

ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO THE BAY AREA CONSUMER

Elsa Dawson*

INTRODUCTION

Welfare Reform generates many challenges for all involved, in particular TANF recipients. Stricter eligibility requirements, time limits and flexibility for states to design their own programs are some challenges facing not only Social Services agencies, but also the clients. The new program offers current and future TANF recipients opportunities to become self sufficient and use community resources to their advantage. However, without knowing the realities and consequences of the changes, welfare recipients are vulnerable and put the children at risk of losing basic needs. Now more than ever, social services agencies must attempt to educate public assistance recipients. The key to carrying out successfully Welfare Reform, is to educate recipients. Knowing what we expect of them and how much time they have to accomplish the goals established is critical for those who need public assistance to survive. In addition, clients must have knowledge of all available resources, and most crucial, learn how to use the system to their advantage to become self sufficient.

For my internship, I wanted to develop strategies and materials for consumer education centering around the new Welfare Reform expectations. I chose this topic because of my county's welfare reform plan which, in many ways, is unique. My secondary goal was to countervail the many myths and rumors circulating in my service delivery district. One example is the belief that if an undocumented parent applies for assistance for a U.S. born child, the government will take away the child from the parent. They believe the child will be placed in Foster Care.

My mentor, Katherine Armstrong, Executive Director of the Zellerbach Family Fund, referred me to leaders and administrators of successful programs which involved client education. I interviewed Lyn Yaney, Contra Costa County Public Information Officer whose background is advertising and marketing; Maria Bernheinmer and Richard Dana, coordinators of Del Paso Heights Neighborhood Systems in Sacramento; Hope Kamimoto, City and County of San Francisco Social Services Planner, and Mildred Thompson, former Director of the Open Healthy Start Program in Oakland. I used an outline (Attachment I) as the basis for my interviews. Ms. Armstrong also recommended that I read BASSC's case study prepared for Contra Costa County, titled "Developing a Public Information and Community Relations Strategy," one of its components being public education. BASSC's Research Response Team conducted this study at the request of Contra Costa County to examine how they conduct public information in the private and public sector, and how Social Service Department might conduct public information in Contra Costa County.

The persons interviewed have broad experience in public education. Although the programs they administer have different purposes, they gave me valuable information to use in my county to develop a public education campaign for clients. From my research I learned that, a common theme for a public education program is to create activities and materials that provide information and education to the public, in a way that is easy to understand, has a positive

*Elsa Dawson is a District Office Manager in the Income Maintenance Department of San Mateo County Human Services Agency.

message and raises the public's interest. To achieve such a goal a public education program must have the components described below.

COMPONENTS OF A PUBLIC EDUCATION PROGRAM

Planning

The first step in the development of a public education campaign, as in any other project, is to develop a plan. In developing a plan one must think of themes, schedules and messages to get across. One critical element is evaluating how- the message is sent, so that the public easily understands it and it is meaningful for the recipients. The implementation plan must be methodical, realistic and continuous.

Message

All public education campaigns must have a message. In turn, this message must be viewed as the campaign. The first step in developing the message is to decide who is the audience who will see or receive the message. Social Services Agencies must define and write the message to the audience so that it is short and uses simple language. In other words, the message must be written for the clients, not for Social Services professionals. Personalizing the message adds meaning to the campaign. One way to test this is by analyzing media ads that attract the sender's attention and substituting the information we want to give in the ad. Another way to personalize a message is by ranking what points we want to put across and then selecting three to four areas to focus on. Building a successful campaign around too many topics is difficult and it is confusing for the audience. Lynn Yaney, recommends seeing the message as having " a shotgun impact instead of the impact of a rifle." Mildred Thompson perceives that involving client in the design of the message is important. Clients should be involved in the process to give their input about what do they want to see, and what messages catch their attention.

Continuity

Continuity is essential in all facets of a public education campaign. The same idea must be carried through the entire campaign. An example of a successful campaign is Contra Costa County's Foster Parent campaign. All materials used in the campaign had the same format, the same message, and the same visuals such as logos and colors. The final products reflected the same attitude and this made it easy for the public to identify the theme. For example, a group picture of children can be used in a poster followed by individual children featured in individual posters and bookmarks. (Attachments II, III, and IV)

Visuals must represent the community at large. Contra Costa County used employees and their families as models for the Social Service Department Annual Performance Report to the Board of Supervisors. This report provides information on the Department, besides program descriptions, people served, annual performance indicators and accomplishments for fiscal year 1995-1996. The use of photographs depicting the county population brings a human angle to literal information and portrays the population served. Any public education campaign must be

targeted to the entire population served, including those with special needs and the immigrant population.

Delivering the Message

Communicating the message is the most critical component of any public education campaign. To communicate the message Social Services agencies must get beyond the Social Service wall and review all means of communication. We must examine how we personally get information and how we use the information we get. Standard means of communications are radio, TV, and newspapers. We can use the media to highlight successful programs and feature successful clients. Local cable stations can also profile successful clients and programs and provide a forum for Social Services agencies to promote programs and resources available to TANF recipients.

Other very useful and efficient public education tools are billboards and bus shelters. Both Contra Costa County and Oakland's Open Healthy Start Program have advertised programs in billboards and/or bus shelters and had great results. For example, Contra Costa County received 75 phone calls in the five days following the placement of posters in bus shelters advertising the Foster Parent program. The Open Healthy Start Program also used bus shelters to promote the program. Those involved have assessed the positive impacts of the advertisement by the lack of graffiti, unlike other ads in bus shelters. Contra Costa County's plan spaced the distribution of campaign materials over time. The bus shelter posters went up in January in conjunction with media information. The billboard advertisement followed in March 1997 in conjunction with the bookmarks made available at the libraries.

A widespread way of delivering information to the public is via focus groups. Focus groups can serve two functions: information sharing and information gathering. Public forums, like focus groups, are excellent mediums of communication. Information can be shared with the public and questions and concerns can be answered. In planning for Welfare Reform, San Francisco County used focus groups as a forum to ask clients what support, training and services they needed to become self sufficient. A private firm, hired for this purpose, conducted these groups. San Francisco County saw the private firm as an uninvolved party who had nothing to gain or lose by conducting and evaluating the results of the focus groups. Focus groups are also effective when the goal is to generate client involvement. Focus groups should be conducted within the neighborhoods and in conveniently located areas. Since the challenge is to get clients involved, we should give clients "carrots" to encourage participation. Usual incentives are food, such as donuts and coffee, child care or money. Paying clients for the time spent participating legitimizes their roles and lets them know they are making a significant contribution to the process. Focus groups can be used to get client input on public education campaign materials prior to putting them to use.

With the arrival of technology, we are seeing more video tapes used to educate the public. For some, this is a preferable way of obtaining information and in some situations this method can be more effective than paper. One example of using videos to educate clients is the "Work Pays" video distributed by the SDSS. Personally, I consider this an excellent video which meets the elements required to successfully deliver educational information to TANF applicants and recipients.

However, we should not underestimate the use of traditional informational materials such as flyers, brochures and newsletters. Brochures, for example, are important when conducting focus groups. The information disseminated in the focus groups can be condensed in a brochure and can be given to the participants to read later. If used as part of the campaign, traditional informational materials can be of great value and can deliver the message on an ongoing basis.

The last, but not least, resources are Social Services staffs. Staff can be a valuable resource in the communication process. Properly trained staff, who are in daily contact with clients, who know clients' needs, can effectively express the message face to face and readily answer clients' questions. When trying to involve clients in a project, we must keep in mind that they may be reluctant to participate. We must develop a trusting environment to calm their scepticism. Clients must trust the message giver or the message loses its effect. One way to accomplish this is to work cooperatively with community services agencies. since clients see them as more of an ally, and involve them in the public education efforts.

Budget

A public education campaign should be designed as if money is no object. It is difficult for us to fathom, as Social Services employees, the development of a project or program without an initial budget. However, money should not drive the campaign. Once the ideal public information campaign is designed, we need to evaluate what we can and cannot do, how we can afford it. To defray financial costs, Social Services agencies can create partnerships with community agencies that have the same goal and want to achieve the same outcomes and share the costs of the campaign. Advertising costs can be spread out, but not so thin that the campaign is ineffective. Social Services agencies should seek and use internal and external resources, such as photographers and printers who are willing to donate their time or reduce their fees. Additionally, agencies should not only seek monetary donations but also advertising space, such as billboards and bus shelters spaces. Because budget is always an uppermost concern for all agency administrators, we must think of ways to educate the public at little to no cost to the agency. One way to deliver the message, at a small cost, is to set up a booth or table at community fairs and festivals, and have written educational materials available to the public. Social Services agencies should not make money the driving force for creating and implementing a public education campaign.

Evaluation

Evaluating the effects of a public education campaign is probably the most difficult, and maybe even frustrating, component of the process because the campaign results are not readily seen. One can say that the Contra Costa County's Foster Parent campaign results. 75 phone calls within the first five days of the campaign, was successful. However, this is a short term success. A long term outcome would be a significant increase in the number of Foster Parents. It will take a longer period to evaluate the success of the campaign. This drawback should not stop Social Services agencies from starting a public relation campaign. Social Services agencies should not panic if the effectiveness of the campaign cannot be immediately measured. If the campaign does

not produce the desired results, it needs to be revisited and looked at for a possible change in image.

LESSONS LEARNED

A public education campaign can be successfully be carried out by doing the following:

- Have a written plan which includes themes and schedules.
- Have a mission - state it in simple terms.
- Have a short and simple message geared toward the audience.
- Involve clients in the planning process as means of getting their input and gaining their trust
- Carry the same theme throughout all facets of the campaign.
- Review all means of communication and use as many as possible.
- Create partnerships with community services organization and solicit their assistance in promoting the campaign.
- Don't let money stifle the design of the campaign.
- Do not panic if the effectiveness of the campaign cannot be immediately measured.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SAN MATEO COUNTY

San Mateo County's Human Services Agency (HSA) has made a commitment to deliver collaborative services which promote self sufficiency. The SUCCESS (Shared Understanding to Change the Community to Enable Self Sufficiency) Service Delivery Model document is proof of this commitment. The project, a five-year effort, brings together important principles of service delivery, such as managed care, multi- disciplinary case management, personal responsibility, self-sufficiency and more efficient use of resources. A crucial component of this project is to ensure that all services support families working toward self sufficiency. The key to successfully achieving our goal is to educate clients, not only on services and resources available, but also on how they can better use the system to attain the goal. Some ideas discussed in this

document have been implemented by HSA. Focus groups were the vehicles initially used to gather input for the development of a Welfare Reform plan. Currently, HSA is conducting public forums in different parts of the county to discuss Welfare Reform issues and their impacts on the needy population. However, our efforts cannot stop here and we must continue to advocate for clients, now more than ever. My recommendations to HSA to continue the public education endeavors are as follows:

- Use the information presented in this document as the basis for a public education campaign.
- Assign a staff to the function of public education campaign coordinator.
 - Convene a workgroup, consisting of representatives from the four divisions to work with the public education coordinator
 - Develop a detailed plan with schedules and time lines to have the campaign in place by 1/1/98.
 - Use the Audience Grid for Clients (Attachment V) as a guide for conveying the message.

- Develop a message centering around self sufficiency. For example:"When you come to our work center we will give you the key to SUCCESS, and here is how . . .
 - Conduct focus groups with clients and community service organization to get their input and ideas about what do they want to see in a campaign.
 - Test campaign materials on clients prior to final printing and distribution.
- Allocate funds in the SUCCESS budget to start a public education campaign
 - Determine desired outcomes and develop an evaluation tool for measurement.

My internship offered me the opportunity to go beyond the Social Services world. I received valuable information from those I interviewed. This information has broadened my horizons and can be of great use for my agency. I firmly believe that by creating and carrying out a public education program we can help clients by making them aware of the Welfare Reform changes. A public education program can also be a way to advocate for those mainly affected by Welfare Reform, the children. We can create a successful public education campaign that will bring the clients face to face with the realities and consequences of the changes, will make them less vulnerable and will keep children from losing basic needs.

Figure 1: Executive Development Program Internship

Internship Topic: Develop a plan with materials and strategies for consumer information around the new expectations of Welfare Reform.

1. Program Description
2. Your role in the program
3. Objectives/Purpose
4. Population served
5. Outcomes. Have they been achieved?
6. Community involvement? How?
7. Program Structure
8. Outreach efforts - what worked/didn't work
9. Materials? Le.; pamphlets, posters, etc.
10. Methods used to educate the consumers such as public forms, surveys, etc.
11. Can the success of the outreach efforts/information disseminated be treasured? How?

12. Consumer education costs.
13. Other ideas/ suggestions as to how to go about designing and implementing a consumer education program

Figure 2

Kids like these need families like yours.

*Adopt a child or
be a foster parent.*

Call
313-7788

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT
Social Service Department



Figure 3

Kids like Maria need families.



*Interested in
Adoption or
becoming a
Foster Parent?*

Call 313-7788

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY
Social Service Department

Figure 5

Figure 4



Kids like
Maria
need
families.

*Interested in
Adoption or
becoming a
Foster Parent?*

Call

313-7788

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY
SOCIAL
SERVICE
DEPARTMENT

Audience	Messages	Vehicles
<p data-bbox="198 268 344 300">CLIENTS</p> <p data-bbox="198 310 284 342">Goals</p> <ul data-bbox="198 352 576 783" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="198 352 576 457">• Learn to appropriately access the system and to understand the programs. <li data-bbox="198 489 576 594">• Help clients become independent from the system <li data-bbox="198 636 576 783">• Create a relationship with SSD and community-based organizations that is non-adversarial. 	<ul data-bbox="600 352 966 741" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="600 352 966 415">• "Here is what we have; here is how to use it." <li data-bbox="600 457 966 520">• "We provide only temporary assistance." <li data-bbox="600 562 966 625">• "Work with us, we are in this together." <li data-bbox="600 667 966 741">• "We respect you, we value diversity." 	<ul data-bbox="987 352 1364 1549" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="987 352 1364 489">• Media (attract appropriate clientele, highlight successful programs) <li data-bbox="987 531 1364 888">• Printed collateral: flyers, pamphlets, posters which are appropriately distributed (posted, given to referral sources at community-based organizations, targeted to appropriate educational level and language and ethnicity) <li data-bbox="987 930 1364 993">• CCTV-looped videos in waiting rooms <li data-bbox="987 1014 1364 1140">• Sponsor recreational activities as the draw and provide information on-site <li data-bbox="987 1161 1364 1329">• Invite clients to attend special events in which successful clients are featured (e.g. graduation ceremonies) <li data-bbox="987 1350 1364 1549">• Caseworkers are conduits for information. They can help explain the system, and print and electronic communications can help them do it.