

IMPLEMENTING CHANGE FROM A WELFARE-BASE TO AN EMPLOYMENT-FOCUSED PROGRAM IN SOLANO COUNTY

John Tran*

INTRODUCTION

The passage of the federal Welfare reform legislation in August 1996, signaled a fundamental shift in the nature of public assistance in the United States. Federal Welfare reform established work as the reciprocal obligation for able-bodied recipients of public assistance, and redefined cash assistance as time-limited support for needy families. This change will require the redefinition of programs and services available at the local level, revised program goals and strategies as well as new roles for staff who administer these programs and individuals who participate in them.

My internship at the Solano County Health and Social Services Department (H&SSD) provided me the opportunity to examine strategies used by the Department to implement the change from a welfarebase to an employment-focused program in response to changes at state and federal levels. Before I began the task of examining the implementation of change, I had the opportunity to discuss the topic with the Director of the Health & Social Services Department. I talked to his staff, attended community planning meetings on employment, self-sufficiency and visited their One-Stop Center. I also spent time reviewing the Department's Employment Plan.

BACKGROUND

In anticipation of changes at the state and federal levels and in response to widespread recognition at the county level that the system that serves low-

income children, families and individuals could be considerably strengthened, Solano County embarked on an intensive effort to redesign the Health and Social Services Department's Employment Program. The guiding principle of the Mission Statement of the Solano County Health and Social Services Department's Employment Services is to assist unemployed and underemployed individuals in maximizing their potential to become independent citizens. Based on these principles the following goals were developed:

- Move families and individuals from welfare to work.
- Increase earned incomes of Solano County families.
- Provide supportive transition services such as child care, cash aid, access to nutritional and health assistance, and increase access to other services and resources to those in need as they work toward economic self-sufficiency.
- Increase service efficiency and job-seeker, employer and staff satisfaction.
- Develop activities that will promote the idea of "work-first" in agencies which serve low-income people and insure that this is a consistent message through Solano County.
- Coordinate client self-sufficiency efforts throughout agencies which serve low income people in Solano County.

*John Tran is a Program Manager for Refugee Employment Services at the Alameda County Social Services Agency.

The H&SS Department also valued and recognized its responsibility by adopting the following Dean Curbs and Associates (Dean Curtis and Associates, Inc., a national consulting company specializing in Welfare Reform) five principles of self-sufficiency:

- Urgency: "now" is the time to become self sufficient..
- Ownership: encouragement to take control of their lives and to make their own decisions
- Learn-by-doing: *The fastest way* of learning is by doing.
- Life-long learning: Learning is a process, not a product. Life is a continual learning experience and a willingness to learn is a key to success.
- Motivation: Enhance self-esteem at every stage of the program.

In the spring of 1994, H&SSD staff began to Plan A redesign of the Employment program in anticipation of change. As a result of this planning process, in January 1995, the Department began utilizing the Dean Curtis and Associates' job search, job club models to assist clients to become self-sufficient by using the following strategies:

CHANGING CULTURE

Changing vision of welfare programs and systems to a focus on employment as the primary tool for lowincome families to care for themselves is a complex challenge for the Health and Social Services Department. It requires partnership among employment services providers, education and training institutions, organizations which provide a variety of resources for families and agencies that provide economic assistance. It also requires collaboration among service providers in other areas, including housing, transportation, substance abuse services, and others. Many elements of this agenda are already in place in various stages of maturity. The Department's plan is to build on these valuable foundation.

Organizational Culture Change

Organizational change training efforts were focused on communicating the vision to staff and community. Last summer, H&SSD began a series of Client Self-Sufficiency training for AFDC staff. In addition to training all of its staff, the Department has begun presenting Client Self-Sufficiency Training and information sessions for the community partners, such as Board of Directors of the Regional Occupation Program, community-based organizations, Private Industry Councils and service providers. The regular Department newsletter is utilized to inform and educate staff about welfare reforms and changes within the Department.

The Department focused on staff discussion and clients' surveys to get feedback. Program evaluation was emphasized. According to program staff, their employment program was successful because of staff commitment, positive attitude, new ways to do business and importantly - the support from the Director.

Client Lobbies

The H&SS Department's mission is to transform the look, feel, and function of the lobby and to present an informative, fast moving, positive atmosphere for both clients and staff so as to reflect its ultimate goal, namely, to motivate clients to become self-sufficient. To accomplish this, the Department has been transforming the lobbies from waiting room to Employment Resources Centers by completion of the following:

- Post colorful, motivational banners throughout the center.
- Continuously show employment focused videos in all public assistance lobbies to provide clients with valuable job-seeking information.
- The Department is implementing a Story Time Corner for job seekers' children, staffed by members of the Solano County volunteer Center to allow parents to focus on resources available within the center (in progress).
- Design information boards for employment related information to meet challenges of employment, child care, transportation, job hotlines, job leads, etc. (in progress).
- EDD hook up to allow clients to access job information (in progress).

Client Self-Sufficiency Committee

The main purpose of this committee is to promote the vision of client self-sufficiency throughout the H&SSD and the community by involving employer groups, current and former clients, local educational and training institutions, various innovative community-based organizations and government agencies in program design and implementation.

AFDC client "work pay" Workshops are held to promote the benefit of work and to enhance clients' knowledge of budgeting on income in AFDC and how to correctly complete an Income Report, information on support programs such as Supplemental Child Care, California Alternative Assistance Program, and Reduced Income Supplements.

Beginning December 1996, the clients' self-sufficiency monthly letter "Bridges" was sent out to clients with checks, and to Department manager and supervisory staff. A Client Resource guide, "Stepping into Success," which is currently given out to clients at "work pay" workshops will be available in employment resource centers.

One-Stop Career Center

The philosophy of a One Stop Career Center is that "the door is always open." It's like a huge mall with a complete range of services offered and each person, regardless of skill level, can make a choice. Its self directed and user-friendly approaches are to promote customers (clients & employers) satisfaction. Recently, through a partnership of the Private Industry Council, a Solano County office of Education, the Employment Development Department and Health & Social Services Department, this consortium has successfully applied for, and was granted a One-Stop Career Center Grant. This group was committed to incorporating and enhancing its current successful employment activities into the plan, rather attempting to reinvent its current success. Through co-location, the coalition envisions two One-Stop Career Centers for Solano County. The first center was scheduled to open in the south of the county in early April 1997 and the other one in the south of the county is scheduled for the end of this year.

FRONT DOOR ASSESSMENT

In addition to the employment related videos which are shown in all public assistance lobbies to stress the importance of employment first, the Department has engaged in developing a network of resources, with an emphasis on employment services to be available to help low income families meet their challenges of employment.

- The Department is developing a process to identify employment needs of applicants. A diversion plan will be available for eligible applicants who choose to forfeit their public assistance.
- Early diagnosis and intervention were considered vital for the success of the program. A task force was set up to develop a process to quickly identify clients with substance abuse and mental health issues severe enough to create a major challenge to employment.

EMPLOYMENT DEVELOPMENT

Up-front Job Clubs

H&SSD's Employment Services's is the Job Club. This is the Dean Curtis and Associates Model which was developed to specifically target the needs of people currently receiving public assistance in order to build their self-esteem and to achieve self-sufficiency. This is a four-week workshop in which participants learn money management, decision making, problem-solving, resume development, job search and interview skills and how to dress for success for less. Clients who come to an employment service program (GAIN, GA) are first sent to Job Club.

Pre-Employment Preparation Program (PREP)

PREP is a non-salaried work experience component of GAIN. It is designed to assist GAIN participants in obtaining valuable work experience and developing a current job related skills necessary to successfully find and keep employment.

Community Employment Task Force (CET)

Last fall, the client Self-Sufficiency Committee identified the need for countywide job development coordination. As a result, the Community Employment Task Force was developed to collaborate in all job development activities.

Solano Community Employment Summit

The Solano County Board of Supervisors, PIC Board and community members were collaborating in the development of the summit agenda. The purpose of this summit was to deliver the message that welfare reform is here and that it is a community challenge and all partners must participate in order to achieve success for Solano residents. This summit took place in early April 1997. It is one of many steps involved in community partnership development and economic development.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT (POST EMPLOYMENT SERVICES)

H&SSD's Employment Services has been successful in helping clients become employed. Currently, 95% of job seekers receiving employment services through Self-Sufficiency Centers successfully find employment, and 82% are still employed after six months. The successful rate was very impressive.

It should be noted that, presently, H&SSD is serving only ten percent (10%) of the County's AFDC population of 9,000. The following questions need to be examined further: "Will the Department be successful once it embarks on serving a larger percentage of this population?", "What are the costs related to the employment activities?", and "Are those who become employed considered "cream of the crop" or the "hard to serve" population?"

Another factor which contributed to the success of the employment-focused program that was not mentioned is economic development. This component needs to be established and it must have the involvement of public agencies and private enterprises. Its role is to create jobs. Since our economy is based on supply and demand, we can't just create a demand side and neglect the supply side. Our clients will not be able to get employed if jobs are not available. This issue needs to be explored further.

To foster a job retention rate and promote job progression, and career ladders, H&SSD has developed and is implementing the Solano County Partnership Retention Interventions During Employment (PRIDE) Program. Case manager/social workers were assigned to work with employed participants. Their main responsibility is to help ensure job retention and encourage participants to continue to seek additional and/or promotional employment opportunities with the final goal of clients achieving economic self-sufficiency. The following activities are provided under the PRIDE Program:

- Increased individual sessions to identify employment progress challenges.
- Provide workshops on money management, careers planning, conflict resolution, delegation etc.
- Facilitate client support groups.
- Collaboration with community college, adult schools, to develop an array of short-term training/education programs that will be available during non-traditional hours.

IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Solano County has embarked on an innovative journey to public service reform. Their change in their service delivery system produced impressive results. Will H&SSD continue to be successful once it starts serving larger numbers of clients? This cannot be completely answered until H&SSD expands its services capacity and evaluates the results of that expansion. Can this model be applied in Alameda County which has some larger AFDC cases (40,000 cases versus 9,000 cases in Solano County) and a more diversified population (urban versus a rural county)? Based on my two-week internship in Solano County, I feel that Alameda can be successful in utilizing the Solano's Model. Of course, some modification is needed to meet local conditions.

The success of Solano County H&SSD's Self sufficiency workshops can be duplicated or improved in Alameda County. About a year ago, Alameda County Social Service Agency & Employment and Community Services Department contracted with Dean Curtis and Associates to implement Job Search Workshops for AFDC clients. Based on the success of our current program and that of Solano County, we need to expand these activities throughout the SSA. Since we are in a planning stage, this is a good opportunity for our agency to look at strategies utilized in Solano County and adopt appropriate activities for Alameda County.

The post employment services, up-front job clubs and method of identifying substance abuse and mental health are relatively new concepts. We should adopt and use them in Alameda County because they are vital for the success of our employment program. We not only help clients become employed but we also have to prepare them beyond the job entry level, in order for them to be truly self-sufficient (job upgrading, job promotion and career ladders).