

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES IN A SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCY

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INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to predict whether certain child protective services cases will have repeated incidences of child abuse based upon attributes we can identify at a home visit?

Are there simple administrative procedures we could implement to significantly reduce our G.A. and AFDC case loads by eliminating ineligible households?

Where are the best locations to site AFDC field offices if we want them to be as close as possible to client residences?

Should all children in foster care be placed in ethnically matched homes?

The Alameda County Social Service Agency (SSA) has committed itself to finding answers to questions like these. In fact, according to Jill L'Esperance, Deputy Director of the Alameda County SSA, the activities of a social service agency represent a type of malpractice if management does not know how its programs are working. Through its research and evaluation programs the Alameda County SSA is able to understand the effectiveness of its programs and why they are effective. This kind of understanding enables a large agency to allocate limited dollars to the best programs and to regularly implement effective new programs.

For my BASSC Executive Development Internship, I studied Alameda County's research and evaluation activities. My experience suggested many factors that San Mateo County should consider in undertaking research and evaluation activities for San Mateo County HSA.

OVERVIEW OF ALAMEDA COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY'S RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PROGRAM

Alameda County SSA has a Planning Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) whose work is devoted entirely to program analysis and planning. The activities of the PERU enable the Agency to plan social service programs and allocate scarce resource in the most cost-effective manner possible. While the actual methods and strategies employed to carry out research and evaluation sometimes cause disagreement among Agency staff, there is general consensus in the Agency that the PERU's work is crucial, particularly in an era of intense public concern over the outcomes of services offered by government agencies.

Following are specific examples of projects completed by the Agency. A more extensive list of research projects completed by the Agency is presented as Appendix A.

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Examples of Research and Evaluation Projects in Alameda County

Physical Reabuse Study

In the Children's and Family Services Department, a study was conducted on factors associated with physical reabuse of children. The study enabled Agency staff to develop an actuarial model for predicting reabuse and to actually estimate the desired number of home visits for specific clients in order to reduce the risk of repeat child abuse incidents.

Effective Black Parenting

In 1995 the Zellerbach Foundation funded a pilot "Effective Black Parenting" ("EPB") program which involved classroom instruction in a peer group setting. Course content includes several modules on topics like physical punishment and more positive disciplinary methods. An evaluation of the program completed by the PERU found that for certain types of clients, EBP is an effective way to preserve and strengthen families. The results of the evaluation have suggested to planners that EBP is most effective for highly motivated clients who are most likely to use agency resources. Based upon the success of the pilot program Alameda County SSA intends to continue offering EBP to selected client groups.

CA7 Bar Code Study

The Social Services Agency faces a large mismatch between resources available for case management and numbers of cases on hand in the Economic Services Department. This mismatch has resulted in the creation of case banks ("transfer desks") where thousands of cases are tended by a small number of available staff. Although it is the Agency's practice to discontinue aid to those who are found to be ineligible or who refuse to submit to an examination of their eligibility, limited staff resources make it difficult to validate eligibilities on an ongoing basis.

Recently, the Agency's Quality Assurance Unit ("QA") has initiated a program of scanning bar codes on eligibility questionnaires from GA recipients. Each case has a unique bar code printed on the return envelope. Automated scanning of all returned eligibility questionnaires enables the QA to identify cases who are ineligible for continued assistance based upon their unwillingness to cooperate with an audit. Preliminary results of an evaluation completed by the PERU show that the CA7 Bar Code scanning procedure could increase the number of GA discontinuances by about 180 percent. This translates to savings for the Agency of about \$700,000 annually. Based upon the cost savings generated by CA7 Bar Code scanning for GA clients, Economic Services plans to implement a CA7 Bar Coding procedure for AFDC recipients.

Service Excellence Training

In recent years there have been many complaints that social workers and other Agency staff are rude and inconsiderate toward clients. In response to these complaints, management contracted with an outside company to conduct mandatory "Service Excellence Training" for all Agency

employees. The PERU is conducting a before and after study to determine whether Service Excellence Training creates an improvement in client satisfaction levels.

Selection of Research Topics

I was interested to learn that research topics and the work load of research and evaluation staff is determined through a somewhat ad hoc process. Although annual budgeting and departmental planning processes set some guidelines for research staff, the research program is most valuable when it is flexible and can realign priorities in order to respond quickly to requests from top management or elected people. Research priorities change throughout the year as policy discussions occur. One of the most important reasons for having an inhouse research and evaluation program (versus using outside consultants on a contract basis for specific assignments) is that staff are flexible to shift their focus as issues arise.

The PERU, in consultation with top management go through a formal research design and development process to determine specific research questions and methodology.

Staffing

There are four full-time professionals within the Alameda County Social Services Agency whose primary assignment is research and evaluation. Will Johnson, Ph.D. coordinates the PERU and reports to Jill Esperance, the Deputy Director. Two management analysts report to him. Tom Clancy is a program specialist in the Children and Family Services Division. He reports to the Children and Family Services Director and has a workload that is primarily focused on child welfare policy analysis. It is important to note that in addition to these four positions, there are several program specialists in who do short evaluations as part of everyday program management.

The four research and evaluation professionals are assisted by several interns and university students who assist with data collection and analysis, library research and report writing. This support staff varies in size from 4 to 6 at any given time. My discussions with managers in Alameda County emphasized the importance of these interns, many of whom work on a volunteer or work/study basis, to the overall research and evaluation mission. The Agency's research and evaluation activities would not be affordable were it not for this flexible, relatively low cost work force of interns and students.

Estimated Cost

Table 1 provides an estimate of the total cost of Alameda County's research and evaluation activities. Table 1 does not reflect any expenses for overhead costs such as clerical expenses, or costs associated with management time when it is spent reviewing and discussing research projects. Nor does Table 1 reflect costs for student interns who work as volunteers or are paid various forms of stipends or fellowships by sources other than Alameda County. It also does not include costs associated with studies completed by outside consultants.

**Table 1. Social Service Agency Research and Evaluation
Estimated Cost Alameda County Social Service Agency PERU**

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| Research and Evaluation Staff | \$250,000 |
| Part-time interns | <u>\$ 18,000</u> |
| Total | \$268,000 |

CHALLENGES FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY R&E PROGRAM

Program managers and top executives in Alameda County described many challenges and issues that they must consider in administering research and evaluation of social service activities. Several of these challenges are discussed in this section.

Controversial Results

All of the individuals I interviewed for my internship described the difficulty in conducting truly objective research in an environment where publicized results can be controversial. For example, while considering a G.A. grant reduction, the Alameda County Social Service Agency commissioned a study of rental housing prices in Alameda County by an outside consulting firm. The study found that housing prices would be unaffordable to G.A. recipients living on a reduced grant and served to validate the claims of various advocacy groups that the reduced grant would cause many G.A. recipients to become homeless.

In another situation, a study of flex time for Social Service Agency workers concluded that flexible work hours should create no diminution in productivity. This study was the basis for labor agreements which offer workers enormous flexibility in selecting their work hours, a result that has created a work scheduling nightmare for many supervisors.

Finally, the CA7 bar coding study described earlier created some difficulties because of its recommendation that a new activity (CA7 Bar Code scanning) be implemented. Labor apparently interpreted the recommendation as "additional work" without hiring of new staff. In Alameda, additional work requires labor and management to meet and confer and to revise labor agreements. According to managers I spoke with, a better programmatic review of this report, which was completed by the PERU would have helped to avoid labor's response to the CA7 Bar Coding study.

The lesson for other counties considering research and evaluation activities is to recognize that when a manager asks a research professional to carry out objective research, they need to be prepared to deal with what they find. Those involved in research and evaluation must consider carefully what potential results of a study might be, and how they intend to use results. This includes careful consideration various alternatives for framing a research question and presentation of results. In spite of controversial results that research and evaluation activities occasionally generate, everyone I spoke with emphasized the importance of objectivity in research projects. One research staff person commented to me that the reason the PERU in

Alameda County is so successful is that they are never asked to carry out research in order to support or validate an a priori conclusion.

Centralized versus Decentralized Research & Evaluation

In Alameda County most research and evaluation staff within the Social Service Agency report to the Deputy Director, Jill L'Esperance in the executive division. Research topics are frequently developed and priorities determined by top management. This arrangement is consistent with the belief that central administration has the broadest view of the agency's overall mission. Several individuals in central administration commented to me that research and evaluation is most creative, objective and impartial when it is one step removed from actual program operations. Several managers suggested to me that research conducted by staff who are also involved in program delivery can be biased and constrained by the operational constraints that face program staff on a daily basis.

At the same time, program managers emphasized the necessity of a "marriage" between research/evaluation activities and program operations. Several described problems which arise when staff who don't understand program operations attempt to understand case data and recommend changes to program operations. One program manager expressed a general rejection of research conducted by an individual outside of her division. The flex time study described above is one example of a disconnect between top management-sponsored research and programmatic realities.

Overall, the tension that exists over whether top management or program managers are best able to define research questions and use the results to plan more effective programs suggests the critical importance of program level input in planning conducting, reviewing and presenting research projects. Program level input also helps to placate the sentiment of a small minority of staff who feel that all research and evaluation is a waste of time. This minority opinion was summarized by one social worker who stated "everyone should be out on the line dealing with clients; it's just too bad out there for us to spend money on research and evaluation staff who don't understand what's going on out there and don't help with the case load."

Experimental Design: Purity Versus Practicality

Another issue that seems to divide research staff and program managers in Alameda County is optimal research design. The research staff I spoke with emphasized that valid research must be based upon a true experiment. A true experiment involves random assignment of a "treatment" and a true control group. A true experiment involves significant amounts of time and financial resources. It also requires that the treatment and control groups are large enough to produce statistically significant results.

Program staff on the other hand, frequently expressed dissatisfaction with research staffs' insistence on pure experimental design. They commented that research design considerations must be balanced with practical considerations such as cost and timing. They also described ethical problems associated with pure research design when a treatment is denied to a client group solely for research purposes. Another problem with a pure experimental design is the client sample

sizes that are required in order to produce statistically significant results. Apparently, some research projects in Alameda County have been dropped due to inadequate sample sizes, in spite of significant staff interest in results. Finally, there were many comments about whether pure research design actually produces results that are any more useful *or* valid for social service program purposes.

Following are typical comments made by program staff relating to the issue of optimal experimental design:

"Sometimes a process evaluation is good enough, but research staff always insist upon classic experimental design which is costly and time consuming"

"Research staff don't want to give me the practical information I need to plan my program, they want to give me the information that they want me to have, which sometimes doesn't mean anything".

Funding-The Grants Roundtable

Dr. Lum, the Director of the Alameda County Social Service Agency, is very enthusiastic about seeking outside funds for research and evaluation activities. He strongly encourages his staff to monitor professional journals and Federal publications for funding opportunities. To this end, under his directorship, the Grants Roundtable was convened. The Grants Roundtable includes staff from all of the Social Service Agency divisions. The group meets to consider various collaborative projects and to establish priorities for inter-agency collaborative projects. A significant emphasis is placed upon identifying funding sources that are consistent with program priorities.

The Alameda County Social Service Agency overall has had some success in obtaining outside grant funds for new programs. For example, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) provided approximately \$1.2 million in funds to establish the "Family Reclaim" program in Alameda County. This program offers a variety of services to families with a history of substance abuse and utilization of child welfare services. Services offered under Family Reclaim include parent mentoring, parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, after school recreation and transportation services.

Overall, however, the Grants Roundtable's pursuit of funding has been rather disappointing. According to staff I spoke with, grant opportunities from private foundations for social service activities have decreased in both number and size. Most of the funding opportunities identified recently by Alameda County staff are for grants in the range of \$20,000 to \$50,000, and require an evaluation component. This funding level is often too small to finance implementation of a pilot program and evaluation.

Over the last year, the Grants Roundtable has identified a fundamental shift in the way private foundations distribute funds for social service programs. Specifically, foundations used to establish their funding priorities internally and provide information to agencies who could then craft a proposal in an open proposal process that would meet foundation objectives. In recent

years, the funding process has become less open, as foundations contact high level managers directly to participate in discussions of social problems and possible collaborative partnerships to address these problems. Foundations actually make their funding commitments as they are defining their priorities. This shift in foundation funding procedures means that staff-level funding searches will have a declining importance while networking of top management with foundations and community leaders might be a more productive way to secure outside funding for social service agency program and evaluation.

In spite of shrinking funding opportunities from foundations to Social Service Agencies, Alameda County staff did indicate that foundations are particularly concerned about results of the new programs they fund. The existence of research and evaluation expertise within a social service agency would increase its chances of receiving funding.

LAUNCHING A RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PROGRAM IN SAN MATEO COUNTY

This section provides an initial framework for establishing research and evaluation activities in San Mateo County

Potential Areas of Study

The SUCCESS Research and Evaluation Design Team has produced a draft report which provides a compendium of questions relating to the effectiveness of human service programs implemented as part of SUCCESS. This document, when finalized will suggest many topics that a research and evaluation coordinator might undertake. In addition to the Research and Evaluation Design Team report, I discussed research and evaluation needs with several program managers in various HSA divisions. The following topics were suggested:

Income Maintenance Who is the long term AFDC recipient population in San Mateo County?
What factors seem to contribute to long and short term utilization of AFDC in our county?

Youth and Family Services

What are the long term impacts of decentralized school-based services such as those offered in the FUTURES program? Is there a relationship between participation in the FUTURES program and reduced participation in activities such as drug abuse, criminal behavior and teen pregnancy? Does participation in the FUTURES program improve school achievement on a long term basis??

JTED

What is the long term impact of the SUCCESS Workshops on participant earnings and utilization of AFDC? Which individuals receive multiple county services (by type of service)?

Housing

What is full array of services offered by non-profit organizations who receive Community Development Block Grant funding in San Mateo County ? What opportunities exist for improved collaboration between non-profit organization, county agencies and communities?

Has the Housing Authority's Family Self-Sufficiency escrow credit worked as an incentive in moving families toward self-sufficiency?

Comparison of San Mateo and Alameda Counties

Alameda and San Mateo differ in terms of their overall size, demographic profiles and the overall extent of social problems which require consideration by a social service agency. Overall Alameda County is larger, less affluent and has a much larger caseload of social service agency clients. Table 2 documents some the differences between the two counties.

The differences in size between the two Counties and their social service agencies suggest that San Mateo County's research and evaluation program should be somewhat smaller in scope than Alameda County's.

Existing Resources

Preliminary plans in San Mateo County call for one new person to be hired to coordinate HSA's research and evaluation activities. The relatively small envisioned staffing suggests that research and evaluation activities should draw upon existing resources as much as possible. For example, program staff in the various divisions should be utilized when necessary. There is already an enormous amount of case data managed by the Business Systems Group which could be used for research purposes. (This is discussed more thoroughly in Section VII).

Another important resource is the Community Information Mapping Project sponsored by the Community Information Program. The Community Information Program has maintained a database of health and human services in San Mateo County for over twenty years. Users of the database have often looked to see where services exist and where they may be sparse. The ability to display this information on a map and see the actual service location, or conversely, gaps in service, greatly enhances the ability of service providers, policy makers and others to analyze the work they do. Information about the agency's target client population is also available.

The following is a sample of projects completed by the Community Information Program to data:

- The distribution of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cases in the county for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency
- Concentrations of persons age 55 or over in Foster City for the Foster City Parks and Recreation Department and its planning for a senior center.
- Outpatient health clinics for the Peninsula Community Foundation

Staffing of Research and Evaluation Activities

Qualities of Successful Research Coordinator

Based upon my discussions with staff and observations in Alameda County Social Services Agency, I have several recommendations regarding the type of individual that could successfully coordinate research and evaluation activities for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency. The person selected should be a visionary, assertive and naturally inquisitive person, someone who by nature constantly asks "why" and relentlessly pursues answers. This type of personality will always be thinking of new projects and new techniques for understanding why particular social programs are effective. Roger Lum commented that the ideal candidate for a research and evaluation position is a voracious reader. The ideal candidate will be in a relentless search for answers which keeps them in constant communication with key planners in the social services field.

Table 2
Comparing the Structures of Social Service Agencies in Alameda and San Mateo Counties

| | <i>Alameda County</i> | <i>San Mateo County</i> |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total Population (1996) | 1,362,900 | 695,100 |
| Percent of Total Households With Income Below Poverty Line | 29.8 % | 5.6 % |
| Number of Social Service Agency Employees' | | |
| Administration | n/a | 94 |
| Income Maintenance | 1,134 | 273 |
| JTED 116 | 106 | |
| Youth & Family Services | 525 | 220 |
| Total | 1,775 | 693 |
| Total Budget for Agency | | |
| Income Maintenance | \$ 445,840,187 | \$ 74,463,029 |
| Youth and Family Services | \$ 128,799,771 | \$ 37,029,751 |
| JTED \$21,160,492 | \$ 11,489,999 | |
| Administration' | n/a | \$1,906,659 |
| Total | \$595,800,450 | \$124,889,438 |

The Alameda and San Mateo County Social Service Agencies have some differences in how they are organized. The various divisions are roughly comparable but not identical in terms of which program functions are included. Staffing levels and budget amounts are presented for illustrative purposes. Under Alameda County's budgeting procedures, staffing and budget amounts for administration have been allocated to the various program divisions.

Dr. Lum also emphasized the importance of assertiveness in a research coordinator. In order to succeed in all of the aspects of a research and evaluation position (funding, framing research questions, acquisition of data, presentation of results and implementation of recommendations), the coordinator needs to be driven person, someone who takes initiative.

Several managers in Alameda County emphasized how important it is for a research coordinator to understand the political and social context of the research they conduct. A research coordinator must be able to frame results in a way that has applied value in a politically charged environment. They should have some expertise in public relations and communications. Managers also commented that the individual should have a certain stature within the social service organization that would give them access to top managers and insure that they are included in critical public policy discussions. In Alameda County, research staff are management employees with compensation equivalent to a program manager or management analyst.

An individual hired to coordinate research and evaluation activities must be flexible and understand realities of a political environment. He or she may be thoroughly engrossed in a particular study and asked to completely shift their focus to a project that has higher priority. They must understand deadlines that exist for a public agency. Due to time constraints they may be asked to conduct a study that is not methodologically optimal, with a "pure" experimental design, but which is good enough for its intended purpose.

I was interested to learn that managers Alameda County did not rank technical and statistical skills very highly as desirable skills in a research coordinator. Repeatedly, they emphasized the less quantitative skills discussed above.

Size of Research and Evaluation Staff

Throughout the Alameda County Social Service Agency, staff involved in research and evaluation indicated that a critical mass of research staff is needed for research and evaluation activities to succeed. The individuals I interviewed all emphasized that at a minimum there should be a research coordinator who should have at least one full time staff person to assist with data analysis and report preparation. The scope of work for research and evaluation activities include identification of research questions, literature reviews, data analysis, report writing, report editing, fundraising, presentation of results.

Organizational Location of Research and Evaluation

If research and evaluation activities are to provide truly relevant, strategic recommendations for San Mateo County HSA then the research coordinator should have access to top management and be fully aware of the perspectives and themes of current executive-level policy discussions. I recommend that the research coordinator report to a top manager concerned with policy and program development in the Office of the Director.

Selection of Research Topics

A work plan for research topics should be developed by a work group that might include program managers, top Agency management and interested community organizations. As discussed above, managers should recognize that research priorities may change as unpredicted issues arise. All staff involved in research and evaluation should be flexible to meet changing demands on the Agency for outcome data. Top management should redefine priorities for research staff as necessary.

USE OF OUTSIDE RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

A variety of research organizations exist that can complement and supplement the activities of a county social service agency. This section provides an overview of some of these organizations and issues that should be considered in retaining another organization to undertake research.

Examples of Outside Research Organizations and Their Capabilities

CWRG

The Child Welfare Research Group (CWRG) under the direction of Richard Barth and Jill Buerr-Berrick (School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley) frequently provides research and evaluation services for the Alameda County Social Services Agency. CWRG maintains the California Children's Services Archives, which includes data from every California county on child welfare, foster care, Medi-Cal, The California Youth Authority, adoptions, special education. Sometimes CWRG research is funded by the County itself, in other cases the research is based upon Alameda County client data, but funded by an outside organization. Following are illustrative examples of research undertaken by CWRG for Alameda or other County Social Service Agencies:

- CWRG is conducting a study funded by the California Department of Social Services relating to the time adoption *staff allocate* to various adoption-related tasks. The study will be useful in determining future budget allocation formulas for adoption units. Staff from the Alameda County Adoption Unit participated in focus groups.
- Alameda County Social Services Agency funded a study by CWRG to provide information about the constellation of services and circumstances that contribute to positive reunification of children from foster care, one of the major goals of child welfare policy.
- Of interest to Alameda County was a 1994 CWRG evaluation of the Contra Costa County Social Service Department's Adoptions program. The evaluation was prompted by two Grand Jury reports that were critical of the operations and practice of the County's Adoption Program
- Of interest of Alameda County was a 1996 study by BASSC Research Response Team (under the direction of Dr. Sheryl Goldberg at the University of California Berkeley Center for Social Services Research) on General Assistance Client demographics in Contra Costa

County which contains information on GA client demographics, residency status, housing, employment status, social service utilization, and General Assistance history.

Other organizations

Other organizations exist which can be important potential resources for county social service agency. Following are illustrative examples:

- Manpower Development Corporation is a nonprofit social policy research organization founded in 1974 by the Ford Foundation and a consortium of federal agencies. Its mission is to design and rigorously field test promising programs aimed at improving the life prospects of the disadvantaged, and to provide policy makers and practitioners with reliable evidence about what works. MDRC's evaluations focus on welfare employment training programs, school to work programs and the JTPA system. These evaluations seek to answer such questions as :Do programs increase employment and earnings? For whom do they work best? Are they cost effective? What factors explain their success? Can innovative programs be replicated?
- Center for Applied Local Research -The Center for Applied Local Research (C.A.L. Research) is a non-profit organization dedicated to applying social sciences and related skills to improving the quality of human services at the local level. C.A.L. Research has completed evaluations of substance abuse treatment projects, planning studies relating to drug and alcohol education programs and grantwriting expertise for public agencies seeking funding for social service programs.
- SRI International-The Center for Education and Human Services at SRI International focuses on federal, state and local policies and programs for elementary, secondary, and higher education; employment education and training; and human services. For example SRI has completed evaluations of community-based, integrated child and family services, particularly collaborative school-linked community services. The Center documents changes over time in services, service delivery, and outcomes for children, families and communities. In addition, SRI prepares evaluations of family assistance programs that support parents' efforts to raise healthy, well-developed children. These studies assess the effects of various of parenting-education models on both parents and their children.
- The Mental Health Research Group under the direction of Professor Steven Segal (School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley) has completed research projects relating to homelessness and the mentally ill for public agencies. Most recently, Dr. Segal prepared a study of G.A. recipients in Alameda County which offered recommendations on methods to cut G.A. costs. Dr. Segal also prepared an evaluation of the Headstart/Homeless Program for Alameda County.

Issues to Consider in Using Outside Consultants

Alameda County staff, as well as representatives of research organization interviewed for my internship, cited many advantages of using outside expertise. Specialized consultants have a very

current knowledge of their topic area and often have access to extensive data on a particular topic area. Because an outside consultant devotes all of their time to research in a particular subject area, they might have current knowledge of research designs, data resources and methodology that a "generalist" public sector research coordinator is unaware of. For a public agency, an outside expert, particularly when they are university-affiliated brings objectivity to an assignment, the results of which might be viewed as more credible than when prepared by county staff who are viewed as having a vested interest in the outcome of research.

At the same time, there are many situations where conducting research using in-house staff is preferable. First, in-house staff can initiate and complete a study more rapidly than an outside organization. If a study is done in-house there is no need for the lengthy contracting phase which can delay a study by 6 months or more. A county agency has more "elastic" staffing which make it easier to temporarily assign staff to a high priority research project. This contrasts with a research organization like CWRG which typically hires student interns to work on a particular piece of research. Funding arrangements make it infeasible to reassign this type of staff. If contacted by a county agency to complete a research project quickly, CWRG would need to schedule the study into its workload and/ or recruit new research staff. As a general rule, various individuals told me, whenever, one bureaucracy speaks to another, the process is slowed.

In addition to timing, research organizations sometimes have a fundamentally different mission than a public agency. This difference can result in conflicts over how research is presented and its overall usefulness to the client agency. Specifically, research organizations, particularly if they are affiliated with a University, frequently are mandated by their directors to present research findings in an unedited fashion. Jill Duerr Berrick Director of CWRG commented "Our fundamental mission is to provide information to the world and we have received a very clear message from the U.C. regents that we are not to alter our findings or recommendations to meet political objectives. We can do some editing to change the tone of recommendation, but we cannot withhold results once we have obtained them" This position needs to be contrasted with that of a public social service agency which operates in a highly political and public environment. There are situations where truly objective research on a divisive issue would serve only to undermine the activities of the agency. In these situations careful framing of results and recommendations is critical if the research is to be of any value.

USING DATA

Case data is the primary source of information for conducting research and evaluation. This section presents an overview of how data is stored and utilized in Alameda and San Mateo County.

Alameda County has several sources of data to draw on for research projects. Table 3 summarizes the data sources available by division. There are two important attributes of a data base design that must be considered when it is to be used as the basis for a research project. First, whether the data base contains "flat files" or is structured in a relational format. It is important to note that many standard data management systems typically used by social service agencies, for example, CDS, were intended to be used as accounting systems, rather than as resources for research and analyses. Given this history, many data management systems currently in use store

client information as "flat files". Flat files do not permit a researcher to extract ad hoc reports for specified variables. Flat files are different from relational data bases which allow an analyst to select cases with a particular set of attributes and construct cross-tabulations of cases.

Table 3
Social Service Agency Research and Evaluation
Summary of Alameda County Social Service Agency Client Data Management Stems

| <i>Division</i> | <i>Data Source</i> | <i>Relational</i> | <i>Primary Identifier</i> |
|------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Economic Services | CDS | No | 11-digit serial number |
| Employment Services | GIS | No | 11-digit serial number |
| Children and Family Services | SSRS | No | 11-digit serial number |

The other important attribute of a database is whether the records contained within have uniform "primary keys" or record numbering systems. A primary key is a name given to an individual data record. Frequently social security numbers are used as primary keys in demographic analyses. When various data bases have different primary identifiers, it is not possible to merge data sets, and the range of potential analyses is reduced. For example, if a researcher wanted to know the relationship between length of time on AFDC and job training experiences, it would be necessary to merge data from CDS and GIS, a task that is only possible if clients have the same primary key in both of the original data sets.

According to Alameda County Social Service Agency staff, data that is routinely collected for its clients is generally adequate to answer most research questions.

As shown in Table 3, data for clients relating to AFDC and GA is kept in CDS, a non-relational data base. Because this is a data source that is frequently needed for studies undertaken by researchers in Alameda County, research staff frequently convert the CDS files to ASCII files which can be entered into standard statistical software packages such as SPSS or SAS. In addition, research staff use a product called IMAGINE, an ad hoc reporting system, to convert CDS records to a format that is relational and can be utilized for analytic purposes.

Within the Alameda County Social Service Agency, case files for Economic Services and Children and Family Services have a uniform system of primary keys, and therefore can be merged for analytic purposes. Data from the Employment Services cannot be merged with data from the other two divisions.

Table 4 summarizes client data that is currently kept for San Mateo County HSA. Overall, the existing data bases kept by the various HSA divisions contain an enormous amount of information on the Agency's clients. Accordingly, the critical task in establishing a research and evaluation program is not to initiate collection of data. Rather, the important tasks will be to

develop a master list of variables that are already available in the various data bases and to design new data management systems so that they can be manipulated to answer research questions.

In conjunction with SUCCESS, HSAs program to redesign its human services delivery system, HSA is currently developing plans for a universal data management that will support a single intake system for all HSA clients. A consultant has been selected to develop a client data management system called SUCCESS/ACCESS. When implemented, this system will be fully relational data base with a universal system of primary identifiers. Unfortunately, the SUCCESS/ACCESS system is not expected to be operational until late 1998.

In the meantime, there are interim measures HSA could take to make existing data suitable for research and evaluation activities. One, would be to convert existing "flat" files to ASCII files, which can be transported to standard statistical analysis packages like SPSS or SAS. This option would require significant amounts of programmer time. In addition, this is a somewhat sloppy, inefficient method of manipulating data because it would result in the production of a huge number of files with many redundant fields. The resulting ASCII files created for the purpose of a longitudinal analysis would require upgrading of a computers to accommodate these large files.

Table 4
Social Service Agency Research and Evaluation
San Mateo County HSA Case Data

| <i>Division</i> | <i>Data Source</i> | <i>Contents</i> | <i>Relational</i> | <i>Primary Identifier</i> |
|-------------------------|----------------------|--|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Income Maintenance | CDS | data on AFDC, GA and Medi-Cal recipients | no | 18 Digit serial number |
| JTED | GIS | data on GAIN participants | no | social security number |
| | JTA ³ | data on JTPA clients | yes | social security number |
| Youth & Family Services | SSRS | data on child protective services clients | no | 18-digit serial number ⁴ |
| | CWS/CMS ⁵ | data on child protective services clients ⁶ | yes | not determined |
| | DADS | data on drug and alcohol program participants | no | "UPI" |
| | FUTURES | data on "FUTURES" school-based human services clients | yes | number keyed off mother's name |
| Housing Authority | WANGIDDI | data on rental assistance clients | no | social security number |

3. To be fully operational May, 1996.

4. Key indicator for SSRS records is 18-digit CDS serial number. Limitation to merging

5. Hardware will be deployed by May, 1996, but software application will not be implemented until 1997.

6. Will replace SSRS. Forthcoming 1997.

Another option for overcoming the constraints of existing data management systems is purchase of a "middle ware" product or "OLAP". This interim solution for a universal data base would cost approximately \$200,000 and would enable a researcher to flag cases with specific attributes from various Agency divisions on a daily basis. An OLAP solution has the advantage over the ASCII conversion option in that redundant fields are eliminated and case files are condensed to a

manageable size. Unlike ASCII files, data files created by OLAP can be easily updated to reflect new cases and changes in existing cases. OLAP would not enable the Agency to overcome the problem of dissimilar primary keys that currently prevents merging of certain data sets.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WARNINGS

As the San Mateo County Human Services Agency moves toward implementation of various elements of the SUCCESS program recommendations, we are at an optimal time to initiate research and evaluation program similar to Alameda County's. Based upon my observations in Alameda County, the following recommendations are offered as strategic steps San Mateo County HSA might take to maximize the success of a new research and evaluation program:

Capitalize with credibility.

Several managers in Alameda County discussed the importance of a research program's initial activities in order to establish credibility. One recommended that research staff immediately do some quick turnaround studies for HSA divisions or community groups. These initial work products can help to consolidate support for a new HSA activity and convince various interests of the usefulness of research and evaluation in social service planning efforts.

At the same time, other manager's suggested that the new research coordinator aggressively seek outside funding opportunities for a major research venture. San Mateo should identify a university professor who is widely recognized (and published) in the necessary topic area and enter into a cooperative agreement whereby the professor serves as principal investigator. Such an arrangement would give San Mateo County HSA the opportunity to undertake a piece of significant research with regional implications. Completion of such a project would earn considerable recognition for the Agency's research activities and enhance the likelihood of future outside funding.

Convene a workgroup

Alameda County staff repeatedly emphasized to me that one professional cannot perform all of the tasks that are needed to ensure a successful research and evaluation program. If hiring of more than one research professional is not possible for San Mateo County HSA, then the Agency needs to be very careful in developing reasonable expectations for a research coordinator.

A research and evaluation workgroup could bring together many existing resources from the Agency and from our communities which could be of great assistance in the production of useful research. I recommended that the work group include representatives from top Agency management, as well as from the various program areas. Initial tasks of the work group should be to establish research priorities and to develop a research and evaluation work program. The work group should also consider practical ways to provide some staff assistance to the research coordinator either through the temporary use of existing program staff, student interns or other resources.

The research and evaluation workgroup will also need to consider Agency staff concerns over "centralized research." In my discussions with staff throughout the Agency, several managers conveyed a general resistance to research completed by an Administration employee. This was reflected in comments like "If they want us to analyze and plan our programs, tell them to give us more money, and we'll do it ourselves" and "Someone outside of our division can't understand our programs, who we are, or what we really do". Given these concerns, it is critical that the research and evaluation workgroup include adequate representation from the various program areas in order to ensure that research results are convincing, acceptable and relevant to actual programs.

Include transition from research to practice in every research project.

In order to ensure that research and evaluation activities are practical and relevant to HSA's mission, every project should include a program implementation component. This might include work group sessions which focus on questions such as "Given these results, what sort of programmatic response seems appropriate?" or "Now that we know this about very young children and our program, how are you going to do things differently?" Alameda County staff mentioned that some foundations actually require that researchers conduct these kind of discussions with line workers as a condition of funding.

Do not let data drive the research agenda.

There is a standard process that researchers should go through in designing a research project. This process includes as its first steps framing a proper research question and stating a research hypothesis. Selection of data is the third or fourth step in the process.

Research staff in Alameda County commented several times that data is of secondary importance in carrying out a research program. This was reflected in comments like "Data is a means to an end, it is not an end in itself" and "don't ever ask 'is the data available?', the proper question is 'what will it take to get the data we need to test our hypothesis?'"

This is not to say that the research and evaluation workgroup do not need to consider data at all. There are some important long term and short term decisions that the Agency will need to make regarding data base designs that provide a researcher with access to useable data. My concern here is that the research and evaluation work group devote excessive time to data concerns at the expense of planning meaningful research projects with significant policy implications.

Drive and direct consultants from inside HSA

Given that our research and evaluation program will have a "lean" staff, we may decide to use consultants for many research projects. I believe that dollars spent for consultants will be most effective if the research coordinator gives them diligent oversight and direction. The research coordinator should be included in all aspects of the research project including definition of the research questions, selection of data and analytical methods, review of initial results and presentation of final results. I recommend that our Agency avoid the temptation to allow consultants to carry out the project without ongoing HSA oversight and input.

Appendix A
Examples of Research and Evaluation Studies Completed
by Alameda County Social Service Agency Staff

Annual Report on Foster Care Placements. Includes sections on Ethnic Matching.

Will Johnson and Tom Clancy (1991) Efficiency in Behavior-Changing Social Programs: The Case of In-Home Child Abuse Prevention. *Administration in Social Work* 15(1/2).

Alameda County Social Service Agency -Foster Care Placements in 1993 (Demographic information about placement activity in the County's Foster Care system in 1993)

Alameda County Social Service Agency -Foster Care Placements in 1994 (Demographic information about placement activity in the County's Foster Care system in 1994)

Alameda County Social Service Agency, Children and Family Services Special report on children under 6 years placed in Foster Care in 1994

G.A. Client Profiles-Detailed demographic data for existing G.A. cases in Alameda County

Evaluation of Service Excellence Training

Mapping of AFDC Clients-Study mapped location of AFDC clients enabling service providers plan effectively for AFDC check redemption centers and AFDC field offices.

Using Risk Assessment in the Evaluation of Public Agency Child Protective Services.

A Comparison of the California Risk Assessment Curriculum with Risk Assessment Models Developed in Alameda County and Other Jurisdictions

Quarterly Report-Program Data and Trends for Alameda County Social Services Agency

Profiles for Identifying G.A. Cases Likely to be Ineligible or Unwilling to Cooperate With An Audit

Indicators of Positive Family Reunification Literature Review, prepared by Melissa Lim-Student Intern

Study of Incarcerated Parents, prepared by Melissa Lim- Student Intern