

Simulation-Based Training: Developing Napa County Employees

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The training of new child welfare employees continues to evolve to ensure the best, most up-to-date, innovative education and training is available to ensure incoming child welfare professionals are best equipped to serve the community and clients. It is no surprise that Child Welfare is a stressful and high-risk career, and it is vital for employers to ensure their staff are properly trained before going into the field to work with clients. The increasing popularity of simulation-based training in the child welfare field has proven to be successful by properly preparing staff to have confident real-life interactions with the clients and populations they serve. California is a forerunner in the simulation-based training modality, as are other states such as Oklahoma, Illinois, Minnesota, Vermont, and Virginia.

The Sim-Lab in Alameda County, managed and staffed by the Training and Consulting

Team (TACT), has shown proven positive results within the Child Welfare division by ensuring staff have had the opportunity to learn new client-engaging soft skills by being allowed to "try on" these skills in a simulation environment that mirrors the "real life" encounters that they will have when interacting with their clients. This simulation-based environment is also a way for supervisors of new employees to view and monitor the skills and areas of development of new employees, allowing them to appropriately tailor learning plans for them as they enter the in-person work with clients. As Napa County Child Welfare Services (CWS) continues to evolve the Staff Development Unit and Induction Series for new employees, implementing simulation-based training could be beneficial for ensuring staff maximize the county-provided training before entering into real-time fieldwork.

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Introduction

The use of simulation-based training is rapidly spreading throughout the United States in Social Services. Simulation-based training gained traction as efficient training in the medical and aviation fields in the early 1900s (Owen, 2016). This manner of training was especially popular in these fields because of the reduction of risk and liability. Simulation-based training has continued to gain momentum and spread into many fields of practice, including the child welfare field.

Simulation-based training is a way to develop an employee's skills, knowledge, and abilities in a safe, controlled, and confidential environment (Asakura & Bogo, 2021; Meekyung, Pnina, Lee, & Kohtz, 2020; Minnesota Child Welfare Training Academy, 2022). It allows trainers to provide the employee with real-time direction and feedback on performance while reinforcing strong skills and developing identified areas of need. The simulation environment in which the employee will practice their learned skills will mirror the actual work environment, thus building the employee's confidence and skill set and preparing them for real-life in-person interactions. This environment will allow the employee to try new skills, make common mistakes in an environment that is observed, and create new skills. Employees can also practice their commitment and dedication to their new careers (Asakura & Bogo, 2021).

Within simulation-based child welfare training, the trainer chooses a scenario from a catalog of preset scenarios or develops a new tailored scenario based on the current learning objective and format of the

roleplay. The trainer then observes and guides all those involved in the simulation. The employee follows the same family scenario throughout multiple simulation-based trainings. Prior to the simulation, the employee is briefed on what to expect during the simulation. Following the simulation, there is a debrief of the activity. These debrief sessions allow the employees and trainers to ask and answer any questions and have an open discussion about real-time critical thinking, client engagement, safety and risk, and investigation practices. This also allows staff to identify any unconscious biases they have when working with families and develop skills to help them overcome biases to effectively advocate for families.

Advantages of Simulation-Based Child Welfare Training often include:

- Fosters professional development through real-time feedback
- Provides context through application
- Creates custom simulations based on specific roles and job duties
- Helps strengthen critical soft skills used during client engagement
- Encourages reflection on strengths and development areas

Disadvantages of Simulation-Based Child Welfare Trainings may include:

- The expense of creating a training environment
- The amount of time added to training
- The maintenance and update of technology used in training

Alameda County Simulation Lab

In 2017, the Alameda County Training and Consulting Team (TACT) developed an

in-house simulation-based training program for Alameda County Social Services based in Hayward, California. New child welfare employees participate in and complete a 10-week training series in Alameda County that includes Common Core 3.5, County-based trainings, and Simulation-based training. The Sim-Lab training is used to help develop and reinforce such skills as client engagement and interviewing techniques, safety and risk assessment, real-time decision-making abilities, and the ability to problem-solve in real-time and potentially high-stress situations.

During this training period, the TACT team monitors and records all training and assignment completions, e-learning, and any missed trainings, and schedules regular supervision with new workers to discuss their learning. There are 18 Common Core 3.5 trainings, 13 county-specific training, and roughly 3-4 opportunities to complete a simulation-based training in the Sim-Lab offered to all new employees.

The Sim-Lab is a furnished room that can replicate a studio apartment or a courtroom based on the training exercise and scenario the employee will participate in. In this Sim-Lab environment, new employees in the training and onboarding phase of employment will get the opportunity to practice their learned soft skills, client engagement skills, and investigation skills, all in a safe and secure environment. Prior to participating in the Sim-Lab activities, the employee will review and sign a consent form releasing consent to have their simulation-based activity recorded for learning purposes. During the simulation training, each employee will participate in a 3-5 minute simulation with actors playing

specific roles in the assigned scenarios. The TACT team will prepare the Sim-Lab by using fake props in the room to observe the employees' observation and investigation skills. These props are safely secured before and after the simulation and include things such as fake weapons, drugs, needles, knives, pills, and alcohol bottles. After the simulation, the employee is able to return to their desk and review their recording while the other employees are completing their simulation. After all employees have completed their simulation activities, they convene and review all recordings and allow time for feedback. In this open feedback environment, employees can give and receive constructive criticism on what they did well and areas for improvement regarding their simulation activity.

Though Alameda County is unable to gather quantitative data on the impact of the simulation-based training, the qualitative feedback from staff has reflected the success of the program. The participants report they were initially nervous about participating in the role-play activity, but 100% of them stated that the exercise was valuable and allowed them to build their confidence and skill set in a safe environment, making it easier for them to make real-life home visits and court appearances.

The Sim-Lab is fully staffed by Alameda County employees who maintain the lab, schedule trainings and activities, and play the role of the actors in the scenarios. Alameda County has contracted with UC-Davis to teach and train the trainers who are playing roles of actors in scenarios to ensure a high level of realistic acting. This training also teaches the trainers to be able to coach the new employees, identify when they are struggling, and how to recognize

emotional distress during simulations and be able to coach and redirect the employee. To participate in a Sim-Lab activity as an actor, an employee must complete a Simulation Lab Certification. To complete this certification, the employee will participate in a two-phase overview and training, which includes a 3.5-hour training targeting the employee's acting and improvisational skills to teach them how to play realistic roles during the Sim-Lab activities. They also complete a 3-hour overview of the Sim-Lab, equipment, use of props, and how to create a safe learning environment for employees.

Simulation-Based Training for Napa County Child Welfare Professionals

In October 2021, Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) – Child Welfare Services (CWS) implemented a nine-week, County-specific induction series for new employees that accompanies the state-mandated Child Welfare Common Core 3.5 training and gives new employees Napa County CWS-specific information regarding policies, practices, and community partners. This training is facilitated by the Staff Development Supervisor, Child Protective Services Worker (CPSW) trainer, and the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who are current employees of Child Welfare Services. During this training series, the new employees have a set schedule that includes training and orientations to:

Napa County New Employee Induction Training	
Week 1: Welcome, Orientation, Facilities, and Administration	Week 6: Placement, CWS Activities, and CANS Certification
Week 2: Data Systems in Child Welfare	Week 7: Working with Community Partners
Week 3: Important Practice Modalities, Dependency Overview, and Court Orientation	Week 8: CWS Activities & Working with Networks/Clients Services
Week 4: CWS Programs (Emergency Response) and Working with Latinx Populations	Week 9: CWS Activities & Working with Networks/Clients Services continued
Week 5: CWS Programs continued (Resource Family Approval, Family Preservation, Dependency Investigation, Family Time, Child and Family Team, Ongoing Adoptions)	

Prior to the implementation of these structured training services, Napa County did not have a robust training and induction for new child welfare employees. Through

the implementation and rollout of this new employee training, Napa County has taken the feedback from the new employees who have completed this training and the

established employees who participate in facilitating the training and has revised the training on an ongoing basis to ensure that they are providing the most up-to-date information and training to new employees. The feedback from new employees reflects that they feel supported during the training process and can focus on learning new information and not on case management. They are able to learn and hone new skills prior to going into fieldwork with clients. The leadership team who supervises the new employees has observed that they are more prepared and better suited to enter the fieldwork after the completion of the Common Core 3.5 and county-specific Induction Series.

Proposal

Currently, Napa County has a Training/Induction Unit that has established a unique induction series that educates new staff on County-specific information and processes, has continuous training opportunities for staff, and is always open to training improvement to ensure that their staff are properly prepared with the best skill set to serve their clientele. The basis of the simulation-based training modality, the implementation in Alameda County, and the pros and cons of this training have been reviewed with the Napa County CWS Training Unit, the Management of CWS, and the Director of Napa County HHSA. The benefits of this training format would be an asset to HHSA and will start with implementation and development in CWS. The Training Unit will review the current Induction Series calendar and see where simulation-based training would be beneficial to insert into the calendar.

Napa County should not look to spend any money at the implementation of the simulation-based training. CWS currently has a Family Time Unit in which they conduct the parent-child visitations. Currently, a room mimics the home-like setting with couches, tables, storage, play areas for the children, and a double-sided mirror that allows for observation. This room will be a perfect setting to begin simulation-based training with new staff. The trainers will be able to see and record the simulations of the new employees and allow for real-time feedback about employees' skills and interactions. Should Napa County decide to invest in recording equipment, they would need to collaborate with Information Technology (IT) to ensure that the room is properly equipped for any equipment that would need to be hardwired for recording. Alameda County is currently using Amcrest recording equipment and is in the process of upgrading to a 6-camera system from Reolink that will allow better recording and voice commands through the speakers for the total price of \$650.00

While Napa County does not have a contract with a college to provide training to those who would participate in role-play, they do have employees who are willing to play the part of actors in simulations. The fact that the current employees have real-life experiences serving the clientele will bring valuable insight, best practice skills, and the ability to provide constructive feedback to their peers.

Reviewing Napa County HHSA as a whole, other areas have been identified that could potentially benefit from simulation-based training in the future. All departments, including Alcohol & Drug Services, Self-Sufficiency Services, Mental Health,

and Public Health, could benefit from training simulations that would address skills needed for in-person and telephone calls with clients. HHSA could benefit from simulation-based training when promoting existing staff to supervisory and management positions by allowing them to practice skills needed when delivering performance appraisals, conducting supervision with staff, delivering performance improvement plans and progressive discipline, and having hard conversations with staff and clients.

Conclusion

Simulation-based training has proven to be successful in the social services and child welfare field by allowing staff a safe environment to practice their learned soft skills, client engagement and interviewing techniques, investigation skills, and safety and Risk assessment. Staff are able to receive real-time feedback and direction to reinforce strong skill sets and build upon identified areas of need.

The Alameda County TACT team has created an effective simulation-based training facility that supports current best practices. The feedback from the new employees and supervising staff regarding this training modality has been positive and encouraged Alameda County to continue with its simulation-based training.

Napa County CWS has proven to be open and willing to try new training modalities when they are proven effective and is willing to tailor their Child Welfare Induction Series to incorporate simulation-based training. At this time, Napa County will not have to invest any additional funding into implementing this

training on a trial basis; however, if there is success with this training modality and it were to be replicated through the HHSA, there could be additional costs to secure a training site and updated technology.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the Alameda County Training and Consulting Team (TACT) for providing information, direction, and observation of their Simulation Lab. Special thanks to Michael Little, Maryam Farooq, Delia Torres, Sadig Algazzali, and Jonathan (JR) Rodriguez for their hospitality and willingness to share the resources they developed in order to build a stronger public servant workforce throughout the Bay Area. Thank you to Napa County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) Director Jennifer Yasumoto, HHSA Child Welfare Services Deputy Director Veronica Piper Jefferson, and CWS Staff Services Supervisor Fatima Gutierrez for taking the time to help guide and the willingness to hear new ideas that could have a positive impact on the professional development of the employees that serve Napa County.

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