Planning, Evaluation, and Research: The Backbone of Change

Marcie Castro

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Finally, someone said it: the status quo is not working, we are not going to case manage out of poverty; we've got to do better. Alameda County's framing document, *Refocusing our Efforts for Long Term Community Investments*, is direct, pointed and deliberate. It calls for a new way of doing business; one that is customer-centered, driven by data and best practices, and targeted to neighborhoods with those most in need. Through this innovative approach, Alameda County expects to expand employment opportunities for residents; enhance access to capital and business possibilities; increase asset building opportunities; and transform neighborhoods.

Alameda County's approach is well researched, a model that can be replicated, and much needed as California's safety net is stretched too thin and cannot address the complex social problem of poverty alone. The Monterey County Department of Social Services (MCDSS) must outline its vision and strategies for a broader approach. It must increase its capacity for data-driven decision-making, proven outcomes, and communication that informs and influences people to take action. With this backbone in place, MCDSS is positioned to achieve large-scale change.

Writing a framing document that outlines departmental goals and strategies for the next three to five years can be completed with existing staff at no additional cost to the department. However, it is recommended that a Program Manager II position be added to provide strategic support to align data collection and communication, and to identify and seek additional funding and cross-collaboration opportunities. Estimated budget impact is $147,670.

Marcie Castro, Management Analyst III,
Monterey County Employment Services

Planning, Evaluation, and Research: The Backbone of Change

Marcie Castro

History

A sense of urgency, a calling, and a passion for children and families led Lori Cox, Director of the Alameda County Social Service Agency (SSA), to seize her opportunity to use resources differently; to be strategic, innovative, and proactive.

One of her first steps was to move Kristin Spanos, also motivated by a sense of urgency and a deep commitment to and expectation of excellence, to the position of Agency Deputy Director with her extensive program and fiscal knowledge.

Together, along with the SSA executive team, Cox and Spanos created a new, shared vision and framework for their agency called *Refocusing our Efforts for Long Term Community Investments*, published in January of 2013. This visionary document acknowledges that despite effort and investment,
poverty has not decreased, and it lays out a road map for doing business differently. The framing document serves to spark thinking and conversation amongst community partners, and puts into context the work the SSA plans to accomplish under their leadership.
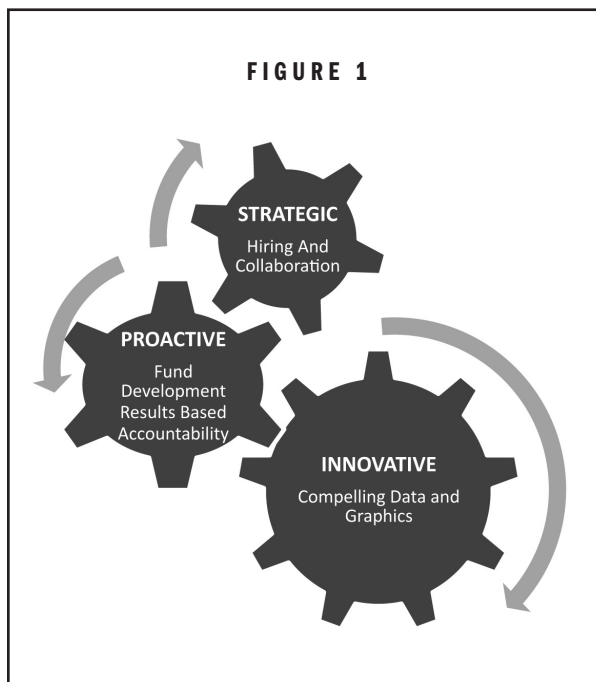
Background

With a budget of $639.75 million and more than 2,200 staff members, the SSA administers over 40 programs and contributes more than $63 million to 108 community-based organizations throughout the county. Overall, benefit programs contribute more than $711 million to the local economy through cash assistance and food assistance programs.[1]

Every month:

- More than 52,000 people receive CalWORKs, CalFresh and General Assistance.
- More than 78,000 people are able to access health insurance through the Medi-Cal program.
- More than 11,000 frail, elderly, and disabled individuals receive in-home care, adult protection, and support managing their affairs.
- More than 1,600 reports of child abuse or neglect are filed with SSA.

Additionally:

- Emergency shelter is made available to 415 people nightly.[2]
- Approximately 16,000 seniors receive services through the Area Agency on Aging throughout the year.
- 3,700 children are in foster care.

FIGURE 1

STRATEGIC
Hiring And Collaboration

PROACTIVE
Fund Development Results Based Accountability

INNOVATIVE
Compelling Data and Graphics

1. Refocusing our Efforts for Long Term Community Investments (Alameda County, 2013) 10.

2. Mission (2012) Retrieved from http://www.alamedasocialservices.org/public/about_us/mission.cfm (April, 2014)

Despite these services and investments, "poverty hasn't decreased and numerous measures of well-being whether it be wealth, health, or education haven't improved in any meaningful way in decades—in some cases the inequities have grown."[3]

Similarly, MCDSS assists 30% of the population with safety net programs through direct provision of services and partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs). These services are essential, and without them things would be much worse for thousands of families. Per U.S. census data, the poverty rate for Monterey County was 15.1% for the period 2007-2011. The south county region of Monterey consistently struggles with unemployment, low paying job opportunities, and high rates of poverty. In fact, in the city of Greenfield the poverty rate was 19.5% between 2007 and 2011, significantly exceeding that of any community in Monterey or the nearby counties of Santa Cruz and San Benito.

Most of Monterey County's needy are the working poor. The numbers of very low-income residents are lower than the state's average, but a larger portion of the county's residents make between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty threshold, suggesting residents are working, just not earning much money.[4]

By creating a framing document and planning, evaluation, and research protocols to support data-driven decision-making and communication, MCDSS will take the next step toward creating better outcomes for families.

Case Study

Alameda County's framing document is very exciting because it acknowledges the need to do things differently, and outlines several key and innovative strategies to reach its vision of shared prosperity and collective well-being.[5]

The crux of Alameda County's approach specifically targets investments and place-based

TABLE 1
Monterey County Population and Poverty (Census Estimates 2013)

Population, U.S. Census 2013 Estimate	428,826
Percentage below poverty	16.1%

TABLE 2
MCDSS Investments (Budget Year 2013–2014)

Annual Budget	$212 Million
Average Number of Staff Members	800
Programs Administered	20
Investments Provided to Local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) Throughout the County	$8 Million to 100 CBO's
Benefit to Local Economy through Cash Assistance and Food Assistance Programs	$130 Million

interventions in low-income neighborhoods. However, the focus of this case study is on the initial strategy: *Increase Data, Evaluation, and Policy Capacities*, because these areas are the backbone required to support in-house and community-based initiatives.

SSA recognized early on that in order to realize its vision, the agency needed to be able to produce data that could show what SSA and its contractors do; and make it informative, influential, and linked to policy to secure funding and support for research-based initiatives.

Under the leadership of Deputy Director Kristin Spanos, Policy Director Lisa Forti oversees the fund development/portfolio manager, data and communications Manager, and the Planning, Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) manager.

Together, this team is responsible for building capacity for data-driven decision-making throughout the agency. They coordinate the agency's interests in legislation and policy, provide policy perspectives for

3. Refocusing our Efforts for Long Term Community Investments (Alameda County, 2013) 3.

4. American Community Survey 2009

5. Refocusing our Efforts for Long Term Community Investments (Alameda County, 2013) 27.

the finance division to use in budget development, and lead the agency in fund development efforts and donor cultivation. PERU is considered the go-to 'think tank' in the agency, providing broad program analysis and producing internal tools to support the work of managers and line staff, as well as producing public-facing documents that tell the story of the agency's work.

Policy, Research and Evaluation in Action: A Few Success Stories

Strategic – Hiring: The fund development portfolio manager was added back into the branch after funding cuts had eliminated the position some years ago, and the agency's investment in this position paid off. In collaboration with staff from the SSA, Health Care Services Agency (HCSA), and the Probation Department, the fund development portfolio manager has secured an additional $4M in grants for programs related to health care reform, homeless prevention for former foster youth, food access, and asset building. Additional proposals have been developed that address employment and economic development.

   Strategic – Cross Collaboration: SSA created a legislative council to engage staff across departments. This council consists of representatives from the SSA Adult, Aging, and Medi-Cal Services, Children and Family Services, Workforce and Benefits Administration; the HCSA; and the District Attorney's office. Together, they assess the potential impacts of proposed legislation, state and federal budgets, and solicit potential legislative ideas to move forward. As a result, staff members from all three departments make connections and are more informed about services, priorities, and ways to maximize resources for the people they serve.

   Proactive – Results-based accountability: Faced with a mandate to make the agency more performance driven, the policy division, in partnership with contracts and program staff, researched and recommended best practices for Results Based Accountability (RBA) in contracted services. Together, they

FIGURE 2

1 in 6

children in Alameda County lives below the poverty line.
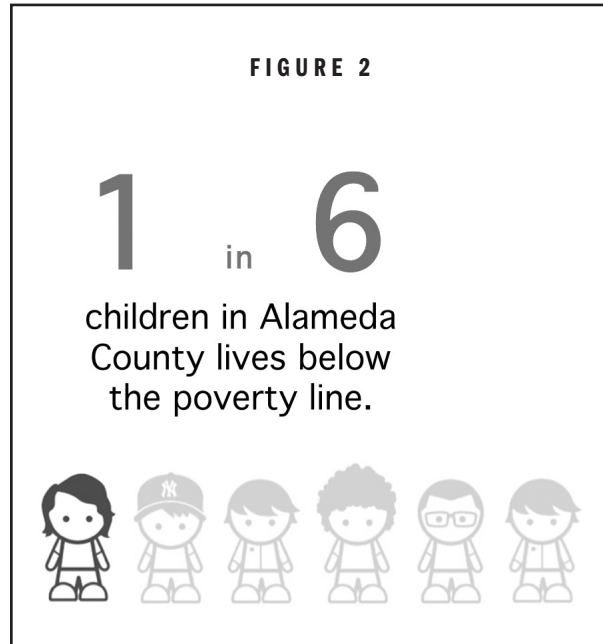
Graphic by Laura Schroeder, Alameda Social Service Agency, May 2014

worked their way through the procurement process to set up user-friendly systems to assess, design, monitor, and evaluate contracts. As a result, all new or renewed contracts are required to provide information and data that addresses the three basic RBA questions: how much was done, how well was it done, and is anyone better off? This practice was recommended for implementation in Monterey County in 2003.[6]

   Innovative – Compelling data and info graphics: The data and communications Manager collaborates with each division to review data needs and opportunities for standardization across the department. Reports are provided quarterly, and consistently tell the story of how much was accomplished, how well it was accomplished, and who is better off. The data is valuable, but the way in which the data is presented—through infographics and dashboards—allows staff and department heads to easily see and celebrate success or make data-driven decisions for any needed changes.

   Alameda County has invested in staff members who are able to produce compelling infographics that

---

6. Lerable, Christine, *Outcome-Based Management in the San Mateo County Humans Services Agency* Case Study, University of California, Berkeley (2003)

TABLE 3
Monterey County Values in Action with PERU

MCDSS Mission:

To promote the social and economic self-reliance of each individual and family we serve through: Employment services, temporary financial assistance, social support services, protective services for children, dependent adults and seniors, partnerships with the community to develop and support social change, highlighting personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

MCDSS Values	Values in Action We will:	What this looks like with an investment in a Framing Document and Planning, Evaluation and Research Tools
Leadership that demonstrates vision, knowledge, dedication, competence, compassion and results	Lead by example	**A Framing Document outlines MCDSS work for the next 3-5 years.** **Planning, Evaluation and Research protocols assists each branch to set up tools to measure and share success and ensures best practices are used.** **A Fund Development Lead guides the department in creating additional revenue to support identified goals.**
Self-sufficiency as a measurement of our community's economic and social health	Encourage active participation of all community members in addressing social concerns	**Researched Based - Best Practices with Results Based Accountability practices are used internally and in community contracts.**
Quality services that are delivered with integrity, innovation, and that respects cultural diversity	Assist and support the persons we serve to better meet the challenges of their lives	**Data driven decision making supports all services and customers.**
Full participation by persons we serve in making decisions that affect their lives	Encourage personal and professional development in realizing one's potential	**Cross branch/department collaboration strengthens programming and services for customers.**
Lifelong learning and the development of job skills	Promote collaboration throughout our community	

tell the value of the agency's work and influences the community to feel and understand the importance of their work. It creates buy-in and support from community members, elected officials, and funders.

SSA also uses maps to show where poverty is located by neighborhood, the number of people in those neighborhoods who are receiving available benefits, and how many more are eligible to access available resources; all overlaid with the location of the SSA offices and other community based organizations. This type of data communication maximizes the agency's ability to target existing resources

and shift or expand where needed. It creates an emotional response for the reader, which leads to an understanding and investment in the issues we are all striving to address.

Implications and Recommendations for Monterey County:

MCDSS has a strong mission, vision, and culture of staff and partners dedicated to making that vision a reality. The creation of a framing document and adoption of planning, evaluation, and research tools will only embolden the department's ability to

TABLE 4
Monterey Action Plan and Budget Impact FY 14/15

What Success Looks Like	Person Responsible
Framing Document – Created for the department, and builds upon the MCDSS mission and value statements to show assets, needs, goals, and plans for making change.	MCDSS Exec Team
Planning Evaluation and Research Protocols – Established to tie together branches, data, contracting, budget, fund development, and legislation efforts in support of the framing document goals.	New Hire Program Manager II (PM II)
Cross Collaboration – Senior managers have opportunities for discussions about the big picture, goals outlined in the framing document, RBA training, Best Practices, legislation and policy discussion, and cross-branch/department networking.	MCDSS Exec Team
Compelling Data and Infographics – Data and communication is standardized wherever possible (i.e. collected/reported monthly/quarterly, etc.). Useful, exciting, and strategic communication of data and policy information is created that advances program initiatives and department goals.	PM II in collaboration with each branch
Fund Development - Major proposals are developed; the Program Manager II guides agency funder cultivation efforts, and builds agency fund development capacity. There are strong links between branches within DSS and MC Health, Probation, and Economic Development departments to identify and build cross-department opportunities.	PM II in collaboration with each branch and across MC Departments
Results-based accountability- All contract analysts have completed RBA training and work with the Program Manager II to establish RBA policies for all new DSS programs and contracted services, Program Manager II works with admin services to research and implement performance bonus policies for contractors.	PM II in coordination with MC Staff Development Fiscal and Exec Team Purchasing Department.

demonstrate the work it does, generate revenue, and increase in-house, cross-departmental, and contractor capabilities so that its customers are receiving services that have proven results. *Table 3, Monterey County Values in Action* with PERU demonstrates how the creation of a framing document and policy, evaluation, and research protocols are the next logical steps to support MCDSS mission, values, and actions.

There is no budget impact to create a framing document; the investment of time and effort of existing leadership is required. The roadmap, however, is invaluable as seen in the efforts of the local Early Childhood Development Initiative and its collective impact approach. By outlining the agenda, focusing on shared data, policy, advocacy, research-based practices, and results, the initiative has garnered significant investment from the Board of Supervisors, local funders, and community members; all of whom are required to achieve large-scale change of complex social issues.

It is possible that Monterey County could also use existing staff to develop policy, evaluation, and research tools and protocols for each branch. However, the level of coordination, importance of this work, and urgency to improve outcomes for customers requires the department to invest in a full-time Program Manager II position, at an annual salary and benefits cost of $147,670. Alameda County achieved incredible returns on its investment through increased revenues and quality services for the community.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to Henry Espinosa and Elliot Robinson for allowing me to attend the BASSC Executive Development Program. I will never forget what I learned and hope to motivate others as I have been motivated by this experience. Thank you to Lori Cox, Kristin Spanos, and Lisa Forti for their bold vision, dedication, and perseverance to make a difference in Alameda County, and for sharing their valuable time with me. A special thank you to Laura Schroeder and Hollis Williams for their inspirational infographic and dashboards.