

## Chapter 10

# Utilizing Hotline Services to Sustain Employment

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With the passage of 1996's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the welfare system in the United States shifted from one focused on eligibility and economic assistance to one focused on propelling welfare recipients into the workforce. The new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) applied lifetime limits to assistance and required states to devise and implement welfare-to-work plans that address barriers to employment and move welfare recipients into sustainable jobs in the workforce. Under the California program (CalWORKs), adult recipients of aid who do not meet exemption criteria are required to meet work requirements by participating in welfare-to-work activities in order to maintain their cash assistance.

In an effort to remove these barriers to employment, California counties, including Santa Clara, have developed and implemented a series of support services for CalWORKs participants. One such service is the JobKeeper Hotline, which provides round-the-clock counseling, crisis intervention, and information and referral services. The hotline is considered a preventive measure, designed to help employees retain their jobs and help the unemployed gain access to needed resources that may help them find a job. This is a case study of how Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA), along with community partners, developed and implemented a telephone hotline to address the complexities of obtaining and maintaining long-term employment for CalWORKs recipients.

### ***BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW***

In terms of welfare-to-work strategies, it is noteworthy that there is little or no published evidence of programs such as JobKeeper which provide in-

formation and referral services specifically geared toward job retention through a hotline for welfare recipients. Although hotlines have been in existence for decades, until recently they have generally been geared toward crisis intervention in fields such as domestic violence, child abuse, rape, suicide, and health-related issues. In an early study of their use, Rosenbaum and Calhoun (1977) cite several reasons why hotlines came to be regarded as accepted, successful methods of disseminating information and referrals to the public:

1. Callers have more control over the situation
2. Callers can remain anonymous if they so choose
3. Hotlines can break geographic barriers
4. Operators can also remain anonymous

Practitioners in health, mental health, and social service agencies have utilized hotlines (or helplines, as they are sometimes called) to provide information and referral to callers since the 1960s. Typically, agency-based hotlines provide an opportunity for caregivers to intervene in the lives of those who would seek only anonymous help. Hotline callers are usually in the midst of a crisis and are not sure where to go for necessary services (Loring and Wimberley, 1993).

Hotlines have been developed to address a diversity of social and health problems and issues. Researchers have explored hotline use in assault and rape (Renner and Wackett, 1987), learning problems (Adelman and Taylor, 1984), suicidal ideation (Glatt, 1987; Glatt, Sherwood, and Amisson, 1986; Green and Wilson, 1988; Rustici, 1988), parenting stress (Elmer and Maloni, 1988), child abuse (Fandetti and Ohsberg, 1987), and eating disorders (Burket and Hodgin, 1989), to name a few. Similarly, the use of the telephone has been particularly effective in connecting elderly persons with resources. Providing community referral has been found to be an important service component, as the problems facing older adults tend to involve less situational crises and more long-term problems with life management and independence (Winogron and Mirassou, 1983). Many are afraid to seek services due to feelings of shame, suspicion, or fear of losing control of one's life, such as forced institutionalization. Calling in to a hotline offers the advantage of help while protecting the elderly from having to self-identify (Loring, Smith, and Thomas, 1994).

In addition to seeking information and/or referral, more callers are utilizing hotlines and helplines as a means of social support. Helplines have become an established part of many community social services, and Goud (1985) states that their popularity stems from accessibility, increased willingness of people to seek help in times of stress, declining opportunities for

intimate relationships, or a preference for a quick fix. Ouchi and Johnson (1978) attribute the increase in helplines to the weakening or lack of traditional forms of social support such as the family, church, and community.

Several studies suggest that callers to helplines are seeking, first and foremost, social support, which can be defined as "the degree to which the person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others" (Thoits, 1982, p. 147). According to Thoits, basic needs include affection, esteem or approval, belonging, identity, and security, to which others would add instrumental, informational, and emotional support (Himle, Jayaratne, and Thyness, 1989; Kauffman and Beehr, 1989). It is often the case that callers to social service hotlines do not have an emergent problem but rather a need for someone to engage in active listening.

Although telephone hotlines and helplines are available in many communities, it is an ongoing challenge for agencies to evaluate their effectiveness for the people who use them. First, many hotlines and helplines are anonymous, with no contact information given for follow-up, so outcome assessment is impossible. Although some hotlines are able to ask callers about satisfaction with services, client satisfaction alone is a weak indicator of success, as clients of social services often report satisfaction at rates in excess of 90 percent (Gingerich, Gurney, and Wirtz, 1988). Measuring effectiveness through outcomes can also be difficult, as it is not always clear which outcome to measure. There is no universal definition of effectiveness, and different programs operate with different outcomes in mind.

### **SANTA CLARA VALLEY EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT INITIATIVE**

In February 1996, County Supervisor James T. Beall Jr. and the social service agency's executive team initiated a local planning effort to address the anticipated welfare reform legislation. Local businesses, community groups, public and private agencies, and public assistance recipients were invited to participate in a series of community forums to address welfare reform as a community issue. The goal of these discussions was to find ways "to strengthen low-income parents' access to the resources they need to care for their children through employment and related service" (Employment Support Initiative [ESI], 1996, p. 4).

To facilitate this process, an oversight team was created, chaired by Supervisor Beall, the SSA director of income maintenance, another elected county supervisor, a county executive, and an expanding group of community leaders. This group, in turn, initiated a variety of specialized work teams that focused on specific issues such as child and youth services, im-

migrant issues, housing, and job-retention services. In subsequent months, these work groups gathered information, refined ideas, and made recommendations that eventually led to the development of a concept paper titled "The Santa Clara Valley Employment Support Initiative: An Agenda for Children and Their Families." The JobKeeper Hotline was one of the recommendations.

Planning for the JobKeeper Hotline began in October 1997, and it opened in July 1998. It is a hotline to help CalWORKs participants find ways to deal with crises on the job as well as gain support for locating employment. JobKeeper was developed through the collective efforts of the Career Retention Employment Support Team (CREST), one of the initial work groups of the ESI, whose goal was to assist customers in obtaining long-term, sustainable employment. Currently, the team is represented by over twenty organizations that provide education, training, and support services for CalWORKs participants throughout Santa Clara County. The purpose of the collaboration was to develop and coordinate employment and retention services countywide and provide feedback to the CalWORKs Employment Services Retention and Advancement Units in the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (Employment Support Initiative, 1999).

Although CREST team members provided most of the services utilized by CalWORKs participants, many of the participants were either unaware of available services or did not know how to access them. To address the information gap, CREST envisioned a hotline which customers could call anytime of the day or night for resource information and referral. Although the primary goal of the JobKeeper Hotline is to maximize job retention through immediate assistance in addressing barriers to employment, it was agreed that callers would also be able to get help with non-employment-related issues.

### *CONTACT CARES, INC.*

Contact Cares, or simply Contact, is a nonprofit organization (accredited by Contact USA and affiliated with Lifeline International and the United Way of Santa Clara County) that provides a twenty-four-hour per day, seven-day per week hotline service to Santa Clara County. The agency is staffed by trained volunteers and operates seventeen other hotlines in addition to JobKeeper. The services include telephone listening and support, crisis intervention, information and referral, and answering services. Specially trained personnel are on hand at all-times to lend support and assistance to volunteers. Using an extensive computer library, Contact is able to access a network of community resources and links to human service agencies. The

agency is funded by individuals, corporations, foundations, religious organizations, service clubs, and the United Way.

Contact training includes a paraprofessional thirteen-week, fifty-hour course consisting of listening skills, strategies for helping those in need or under stress, and basic understanding of human personality and needs. Although Contact training is open to anyone, teens and college students with interests in psychology, counseling, or human services are encouraged to gain experience through volunteering. Both experiential and didactic training are used through lectures, readings, and facilitated group work. Although Contact training is available to those who wish to volunteer (for one dollar per hour of training), sessions are also open at a higher fee to professionals and community members seeking to enhance their skills.

To recruit volunteers for the agency, Contact sends out public service announcements to a variety of media sources and makes personal recruiting presentations at locations such as churches, schools, community colleges, job fairs, and corporations. In addition, Santa Clara SSA publishes an all-staff memo prior to each biannual training session in an effort to recruit agency staff members to serve as volunteers. There is no age limit (young or old) to volunteer in the program, but youth under the age of eighteen must be accompanied by a parent and often take a more limited number of calls. Volunteers generally work four-hour shifts, although some of the late-night volunteers have opted recently to work a full eight hours while phone lines are less hectic.

Trainees are given assistance and practice with communications skills and are trained to refer callers to mental health and community resources. Twelve hours of apprenticeship with experienced Contact volunteers is included, and volunteers are asked to make a minimum commitment of eight hours of service per month for a period of one year. Training topics include the following (Contact of Santa Clara County, 1999):

- Orientation
- Communications I and II
- Crisis intervention
- Family relationships
- Adolescence/young adult issues
- Mental illness
- Human sexuality
- Parenting/parental stress
- Domestic violence/child abuse
- Death and dying
- Depression/suicide

- Substance abuse
- Reality therapy
- Caring confrontation
- Community resources
- Job retention

The thirteen weekly training sessions last three hours per night, with an initial orientation session at the outset and a Saturday workshop to complete the training. At the final Saturday workshop, Contact staff members explain policies and procedures with the potential volunteers and conduct a final interview to determine the applicant's suitability. The final steps are taken when new volunteers sign an agency confidentiality agreement and have their pictures taken and displayed at the agency for security reasons.

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency assists Contact in recruiting volunteers to work the hotline and also provides meeting space for many of the volunteer training sessions in addition to the sessions reserved specifically for JobKeeper training. The following is a description of the JobKeeper hotline service along with information and statistics on the first year of operation.

### **JOBKEEPER**

When contacting JobKeeper, callers reach trained, volunteer phone counselors who can provide support, information or assistance, crisis intervention, or active listening. Some counselors speak Spanish or Vietnamese, and all counselors have access to translation services. Each JobKeeper volunteer is familiar with and actively uses the Santa Clara County Job Support Resource Directory.

Produced by the Employment Support Initiative in conjunction with CREST, the directory is a comprehensive source of information and referral related to child care, employment services, education and training programs, legal and mediation services, and transportation. These topics were selected based on the most commonly requested subjects from callers during the first year of operation. Each listing in the various sections contains agency name, address, phone and fax numbers, eligibility and fee requirements, transportation options, physical accessibility, languages spoken, and listings of any other available services. Sections of the directory are color coded according to topic so that volunteers can quickly refer to the appropriate section to provide the caller with resources.

In its first year (July 1998 through June 1999), JobKeeper received a total of 770 calls, and 68 percent of the callers were female. The types of re-

requested information included child care, skills or education, transportation, job search/résumé, and legal services. The job search requests accounted for nearly one-third of all calls. The language spoken was primarily English (87 percent), and 80 percent of the calls came from the city of San Jose, where 77 percent of all CalWORKs participants reside. Half of those who called in were currently employed.

At present, JobKeeper receives between forty-five and sixty-five calls per month, reflecting a continuous rate of increase despite limited advertising. When calls come in, callers are asked how they heard about the program. Although most referrals come from community providers, an increasing number of callers are referred by a friend or a relative, or are self-referred based on seeing a flyer. With the growing success of the program, staff members are exploring ways to reach a larger population.

### **SUCSESSES**

One of the ways which JobKeeper has continued to improve its services is through the development of a seamless system of service. For example, individuals who call during business hours with child care questions are now transferred to the Community Coordinated Child Development Council for immediate response by a professional. Likewise, callers seeking employment information are now transferred directly to a professional counselor at the Employment Connection. Because of the many calls related to child care and employment, it has proven beneficial to have a professional in these fields available during peak calling times to provide immediate assistance and free volunteers to assist other callers.

Given the unusually low rate of unemployment in Santa Clara County in the late 1990s, many people were able to move off cash assistance and retain support services for a period of up to one year. This is an important time for participants to utilize JobKeeper in an effort to sustain long-term employment and self-sufficiency. In addition, although JobKeeper was designed to assist CalWORKs participants in finding and maintaining jobs, persons who are no longer eligible for CalWORKs may still utilize JobKeeper for information and referral to non-CalWORKs services.

To further improve services, JobKeeper is updating their technology to include a faster and more efficient phone system to allow volunteers to be available to answer additional calls. The CREST committee continues to meet on a quarterly basis in order to monitor operations and identify opportunities for improving the service.

### CHALLENGES

In implementing any new pilot program, there will be challenges related to establishing and marketing the service. For example, in an effort to expedite start-up, the county neglected to utilize an 800 number, rather than a local area number, requiring some callers to make a long-distance call to access the service. This was corrected immediately and incurred additional expenses to change printed flyers and marketing tools (key chains and magnets) that advertised the local number.

Another ongoing challenge is to maintain a sufficient pool of trained volunteers. Given the extensive array of community resources, JobKeeper volunteers must be able to absorb a large quantity of information, quickly learn to use the available technology, and apply the policies and procedures that govern their work.

In the context of a strong economy and low unemployment rate, maintaining employment has become more of an issue than obtaining a job. In the past, employment services were geared primarily toward finding jobs and helping people remove the barriers to gaining employment. Now, the challenge is to make it possible for participants to obtain the skill upgrades needed to sustain long-term employment. Competition for good jobs is an issue in Silicon Valley, and earning a living wage is a continuing challenge when prices for food, housing, and services continue to rise. It is only through increased skills that persons moving off cash assistance will be able to compete for living-wage jobs.

Finally, program evaluation is also a continuing challenge. Although volunteers are expected to record information from each call, the crisis nature of the calls does not always lend itself to answering service evaluation questions. Also, because the service is confidential (no name or number), there appears to be no easy way to evaluate through follow-up whether the service has been of use to the caller. Although the numbers of people utilizing JobKeeper has increased, it seems equally important to assess the impact of the hotline service on the callers.

### LESSONS LEARNED

In looking back on its past two years of services, those involved with the planning and implementation of the JobKeeper Hotline identified the following lessons related to program development, staff training, and evaluation:



1. When launching a pilot program, it is important to develop a marketing plan. It is helpful to seek out the opinions of the people who will be served when deciding how to best reach that target audience.
2. It is necessary to provide initial and ongoing training for program volunteers. When orienting volunteers to the new program and whenever introducing them to additional technology or program responsibilities, it is important to conduct informational sessions utilizing skilled trainers.
3. A system needs to be in place to update program data. It is necessary to keep updated information by identifying someone to work exclusively on this task, or to make it a job duty for all volunteers.
4. It is necessary to incorporate evaluation into every program. It is important to have information that can help clarify how a program is being utilized, as well as identify areas for improvement.
5. It is sometimes necessary to provide for the confidentiality of program staff as well as for program customers. The location of the JobKeeper program is kept a secret, except to those who administer or volunteer for the program. Due to the sensitive nature of information exchanged and safety concerns of volunteers who work through the night, the location of the JobKeeper program is not advertised.

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