

SANTA CLARA COUNTY'S KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR LEARNING DISABLED CALWORKS PARTICIPANTS

Jeanne Zarka*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

As part of state welfare-to-work requirements, beginning in 2002, county welfare departments were required to screen CalWORKs participants for learning disabilities (LD), and to provide those that screen positive with opportunities for more comprehensive assessment and, if needed, accommodations for work activities. The intent of the state was to level the playing field for learning disabled CalWORKs participants by providing accommodations that could help them succeed in the welfare-to-work program.

San Francisco Department of Human Services (DHS) designed and implemented a process to meet state LD requirements and deadlines for implementation; however, most participants who screened positive and were assessed for LD, actually were diagnosed as low functioning with cognitive impairments.

Meanwhile, the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency was able to respond to state requirements by adapting existing services that had been designed specifically to meet the learning needs of individuals with learning challenges.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The result is Santa Clara County's Keys to Success (KtS) Program, a comprehensive model that combines LD assessment and accommodations with

coping strategies, learning skills practice, and self-advocacy training.

Keys to Success has proven its effectiveness in

- Providing individualized assessment results, explanations, and plans for next steps for all participants who complete LD assessment—whether diagnosed as learning disabled or low functioning; and
- Assisting participants to gain self-knowledge about their learning styles, challenges, and coping strategies, and to become more confident and able to advocate for themselves and their children.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The Keys to Success Program has demonstrated more positive outcomes for participants that improve the ability of learning disabled and low functioning participants to succeed in personal and vocational activities, including:

- Increased participant understanding of how their learning strengths and weaknesses relate to their vocational interests and aptitudes;
- Information, resources, and contacts to help resolve problems that may get in the way of making progress in welfare-to-work;
- Practice at utilizing learning strategies and coping skills, and setting goals and achieving them;
- A support network of peers to provide encouragement to stay on track toward achieving personal and professional goals.

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RECOMMENDATION

I recommend that San Francisco consider adapting the Keys to Success model, by re-targeting existing resources, to enhance the quality and effectiveness of its LD evaluation and accommodation process, and to increase positive outcomes for learning disabled and low functioning CalWORKs participants.

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BACKGROUND

In spring of 2002, county welfare departments received notice from the state that they would be required to begin screening CalWORKs participants for learning disabilities (LD). Counties were instructed to begin identifying clients with LD no later than September 2002, using a validated screening instrument. CalWORKs participants who screened positive for potential LD, had to be offered the opportunity for formal evaluation by qualified professionals, and, if diagnosed with LD, had to be provided with a copy of the results and appropriate accommodations for welfare-to-work activities.

The first year results of San Francisco Department of Human Services (DHS) strategy to implement State LD requirements have been mixed. A lot of effort has been expended to screen and evaluate participants for LD, yet few actually have been diagnosed as learning disabled; most were assessed as low functioning with cognitive impairments. The dilemma for the county is how to make the most effective use of the LD assessment process to assist both learning disabled and low functioning CalWORKs participants to optimize their opportunities to succeed in welfare-to-work.

Santa Clara County's Keys to Success (KtS) program was recommended to me as an effective and comprehensive program designed to meet the needs of participants with learning challenges. KtS differs from San Francisco's LD project in two significant ways:

- KtS provides individualized assessment results, learning strategies, and plans for next steps to all participants who complete LD assessment, whether they are diagnosed as learning disabled or low functioning; and
- KtS provides training in learning styles, compensatory skills, and self-advocacy.

I gathered information for this report from

- meetings and interviews with county and program management and staff;
- personal observation and hands-on engagement with participants in two days of a 10-day classroom training session;
- attendance at a CalWORKs orientation and client intake session to observe how the LD screen and KtS program are described to potential participants;
- review of LD employment and accommodation plans, program curriculum, monitoring reports, and other materials.

KEYS TO SUCCESS MODEL

Keys to Success, a partnership between the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA) and San Jose/Evergreen Community College, is a two-week diagnostic program for CalWORKs participants that integrates LD assessment with learning needs and self-advocacy instruction.

Facets of the program already existed in the county prior to state LD requirements. As a result, SSA was able to build on existing services and relationships with learning specialists to incorporate best practices into a program specifically designed to

meet the needs of individuals with learning challenges.

SSA contracted with a highly experienced learning disabilities consultant to develop the KtS curriculum and to train program staff, and collaborated with the community college district, using their contract education process, to hire professionals to conduct and interpret learning assessments, and to facilitate the classroom training component. The result is a program that delivers quality assessment and learning skills training services to learning disabled and low functioning welfare-to-work participants to help them succeed in educational and vocational endeavors.

The goals of KtS are that each program client will:

- Obtain a formal and informal evaluation;
- Gain self-knowledge;
- Become more confident and self-advocating.

Similar to San Francisco's process, and in accordance with State requirements, CalWORKs participants who receive a score of 12 or above on the validated LD screening instrument, are referred by SSA staff for voluntary participation in KtS.

Professionals, using standardized LD assessment instruments that measure aptitudes, achievement, and information processing, test participants for LD. They also engage participants in one-on-one learning needs counseling, and vocational interest assessment, if needed.

In the classroom, by means of motivational workshops and interactive exercises, participants identify their learning styles, and learn to use their strengths to compensate for weaker areas, in relation to education, vocational training, and employment.

Diagnostic testing and evaluation spans a period of 8-9 hours in 2-3 sessions. The classroom component extends over 10 days, M-F, from 9:00AM-4:00PM.

According to the consultant, the KtS workshop curriculum "fills in gaps of social learning," provides coping strategies to improve the ability to learn, and incorporates life skill development, such as goal-setting and budgeting, and vocational interest exploration. Both the consultant and learning specialist described these skills as critical to social development and vocational success for persons with learning challenges.

The KtS program also includes outside presentations and resource materials on issues of particular concern to CalWORKs participants with learning challenges. During my classroom visit, for example, a practical workshop on criminal record expungement received a high degree of interest and very favorable reviews from participants. (A disproportionately high percentage of persons in the criminal justice system have learning disabilities or other cognitive impairments.)

At the end of the session, all KtS participants, whether or not they have an LD, receive:

- An Employment Plan or LD Employment Plan;
- A personalized binder with test results, suggested compensatory strategies, and workshop and resource information;
- A written evaluation which outlines the test results, strengths and weaknesses of the client and accommodations needed;
- Ongoing support from Keys to Success that includes periodic workshops and check-up on progress.

SSA staff receives a copy of the Employment Plan or Learning Disability Employment Plan prepared by professional KtS staff, indicating recommended activities and formal assessment data. The plans that I reviewed included extensive testing results, understandable explanations, and practical suggestions for academic and work-related accommodations and self-help.

PROGRAM RESULTS

KtS monthly reports for the five month period August -December 2003 indicate:

Referrals	289
Completions	108 (37% of referrals)
LD Certification	77 (71% of completions (Other non-LD certified participants have been found to be "low functioning."))

Reasons cited by KtS for non-completion include: no-show following referral (35%); other needs identified, such as eyeglasses, hearing aids, or medication (11%); attendance (7 %); and exemption (4%).

Program staff indicate that they routinely over-book classes to compensate for the no-show rate. However, it appears that once participants begin the program, most successfully complete it.

KtS conducted satisfaction surveys from program participants and referring staff following eight two-week sessions. The summary report indicates that individual client comments were positive in nature with respect to how the program served clients and whether it was helpful. Most staff who responded to questions concerning written client plans rated the

reports as "good" or "excellent" with respect to being clear, realistic, and easily implemented.

The SSA Program Manager indicated that most KtS graduates move on to community college for further education and training prior to job search. A comprehensive survey of all program graduates is planned for Fall 2004 to determine status and whether the program has continued to be helpful to participants six months beyond completion.

OTHER POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Since most KtS graduates have moved into education plans as their next welfare-to-work activity, it is not possible at this time to assess their performance in job search and employment in comparison with persons who declined to enroll in KtS.

However, there are other positive outcomes for KtS graduates that boost opportunities for future vocational success:

- Increase of self-knowledge and understanding of vocational interests and aptitudes;
- Acquisition of self-help skills to maximize strengths and compensate for weaknesses in work situations;
- Acquisition of skills to assist their children with homework, and to advocate within the school system for their children who may have learning challenges (learning disabilities often are inherited.)
- Increased familiarity with resources and contacts to help problem-solve issues that may get in the way of working, such as record expungement, domestic violence, transportation benefits and options for back-up child care.

- A support network of peers to provide encouragement and practical advice to keep on track to achieve personal and vocational goals established during the KtS session.

KtS also provides invaluable support for county staff, including:

- Professional staff observations of participants' learning styles, interpersonal skills, and behavior over a two-week period, that serves as a kind of "situational assessment" of participant readiness for further education, training, and/or employment; and
- Professional assistance to develop appropriate next steps and welfare-to-work plans tailored to SSA clients' particular learning and vocational needs and interests.

BEST PRACTICES

An outstanding feature of the KtS program is the level of expertise of the learning specialists who administer LD assessments and interpret results, and conduct classroom training. The significant private sector experience of key program staff also benefits program participants on the welfare-to-work track. The resulting employment plan recommendations include education and work accommodations tailored to the vocational interests and aptitudes of the individual and relevant to the workplace.

The KtS curriculum offers participants frequent opportunities to practice newly acquired skills to reinforce learning and to build participants' confidence to take on more responsibility for their own learning and success in the future.

I was particularly impressed by the increased level of confidence demonstrated by program graduates

at the end of 10-day classroom training. Armed with self-knowledge about their learning styles, strengths, challenges, vocational interests, and experience in using strategies to maximize abilities, graduates expressed confidence and willingness to take the next steps toward their self-sufficiency goals.

CHALLENGES

SSA staff indicates that they have had to enroll about twice the number of participants for each KtS session to achieve the desired cohort group of 12-15 due to no-shows and dropouts.

The SSA Program Manager reports that a major difficulty has been identifying community-based organizations that can provide effective job training and placement services for CalWORKs participants with special needs. In response, SSA recently designed a customized training program, and reallocated CalWORKs incentive funds to contract with Mission College for short-term vocational training in demand occupations. The training would include individualized counseling, tutoring, and hands-on training at employer sites in career ladder occupations: landscape maintenance, environmental health technician, home care aid, and hospitality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SAN FRANCISCO

DHS must decide whether it wants to go beyond state LD requirements for assessment services and accommodations plans, either to enhance services for participants diagnosed with LD, and/or to extend services to those diagnosed as low functioning. The state may not have anticipated that so many CalWORKs participants who screened positive for LD would be assessed as low functioning. However, now that DHS and other counties have

obtained such information through assessment, one may take the position that counties have an affirmative responsibility to advocate or provide for a parallel process for accommodations for low functioning participants.

DHS is poised to take this step. As part of DHS' LD project implementation, Employment Specialists completed experiential training in what it is like to have a learning disability. They have made efforts to connect LD and low functioning participants with other available services, including State Department of Rehabilitation, DHS' Special Needs Multi-Disciplinary Team, and Westside CalWORKS Counseling Services for assistance with applying for SSI, if necessary.

Now that LD screening and assessment elements of the LD project are in place, DHS has the opportunity to implement a more comprehensive program. At the very least, DHS could provide information to every participant who screens positive for LD about learning styles and effective strategies to increase her/his ability to learn.

To go further, DHS could implement an integrated LD training component, similar to the effective KtS model, without a significant increase in resources. This LD project adjustment likely would require reallocating resources that already exist.

There may be serious implications for not taking a more aggressive approach for participants with learning challenges, not the least of which are proposed changes in TANF reauthorization that likely would increase their work participation requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that DHS modify its LD project so that:

- LD assessment clinicians provide a written report including assessment results and explanations, strategies and accommodations for all participants who complete LD assessment, not only those who are diagnosed as learning disabled;
- DHS' Vocational Assessors (VA's), in consultation with clinicians, develop a plan for next steps for each participant who completes LD assessment, irrespective of LD or low functioning diagnosis;
- DHS implements a pilot project based on the KtS model and offer LD training as well as assessment to participants who screen positive for LD. The pilot would include short-term training on learning styles, coping strategies, and self-advocacy to complement the LD assessment process. The training may be in conjunction with DHS Workforce Development and/or One-Stop System training programs. I would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the LD project team and Workforce Development Division to develop a proposal for the pilot program.

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