

# TEAM – Together to Engage, Act and Motivate

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this case study is to explore a newly implemented program in Sonoma County. Sonoma recently launched TEAM – Together to Engage, Act and Motivate, as a way to engage parents, their support systems, community, and service providers in the development of child welfare case plans. The TEAM program engages parents' active participation in their case plans, which ultimately impacts their successful reunification with their children.

TEAM is a program that provides facilitated family meetings for the intentional purpose of developing a case plan that directly addresses the concerns that others have for child safety while drawing on

parent and family strengths. The meetings are inclusive of the family, the family's identified supports, and service providers and all who seek to give the family a voice in the development of their service plan.

The primary goals of the program are to improve child welfare outcomes, with increases in measures of reunification and child wellbeing together with decreases in the measure of recurrence of maltreatment. The program is still in its infancy stage, but appears to have some positive impacts on families by improving timely referrals to services and locating services near the client, both of which are important for client engagement in their case plan.

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## Background

A common belief in child welfare is that involving children, parents, and families (engagement) is believed to improve child and family outcomes. Families are given a voice in the child welfare process and considered to be experts on themselves. Family meetings are a primary way to engage families. These meetings utilize different formats, but a common theme is to involve professionals and families (birth, extended, foster, and adoptive) in planning and decision-making teams. This places more families at the table when decisions are made. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, federal legislation strongly encourages a commitment to collaborative case planning. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 affirms the use of teaming as a family engagement strategy.

The new California Core Practice Model for Child Welfare includes family engagement as an important part of the model. Engagement incorporates collaboration, joining, facilitating, and partnering as key factors. Child welfare should use natural supports and resources to surround the family. The engagement of parents and other family members, combined with the building of a community support network, helps keep families together and ensure child safety. The Core Practice Model reminds child welfare of the importance of respecting and valuing the perspectives, abilities, and solutions of families and their supportive communities in all teaming and casework practice.

With an interest in utilizing teaming and engagement strategies in case plan development, Santa Cruz County examined Sonoma County's new program, TEAM (Together to Engage, Act and Motivate). This program was developed as a team approach to

engaging parents, their natural supports, and service providers in developing the case plan to assist parents with their success.

## History

A vision of the Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's Services is teaming, collaboration, coordination, and shared responsibility for child protection. Family engagement was of particular interest due to its direct link to successful child welfare outcomes in safety, permanency, and wellbeing. Achieving these outcomes reduces the likelihood that the family will re-enter the child welfare system. In January 2012, Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's Services presented a proposal to the Human Services Department Executive Team for the TEAM Project.

The TEAM Project was based on an evidence-based "access-linkage" model that has been determined to be effective in the delivery of services to families with co-occurring needs common in child welfare. These needs include substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, and inadequate housing. The essential elements of the model are careful assessment, tailored and targeted services, and the use of an intensive case management linkage mechanism that emphasizes actual utilization of services over simple referral to services. Sonoma County had already implemented Structured Decision Making (careful assessment) and assessment-driven service referrals to evidence-based practices (tailored and targeted services). The TEAM project was designed to provide the use of an intensive case management linkage mechanism that would increase client access to necessary services by integrating existing services and interventions provided to families involved in the child welfare system.

The TEAM project provides staff to work with the Court Services, Family Reunification, and Permanency Planning units with the purpose of engaging families, removing barriers to achieving case plan goals, and maximizing the effectiveness of child welfare interventions, services, and initiatives already in place. TEAM facilitates multi-disciplinary, family-involved team meetings; outreach to families; advocacy; service coordination; quality improvement; and administrative support to social workers. The purpose of engaging the family is to increase positive child welfare outcomes.

Sonoma County Family, Youth and Children's Services realized that it had service providers who were underutilized. Social workers tended to refer clients to the same providers and did not fully access the range of service providers available. It was also recognized that service providers were in contact with the client and the social worker, but rarely in contact with other service providers working with the client. This created a disjointed approach, and was a barrier to engaging families in their own case planning. An intention of TEAM was to provide networks by connecting existing initiatives to each other, connecting social workers to their case management partners, and connecting clients to services. This made it easier to coordinate, provide, and engage families in services in their case plans, thereby leading to improved, positive child welfare outcomes.

The TEAM project proposal included three Social Services Worker IV positions and a one-half Social Services Supervisor. The proposal also included five Senior Office Assistant positions and one Office Support Supervisor. These positions were added when the county hired approximately 30 new staff with the 1991 and 2011 realignment funds.

The TEAM project staff support case-carrying social workers and families in utilizing programs and services that are available and in developing individualized service objectives. Additionally, TEAM social workers help case-carrying social workers and families by facilitating multidisciplinary team meetings, providing outreach to families, coordinating services

and referrals, developing community supports, and providing administrative support to social workers.

In October 2012, the Sonoma County Human Service Department Family, Youth and Children's Services went before the Board of Supervisors for approval for the project. In 2013, the planning process was started. The workgroup maintained the values of teaming, collaboration, coordination, and shared responsibility during this process. The belief was that by integrating services, families would have improved outcomes. The TEAM project was officially launched in June 2013.

Sonoma County determined that if the TEAM project was successful there would be positive changes in client behavior, attitude, engagement, motivation, skills, stability, resources, connections, self-esteem, and options. These positive changes would then affect child welfare outcomes in reunification cases with an increase in reunification rates, an increase in child wellbeing, and a decline in the recurrence of maltreatment. For permanency cases, there would be an increase in permanency, wellbeing, and independence for youth.

### **Key Elements**

The main purpose of the TEAM project is the development of behaviorally based case plans. This approach emphasizes the engagement of family and community members in a case plan development process. Meetings are facilitated by trained, non-caseload carrying staff. Child welfare social workers, family, family supports, and service providers work together to assess a family's strengths and needs, the concerns that brought them, and to develop specific safety plans. The goal is to reach a consensus, however the child welfare agency maintains its responsibility for final decision making.

Sonoma County began the TEAM project with case plans for all jurisdiction/disposition hearings, six-month family reunification reviews, and twelve-month permanency planning reviews. Court-ordered family maintenance cases were added in March/April 2014.

A clerical TEAM member is assigned for the duration of the dependency. The clerical staff is responsible for scheduling, inviting participants, and sending referrals. Participants include the family, relatives, extended family members, family identified supports, existing service providers, anticipated service providers, ICWA representative, foster parents, the youth (12 and older, if appropriate and supports are present), and the case-carrying social worker.

The role of the TEAM social worker is to facilitate TEAM meetings with the goal of creating a case plan that addresses all concerns. The plan should address any barriers that prevent a client from following through with objectives and meeting their goals. The meeting discusses concerns, strengths, ideas, an action plan, and reducing barriers. The meeting is structured to address parents' strengths; the concerns for the family; ideas of how to address the concerns, build on strengths, and meet the service objectives; and to create the action plan that becomes the case plan. The TEAM social worker follows up with the parents to see if they have connected with the identified services. The TEAM social worker will continue to identify and remedy any barriers. The TEAM social worker translates the action plan into the case plan.

Ad-hoc meetings can also be requested and facilitated by the TEAM social worker. The purpose of an ad-hoc meeting is to re-engage the family with their case plan. If new allegations of abuse arise and the case plan does not already contain objectives to meet the new allegation, the ad-hoc meeting can address the new concerns.

Due to the newness of the project, which has been in effect for less than a year, Sonoma County has not yet been able to make specific connections from the TEAM interventions and child welfare outcomes. A TEAM data committee is in the process of structuring how the information will be gathered and analyzed. Sonoma County has noted that their timely reunification rates began to improve around the time of the launch of the program, however it is unknown if TEAM has had any impact on that data.

## Implications for Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County recognizes the importance of engaging families and their support systems (both formal and informal) in the child welfare process in order to improve child welfare outcomes. Santa Cruz County currently uses various forms of family engagement in dependency cases. Team Decision Making meetings are conducted at the point where a child will begin overnight visits, as this signals the intention to reunify the child with the family. This allows the family, extended family members, community supports, and service providers to assist with addressing the concerns that still remain while also focusing on what is working well with the family. Santa Cruz County will also soon begin implementing family meetings soon after a child is removed from the parents' care. These meetings will also include the various supports that a parent has in order to quickly and comprehensively address the concerns that led to removal.

Santa Cruz County also recently began including Safety-Organized Practice into its child welfare work. A second set of social workers will soon complete the initial training, and there has been a lot of interest from the social workers to incorporate this practice into their social work. Therefore, it is expected that Safety-Organized Practice will become a standard mode of practice in the department. This model emphasizes the importance of using extended family and other community supports to address the safety concerns that put children at risk of abuse and neglect. As more social workers are trained on using the tools included in Safety-Organized Practice, there will be more opportunities for more family, extended family, and community involvement in the case.

With the backdrop of these practices already incorporated into Santa Cruz County, the Core Practice Model will continue to encourage and highlight the importance of family engagement and teaming as a fundamental value in child welfare work. It is recognized that families and children will have improved outcomes and be more successful

in meaningful behavioral changes if they have the support of, and work with, all interested parties—such as extended family members, non-relative supports, community members and agencies, and service providers.

Santa Cruz County currently does not have the staffing resources available to incorporate such a formalized program as Sonoma County has implemented. Due to budget restrictions that occurred over the past several years, the number of staff has been reduced and current vacancies are for case-carrying social workers. Without the ability to have additional trained, non-case carrying social workers and dedicated clerical support, a program such as TEAM would not be feasible to implement in a manner such as Sonoma County was able to do.

### **Recommendations**

- Santa Cruz County should continue to utilize processes already in place to encourage family engagement and teaming in its work with families. This includes continuing to incorporate Team Decision-Making Meetings, other facilitated family meetings, and Safety-Organized Practice as a way to bring multiple supports to the table when discussing the concerns about children and their families.
- Santa Cruz County should continue to examine ways to encourage the use of the family, youth, family supports, and service providers in the development of case plans. A parent that has a

voice in determining what behavioral changes are needed and how he/she could successfully make that change will be much more invested in their case plan. At the same time, the family is able to hear from all interested parties what the concerns are and what others feel are concerns that need to be addressed.

- Santa Cruz County should continue to make efforts to ensure that case plans are behaviorally based and focused on the concerns that impact child safety.
- Santa Cruz County should consider other decision points when a facilitated family meeting would be helpful to the family and the social worker. Any opportunity to bring in the family, their natural support systems, community members, and service providers can assist the family in engaging with child welfare and improving the outcomes for their family. The added benefit of having a trained facilitator to lead family meetings allows the social worker to participate in the meeting.

### **Acknowledgments**

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