

## Chapter 11

# Hiring TANF Participants to Work in a County Human Services Agency

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### *HISTORY*

Although the San Mateo County Human Services Agency has a history of hiring clients for temporary assignments, the agency's most recent effort to hire clients into full-time, permanent positions occurred with the implementation of welfare reform. The primary goal was to address the agency's staffing needs by providing meaningful employment for former welfare recipients as well as set an example for the larger community. In 1997, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency developed a new service delivery model called SUCCESS (Shared Undertaking to Change the Community to Enable Self-Sufficiency) which included restructuring the benefit analysts positions into new case-management roles. The transfer of employees from one unit to another left many vacant positions, especially in the Medi-Cal benefits unit which has the largest caseload. In their effort to fill these positions, the human services agency began hiring their own clients and this case study describes that process.

While the Medi-Cal eligibility unit deliberately hires current and former clients to fill open positions, other areas in the agency also do the same. With the implementation of the SUCCESS model in 1997, welfare recipients were hired in all three of the agency's regional SUCCESS Centers, as well as elsewhere in the agency. Outside the agency, but still within county government, the family support division in the district attorney's office obtained a grant to hire seven to eight TANF recipients to perform child-support collections duties. These former TANF recipients were eligible to compete for full-time positions in the family support division in March 2000 when the grant expired.

Earlier efforts to hire clients date back to 1989 when the agency created internships for welfare clients who needed work experience that would qualify them for a greater number of employment opportunities. A number of the interns later went on to become valued, permanent employees of the agency. One such employee has worked for the agency for several years and now holds a supervisory position. Another intern went on to earn permanent employment at the central county government office. Throughout the agency's efforts to hire its own clients, the goal has been to set an example for the larger community to hire welfare recipients.

### **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

On August 22, 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) established lifetime restrictions on the amount of time individuals could receive public assistance funds, while also establishing a "work-first" expectation that welfare recipients obtain any employment as soon as possible. One-stop centers provide a single point of entry for employment-related services to welfare recipients. In San Mateo County, these one-stop career centers are located in its three regional SUCCESS Centers or Work First Centers. Recruitment of welfare recipients for human services agency positions is conducted through the SUCCESS employment centers. While PRWORA challenges public assistance recipients to obtain employment, it also challenges employers to hire them.

On March 8, 1997, President Clinton issued a memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies, directing the federal government, as the nation's largest employer, to hire people off the welfare rolls into government jobs (The White House, 1997a). To assist in these hiring efforts, the president created the Worker Trainee Program to allow federal agencies to bypass the complex federal personnel hiring rules and procedures to hire entry-level persons for up to three years. Seven months later, in October 1997, Vice President Gore announced that the federal government had already hired nearly 2,000 welfare recipients and was well on its way to achieving the president's goal: to hire 10,000 people by year 2000 (The White House, 1997b). By giving welfare recipients the opportunity to work for the federal government, they set "a powerful example for the private sector," said the Vice President (The White House, 1997b).

Recognizing that the government could not bear the entire burden of putting all welfare recipients to work, and in response to President Clinton's encouragement of the private sector to hire people on public assistance, five major corporations formed the Welfare to Work Partnership. The CEOs of United Airlines, Burger King, Sprint, Monsanto, and UPS formed the national, independent, nonpartisan organization to help the business community

hire and retain welfare recipients, without displacing existing employees. For instance, in less than two years UPS hired 10,000 welfare recipients, estimating that about 70 percent were retained (Jacoby, 1998). Providing information, technical assistance, and support for all businesses, the Welfare to Work Partnership involves business leaders and government officials in achieving the common goal of putting welfare recipients to work.

In a follow-up survey of the impact of their efforts, the Welfare to Work Partnership (Carroll, 1999) found that

- child care and transportation are the primary obstacles among working welfare recipients;
- creating a welfare-to-work program does not cost a company extra money (16 percent report they saved money by creating a program);
- 82 percent who have hired former welfare recipients describe them as “good, productive employees”;
- 27 percent hire welfare recipients into salaried positions; and
- 77 percent hire welfare recipients into promotional track positions.

A common thread running through each of these findings is that job-retention strategies must address the needs of both employers and employees. Employers identified the following major obstacles facing their newly hired former welfare clients: child care, transportation, technical skills, motivation/attitude, education/training, job-readiness skills, and the need for mentors/positive reinforcement (The Welfare to Work Partnership, 2000).

The need for welfare recipients to acquire “soft skills” (e.g., motivation, understand appropriate behavior in a work setting, manage family and work responsibilities, reliability, time management) is considered more important than their technical or training needs (National Governor’s Association, 1999). As noted in Jacoby (1998), “You cannot push someone out there who has never done this before and expect them to succeed (without help).” For example, Candleworks, Inc., an Iowa City company, offers weekly “life counseling” to its employees; approximately half of whom are welfare recipients, on topics including nutrition, drug abuse, and financial planning (Jacoby, 1998).

Specific strategies for employers to utilize in helping welfare recipients retain their jobs include the following (Jacoby, 1998):

- *Providing ongoing case management:* Case managers could help employees cope with the workplace, the public service system, household difficulties, and the social service network through counseling, advice, support, and assistance in accessing services and resources.
- *Developing effective mentoring programs:* Mentors could be volunteers from the community, current employees of the agency, or peer

mentors who are former recipients and can assist new employees with such issues as managing time and stress, balancing work and home demands, managing finances, adjusting to new responsibilities, developing appropriate work habits, and understanding office relationships.

- *Improving access to support services:* Employers could ensure that former welfare recipients know about and understand the application processes for accessing state-sponsored Transitional Child Care and Transitional Medicaid, in addition to other local resources for the provision of child care and medical attention available to low-income workers. Employers could also make sure employees understand their eligibility for the federal earned income tax credit (EITC), as well as its advance payment option that allows a portion of the credit to be added to each paycheck. Even though 80 to 86 percent of eligible families receive the credit, less than 1 percent utilize the advance payment option.
- *Providing opportunities for career advancement within the organization:* When welfare recipients obtain entry-level jobs, they experience the high cost of working, which can include new or additional child care, transportation and clothing costs, reductions in case assistance and Food Stamps, and even higher rent for those living in subsidized housing. Therefore, career advancement and promotions are critical in moving welfare recipients from just any employment to long-term self-sufficiency.

In addition to the San Mateo Human Services Agency, other public agencies throughout the nation are making efforts to fill vacant positions with TANF recipients. Hennepin County, Minnesota, piloted a Community Workforce Partnership to train and hire twenty TANF recipients for permanent positions in county departments experiencing labor shortages (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees [AFSCME], 1999). Throughout the training period, participants are paid a rate equivalent to 90 percent of the entry-level salary for the position in which they will be eventually hired. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has implemented a transitional work program using funding obtained from donations and funds previously earmarked for TANF benefits (Cohen, 1999). The program provides six-month positions in public and nonprofit agencies for 3,000 TANF recipients over a three-year period. Working twenty-five hours per week and receiving ten hours of training per week, participants learn skills, receive the workplace support of mentors, and receive the minimum wage and a bonus of up to \$800 upon obtaining a permanent job. In Kansas City, Missouri, Mayor Emanuel Cleaver earmarked more than 150 city jobs for TANF recipients (Kniss, Mathews, and Thurmaier, 1998).



### **HIRING FORMER CLIENTS AT THE SAN MATEO HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY**

Although welfare reform legislation added new pressures to welfare recipients to obtain employment, these expectations have also given employers a new pool of potential applicants from which to draw. Since the federal government began its recruitment of welfare recipients and set an example for private and public agencies to follow, welfare recipients continue to find jobs with employers eager to hire them. However, both TANF recipients and their employers acknowledge the extra support they require to retain these jobs.

The San Mateo Human Services Agency's first efforts to hire clients predate welfare reform with the internships they offered during the GAIN program. The internship was designed to provide participants with enough current work experience to augment their job applications and résumés. One former intern has worked for the agency for over four years and is the supervisor of the human services agency records center. After receiving public assistance for three years and having not worked for almost ten years, she reported that she was surprised at how much she had missed the opportunity to work. Believing that, "no one's going to hire me" and that the "odds were against" her, she began a two-month, unpaid internship at the agency. These two months, she said, gave her time to gain basic computer skills and learn how to use current office machinery. The two months of work experience gave her confidence and a transition period for "getting in the routine" of working. It was the agency's willingness to "take a chance on her" that gave her the opportunity to believe in her own abilities and continue advancing her career in the agency.

The agency has hired clients to fill a variety of positions during the past decade; some went on to obtain permanent employment and supervisory positions within the agency. One of its most extensive efforts to hire TANF recipients, however, has been in filling vacant Benefits Analysts I positions. This case study describes the strategies used in hiring, training, and recruiting clients to fill this position, along with the lessons learned.

#### ***Job Description and Hiring Practices***

A detailed description of the Medi-Cal Benefits Analyst I position, including minimum qualifications, is included in Box 11.1. Because eligibility requirements of public assistance programs are complex and ever-changing, benefits analysts need to retain a significant amount of information, make quick and accurate mathematical computations, and organize a considerable amount of paperwork. The agency makes a concerted effort to staff the Medi-Cal Benefits Analyst I positions with either agency clients or

**BOX 11.1. Benefits Analyst—Extra Help Job Description*****The Position***

The trainee-level position in the Benefits Analyst series in the Human Service Agency. Benefits analysts receive intensive training to perform a variety of duties including interviewing applicants for public assistance, applying regulations and procedures for eligibility determination, maintaining accurate records, and providing referrals to community resource agencies.

***Minimum Qualifications***

California driver's license

***Experience and Education***

Any combination of education and experience that would likely provide the required knowledge, skills, and abilities is qualifying. A typical way to qualify is equivalent to two years of clerical or public contact work which involves responsibility for interviewing and record keeping or two years of college course work.

***Knowledge and Education***

- Principles of eligibility determination
- Public assistance laws and regulations
- Basic interviewing techniques
- Basic office procedures and record keeping

***Skills Required***

- Organize and maintain a heavy workload within deadlines
- Make arithmetic computations quickly and accurately
- Utilize data-processing systems
- Communicate effectively, orally and in writing, with people from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds
- Prepare, maintain, and interpret records and reports
- Interview effectively and secure cooperation of applicants in obtaining pertinent personal information
- Interpret and apply laws, rules, and regulations
- Work under pressure with frequent interruptions

current clerical staff. This policy gives public assistance clients a better chance of becoming county employees than applicants from the general public.

Initially, the position is open to clients under the status of "extra help," a trainee-level position without medical or vacation benefits or job guarantees. Periodically, permanent positions become available within the agency

and the extra help employees are encouraged to pursue the civil service testing process to secure permanent employment with the agency.

### ***Recruiting***

To recruit for the Medi-Cal eligibility positions, the Medi-Cal program training specialist sends flyers advertising the positions to SUCCESS Centers, the income and employment services specialists (case managers), the agency's clerical staff, and the lead instructor of the human services certificate program at the San Mateo community colleges. At the SUCCESS Centers, all job leads are shared with all participants and it is left to individual participants to decide whether to apply for agency positions. According to management staff, the positive attitudes, personal experiences, and enthusiasm for the work make former clients ideal employees. Although the positions for which clients were recruited were identified as new and additional positions, with no displacement of current employees, management staff needed to reassure current employees and their unions that they would not be displaced.

During the first few years, recruiting qualified applicants from SUCCESS Centers for positions in the human services agency was a relatively easy task. Recently, however, the applications received from clients have begun to reflect those individuals on aid who lack many basic skills and relevant work experience and face significant barriers to employment (e.g., alcohol and other drug abuse, mental illness). As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to find already-qualified employees among the ranks of public assistance clients.

### ***Training and Hiring***

To train applicants for these positions, four cycles of training were completed (July 1998, January 1999, May 1999, and August 1999). Each training cycle included approximately ten to twelve participants. Approximately six trainees were offered positions at the end of each training session. Trainees are not retained in the event that their absences during training are too high, scores on tests given during training are too low, they voluntarily decide not to continue, or they have not admitted criminal history revealed in background checks.

The training for Medi-Cal Benefits Analyst I positions involves a seven-week program. The first four weeks include academic/classroom instruction, followed by two weeks of on-the-job training, and one week of both academic and computer training. On-the-job training is provided by a lead worker who is selected by a district office manager. Program-specific infor-

mation and interpersonal relations issues are presented and discussed in training. Trainees are tested each of the six weeks on cumulative material and must score 80 percent or better in order to be hired. A total of eight extra help staff have been hired from the client population and three have become permanent employees in the Medi-Cal Benefits Unit. Unfortunately, six to ten clients hired from the SUCCESS Centers to fill extra help positions have been terminated because they did not pass the civil service testing process.

A significant challenge for many former clients during training (and throughout their employment) is related to being absent. Missing even one day of training due to illness or lack of child care can result in not only a loss of pay, but also a loss of a significant amount of information, making it difficult to pass the training tests. All of this is compounded by the fact that the training experience is fast paced and covers a lot of information in a short period of time.

### *Impact*

Agency employees support hiring clients, especially since it sets an example for other county agencies and the larger community to hire public assistance recipients. Hiring clients also promotes increased diversity among the agency's employees, since the cultural, language, and income backgrounds of clients are often quite different from those of the agency's other staff.

Administrators and program managers have been pleasantly surprised by the high quality of employees who had been clients. The former clients are described as highly motivated, eager, committed, and very bright. For example, one agency employee who was impressed by the former clients' passion for work noted, "We can teach anyone the tasks of the job, but we can't teach people to have a positive attitude about the work they do." In the case of former clients working in the SUCCESS Centers, one manager attributes the success of the centers to the very nature of having ex-clients as employees.

The opportunity to become permanent county employees is a significant accomplishment for individuals receiving public assistance. The welfare reform time limits have placed new pressures on public assistance clients to obtain both employment and long-term self-sufficiency. In the event that an individual hired as extra help does not pass the civil service testing process, he or she will leave the agency with a new set of transferable skills, including time management and interpersonal communications.

Although obtaining employment has the reward of income, it also involves new expenses such as transportation, child care, medical care, and work clothes. Although extra help staff do not have employer-provided health coverage, former CalWORKs recipients are eligible to receive transi-



tional Medi-Cal at zero share of cost for two years following their receipt of public assistance.

Another difficulty for former clients is that many are likely to have insufficient support networks in their personal lives. This not only intensifies their problems with child care, but also makes them less likely to have the resources needed to cope with some of the aspects of their new jobs (e.g., stress, feeling overwhelmed, interpersonal conflicts). In addition, former clients may not have the experience to handle such workplace issues as interpersonal tension/conflict with co-workers and managers, time management, or organizing the flow of work. Although these capabilities are required of any successful employee, this group of employees has had fewer work-related opportunities to acquire them.

The chief obstacle in hiring clients as permanent employees is the civil service application process. Although there are obvious benefits to becoming a permanent employee (e.g., health care, sick leave, job guarantee, wage increase), most clients hired as extra help do not successfully pass the civil service testing process. Many former clients perform their jobs successfully for a year or more, but they are not able to pass the civil service application process due to the broad nature of the questions and the lack of preparation for the panel interviews.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The San Mateo Human Services Agency supports hiring former clients and reports positively on their job performance and attitudes. However, as the welfare rolls decline, the pool of qualified applicants shrinks. Future staffing needs and caseload sizes, coupled with the ability to find qualified individuals among those on public assistance, will impact the agency's future efforts to hire former welfare recipients. Interviews with administrators, staff trainers, and former clients employed by the agency revealed that the following lessons have been learned in hiring TANF recipients to work in the agency:

1. It is crucial to find ways to address the obstacle of the civil service exam. One approach is to support supervisors in helping prepare extra help staff for the civil service exam and interviews. It remains to be seen if coaching from supervisors will be sufficient to help prepare former clients for successfully passing the exam.

The second, and more radical, recommendation is to develop a policy which exempts former clients from the civil service hiring process and grant permanent status to extra help employees who have demon-

strated on-the-job proficiency. In this way, advancement to permanent positions could be based solely on performance and the support of the employee's supervisor (e.g., letters of reference). However, this approach would need to be negotiated with the unions.

2. Job advancement requires new ways to address the need for support networks and soft skills. With regard to learning soft skills and constructing a support network, a mentoring relationship with a co-worker or supervisor during the first year of employment could be established to assist former clients with a more successful transition into the work world. The demanding nature of the job coupled with the lack of work experience can lead to the need for more support than may be the case for other employees. Mentoring relationships could focus on preparation for the civil service testing process, as well as provide former clients with a resource to acquire skills needed to deal with workplace issues and conflicts.

Another way to equip former recipients with soft skills is to expand internship opportunities for the client population. The internships can lead to the hiring of the best interns as extra help. An internship program would give former welfare recipients more time to gain on-the-job experience and the skills needed for successful employment and advancement. The benefits of internships have been illustrated in the success stories of former clients who participated in internships during the GAIN program. The extra support and transitional time significantly contributed to their retention and to the attainment of permanent employment with the agency.

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