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**SERVICE USE AND SERVICE NEEDS
AMONG LONG-TERM AFDC RECIPIENTS
IN SAN MATEO COUNTY**

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Center for Social Services Research (CSSR)

The Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) conducts research, policy analysis, program planning and evaluation toward the improvement of the publicly supported social services. Housed in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, the Center responds to the concerns of community professionals and consumers of services to develop research activities that are practice- and policy-relevant. The focus of the work is on populations that are considered needy or disadvantaged and on support to human service agencies through analysis of agency management, finance, professional development and service systems.

Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Research Response Team

The Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) was founded in 1987 and is composed of the directors of Bay Area county social service and human service agencies, deans of Bay Area graduate social work departments and foundation representatives. BASSC activities include directing educational programs, conducting applied research and developing social welfare policies. Housed at CSSR, the BASSC Research Response Team was organized in 1995 to respond quickly to the emerging needs of county social service agencies for information about their changing environments. Small-scale research projects are undertaken in close collaboration with agency administrators and program staff.

Please call (510) 642-1899 to request additional copies of this report or other CSSR materials.

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Executive Summary

In 1996, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) contracted with the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) and the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) at the University of California at Berkeley, to conduct a study of long-term Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients in San Mateo County. This report documents a two part study on the service use and service needs of those long-term AFDC recipients. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the characteristics, service use, and unmet needs of the long-term AFDC population in order to assist them in moving towards self-sufficiency. Phase 1 drew upon data collected from 148 long-term AFDC recipients who responded to a mail survey exploring their service use, service needs, and employment history. In addition, a comprehensive literature review of research related to long-term AFDC use was conducted. Phase 2 built on the findings from Phase 1 by gathering in-depth, qualitative data from 26 self-selected, long-term AFDC recipients on issues such as barriers to employment and needs for adjunct services such as child care. Concurrent with the UC Berkeley research, a county researcher conducted interviews with ten former long-term AFDC recipients selected by HSA staff and two HSA staff members to explore factors which contribute to AFDC recipients' successful transition off welfare.

New national legislation enacted by Congress in August 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, will replace AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants. Beginning in July 1997, adults in families receiving assistance will be expected to go to work within two years or lose that assistance. In addition, benefits for most recipients will be limited to five years. The San Mateo County HSA is redesigning the delivery of welfare benefits

long-term AFDC recipients in San Mateo County which can be useful for program planning and policy development.

The findings from this study illustrate that long-term AFDC recipients in San Mateo County are not unlike other long-term AFDC recipients in the rest of the country (Bane & Elwood, 1994; Cottingham & Elwood, 1989; Lie & Moroney, 1992). Common themes such as: (1) the perception that there were limited jobs available that low-skilled, inexperienced women could qualify for and would pay enough to support their families; (2) the need for safe and affordable child care; and (3) the importance of stable housing, were all emphasized by study participants as vital concerns. Despite numerous similarities, clear differences in job search experiences and service needs were found between respondents who were current AFDC recipients versus respondents who were former recipients.

This study provides an opportunity to review the service use and service needs of recipients, as well as, compare and contrast the characteristics of persons who are able to become self-sufficient versus those who may need governmental assistance for an extended period of time. Using a qualitative rating scale, researchers assessed the employment and self-sufficiency prospects of respondents.³ Recipients with good prospects for employability were those women who were already working, had completed some level of education, and had extensive personal resources and social support. Former recipients articulated that it was a “sense of readiness” and “a desire to get a job and get off AFDC” that assisted them in moving off welfare and into the workforce. Recipients who needed additional support and training before they could become fully self-sufficient comprised the majority of the current recipients interviewed. These women were hampered by their limited work experience, minimal job skills and education, and personal problems which made it more difficult to move off welfare. Finally, recipients with the poorest prospects for employment had severe deficits in

³ Please refer to the Employability Assessment on page 61 for more details regarding the use of this scale.

I. Barriers to Work

Barrier: The temporary and low wage nature of available jobs

Despite overall low unemployment rates and high job growth in San Mateo County, current recipients believed there were not enough good jobs in the county that they could qualify for, and that their skill levels were not adequate for them to support their families without AFDC. On the other hand, former recipients felt that there were ample job opportunities in San Mateo County, a belief that is confirmed by reports on the current economy. Almost all of the women interviewed had some prior work experience. However, jobs held were predominantly in the service sector, required fairly low skill levels, paid low wages, were often temporary and did not offer health or medical benefits. Several women articulated the importance of networking to get a job, but indicated that they were unable to develop the personal networks that could help them find employment.

Recommendation #1

San Mateo County has specified that self-sufficiency is met by persons who have incomes of at least 200% of the Poverty Level, a level that reflects the income vitality of families living in the County. In order to enable more families to achieve self-sufficiency, the County should continue to make support services available for a period of time to insure that recipients are stabilized in their employment, and are able to provide adequate care and support for their families before benefits are eliminated.

Possible Action Steps

- Continue to provide follow-up programs which assist families in dealing with problems that arise after finding employment such as children's illnesses, problems with child care and transportation, or difficulty with co-workers or supervisors. Maintain and foster current collaborations with community-based organizations that provide a wide range of support services for families transitioning off aid to help ensure that there is a safety net available.

Communication skills, which included proficiency in reading and writing, as well as verbal communication, were also mentioned frequently.

Recommendation #2

Most analysts and policy makers agree that a logical first step for work programs is to let the market determine employability rather than conducting extensive assessments, job training or job placement services. However, survey and interview responses suggest that a significant proportion of long-term recipients have minimal job skills or experience and may require additional training, mentoring or other intensive services. Concerted efforts to tap into the expertise of businesses in the private sector for job training.

Possible Action Steps

- Collaborations with community colleges working with private businesses, could be developed to create a link with the business community for ongoing job training including training specifically focused on job advancement. Such training might involve business staff offering courses at community colleges or providing on-the-job training to newly hired AFDC recipients. These linkages between recipients and business employees could also serve as networks to assist long-term AFDC recipients with an “inside connection” for entry level jobs.
- Computer companies and businesses in the high-tech industry may be solicited to provide computer skills and office skills training. Course work should, at a minimum, train recipients on basic word processing and data entry. For recipients with little experience in the workforce, the County should continue efforts to expand internships or work-study agreements with businesses to provide such experience.
- Continue assessments of recipients’ literacy levels as part of GAIN so that recipients can be tracked into appropriate classes, perhaps offered at job sites via Project Read. Collaborations with local community college and adult education programs could also be developed to meet these educational needs.

that are conducive to finding and maintaining employment.

II. Housing

Close to two-thirds of current long-term AFDC recipients reported receiving housing assistance (primarily Section 8 housing) within the past two years. Among those interviewed in person, most had received this support for the last 2 to 10 years. The majority felt that their housing situation was fairly stable and had no plans of leaving Section 8 in the near future. A few women expressed that they would not be able to survive on their AFDC were it not for their Section 8. A few former recipients expressed frustration at the complexity associated with applying for and receiving Section 8. HSA workers felt that long-term housing assistance provided recipients with a disincentive for moving into the workforce.

Several women discussed the difficulties of convincing landlords to rent to families with Section 8 vouchers as well as the poor physical condition and dangerous surroundings of some public housing. Only two of the women interviewed in person had ever heard of the Family Self-Sufficiency Program. One was currently participating in the program while the other had heard about it through a friend. Those unaware of the program were very interested in finding out more about it

Recommendation #3

Considering that San Mateo County has among the highest housing costs in the Bay Area, the stability achieved by families who have housing supports cannot be underestimated. Conversely, poor families not receiving these benefits are chronically vulnerable to homelessness. As housing is fundamental for a successful transition off welfare, the County should continue to explore all opportunities to secure additional resources which can be committed to increasing available safe and affordable housing.

Possible Action Steps:

them to lose their jobs. In addition, respondents shared the difficulties they encountered when trying to get a relative or friend to be eligible to provide child care and receive payments from the county. These difficulties included relatives' reservations about disclosing personal information to the county and the delayed schedule of reimbursements to eligible child care providers. HSA staff articulated that maintaining a consistent child care provider was important for a recipient's smooth transition into full employment. Most of the women desired the following qualities from child care providers: licensure; a child-safe, home-like setting; and that the provider be mature, child-oriented and easy-going. Some respondents also wanted providers who would be flexible about not charging for extra hours if parents had to work odd hours or overtime.

Recommendation #4

Since safe and affordable child care is vital for the success of any efforts to move people into the workforce, the county should continue to explore options to make child care widely available for all who need it on a long-term basis.

Possible Action Steps

- Baby-sitting co-ops which are staffed by other AFDC recipients may help women as they look for work. Continue to utilize funding for child care made available through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act to help AFDC recipients locate child care at the beginning of employment and for a time-limited period after recipients have been employed.
- The county can assist current recipients to become licensed child care providers. Training and assistance with formalizing child care status can provide a supply of low income child care providers for both recipients moving into the workforce and the working poor who cannot afford expensive child care. In addition, the county can explore options to facilitate the process for relatives to be reimbursed for the cost of child care.
- Continue efforts to insure consistency in child care by assigning each family a

Recommendation #5

To the extent that very little data are available about biological fathers' involvement in caring and supporting their children, greater efforts to track their whereabouts should be undertaken.

Possible Action Steps

- Efforts should be made to connect child support collections to existing databases of financial institutions, as is the case with the Department of Motor Vehicles.
- Continue to develop collaborations with the District Attorney's Office to facilitate information sharing about absent parents.