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To cite this article: Michael J. Austin , Michelle A. Johnson , Julian Chun-Chung Chow , Allison De Marco & Virginia Ketch (2009) Delivering Welfare-to-Work Services in County Social Service Organizations: An Exploratory Study of Staff Perspectives, Administration in Social Work, 33:1, 105-126, DOI: [10.1080/03643100802508668](https://doi.org/10.1080/03643100802508668)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03643100802508668>



Published online: 14 Jan 2009.



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Delivering Welfare-to-Work Services in County Social Service Organizations: An Exploratory Study of Staff Perspectives

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There is a limited body of knowledge on the role of staff in the implementation of welfare policy, especially how frontline staff members perceive an array of organizational factors and how these factors affect their ability to serve clients. This exploratory study builds upon this limited body of research by capturing staff perceptions of the personal and community resources that are needed to help TANF participants move from welfare to work in California's CalWORKs program. It is based on staff perceptions of welfare-to-work services (from orientation to post-employment services) during the first five years of implementing welfare reform in eleven California county social service agencies (1998–2002). Data were collected from a sample of 292 welfare-to-work staff (line staff, specialists, and supervisors) through the use of a Web-based survey. The findings suggest that several factors impact service delivery, including the work environment, resources, characteristics of program participants, staff control over service provision, and staff knowledge and skills. The implications for practice and future research are identified.

KEYWORDS *welfare-to-work, organization, staff*

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INTRODUCTION

The 1996 federal welfare reform legislation represented a dramatic shift from a system of guaranteed entitlement to a system of temporary aid known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Welfare reform implementation, characterized by a devolution of federal policy implementation to state and local governments, has had a substantial impact on social service agencies. New agency goals and missions have been developed to reflect the new policy goal of reducing dependence on welfare and encouraging families to become self-sufficient through employment (Carnochan & Austin, 2002). However, very little attention has been given to the frontline staff members in public social service agencies who are given the responsibility and discretion for making decisions that promote these new goals (Abramovitz, 2005; Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, & Lurie, 2001; Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie & Han, 2004).

This exploratory study focuses on the welfare-to-work staff in eleven county social service agencies located in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California. The goal of the study was to capture the perceptions of welfare-to-work staff after the first five years of welfare reform implementation. The primary research questions included: 1) How does the agency environment impact the work of frontline staff? 2) What resource barriers affect their ability to help welfare-to-work participants to become self-sufficient? 3) What personal barriers do welfare-to-work participants encounter that may affect their ability to become self-sufficient? 4) How much control do staff members have in making decisions? 5) What knowledge and skills are most important in providing effective and efficient services? To provide a context for the study findings, California's welfare-to-work program is described and followed by a brief review of the literature.

The CalWORKs Model

The staff members who participated in this study are charged with implementing California's welfare reform legislation through the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program that is designed to assist participants in obtaining employment (CDSS, 2003). Frontline welfare staff members are responsible for making decisions in this complex, new service delivery system that varies somewhat across counties and is illustrated in Figure 1. When a potential CalWORKs participant first enters the system in the intake/orientation phase, the frontline staff begin a decision-making process that can include a package of services that authorizes diversion payments in lieu of granting on-going cash aid, processing applications for cash aid, or further assessment known as the appraisal stage. During the appraisal stage, frontline staff assess the education and employment backgrounds of participants and decide if the CalWORKs

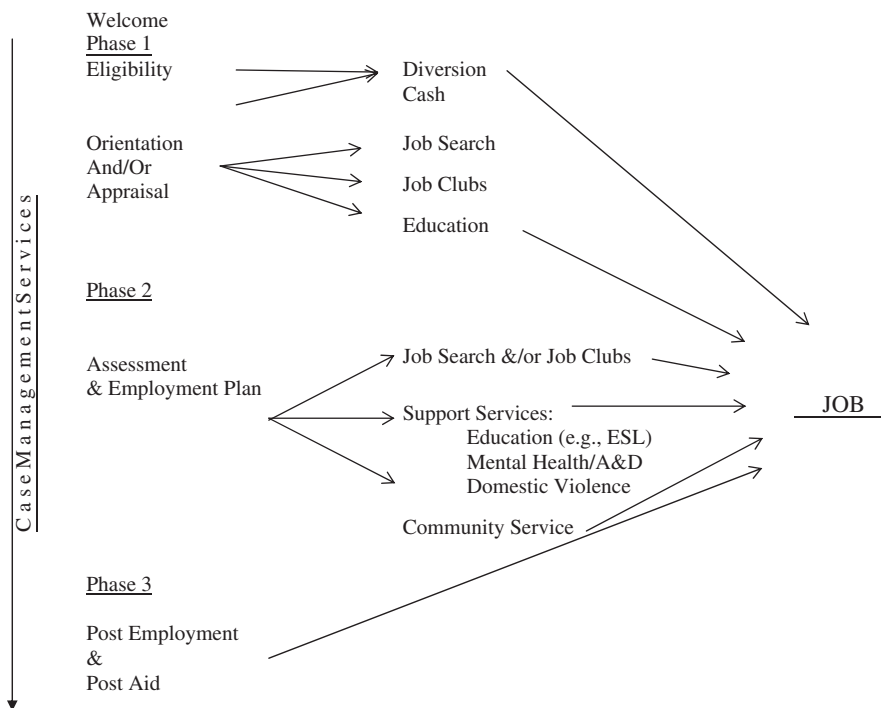


FIGURE 1 Flow Chart of County Welfare-to-Work Services.

participant will engage in one of the following activities: a) enter into the job search stage; b) require further evaluation in the assessment and employment plan stage; or c) be directed to other employment support services, such as education (e.g., English as a Second Language classes) or mental health services.

Based on the “work first” service philosophy of the welfare reform legislation, most individuals also receive job search services to assist them in finding a job. Based on the education and work history of participants, additional employment-related services may be provided, such as unpaid work experience or preparation and/or placement in vocational training sites, adult education, or community college programs. Program participants may also be eligible for post-employment support services such as child care, transportation, and/or supportive services for any other component of the CalWORKs program. Participants who find a job and are no longer eligible for CalWORKs may also continue to receive assistance with medical care, child care expenses, and twelve months of job retention services. Frontline staff members are also responsible for providing or arranging for on-going case management services that may continue throughout the period of eligibility, including post employment services after aid has been reduced or terminated according to regulations and county procedures.

This study focuses on the tasks needed to carry out the major phases of the service delivery system that are designed to help CalWORKs participants make the transition from welfare assistance to self-sufficiency. This study builds upon the limited amount of research that has examined the experiences of frontline welfare-to-work staff and their decision-making practices.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Previous research has identified multiple factors that can influence the decision-making process of frontline staff. The first set of factors relate to the organization that employs frontline staff and includes the organizational environment, the type of agency control that the organization exerts over its workers in relationship to the complexity of its rules and regulations, and the availability of organizational resources. The second set of factors involves community issues such as the availability of resources and the characteristics of the population being served. The third set of factors relates to the staff members and includes knowledge of community resources, professional training and philosophy, job perceptions, and the degree of staff discretion in decision-making.

Within the context of conflicting organizational goals, Lipsky (1980) noted that staff members experience multiple challenges, including the allocation of inadequate resources, the utilization of broad discretion in accessing resources, and the handling of conflicting and ambiguous goals. In terms of self-perceptions related to job performance, he found that staff had difficulty in serving clients who are not part of their primary reference group (racial/ethnic, socio-economic), while at the same time staff perceived themselves and their efforts in a favorable light. Lipsky concluded that workers develop patterns of practice that limit demand, maximize utilization of available resources, and obtain participant compliance with agency procedures. He also noted that staff members manage their work with low expectations in order to reduce the gap between available resources and agency mandates. Finally, he found that staff members modify the expectations of their clients in order to make the gap between service objectives and outcomes more acceptable. He referred to staff who display all these characteristics as “street-level bureaucrats.”

The work of Meyers, Glaser and MacDonald (1998) supports the conclusions reached by Lipsky. They concluded that staff influenced the actions of service recipients through their control over information and their interpretation of that information. In addition, staff members made positive use of discretion in helping participants obtain supportive benefits. Hagen, Lurie and Wang (1993) and Hagen and Lurie (1995a) found that staff, in general, supported the goals of promoting participant self-sufficiency in the JOBS program that preceded the implementation of welfare reform. Case

managers in these studies were primarily brokers of services and monitors of participant involvement. However, only half of the workers felt that the program was helpful to participants due to the multiple barriers to program implementation. In the pre-welfare reform environment (prior to 1996), the barriers included: 1) inadequate funding and availability of participant education and training services; 2) a lack of available employment opportunities in the community; 3) inadequate funding for and availability of child care and transportation; 4) lack of staff knowledge about the program; 5) the complexity of agency rules and regulations; 6) unrealistic expectation for participants; and 7) the program time requirements that lead to the assignment of unnecessary or inappropriate services (Hagen and Lurie, 1995a).

Hagen et al. (1993 & 1995a) concluded that inadequate funding for services may limit the ability of workers to purchase services and restrict the range and types of education, training, and employment services that they are able to offer program participants. In the worker's view, problems with child care and transportation were the major reasons why participants lost motivation and dropped out.

In a subsequent study, Hagen and Lurie (1995b) found that, in many sites across ten states, the limitations on the supply of services constrained the assessments of welfare participants as well as their employability plans. Workers routinely matched participants with readily available community services instead of exploring a wide range of services that might have been more appropriate for the needs and preferences of participants. Resource constraints appeared to lead most agency staff members to prioritize services in favor of the motivated, voluntary participants where employment barriers were minimal and relevant services were readily available in the community.

Weaver (2000), in his study of the California GAIN (Greater Avenues for Independence) program that preceded welfare reform, examined the variation in program implementation across four counties. He found that when there is ideological consensus between the organizational environment and case managers, organizations are able to implement strong control systems and use specific activities to institutionalize service values among staff. For example, county case managers who focused primarily on rules and regulations expressed limited understanding of the needs of welfare recipients and took their directions for program implementation primarily from the legislation. In contrast, case managers who had a broader understanding of the reasons that people were receiving welfare assistance tended to operate in a proactive and entrepreneurial way to respond to the perceived problems of the participants.

Hagen and Owens-Manley (2002) studied the issues that frontline workers faced in implementing welfare-to-work programs in New York. Findings from four focus groups of workers suggested that there was a lack of criteria for granting exemptions from welfare-to-work requirements. Moreover, while most workers extended services to participants who demonstrated self-help

efforts, some workers viewed the emphasis on employment as giving them more authority to enforce compliance and impose work rules and screening mandates. Other workers demonstrated considerable discretion in supporting participant efforts by waiving work rules and developing strategies that promoted educational opportunities for welfare-to-work participants. In a related study in California, Bartle and Segura (2003) focused on the challenges that CalWORKs staff face in providing program participants with sufficient information and timely referrals. The decision-making process of frontline staff, therefore, is an important factor in how they implement welfare policy in the context of their everyday interactions with clients (Johnson, Ketch, Chow, & Austin, forthcoming).

METHODS

The survey sample included line staff, specialists, and supervisors in the following eleven Northern California county social service agencies associated with the Bay Area Social Services Consortium in the San Francisco Bay Area (Austin et al., 1999): Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma. These counties represent a diversity of demographic and geographic characteristics as well as differences in organizational environments, cultures, and job titles. This diversity reflects differences in county job classification systems as well as different levels of responsibilities.

Study Population

To develop cross-county consistency in analyzing the data, all persons with titles related to eligibility determination, employment counseling, and case management were grouped together and referred to as *line staff* ($n = 185$). *Supervisors* ($n=59$) comprised the second group of staff members who also carried line-staff responsibilities (especially in smaller counties). The third group of staff reflected a wide variety of specialized job functions that range from intensive work with CalWORKs participants (e.g., vocational assessor, behavioral therapist with mentally disabled, educational specialist with the learning disabled, etc.) to those who work on larger systems within the agency (program analyst, staff development specialist, etc.). These client and systems specialist were combined into a group of *specialists* ($n = 44$). All the demographic data in this study are reported in terms of these three types of CalWORKs staff. Unfortunately, there was no data available on the characteristics of the total population surveyed, and therefore it is difficult to determine if our responders were representative of the entire population on such important variables as age, gender, years of service, race/ethnicity, or educational levels.

Data Collection and Analysis

To identify the tasks performed by CalWORKs staff and to quantify the amount of effort they expended on these tasks, a series of Likert-type questions were developed in consultation with a group of county welfare-to-work program directors. The questions focused on typical tasks in the CalWORKs workflow process noted in Figure 1: namely, 1) appraisal and orientation; 2) assessment, employment, and on-going support services; and 3) post-employment services.

The structure of the survey paralleled the flow of CalWORKs services in order to gather staff perceptions of workflow processes (specifically, the amount of effort expended and attention given to work tasks), factors affecting service delivery, decision-making processes, and requisite knowledge and skills. The items in the knowledge and skills components of the survey were drawn from a content analysis of the job descriptions and training objectives utilized by the eleven counties participating in the study. In addition, line staff decision-making questions were selected and modified from the pre-welfare reform survey instrument developed by Hagen et al. (1993) in their study of the JOBS program across ten states.

The survey instrument was designed for use in a Web-based format (Dillman et al., 2001). The survey consisted primarily of closed-ended questions with open-ended, text-box options at the end of each major section to capture supplementary data. The survey required approximately one hour to complete. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous and confidential.

The survey was e-mailed in the spring of 2003 to 917 staff members whose contact information was provided by the county welfare-to-work directors. The survey instrument remained online for three weeks (April 14 through May 2, 2003). Prior to survey administration, a pretest was conducted with nine line staff and two supervisors from six of the eleven counties that participated in the staff survey. The objective of the pretest was to assess the appropriateness of survey content and length, and to identify potential technological problems associated with the survey design and Internet interface. Pretest participants were first asked to complete the survey online, preferably in a single sitting. After completing the survey, participants responded to a short questionnaire conducted through telephone interviews. Pretest results led to several modifications, including changes in the content and format of the survey to reduce the length of time to complete the survey and to provide greater clarity related to the instructions and questions. Despite these efforts, many survey respondents had difficulty accessing the survey, staying connected online, and/or dealing with their agency's intranet system.

To encourage responses, participants were informed that those responding within the first week of the survey would be entered into a drawing for six \$50 gift certificates. Participants were also informed that they could request

a copy of the completed staff survey report. Several reminders were provided throughout the survey period in an effort to increase the response rate.

Online surveys were received from 292 of 918 respondents for a response rate of 32%. The response rates were fairly consistent across the counties, with the exception of one county where an internal intranet problem prevented many respondents from completing the survey. Given the exploratory nature of the study, descriptive statistics and nonparametric statistical tests were used to analyze the data.

Study Limitations

This study was conducted in the midst of a significant state budget crisis (ultimately leading to the unusual recall of the governor of California), so respondents were carrying out the tasks of their laid-off colleagues, as well as their own, in a time of considerable uncertainty. In addition, the variability of the caseload sizes across counties in this study may have also affected the perceptions of service delivery. Line staff members in counties with large caseloads often have less time to devote to each case.

The limitations particular to Web surveys are primarily those related to self-administered questionnaires (sampling, coverage, non-response, and measurement) combined with technical issues related to receiving and responding to the survey (Dillman, 2000). While Web-based surveys are self-administered questionnaires, respondents have different skills in Web site manipulation (Redline, Dillman, Smiley, Carley-Baxter, & Jackson, 1999), thereby affecting the overall response rate.

In this survey, response bias could be related to the following factors: 1) dropout due to the length of the questionnaire; 2) reluctance to respond to questions perceived to be sensitive; and 3) technical difficulties in logging on and off the Web site. Finally, while it has been noted that response rates for all types of surveys have been on the decline since the 1990s (Dillman et al., 2001), the average response rates for Web surveys (48%) have tended to be lower than interactive voice response (50%), or a combination of mail and telephone surveys (80 to -83%). Due to the relatively low response rate (32%) in this survey, the findings presented may not be representative of the CalWORKs staff population in the San Francisco Bay Area region or other TANF programs elsewhere in the country and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

FINDINGS

Of the 292 respondents, 183 provided information on an array of demographic characteristics (see Table 1). Of these predominantly female (80%)

TABLE 1 Profile of survey respondents

Demographics (n = 183):

- *Gender*: 80% women and 20% men
- *Age ranges*: 14% (35 and under), 34% (36–45), 39% (46–55), and 13% (56 and older)
- *Educational experience*: 3% high school diploma, 15% some college, 10% AA degrees, 26% BA degrees, 7% MA degrees, 1% PhD degrees, and 38% non-response
- *Race/ethnicity*: 23% Caucasian, 7% African American, 10% Latino, 7% Asian American, 3% mixed heritage, 1% Native American, and 49% non-response

Program Experience (n = 183):

- *Public assistance experience*: 25% (less than 5 years), 27% (6–10 years), 24% (11–15 years), 10% (16–20 years), and 14% (21 or more years)
- *Prior experience as welfare recipient*: 25% of the respondents
- *Prior experience as eligibility workers*: 70%

Caseloads (n = 146):

- *Caseloads sizes*: 31% (40 cases or less), 54% (41–90 cases), 15% (over 91 cases)

respondents, 65% were line staff (n = 119), 20% were supervisors (n = 37), and 15% were specialist staff members (n = 27).

Time devoted to CalWORKs services

Respondents were asked to identify the average amount of staff hours expended each week in delivering CalWORKs services. The majority of line staff respondents (72%) spent their time in either direct contact with CalWORKs participants or on data entry and paperwork (21% to 60% of their time). Less time (<20%) was spent on each of the following activities: orientation and appraisal, collaborative work with other agencies, and community work.

For supervisory staff, the picture looked a little different. A majority of supervisors (67%) spent from 41% to 100% of their time on supervisory or training activities. The remainder of their time was spent largely with other agency staff as well as on information systems and paperwork tasks. Most of the supervisors (84%) spent less of their time (20% or less) on collaborative work with community agencies.

Finally, for the specialist staff, the majority (56%) devoted the bulk of their time to work with CalWORKs participants and entering agency data and completing paperwork. They engaged in collaborative work with other agencies and contact other agency staff to a lesser degree (<20%).

As might be anticipated, line staff spent a majority of their time in direct contact with participants whereas supervisors spent a great deal of their time in supervision and training. The specialist responsibilities approximated those of line staff with the caveat that some of these specialists are involved in information technology and therefore have minimum contact with CalWORKs participants. All three types of staff responding to the survey devoted a

considerable amount of time to data entry and paperwork tasks and minimal time to collaborate with other agencies.

Staff Perceptions of CalWORKs Services

Since the tasks of welfare-to-work services in the context of welfare reform are not well documented, it seemed important to obtain the views of staff regarding how much “effort” is required for various tasks and how much more “attention” might be needed to more fully address these tasks. For the purpose of this study, “effort” is defined as staff energy and the time required to complete a particular service task. The response categories included: 1) very little effort, 2) some effort, 3) modest effort, 4) extensive effort, and 5) not applicable. “Attention” refers to the emphasis that needs to be given to a particular service task by staff. The attention response categories included: 1) a lot less attention, 2) less attention, 3) the same amount of attention, 4) more attention, and 5) a lot more attention.

Respondents were asked to assess a wide range of tasks related to orientation and appraisal, assessment-planning-support, and post-employment. Examples of the tasks that received the highest responses with respect to “moderate or extensive effort needed” and the “need for more attention” are noted in Table 2. In looking across the three major welfare-to-work service elements and the tasks performed, several patterns emerged. Most line staff perceived that moderate to a great deal of effort was needed on most of the tasks in each of the three areas. When asked to identify tasks that needed more attention, the respondents reflected an awareness that more attention is needed for many tasks in both the appraisal/orientation phase as well as the assessment/planning phase, especially with local employers and community partners. A similar pattern of responses can be found in post-employment, where more effort was seen as needed to assist participants and employers with job information and career advancement issues (e.g., problem-solving, skill upgrading, and trainee positions). In non-parametric Chi-square tests, no significant differences were found by staff type for orientation/appraisal services.

In terms of assessment/planning and support services, staff type was significantly associated with the level of effort reported to confer with other staff on employment/training plans for participants. Fewer specialists reported that the service required moderate to extensive effort ($p < .042$). The majority of all levels of staff (78 percent) reported that referring participants to mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and/or language services required moderate to extensive effort; specialists were significantly more likely to report that these services needed more attention ($p < .013$).

TABLE 2 Percent reporting that a service takes moderate to extensive effort and that a service needs more attention by staff type

| | Effort | | | Attention | | |
|---|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Frontline Staff | Supervisors | Specialists | Frontline staff | Supervisors | Specialists |
| Orientation/Appraisal Services | | | | | | |
| Interview applicants to determine what work is best suited for them | 84% | 86% | 83% | 71% | 66% | 64% |
| Appraise the applicants' need for further assessment | 80% | 83% | 86% | 57% | 49% | 68% |
| Appraise the applicants' qualifications and job readiness | 77% | 80% | 68% | 64% | 59% | 67% |
| Assessment/Planning & Support Services | | | | | | |
| Counsel participants to address employment barriers and recommend support services | 79% | 74% | 72% | 71% | 68% | 77% |
| Identifying employment barriers with applicants | 75% | 73% | 72% | 63% | 63% | 78% |
| Evaluate the applicants' current employment potential | 65% | 60% | 54% | 68% | 65% | 76% |
| Work with employers | 49% | 43% | 46% | 66% | 54% | 66% |
| Refer participants to mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and/or language services | 79% | 79% | 72% | 49%* | 38%* | 71%* |
| Enter participants' information into agency information system and maintain case records | 74% | 65% | 61% | 22% | 31% | 26% |
| Refer participants to training programs and other resources to improve employability | 64% | 50% | 47% | 60% | 57% | 76% |
| Confer with other staff on employment/training plans for participants | 62%* | 67%* | 42%* | 48% | 49% | 53% |
| Ensure that available resources are distributed among participants | 59% | 65% | 47% | 34% | 30% | 46% |
| Negotiate with employers to develop trainee positions | 19% | 8% | 22% | 75% | 68% | 74% |
| Solicit opportunities from potential employment and training groups | 28% | 25% | 26% | 70% | 66% | 61% |
| Post-Employment Services | | | | | | |
| Engage in on-going follow-up and problem-solving with participants | 79% | 72% | 62% | 63%* | 67%* | 91%* |
| Refer participants to community retention/career advancement services | 74%* | 76%* | 45%* | 55% | 45% | 56% |
| Based on reappraisal need, refer participants to job search services | 72%* | 69%* | 37%* | 43% | 36% | 59% |
| Assist participants with upgrading skills through training/job promotion or change | 69%* | 80%* | 50%* | 70% | 63% | 84% |
| Complete additional service plan(s) and discuss results with participants | 61%* | 62%* | 38%* | 51% | 52% | 71% |

*p < .05

In terms of post-employment services, staff type was associated with the level of effort reported for four of the five post-employment service activities, with specialists typically reporting that the service takes moderate to extensive effort less frequently. However, specialists more often reported that these services needed more attention when compared to frontline staff and supervisors. Ninety-one percent of specialists reported that the engagement in ongoing follow-up and problem-solving with participants required more attention ($p < .010$).

In summary, the perceptions of line workers, supervisors, and specialists appeared to be quite similar in the area of CalWORKs *orientation and appraisal* as well as the *assessment and employment* area, but began to diverge in the areas of *support services and post-employment*. As noted in Table 2, there was considerable consensus about effort and additional attention needed for tasks related to orientation and appraisal across all three groups. In contrast, there is more divergence of views across all three groups, especially where more attention is needed in support services and post-employment services. The one area identified by all staff that called for less attention was the process of entering information about each participant into agency computer files.

While the findings in this section focus on staff perceptions of the three welfare-to-work service domains, the next section reports on the organizational and community factors that impact these services.

Factors Affecting the Provision of CalWORKs Services

Respondents were asked to assess the following factors that may have impacted service delivery over the past twelve months: a) the agency work environment, b) resource barriers to service provision, c) the impact of problems faced by CalWORKs participants, and d) staff knowledge and skill relevant to practice.

AGENCY WORK ENVIRONMENT

Staff members were queried about a number of factors related to the agency's work environment, including items such as resources to support staff, rules and regulations, and the quality of services to participants. While all three levels of agency staff members agreed that many of the agency factors affected their ability to provide services, it was clear that one's position in the agency influenced one's perception of the agency environment. As noted in Table 3, frontline staff had a greater variance in their perceptions about the overall impact of the agency environment on the services that they provided to participants. In contrast, supervisors consistently expressed agreement that the agency environment impacted service delivery. The areas of greatest divergence of perceptions between

TABLE 3 Factors Affecting Agency Work Environment

| Factors | Line Staff | | | Supervisors | | |
|---|------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|
| | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| 1 Need to serve as many as possible | 63% | 33% | 4% | 65% | 31% | 4% |
| 2 Provide supportive environment for participants | 53% | 34% | 3% | 63% | 27% | 10% |
| 3 Need to set a tough tone with participants | 5% | 32% | 53% | 10% | 25% | 65% |
| 4 Program needs to help as many as possible | 56% | 40% | 4% | 69% | 29% | 4% |
| 5 Participants need to comply with policies | 54% | 39% | 7% | 69% | 27% | 4% |
| 6 Complicated state/fed regulations | 46% | 40% | 4% | 65% | 19% | 16% |
| 7 Emphasis on opportunities provided to participants | 50% | 40% | 10% | 65% | 29% | 6% |
| 8 Exemption criteria made it difficult to exempt participants | 22% | 29% | 49% | 14% | 23% | 63% |
| 9 Agency emphasis on providing quality services | 48% | 33% | 19% | 61% | 25% | 14% |

line workers and supervisors related to: a) expectations about participant compliance with policies and programs, b) the complicated nature of state and federal regulations, and c) difficulties in applying the exemption criteria.

THE IMPACT OF RESOURCE BARRIERS ON SERVICE PROVISION

In the search for additional factors that may impact CalWORKs service delivery, each staff group was asked to share its perceptions of the resource barriers that were identified through the literature review, such as inadequate funding for services, lack of information, and insufficient staff competency.

There was considerable agreement across all three groups of respondents regarding the adequacy of funding for child care and transportation, and the inadequacy of affordable housing. Well over half of all three groups also felt the number of staff was inadequate to handle the caseloads. However, there is a distinct lack of consensus within and between the staff groups in such areas as the adequacy of employment opportunities for participants, the availability of transportation, and the adequacy of community information. These inconsistencies may reflect the significant geographic variation in the economic and institutional infrastructures of the counties surveyed.

THE IMPACT OF PROBLEMS FACED BY CALWORKS PARTICIPANTS

A range of problems faced by CalWORKs participants was presented to determine the extent to which respondents felt that those problems impacted the capacity of participants to become self-sufficient. There was a high level of consensus across the three respondent groups about the significant impact of behavioral problems as well as the lack of community support on the ability of participants to become self-sufficient. However, while supervisors and specialists perceived that substance abuse was a prevalent issue, line staff remained divided in their opinion. The specialists perceived mental health issues as playing a more important role in achieving participant self-sufficiency than did line staff or supervisors.

STAFF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL PRIORITIES

In addition to the four factors affecting the delivery of CalWORKs services (agency environment, resource barriers, participant problems, and staff control), survey respondents were also asked to identify the top priority skills and knowledge needed to provide effective services to CalWORKs participants. As noted in Tables 4 and 5, the knowledge and skill survey items were taken from the training objectives listed in the county welfare-to-work training program descriptions.

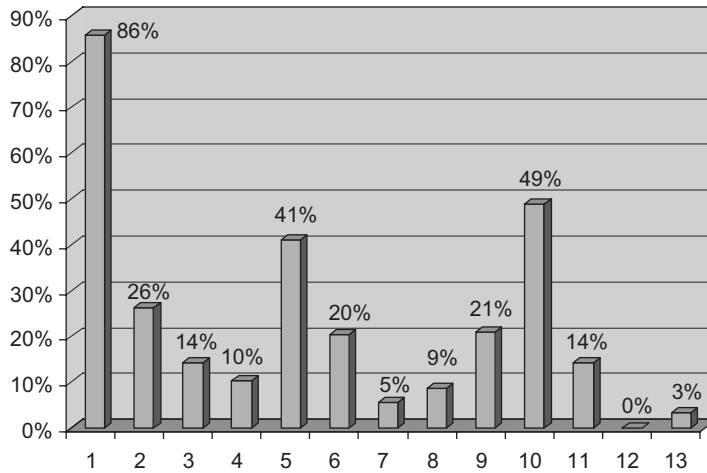
It is interesting to note in Table 4 the high level of consensus about the knowledge area related to counseling and case management (86%). It is not clear if there is a connection between this high level of consensus and the possibility of limited exposure to this area in the respondents' educational backgrounds, or the possibility of inadequate attention given to this issue in agency in-service training programs. The high priority skill areas (e.g., crisis intervention, interviewing, listening, group counseling, etc.) noted by the respondents in Table 5 seem clearly linked to the knowledge area of counseling and the knowledge areas of working with community providers and group of participants related to the skill area of community work.

The second but less prominent knowledge area (49%) regarding the barriers faced by disadvantaged populations may relate to the need for assisting staff in gaining a more thorough understanding of the nature of poverty. It is less clear why the knowledge area related to understanding the diversity of the CalWORKs population (14%) received such a low priority.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that there are similarities and differences among line staff, supervisors, and specialists regarding their perceptions of services for CalWORKs participants.

TABLE 4 Priority knowledge Areas (n = 182)

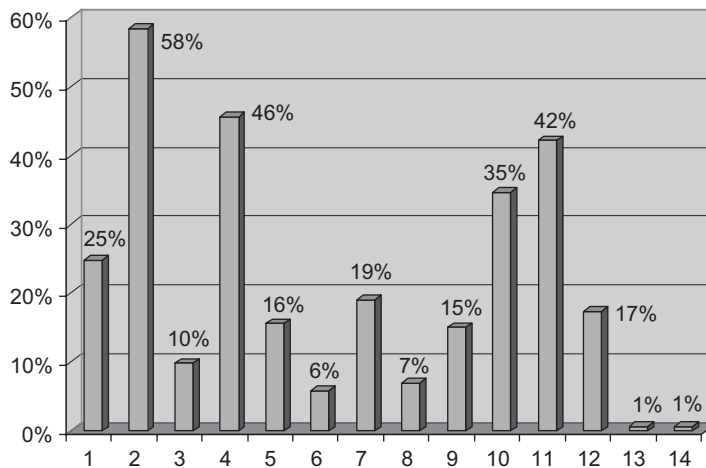


Four Most Needed Knowledge Areas Reported (bolded)

- 1. Principles of counseling, motivation, casework and case management**
- 2. Education and employment requirements and labor market conditions**
3. County, state, and federal laws governing employment, labor conditions and public welfare
4. Computer systems and applications
- 5. Community service providers and resources**
6. Principles of eligibility determination
7. Social & psychological problems of the disabled
8. Basic medical and psychiatric conditions
9. To work effectively with different participant groups
- 10. Understanding of the barriers faced by disadvantaged people**
11. Understanding of different participant groups
12. Do not know
13. Other

Effort and Attention Given to Services

Line staff reported that they devote the majority of their efforts to direct contact with CalWORKs participants and the maintenance of agency information, and about 20% or less of their time to contact with the community on behalf of participants. Line staff reported that they devoted a considerable amount of effort (moderate to extensive) to most tasks in all three domains of welfare-to-work services: *orientation and appraisal, assessment/employment planning and support services, and post-employment services*. They were almost evenly divided (50-50) between those who perceived that sufficient *effort* was being given to each of the three service domains and those who thought that more attention was needed. Line staff perceived more than half of the tasks in two of the three areas needed

TABLE 5 Priority skill areas (n = 173)

Four Most Needed Skill Areas Reported (bolded)

1. Providing effective individual and group employment counseling
- 2. Providing effective case management, including crisis intervention**
3. Using information from screening and assessment instruments
- 4. Interviewing and maintaining effective relations with participants**
5. Fostering a supportive environment for participants
6. Typing information into the agency computer files and maintaining case records
7. Interpreting and applying complex regulations and procedures
8. Acquiring and applying program-specific technical knowledge
9. Acquiring knowledge of community resources
- 10. Listening to the participants**
- 11. Treating the participants with dignity and respect**
12. Communicating in a clear and understandable manner, orally and in writing
13. Do not know
14. Other

further attention, with a third of tasks in post-employment services needing more attention.

While the staff specialists reflected a similar perception of the effort expended and needed, they thought that not enough attention was given to half or more of the tasks in all three areas. Supervisors had a somewhat different perception of the three service domains. The majority thought that sufficient attention was given to most of the tasks in the two service domains of *orientation and appraisal* tasks and *post-employment* services. However, they noted that about half of the activities in the areas of *assessment and employment, employment planning, and support services* required more attention.

This array of perceptions requires further research to identify the sources of these differences. For example, is the distinction between effort and attention a useful approach to use in the redesign of services and job descriptions?

Is the issue of attention related to caseload size, staff competencies, or organizational supports? How much do workload standards (implicit or explicit) affect the quality or effectiveness of services provided?

One of the major implications of the focus on effort and attention relates to post-employment services. Given the preoccupation with front-end welfare-to-work services related to orientation and assessment, it is increasingly clear that new service strategies are needed to strengthen post-employment services. This is both a resource and priority issue. The priority connected to the “work first” philosophy clearly supports front-end services. However, the other goal of welfare reform is to foster family self-sufficiency that will be difficult for former CalWORKs participants to achieve when they are stuck in low-wage, entry-level jobs. Therefore, it will be critical to find the staff resources to assist employers with the development of on-the-job training opportunities as well as staff release time for entry-level workers to attend vocational and/or community college programs designed to increase their knowledge and skills. Similarly, active outreach to former CalWORKs participants will be needed to sustain their involvement in other governmental programs for which they are eligible (food stamps, child care, Medicaid, earned income tax credits, etc.).

Factors Associated with Service Provision

The line staff had greater within-group variance than the other groups related to their perceptions of the impact of the agency environment on their ability to provide CalWORKs services. Supervisor perceptions reflected greater consensus about the positive impacts of certain elements in the agency environment (e.g., my agency provided a supportive environment for most CalWORKs participants) as well as negative impacts (e.g., the federal/state rules and regulations were complicated). In contrast to both line staff and supervisors, specialists reflected consensus around just a few factors that were both negative (e.g., complicated local and federal/state rules, emphasis on participant compliance, and the need to serve as many clients as possible) as well as positive (e.g., related to the agency’s supportive environment for participants). It is clear that the perceptions of the agency environment differed by one’s role and responsibilities.

The different perceptions of the agency environment suggest that top management has increased responsibility for developing a culture of open dialogue and experimentation in order to address the complexity of problems experienced by CalWORKs participants as well as the heavy caseloads carried by staff. It is not clear that welfare-to-work programs have completed the transition from the old culture of an isolated government agency guided by the old bureaucratic AFDC policies and procedures to a culture of community-based services designed to empower staff and participants in fostering family self-sufficiency.

Participant Problems

All three staff groups reported that behavioral problems of CalWORKs participants as well as the lack of community support were significant barriers to participant self-sufficiency. While CalWORKs staff members have a shared perception of the behavioral problems (e.g., substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence) experienced by CalWORKs participants, it is not clear how participant strengths are either understood or being utilized in the delivery of welfare-to-work services. This is a significant area for further research. For example, how are participant strengths assessed and utilized in the development and implementation of employment plans, and how is this information gathered and processed by line staff?

One of the implications of moving from an emphasis on eligibility to one of employability relates to the principles of strengths-based practice. Given the call for increased knowledge and skills in this exploratory study, it is increasingly clear that many line staff members have not had sufficient opportunities to learn about strengths-based practice related to low-income families.

Resource Barriers

While there is considerable agreement across all three groups of respondents (the adequacy of funding for child care and transportation, the inadequacy of affordable housing, and the inadequate amount of staff to deliver services), there is a distinct lack of consensus within and between each group about other factors (e.g., the adequacy of time to communicate with employers and other service providers). Further research is needed to identify the sources of these discrepancies.

Similar to the previous implications for strengths-based practice, the knowledge and skills related to community work also have not been accessible to welfare-to-work staff. The essential skills include group work with former CalWORKs participants in the community, networking skills for promoting self-help, outreach skills for fostering effective employer relations, media skills for sharing community needs and generating donor involvement, and program development skills needed to assist community-based organizations. And finally, there appears to be no analog in the welfare-to-work programs to the extensive investment in child welfare in-service and pre-service training through the federal Title IV-E program authorized under the amended Social Security Act.

Knowledge and Skills Areas

The vast majority of line staff perceived that there were not enough staff members who were sufficiently knowledgeable about welfare-to-work services

(73 percent) and that there had been an insufficient amount of staff training related to the impact of poverty and related conditions on CalWORKs participants (70 percent). All three groups of respondents reported a great need to gain more knowledge in the following four areas: 1) counseling and case management skills; 2) knowledge of barriers faced by disadvantaged groups; 3) identification and utilization of community services and resources; and 4) the role of education and employment requirements. Paralleling the need for staff knowledge, the following four skill areas received the most important attention: 1) effective use of case management practices; 2) interviewing and relationship-building skills; 3) listening skills; and 4) techniques for serving a diverse CalWORKs population based on dignity and respect.

These findings have significant staff development implications. Given the limited number of welfare-to-work staff with a background that includes social work education (reflected in this study and other studies nationally), the extensive focus on agency-based training on administrative procedures and accountability, and the lack of federal training funds (no comparable funding stream to the Title IV-E training support for child welfare services), it is clear that knowledge and skill training needs to be a top priority in the administration of welfare-to-work programs. To improve job functioning, welfare-to-work staff need more training opportunities related to: 1) case management skills (counseling, interviewing, relationship-building, and group work); 2) population-focused knowledge (serving diverse populations); 3) understanding the nature of poverty in America and the dynamics of labor-force attachment and adult education; and 4) community outreach to employers, service providers, and agencies that serve communities of color.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the findings of this exploratory study of CalWORKs staff, what can be said about increasing our understanding of staff functioning in bureaucratic organizations? With respect to Lipsky's (1980) pioneering work, it appears that CalWORKs staff members have acquired increased discretion under the welfare reform legislation when compared to their extensive rule-bound existence before the 1996 federal legislation. However, it also appears that their heavy caseloads and/or the complexity of CalWORKs cases (behavioral problems and limited contact with employers) leads staff to continue to modify the expectations of their clients regarding low-wage, entry-level jobs to make the gap between the "work first" service objectives and the outcomes of self-sufficiency more acceptable. One example of expectations can be seen in the perceptions of CalWORKs participants who perceived that they had minimal involvement in the development and monitoring of their employment plans (De Marco, Austin & Chow, 2004).

In essence, these plans appear to be heavily influenced by staff and agency expectations.

With respect to the major work of Hagen and her colleagues (1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2002), the issue of service resources continues to play a role but in a somewhat different context. While internally controlled services (i.e., those provided by the welfare-to-work agency or contracted out to community service providers) have increased in the context of welfare reform, the staff's limited capacity to access these resources continues to affect the outcomes of services. For example, modifying adult education programs to meet the needs of CalWORKs participants or successfully influencing employers to train and promote former CalWORKs participants continues to be elusive for line staff. This may be related to the resource limitation related to staff time or the limited capacity of staff to influence external resources. As the data in this study suggest, this issue of resource acquisition may also be related to staff competencies and the need for more knowledge and skills, as well as agency support for community outreach work.

In summary, the 1996 federal welfare reform legislation dramatically shifted public welfare from an entitlement system (AFDC) to an employment system linked to temporary assistance (TANF). This shift had a major impact on social service agencies and how staff members serve CalWORKs participants. Frontline staff members are now required to make decisions in a new and complex service delivery system. Further research could also draw upon the variables used in this study to identify the critical pathways of service leading to outcomes that improve the quality of client services. While it is clear that more research is needed, it is also apparent that more attention needs to be given to providing staff with the knowledge and skills needed to engage the community in promoting and sustaining family self-sufficiency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We want to acknowledge the significant contribution of Judie Svihula, MSW and doctoral candidate, who served as project manager of the staff survey. We also want to acknowledge the valuable assistance we received from Professor Jan Hagen at the School of Social Welfare, State University of New York at Albany.

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