring new staff, and utilizes the experience of employees within the organization to help with implementation. The majority of costs for Napa County HHSA for Community Links, outside of the contract with Abode, is for staffing. With the understanding that this program will benefit the navigation of health services in Solano County as a whole, and cut back on the amount of time individual staff are spending on redirecting clients, the concept of reassigning one employee from each division holds its value and worth. Another suggestion is to pilot the program in one city of Solano County first, such as Vallejo, before piloting county-wide. This presents a smaller scale to start and coincides closely with the population of the Napa County program.

Establishing Community Partners

A major part of Napa County's success is due to the engagement with community partners. Currently, Solano County is limited in the number of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that exist for this type of partnership, which serves as a large barrier. Additional work with agencies outside of Solano County to help build capacity for CBOs is recommended. The long-term goal would be for additional client outreach to occur outside of Solano County's brick and mortar facilities and inherit the ability to embrace the "meeting people where they are" concept.

Addressing the Housing Component

Similar to Napa County with housing resources, Solano County is limited in this area within the county. Researching alternatives of agencies outside of Solano County to develop additional housing resources is desirable. It is recommended that Solano investigate the housing component after the basic framework for navigation services has been established. If housing is identified as a major area that clients look towards Solano County Health and Social Services (HSS) to solve as the program evolves, it would establish the need for developing this component of services. With there already being other programs and initiatives within Solano County that have a housing focus, the direction might be to look for opportunities to collaborate, versus developing housing solutions as a stand-alone organization.

Conclusion

The success of the Community Links program in Napa County is connected to the simplistic structure and strategic partnerships in the community. The financial impact to execute Community Links is minimal, when compared to the benefit of increased client care and productivity the program provides. Solano County can manifest a similar outcome with proper surveying of community needs and a phased approach to implementation, which includes

a pilot phase with little to no financial investment by utilizing existing staff. Proper data collection and monitoring should happen consistently to ensure the program goals are happening as intended.

Acknowledgments

References

State of California, Department of Finance, American Community Survey (2016)

University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (2018)

Napa County Health and Human Services Agency