

# ***The Road to Success is Always Under Construction:*** **Santa Clara County's Clerical** **Business Process Improvement Project**

**KAREN PRICE**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency is a dynamic, success-driven organization. This was clearly evident as I met with representatives of the agency regarding their Clerical Business Process Improvement Project. The project was prompted by an ever-increasing demand on services in the Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS), a decreasing budget, and their core value: "We Make a Difference Through People, Service, Performance."

### **Background and Findings**

In 2007, the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) contracted with the Public Consulting Group to review business processes and recommend refinements to clerical and operational supports. As a result of this review, recommendations for further action were made in six areas:

- 1 Relocate Centralized Support Services
- 2 Centralize the Integrated Document Management Process
- 3 Improve Phone System Functionality
- 4 Centralize Application Registration and Improve Appointment Process
- 5 Improve Re-Determination (RRR) Forms
- 6 Implement eFax Technology

The SSA formed work teams that focused on these recommendations. The groups evaluated the recommendations, addressed concerns and business processes, and implemented the recommendations. The work team leads were supported by the project's steering committee. This proved to be a key foundation for keeping communication open between executive leadership, divisional lines, and themselves, as the recommendations not only affected DEBS, but also had implications in Central Services, thereby impacting all agency departments. As Management Analyst Dana McQuary stated, "It was important that the work teams embrace the concepts, felt the changes were valuable, and always felt that their questions and concerns were heard."

### **Conclusion**

As a result of the Clerical Business Process Improvement Project, the SSA was able to capitalize on technology to make improvements to its business processes, including an improved phone system and expanded document management. Improvements were supported by centralizing functions such as mail operations and document imaging. These streamlined processes have enabled DEBS to increase its capacity and truly "make a difference through people, service, performance."

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## **Introduction**

To quote a Chinese proverb, "The road to success is always under construction." The Santa Clara County Social Service Agency (SSA) continuously strives for success by examining their processes and building on their successes. With this in mind, the SSA contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to examine how to deliver the best possible service to its clients by refining its clerical business processes. While the project focused primarily on clerical processes related to the Department of Employment & Benefit Services (DEBS), the resulting recommendations launched a project that has had agency-wide implications.

PGC recommended action in the following six areas:

- 1 Relocate Centralized Support Services
- 2 Centralize the Integrated Document Management Process
- 3 Improve Phone System Functionality
- 4 Centralize Application Registration and Improve Appointment Process
- 5 Improve Re-Determination (RRR) Forms
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To support this effort, work leads were selected and teams were formed to examine each recommendation. To support the teams, a Project Implementation Steering Committee was established to provide a forum for enhanced communication, to address concerns, collaborate across teams, and assist with evaluating and implementing the recommendations. In addition, to expanding the communication loop, the project was a standing agenda item at executive team meetings and regular updates on progress were reported to all staff.

## **Background and Findings**

This paper focuses on three of the recommendations proposed by Public Consulting Group: the Department of Employment & Benefit Services (DEBS) Application Registration, Centralized Support Services, and an Integrated Document Management (IDM) system. The projects were intended to capitalize on the economy of scale, avoid duplication of effort, and leverage technology.

## **Centralized Support Services**

The "as-is" snapshot of department support services revealed that the majority of functions were being performed from the SSA's West Julian Street location. However, dissecting this picture revealed that the majority of district offices, (ten of them), and the Las Plumas Complex were located on Senter Road, and 56% of the department staff were located in district offices as opposed to West Julian Street and other locations. On the other hand, many clerical functions that could benefit from being centralized in one support service center were dispersed throughout district offices. With this in mind, a work team was formed to evaluate relocating support services staff and centralizing support service functions occurring at district offices, including mail services (incoming and outgoing), forms, publishing, packet development, and courier (PONY) services.

## **PONY Services**

The Mail Center, Forms, and Publishing Services were located at the West Julian Street location, at a distance from Senter Drive and the Las Plumas campus location where a majority of DEBS district offices are housed. One benefit of strategically relocating

these services closer to Senter Drive was more efficient use of PONY services; as a result, they were more able to support other initiatives, such as Integrated Document Management and the Application Registration process discussed later in this document.

### Outgoing Mail

The SSA processes a large volume of paper and mail. For example, on average, DEBS mails 348,213 QR7s, MSRS and RRRs each year. Moving Centralized Support Services opened the door for centralizing all outgoing mail to one location versus spreading it amongst district offices. Utilizing the PONY services, all outgoing mail was shifted to a centralized location, which maximizes the use of clerical support, leads to more efficient use of equipment, and monopolizes on the ability to use bulk rate discounts.

### Packet Development

The work team also shifted packet development to become a centralized function. In the former model, an average of 123,405 packets were produced and assembled by staff at various locations with the assistance of General Assistance (GA) and CWES workers. By centralizing this function, DEBS capitalizes on an economy of scale by printing all its materials in bulk. On an as-needed basis, PONY drivers deliver packets to district offices. Other business improvements include the distribution of notices such as the state's All-County Letters by email rather than hard copy.

Centralizing Support Services realized a number of benefits, including:

- Saving on rent by moving to a lower-rent industrial-style building
- The ability to utilize bulk rate discounts
- Saving time and mileage by moving PONY services closer to district offices
- Avoiding a duplication of efforts
- Saving financially on printing, packet development, and mail services

- Making the best use of equipment such as printers and mail machines

### Centralized Integrated Document Management

Centralizing Integrated Document Management (IDM) was an important piece of the DEBS Clerical Business Improvement Project. An examination of DEBS' document management system revealed that a decentralized approach to document imaging lacked standardization, proved to be an inefficient use of scanners, and diverted staff time away from clients at district offices. In conjunction with the initiative of centralizing Support Services on Senter Road, SSA created a state-of-the-art scanning center to support DEBS' district offices.

Document imaging is an involved process that involves identifying clients, preparing header sheets, arranging paperwork, straightening out documents, copying half-sheets, and removing staples and paper clips. Once prepared, documents are scanned and then reviewed for quality. This process was being repeated at all district offices with an average of 30,944 documents being scanned per day. District office staff were overwhelmed by the task; furthermore, a number of clerical support staff were working below their class to assist in the IDM process.

SSA found that by centralizing IDM functions at one location, SSA was able to smooth the workload over the course of a month. During the first two weeks of each month, staff focus on QR7/MSR and RRR; the remaining two weeks are spent supporting the document imaging process for intake and continuing cases. Also, SSA found that with dedicating staff specifically to the task, documents were prepared consistently, images were high-quality and were filed properly, and staff met strict turn-around requirements.

By centralizing IDM, SSA realized a number of benefits related to quality and an efficient use of staff. They:

- Utilized IDM technology more fully
- Eliminated scanning back-log

- Standardized document preparation
- Improved document quality
- Reduced clerical overtime
- Increased the available staff time at district offices for serving clients

### Application Registration

DEBS receives an average of 5,357 intake applications per month at six DEBS intake offices. It was identified that a large percentage of the monthly applications are received at the Application Assistance Center (AAC) at 1919 Senter Road. DEBS realized that by expanding the capacity of the AAC by centralizing the process at the site, they would be able to more efficiently perform Application Registration (App Reg). (See Table 1.)

The Application Registration Work Team identified a number of issues in the previous environment, including the App Reg backlog at some locations, the need to turn around emergency intake applications within 36 hours, and the goal of scheduling all appointments within 10 days of their application.

The consulting group recommended that Foster Care and General Assistance continue to perform the Application Registration functions due to their client make-up and their referral processes. Upon review, it was also found that some of the outlying Valley Medical Center Clinics had such a small volume of applications that staff at those sites were able to absorb the workload with ease (however, the AAC will assist these sites with App Reg as-needed).

This centralization was facilitated by the changes made in Centralized Support Services that increased the efficiency of the PONY service. In order to achieve the goal of turning around applications within 24 to 36 hours, prompt transportation of documents between facilities is critical. To support the process, the AAC receives PONY services twice per day.

As a result of the centralization of the 'App Reg' process, DEBS achieved their goal of swift application processing to promptly serve clients. Additionally, the centralization:

**TABLE 1**

Office	#	%
Application Assistance Center	2,413	45%
North County	371	7%
South County	319	6%
Valley Medical Center	1,220	23%
General Assistance	879	3%
Foster Care	155	3%
Monthly Average	5,357	

- Reduced overtime
- Eliminated backlog
- Achieved a 24- to 36-hour application turn-around
- Standardized practices

### Implications for Sonoma County

The Sonoma County Human Services Department has recently launched a strategic initiative regarding administrative support functions. The purpose of the project is to promote efficient resource management with the goal of providing effective client services. In particular, the strategic initiative goals are: 1) to develop an organizational structure that expands the department's capacity to improve management with data; and 2) to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of administrative functions that cross over all divisions. The initiative is employing the use of a consultant, who is working with sponsors from the executive team.

My recommendation is for the county to take this strategic initiative a step further and to specifically examine the roles and responsibilities of office support staff supervised by Office Support Supervisors (OSS). These classifications include Office Assistants, Senior Office Assistants, Receptionists, Mail Clerks, Telephone Operators, and Micro Techs. Possible topics of review are job tasks, the possibility of centralizing or decentralizing functions, the development of better processes, consistency in job

classifications throughout the department, and staff development.

The structure of the forum would initially include a consultant to facilitate the process, who would be supported by a project manager. Steps for pursuing this involve:

- 1 Obtaining support from the Executive Team
- 2 Assigning a project manager and support staff
- 3 Selecting a facilitator
- 4 Conducting an office support supervisor forum
- 5 Analyzing findings and making recommendations
- 6 Reconvening the OSS group as a steering committee
- 7 Assigning teams to review and implement changes, as necessary

A side benefit of such a forum is that it provides support to the supervisors as a place where they can share common concerns and enhance communication across divisions. It is expected that some of the recommendations proposed by the strategic initiative will directly affect office support staff. The OSS Forum would provide a vehicle for reviewing and implementing recommendations in the clerical arena.

## Conclusion

Santa Clara Social Services Agency's review of their DEBS clerical business processes yielded gains in time, effort, and quality on many fronts. I was impressed with the agency's continuous process of evaluating their business practices to best serve clients. I also found that their open and continuous communication across divisional and program lines enhanced both the Clerical Business Process Improvement Project and the ongoing refinement of their services.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff who took time from their schedules and shared their vision of creating an agency that lives by their motto, "We Make a Difference Through People, Service, Performance." In particular, special thanks to: Dana McQuary, for creating an environment where open communication is honored; Katherine Sanchez, whose conviction to continuous process improvement shines; Katherine Sun, for welcoming me into her beehive of activity; and, Eva Chaboya for her openness to me and her unwavering care and support of her staff. Your passion and conviction uplifted and inspired me.