

**SUPPORTING AND GROWING ITS OWN: SONOMA COUNTY'S  
RESPONSE TO A CALL TO ACTION TO NURTURE AND DEVELOP  
LEADERS WITHIN THE HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT**

**Virginia Pierce**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Across all 58 California counties dialogue about workforce needs to continue. Filling vacancies, position recruitment, career advancement and staff development are critical components for any human services agency. Once staff are hired, the provision of supportive, continued professional growth opportunities can be challenging. Consistent workload demands as well as limited departmental resources are just two of the reasons ongoing staff and leadership development opportunities are often not prioritized. In 2012, at a time when fiscal resources and morale were low across the state, Sonoma County looked at the landscape of its current staff, especially related to the retirement eligibility of supervisors and senior managers. Realizing that over 50% of supervisors and managers were eligible to retire at that time, the Sonoma Human Services Department (HSD) took a risk and invested time, talent and resources in its internal team to actively plan for nurturing and developing the next generation of leaders. Now in its fourth year, Sonoma County's Mentor Project and Employee Leadership Track (ELT) is ahead of many counties and is a truly integrated part of the Sonoma County HSD culture. The programmatic and cultural development created by Sonoma County HSD not only addresses the need for internal leadership development, but it also supports positive staff morale and improvement in the overall workforce competencies for those participants working within human services.

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**Background/Introduction**

“Adequate workforce” is a topic that is consistently discussed, pondered and planned for across all 58 California counties’ human services agencies. The specific reasons for the discussions may vary; yet, every California county desires to find and hire competent employees, retain these employees and support their professional competencies and growth. Smaller to midsize counties often share some of the same concerns and goals on topics related to workforce. Recruitment pools are often smaller than in the larger counties, and competition to keep staff from transferring to larger counties makes the need to retain hired staff even more critical. Pending retirements of leadership positions pose a greater impact in smaller counties where senior managers often take on multiple roles and tasks. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) took an in-depth look at this in May of 2012, finding that over 50% of its management team was eligible to retire and 70% of its supervisors were eligible to retire now or within the next 5 years. (Retirement eligibility under Sonoma County’s Plan A is defined as completing ten years of service and reaching age 50, OR completing 30 years of service regardless of age OR reaching age 70 regardless of the amount of service credit). Sonoma County implemented a dual track succession planning model to identify and foster the next generation of human services leaders to address this issue and to hopefully tackle some of the

other workforce issues faced by mid-size counties. The approach developed is a multilayer approach offered in Sonoma County through Human Resources-Staff Development. It emphasizes employee development across divisions and engages employees in various ways to support them reach their potential. Beginning as a pilot in 2012, both the Mentor Project and the Employee Leadership Track (ELT) were developed to not only foster leadership, but to also support employees to get out of their comfort zone, formulate career goals and attain these career goals. Led by the HSD director, the program is spearheaded and implemented through staff development. Potential participants must apply to participate. Division leadership selects those who may participate each new cycle. Now in its fourth year, the program and participation rates remain strong. Lessons learned have also materialized. Feedback has been collected and positive impact has been seen. Leadership and skill development experiences within the Sonoma County Human Services Department are now cultural norms within the organization; they are considered part of internal best practices for the staff spending their days serving the community. Monterey County faces similar challenges to Sonoma County. Although specific data is not provided, DSS staff are aware of retirement plans of division leaders. Staff recruitment and retention remain ongoing concerns. Learning and researching about what is working well within Sonoma County, specific to succession planning and leadership development, can now support a similar discussion and action plan within Monterey County. This can help develop tangible programs that genuinely support Monterey County DSS staff in their own professional development and lead to positive morale and better workload outcomes for the department as a whole.

### **Key Elements**

The Sonoma County HSD pilot program planning process was inclusive, engaging staff, external

county leadership, internal HSD leadership and the union on the needs assessment and design of the program. From this input, two main program components, or tracts, were developed within Sonoma County HSD. This two-fold design responded to learning styles, time limitations, various needs, voiced concerns and identified wants and ideas of the group. The two program models developed are The Mentor Project and The Emerging Leader Track (ELT).

The Mentor Project is designed to give employees the opportunity to mentor with a leader whose job, leadership style, career path or even personal life story is of interest to them. Leadership panels come forward from all divisions to discuss their current positions, a bit about their career path story and their mentoring style. Staff interested in being mentored have an opportunity to ask questions about the skills needed for the position and the career path the mentor took to get there. After the panels, potential mentees apply to the program and request their top three choices for a mentor. Mentors decide the number of mentees they will have, between one and four, and work with HR to select mentees based on all information provided. The project runs for three months, two times per year, about four hours each month. The program design allows staff to participate in the spring or fall. Prior to being assigned mentees, the mentors are invited to an orientation to discuss ideas about how to work with the mentees, possible activities to do with mentees, etc. Mentees reported they got involved in the project to gain confidence, to get out of their comfort zone and in response to feeling stuck in their current positions. They also enjoyed informal access to more senior management. Mentors who are engaged desire to help develop future leaders, while also seeing it as a chance to enhance their own leadership skills in a more informal manner. In its fourth year, there has been an average of 21 mentors serving 33 mentees each year. Cost is minimal; the mentorship is done in house and the program is limited to 12-15 hours per mentor experience.

The Emerging Leader Track (ELT) is a four-year/four-level educational investment that runs parallel to an academic calendar. Participants enter at Level 1, although some participants based on their position held, will enter at a higher level. Potential participants submit an application of interest that is reviewed by leadership. Names are recorded and sorted by Staff Development. Individuals are selected based on their application, satisfactory employment status and the capacity/current workload within their division. Once selected, Staff Development purchases and administers the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) for each new ELT participant. The information is provided to each participant at the start of the ELT participation and is used throughout their time in the program. Classes are held on “dress down” Fridays, meeting about two times per month from September through May, with lunch provided. There is a group project emphasis in the second semester of each ELT cohort/level. Three cohorts are active at this time, with little turnover of participants. Commitment of the participants to the process is strong and the development of the fourth level is well underway, using consistent feedback from the current program participants to design the level. Each level of ELT dives deeper into various leadership topics, with Level II using a hand selected Training Academy in lieu of sending staff to the Supervisor Training offered for new Bay Area supervisors. In ELT, participants enjoyed building relationships across divisions and the ability to see the intersection between all the work done throughout HSD. Participants, overall, prefer in-house trainers to those contracted from other entities. Below is an example of the instructional costs for the ELT Level III. This cost can vary a bit per level. Food costs, the completion of the MBTI for each first year participant and other one-time costs are not listed below.

### **Emerging Leader Track Level 3**

#### **Instructional Costs**

**2015-16**

<b>Critical Thinking</b>		
<b>Title</b>	<b>Trainer</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Critical Thinking: Making Good Decisions and Backing Them Up	Consultant	\$1,800
By The Numbers: Collecting, Analyzing and Applying Data	In-House	\$0
<b>Resource Management</b>		
Negotiating Successful Contracts	UC Davis	1 Day
Fiscal Essentials for Public Human Services	UC Davis	1 Day
<b>People Management</b>		
Creating a Culture of Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose	Consultant	\$1,800
Life Balance & Self-Care	In-House	\$0
Emotional Intelligence 3 - StrengthsFinder	Consultant	\$1,800
<b>Communication</b>		
Media Relations & Public Presentations	UC Davis	1 Day
Marketing Human Services	UC Davis	1 Day
<b>Planning</b>		
Systems Thinking	Consultant	\$1,800
<b>Change Facilitation &amp; Continuous Improvement</b>		
Why Change, and How	Consultant	\$1,800
<b>Organizational Acumen</b>		
Political Acumen	In-House	\$0

Project Management		
Project Management	UC Davis	1 Day

**Lessons Learned**

Since 2012, Sonoma County has developed a solid leadership development program that is now accepted as part of the culture of Sonoma County HSD. Although the program is on solid footing, Sonoma does not shy away from continuous feedback and making changes to the program as part of its lessons learned. The county is also working on the development of outcome measures that can truly tell the story of those who participate in one or both of the programs. Specific to the ELT, the cohort, multi-year model with the same participants continuing together in the same cohort is well received. This supports learning and the building of trusting relationships across division lines. This has also allowed for some best practice experiences to emerge for those families involved in services and supports across divisions. Staff report having a greater understanding of the work done by other divisions and that they are now much more comfortable reaching across division lines to get questions answered and problems solved. Sonoma has learned that the participants prefer internal HSD trainers over contracted trainers and that training offsite, away from their offices, contributes greatly to the success of ELT. Lessons to ponder specific to the ELT Level III (in its first year) and the developing Level IV cohorts continue to emerge. Thus far, it appears this is a time where competencies and skill sets vary most. Some staff, theoretically ready for entrance in Level III or Level IV, remain at an entry level position within HSD, while others have been promoted or personally taken full advantage of the program, therefore attaining higher levels of skill. There is somewhat of a void or small break at Level III/IV among the group. Some participants are not yet at a level in their

career where they can, or have had the opportunity to, apply the learning from the first two years in ELT. Others may have chosen to not work toward attaining a higher position within the department yet wish to continue in ELT. Sonoma Staff Development does see sensitivity in this and the possibility of how it could affect the group dynamics moving forward.

Lessons learned specific to the Mentor Project stem from observation and discussion. The three month timeframe for this project works well, and allowing for a time-of-year choice minimizes impact to both the mentees and mentors who may have differences in seasonal workloads. The flexibility and individual design for the mentor/mentee relationship is a true benefit of the program as was validated in the one-on-one interviews. Participants interviewed all independently cited that the relationship with their mentor really “help[ed] with their shyness or personal communication skills” which was a personal goal for each of them participating in the program. One person described that he/she believes The Mentor Project gives a great opportunity to staff who may be “diamonds in the rough” to achieve great things. All stated they gained skills and competencies in the area of communication, citing the individualized or smaller group make-up of this program as key. Both programs combined (including mentees, mentors and ELT) directly impact less than 10% of the full staff of HSD; yet, the observed impact across the department is at a much greater level. Familiarity and support of the program exists across the board, within participants and non-participants alike. The program is perceived as a sincere investment by senior leadership in the growth and well-being of all staff. In 2012, when this pilot began, the overall constructive effects on morale and positive impact might have been underestimated. It would be interesting to evaluate this more moving ahead, as well as to determine how the program might change with the return of county-wide leadership development options.

## **Recommendations:**

“Timing is everything” has been a cliché used for centuries for a reason. For human service organizations, timing is critical when considering internal change and opportunities. In Sonoma County the data showed both the imminent need for leadership development and the pulling back of the county-wide, staff development program offerings. This made it the perfect time to develop and implement this program across all HSD divisions. Straightforward retirement data fueled the drive for all to be invested in a department-wide leadership project. Four years later it is a cultural norm, woven within the organization.

Monterey County is experiencing similar timing. Although specific data has yet to be provided, division staff remains aware of retirement plans of division leaders. Dialogue specific to recruitment, retention and leadership development often occurs informally within Monterey County DSS. Family and Children’s Services (FCS) recently developed its own SAVE (Support and Valued Employees) workgroup. Staff Development recently assigned a Bachelor’s level student to develop a Staff Mentor Program for her Capstone Project. These efforts align with the recommendations below specific to possible program implementation within Monterey County DSS.

- 1) Data baseline: Work with DSS HR using the MC definition of “retirement eligible,” to obtain aggregate retirement data on the Executive Team and Senior Managers to share with DSS staff. Target for completion 9-1-16.
- 2) Pilot Mentor Project Development: Obtain support from Executive Leadership and the union to host a department-wide workgroup, organized via Staff Development/CSUMB intern, to develop the pilot mentor project. Workgroup would meet June through August 2016. Recommendations presented to Executive

Leadership in September of 2016. Workgroup staff time: 4 hours per month for 3 months; suggested mentor pilot participant staff time: 4 hours for 3 months-plus 1 hour orientation.

- 3) FCS SAVE committee: BASSC participant to meet with SAVE committee, DSS Staff Development and division representatives to provide debrief regarding Sonoma Leadership Programs and various support staff practices, and to brainstorm specific to overall DSS recruitment, retention and leadership development. Group will develop a plan of action for 6, 12 and 18 months. Target date 10-1-16. Staff time: 4.5 hours for participants (3-90 minute meetings) and 8 hours for BASSC participant.
- 4) Mentoring Pilot development: Led by CSUMB intern, overseen by Staff Development, create resource e-binder specific to mentoring pilot program development to include information summary, applications, budget, baseline data, exit data, evaluations and a sustainability plan upon the intern's exit. Intern time 40 hours for Capstone Project. Staff Development 8 hours
- 5) Mentoring Recruitment: Upon completion of pilot development, utilizing resources obtained through Sonoma County, create a Survey of Interest for supervisors/managers to act in the mentorship role. Create a Survey of Interest and Application for interested staff participants. Create a 60 minute orientation for the mentors as well as a 60 minute end or mentor pilot debrief session for both mentors and mentees. CSUMB intern and staff review committee time: 8 hours for form development, 2 hours for review team.
- 6) Feasibility study for Monterey ELT: Meet with HR, county LOD staff, Bay Area Academy training staff and interested workgroup representatives to complete a

feasibility study specific to a modified ELT to be offered for DSS staff. Target date for recommendations 12-1-16. Staff time: 6 hours per participant. Budget will be determined as part of this study.

### **Conclusion:**

Sonoma County's Leadership Development Plan is a proactive response to an identified, concrete need. Its Leadership Development program design also responds to the goal of maintaining and growing staff competency and work performance. The design is inclusive and takes into account various learning styles and limitations in time commitment. Sonoma's efforts to support and grow the competencies of its workforce addressed many findings of a recent CALSWEC workforce study specific to trained social workers. CALSWEC, in the midst of a huge task to learn more about social work, public sector workforce, interviewed social workers and supervisors about their work. Although in draft format, the study clearly portrays that staff chose the following magnitude of importance for *On-the-job learning (including coaching, mentoring, shadowing, practicing, etc.)*: "55% as their most important contributors to job satisfaction and performance." Further, this draft report outlines many program supports counties need to develop that were already established by Sonoma in 2012. Five of CALSWEC's ten recommendations (listed below) have already been implemented through Sonoma HSD's Leadership Development Plan: 1) Give staff more room for growth. Offer opportunities for training, including those to improve social and interpersonal skills; 2) Work on building stronger teams; 3) Find ways to support more on-the-job learning; 4) Help identify training needs, which will tap into staff's desires for professional growth; 5) Beef up training for supervisors (esp. the soft skills). The CALSWEC report focused on social work staff, yet these themes can be applied across all divisions. It further gives weight to the need for internal staff development

opportunities, like those available in Sonoma County. Positive secondary impacts from Sonoma's program are just beginning to emerge, from noted job promotions to better intra-agency communication and overall better morale in the workplace. There is much to be gained from implementing programs such as these, possibly providing a multi-layer, positive impact to both the internal and external customers we serve. At a time when fiscal resources and morale were low across the state, Sonoma County HSD took a risk and invested time, talent and resources in its internal team. Now part of the Sonoma HSD culture, Sonoma County is ahead of many toward supporting and growing its workforce competency and overall satisfaction within the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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