

# ***San Mateo County's Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency Team: A Collaborative Approach***

MARSHA RICE

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The applied strategies of the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency Team and community partner collaboration have proven to be effective in moving potential and current welfare clients into welfare to work activities quickly. They have been able to succeed in this endeavor by utilizing barrier removal activities.

The Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency (FSST) model continuously demonstrates that they can link California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) needy families with appropriate programs and services to promote the transition to self-sufficiency.

The keys to their success are staff empowerment, strong collaboration, and strong communication. FSST is a partnership between the department, the community and clients. This collaborative way of working can be credited for their success.

### **Recommendations**

San Mateo County Human Services Agency Multi-disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency (FSST) model is a humane approach, focused on developing personal responsibility, fostering personal growth, and building upon the strengths and abilities of clients to develop the most effective intervention strategies to overcome multiple barriers.

Alameda County can adopt some of the principles by which the FSST model is administered. The specific principles are:

- The ability to communicate at multiple levels and in multiple directions and to maintain trust and respect between all team members.
- The use of multi-disciplinary teams, which foster strong working relationships that are viewed by staff as being both professional and friendly.
- Being centrally located in one facility provides for better collaboration and allows team members to work in a coordinated way toward the common goal of eliminating barriers to programs and services, and creating avenues to self-sufficiency for needy families and adults.

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## **Background**

The Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) recognizes that there is incredible overlap among systems serving families. Families frequently have multiple, complex needs that require assistance from more than one program. California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) staff, assisting families transitioning to work, know that multiple barriers exist such as substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence. These barriers often prevent our clients from accessing or maintaining employment.

To address the overlap of systems serving families, ACSSA actively participates in multiple collaborations addressing this issue. However, this agency, along with other economic welfare systems in California and across the nation, face a funding dilemma that undermines these goals. The federal government recently released a welfare reform reauthorization plan that now requires states and counties to increase their work participation rates or pay significant penalties. This means that if employment workers are not able to engage CalWORKs clients in welfare activities or re-engage sanctioned clients, it will negatively impact county funding allocations. These funding reductions will negatively impact the county's abilities to provide programs and services that promote positive outcomes. This change will heavily impact the hardest-to-serve that remain on welfare cash assistances with ongoing challenges.

Like all California counties, Alameda County is in the midst of redesigning its welfare programs to address this problem. It must now strengthen its welfare-to-work processes by seeking best practice mod-

els that have demonstrated successful outcomes and explore innovative strategies to meet the new federal and state mandates.

San Mateo County's Human Services Agency Self-Sufficiency (SUCCESS) program has multiple plans in place that tackle this issue. One of the delivery models that has been successful is the Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency Teams (FSST) model. FSSTs provide supportive services for CalWORKs needy families with multiple barriers to employment.

## **San Mateo Agency Structure**

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) organization is uniquely structured. One administrator is responsible for managing multiple programs, such as Cash Assistance and Benefits, Employment, Child Welfare, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Housing, Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Services. To ensure the agency functions cohesively for county residents, it created the Multi-Disciplinary FSST model.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of the Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency Team (FSST) is to coordinate and integrate programs, resources and services, and to establish case management plans for needy CalWORKs families in San Mateo County who need assistance toward achieving self-sufficiency through employment.

The FSST was instituted to address the needs of the hard-to-serve welfare recipients who have experienced multiple barriers to employment. The hard-to-serve include recipients with health or addiction issues, have suffered physical abuse, learn-

ing disabilities and have very low basic skills, and/or criminal records. Other obstacles are homelessness and lack of transportation. More importantly, FSST ensures that the interests and rights of needy families are addressed. They identify service gaps and breakdowns in coordination or communication between the agency, community partners, and the recipients. They also try to facilitate a seamless service delivery to those who are at-risk.

#### **KEY ELEMENT**

The FSST is a key element of San Mateo's work participation success. The groups consist of in-house professionals who offer a diverse range of programs and services. The team comes together to provide comprehensive assessment and consultation in the hard-to-serve CalWORKs cases. A Primary Case Manager coordinates and facilitates access to appropriate services and treatments. The group's function is to help resolve difficult cases.

#### **FSST STAFF AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

There are four Family Self-Sufficiency Teams located in the Peninsula Works/One-stop Centers of San Mateo County, which are strategically located in the Central Region, Northern Region and Southern Region of San Mateo County. FSSTs meet on a weekly or bi-monthly basis. The team members are part of Peninsula Works, Women's Enrichment Center Day Treatment, Housing, Alcohol and other Drug Services Programs, Mental Health, and Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

#### **FSST PROCESS**

Cases with multiple needs, ongoing cases subject to sanction, cases managed by the Income Employment Services Specialist (IESS), active cases in Child Welfare Services, and other problematic cases are referred to FSST for review. Families are asked to take part in the meetings when their case is being discussed and approximately 60 percent choose to do so. At these meetings, cases are presented by the caseworker, and recipients are asked to describe how far they have advanced in the welfare-to-work program, describe

what barriers are still preventing them from working, and what types of services can assist them and their families with achieving self-sufficiency.

During the meeting, short and/or long-term goals are established, and a service plan is drafted and administered during the interview with the client. Follow-up appointments are also scheduled with the family to evaluate progress.

The benefits of this process includes the development of a standard case plan that covers multiple programs (Employment, Child Welfare Services, Substance Abuse), and eradicates duplication of work and services. It also allows the clients to have a say in their case planning, which facilitates client buy-in and cooperation, promotes greater compliance, and helps increase the work participation rates.

Primary Case Managers (PCM) are assigned based on knowledge of program, skill level, and expertise. For example, if FSST receives a referral from an IESS worker requesting assistance for a CalWORKs recipient who has substance abuse problems, FSST will then assign a Primary Case Manager who may be a Drug and Alcohol specialist. The PCM will then coordinate and track services including treatment progress.

#### **FSST RELATIONSHIP**

After meeting with Ann Jones (FSST Northern Region Facilitator), it was apparent that the focus of this project would be to address the strengths and challenges of the program in order to see how ACSSA Employment Services Department, as well as other county agencies and community partners, could build upon San Mateo's strengths to administer a similar service delivery system. I interviewed FSST managers and caseworkers to address the strengths of the team.

The managers of FSST and IESS caseworkers believed that a primary strength for the team was co-location of staff, which fosters a strong working relationship that is viewed as being both professional and friendly amongst staff. These relationships have been extremely beneficial to the client because they get timely access to a variety of services. The relation-

ship creates a stronger knowledge of the various programs that team members manage, as well as a better understanding of each program. They value each other's job and welcome the expertise. Being centrally located in one facility provides for better collaboration and allows them to work in a coordinated way toward the common goal of eliminating barriers to programs and services, and creating avenues to self-sufficiency for needy families and adults.

An additional strength of FSST would be the referral and meeting coordination. Everyone participating in the meetings believes FSST works because each person involved seems to be following the same message. The message is "they are the bridge that connects clients to programs and services that lead to self-sufficiency." All staff that I spoke with mentioned the success of FSST and their abilities to remove obstacles to programs and services for needy families.

Staff also stated that FSST was a great resource and able to provide information for program employment and services issues, which has strengthened their knowledge about the hardest-to-serve clients.

### **FSST OPERATING PRINCIPLES**

There are two key operating principles for the FSST team. First, their ability to communicate at multiple levels and in multiple directions is essential to effectively carry-out the activities of the group. Both management and line staff believe communication is the key to their success. Secondly, trust and respect between all team members is critical for group collaboration.

### **Challenges for Other Counties**

CalWORKs recipients have diverse and multiple needs and most counties are not structured like San Mateo County. It is unlikely that any single agency could provide everything that is needed to assist needy families. Some recipients require services from different agencies. If services are not well coordinated, clients may have difficulty negotiating the complex services, "fall between the cracks," fail to receive the help they need, and may be impacted by unnecessary delays, frustration, and disruptions.

In contrast, when services are well coordinated, it reduces the need for multiple interviews, which, in turn, cuts down on the frustration and inconvenience for recipients and reduces wasteful overlap and bifurcation of efforts between departments.

On the other hand, when program services are made available but the recipient fails to take advantage of them, it could take considerable time to document non-compliance and try to re-engage the client before sanctions are imposed. If personal and family challenges contribute to the participant's problems, it may take additional time to develop a plan that will eventually lead to participation in measurable activities. However, implementing strategies to address non-compliance sooner or promote greater compliance at the beginning would eventually cause participation rates to rise.

### **Recommendations**

ACSSA has already begun crossover coordination between the CalWORKs (for employment) Program and Children and Family Services. I recommend that the county consider taking it a step further and move from coordination to collaboration with other county departments and community-based organizations by forming a multi-disciplinary team.

Alameda County can adopt some of the principles by which the FSST model is administered. Currently, with the work participation rate being tied to CalWORKs block grant funding, it is important for counties to understand the multiple barriers that impact those families that remain on cash assistances. It will allow agencies to better position themselves to provide the appropriate services that will lead to employment and avenues to self-sufficiency.

FSST appears to be a valuable model that can be used to improve coordination of programs and services and create better communication between the agency, the community, and the hard-to-serve.

Unfortunately, the lack of statistical data makes it difficult to document the objective value of this delivery model. Regardless, in theory, the Multi-Disciplinary Family Self-Sufficiency Team (FSST) model appears to be a viable approach for Alameda County to consider.

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