

San Francisco County's Homeless Benefits Linkages: A Promising Approach to Serve Those Most in Need

VALERIE LYNNE KANE, MPP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018, the City and County of San Francisco embarked on a new effort to ensure that homeless individuals, especially those facing the most daunting conditions in their communities, enrolled in and received public benefits. Both the biennial Point in Time Count and a data assessment of individuals entering the homeless service system through Coordinated Entry showed that many people experiencing homelessness did not receive any of the public benefits intended to support the lives of those struggling to make ends meet. Comprising two management staff as well as outreach eligibility workers and supporting nonprofit staff, the Homeless Benefits Linkages program highlights the impact of strategy focused on identifying and removing barriers for a highly vulnerable population. While some factors of the homeless service delivery system in San Francisco are unique to the city, the core elements

of the program can be replicated by other counties. Alameda County's recent experience targeting benefits enrollment during the intake process for Project Roomkey illustrates the possibility that San Francisco County's work could be replicated and expanded through additional shelters and access points in Alameda County. As all counties and communities face the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth assessing efforts that can alleviate the challenges faced by Bay Area communities' most impacted residents. Homeless Benefits Linkages holds promise as a practice that centers the needs and challenges of people experiencing homelessness, and strategizes collaborative efforts focused on improving quality of life through public benefits that provide nutrition support, access to medical care, and income enhancement.

Valerie Lynne Kane, MPP, Management Analyst,
Alameda County Social Services Agency

San Francisco County's Homeless Benefits Linkages: A Promising Approach to Serve Those Most in Need

VALERIE LYNNE KANE, MPP

Introduction

Public benefit administering agencies are considered by many to be the agencies of last resort, a web within the social safety net that is intended to catch individuals and families who have exhausted all other resources but still have needs to be met. This perspective is worth reframing when considering that there are access points in the safety net that indicate that public benefits may have provided a path of deflection averting some level of the profound crises experienced by clients. One of these access points is a homeless shelter. For most clients, a shelter is truly an “agency of last resort,” where people seek to meet one of their most basic and fundamental needs. While one cannot know if access to food, medical care, or the extremely modest income support provided through public benefit programs could have prevented someone’s episode of homelessness, it is likely that these supports and services could improve aspects of shelter guests’ lives and assist in reinforcing a path to stability.

Recognizing that people experiencing homelessness frequently come from historically disconnected populations, the City and County of San Francisco’s Human Services Agency (HSA) embarked on an effort in 2018 to provide targeted enrollment in public benefit programs to individuals accessing services across a range of programs. HSA’s current policy is that, “rather than simply referring clients to the address of a county building, the goal of benefits linkage is to meet clients where they are, streamline business processes whenever possible, and provide

personalized support to help them navigate application systems.” Understanding that for homeless individuals, “many are in crisis, have a long history of trauma, and may have a difficult time managing complex, bureaucratic systems,” one organizing goal is to avoid the need to visit a county building for initial benefit approval. Comprising a Homeless Benefits Linkages Manager, Program Specialist, along with outreach Eligibility Workers, the Homeless Benefits Linkages program focuses strategy and collaboration making progress toward enrolling homeless individuals in programs that support their well-being.

Background

On a single night in January 2019, just over 8,000 individuals were identified as experiencing homelessness in Alameda County, according to the Point in Time Count.¹ Just across the bay, a nearly identical number of individuals were identified in San Francisco. In addition to the standard questions about health status, income, location of last residence, and cause of homelessness, San Francisco’s Point in Time Count included questions regarding access to benefits. Fewer than 50% of respondents received support from primary public benefit programs, as follows:²

1. Everyone Home. (2019). Alameda County Homeless Count & Survey: Comprehensive Report 2019.

2. San Francisco Local Homeless Coordinating Board. (2019). San Francisco Homeless Count & Survey: Comprehensive Report 2019.

Social Service Program	PIT Count Respondents Receiving Benefit
CalFresh or WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children)	43 percent
General Assistance	30 percent
Medi-Cal	20 percent
CalWORKs (the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids)	2 percent

Among individuals who reported not receiving public benefit programs, more than half responded with an issue that could be resolved with more targeted application assistance: 15% did not think they were eligible, 14% had never applied, 5% had applied and were waiting for a response, 6% reported being denied benefits, and 14% reported that their benefits had been cut off. Additional barriers were identified as follows:

Barrier	PIT Count Respondents
Did not have the required identification	20 percent
No permanent address	15 percent
Paperwork was too difficult	8 percent
Did not know where to go to seek assistance	6 percent

All of these identified barriers could be addressed through targeted assistance and navigation through the application process. Data on the lack of access to public benefits by people experiencing homelessness was subsequently confirmed by the work of the Homeless Benefits Linkages program. Staff found that 40% of individuals coming through Coordinated Entry access points had zero income, and 45% of individuals entering Whole Person Care lacked Medi-Cal coverage.

Key Elements

While the City and County of San Francisco have a Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing that is separate from the HSA, Homeless Benefits Linkages is housed within HSA due to its focus

on connecting program participants and shelter guests to HSA benefit programs. Funded through a combination California Department of Social Services Housing and Disability Income Advocacy Program (HDAP) and California Department of Health Care Services Whole Person Care (WPC), the Homeless Benefits Linkages program manager position is placed in the HSA Department of Policy and Planning. As the program's work is primarily focused on strategy and inter-agency collaboration, the program manager reports to the Deputy Director of the Division of Policy and Planning, rather than the Economic and Self-Sufficiency Programs Division. The work of Homeless Benefits Linkages is as varied as the homeless direct service programs themselves. There are programs intended to connect individuals experiencing homelessness to targeted services—such as WPC, HDAP, and Expanded SSI Advocacy Services—and to site locations, such as Navigation Centers and traditional shelters.

The essential functions noted in the program manager's job description include: establishing working relationships with staff across a range of departments to evaluate the current procedural pathways for homeless persons seeking public benefits; identifying and analyzing pain points; developing recommendations for improved procedures and processes; assuming a lead role in designing and driving implementation of new collaborative initiatives related to benefits linkage for the homeless population; and developing and implementing a strategic plan that spans the city's service systems while documenting operational changes necessary to make public benefits more accessible to people experiencing homelessness.

A program specialist works at the direction of the program manager. This position's essential functions include: providing logistical support to benefit navigators and assigned HSA Eligibility Workers at navigation centers, shelters, and other locations; providing application system training on MyBenefitsCalWIN (MyBCW) and CanWIN Lite; managing end-users and assigned HSA eligibility workers' functionality on various benefit

application platforms; and managing benefits application data dashboards.

Additional county staff involved in the work of HSA's Homeless Benefits Linkages include HSA eligibility workers located on-site at Navigation Centers. While distinct from traditional homeless shelters due to their flexibility regarding partners, pets, and possessions in order to remove barriers to sheltering homeless individuals, Navigation Centers operate through Coordinated Entry and do still have similar components to traditional shelters operated in other counties.

The Navigation Centers have site managers and case managers, who are employees of the non-profit agency that runs the site. At intake, the case manager assigns the guest to an on-site eligibility worker to conduct a benefits status check, and offers to submit a MyBCW application for benefits the guest does not already receive. The on-site eligibility workers conduct roster checks to compare site rosters to MyBCW and conduct outreach if an application has not been submitted for a guest. At weekly meetings, site staff discuss the list of guests who have not had a MyBCW application submitted, and must be able to identify why each guest is on the list, even for valid reasons, such as a client missing a case management meeting. It is the responsibility of the case manager to continue to re-engage with guests who do not wish to apply for benefits, in an effort to explain the benefits and services they could receive. Eligibility workers are responsible for explaining eligibility requirements to guests, and case managers are responsible for helping guests fulfill those requirements. Case management supervisors monitor MyBCW submissions for timeliness and missing names, and eligibility worker supervisors monitor case processing compliance.

In addition to the work at Navigation Centers, there is also a Benefits Linkages Project at a large traditional shelter and at two Coordinated Entry Access Points. The benefits navigator at these sites is a community partner staff position who specifically works to guide clients through the MyBCW process. Once an application is submitted, eligibility workers

are assigned to process the application in the usual manner. At one shelter, designated CalFresh eligibility workers conduct expedited phone interviews to assist in quickly linking shelter clients to benefits.

From the Homeless Benefits Linkages program manager who oversees interagency and programmatic strategy and the program specialist who monitors data and supports program implementation to on-site eligibility workers and non-profit staff case managers and benefits navigators with their respective supervisors, there is an ongoing team effort across San Francisco to ensure that vulnerable clients apply for and receive HSA benefits and services that can enhance their health, food security, and income.

Recommendations for Alameda County

This author recommends that Alameda County consider implementing some of the work done by the Homeless Benefits Linkages team, as feasible, in the county's larger shelters and Coordinated Entry points. Before commencing this work, it could be helpful to incorporate questions about benefits access and application challenges in the upcoming 2021 Point in Time Count, so management can best assess needs and "pain points" for future navigation assistance. In the 2019 Point in Time Count, Alameda County respondents did note that benefits/income (33%) or employment assistance (30%) could have prevented their current episode of homelessness. Other assistance identified, such as mental health services, alcohol/drug counseling, and rental assistance, could also be obtained through public benefits administered by the Alameda Social Services Agency. It would be helpful to know if difficulties in the application process, such as those identified in San Francisco, were a deterrent to homeless individuals accessing services that could ameliorate their crises.

Alameda County could implement this methodology through a designated program specialist position, outreach eligibility workers assigned to large shelters, and/or existing Coordinated Entry access points, in addition to supporting funding

for a community partner benefits navigator position. Some components of this work have been implemented via Project Roomkey, the California Department of Social Services program providing hotel rooms for homeless individuals and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Benefits assessment and enrollment is included in the intake process for guests entering the hotels by case managers trained by a Workforce and Benefits Administration Program Manager, and follow-up for these applications is monitored through an email address assigned to Project Roomkey. For sites and access points beyond Project Roomkey, an identified benefits navigator or guidance by specified outreach eligibility workers could help increase the percentage of people experiencing homelessness who receive the full range of benefits available to them. Strategy and monitoring work done by a program specialist could further ensure that gaps are identified and that emerging efforts lead to an increase in benefits enrollment at targeted locations.

Conclusion

The primary goals of the San Francisco Homeless Benefits Linkages Program are to: 1) meet clients where they are; 2) streamline business processes; and 3) provide personalized support to help navigate public benefits application systems. These goals are met through a modest staffing structure that includes a program manager, program specialist, eligibility workers, and a community partner-staffed benefits

navigator. While some of the factors in the City and County of San Francisco are unique to their own, internal homeless and care systems, there are positive implications to their work that merit consideration by other counties. In Alameda County, Homeless Benefits Linkages programming could be incorporated by expanding existing business processes piloted at the Project Roomkey sites and tested at other large shelters and Coordinated Entry access points. For people who experience homelessness, each episode is a crisis. Targeted support to assist these individuals and families in obtaining benefits could enhance their quality of life—through nutritional support, medical care, and modest income enhancement. It is possible that the stability public benefits can provide may prevent future experiences of homelessness, ensuring that it is homeless shelters, not public benefits administering agencies, that are truly the resources of last resort for unhoused clients.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Cindy Ward, Homeless Benefits Linkages Manager at the City and County of San Francisco's Human Services Agency, for accommodating me and providing helpful resources during a challenging time. Thank you for being a gracious host and source of valuable information. I would also like to thank Alameda County Social Services Agency Director Lori Cox and Assistant Agency Director Anissa Basoco-Villarreal for allowing me the opportunity to participate in BASSC.