

# Moving the Needle on Long-Term Community Investment

OSCAR CHAVEZ

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can’t just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community. And we have to focus on what actually works.”*

—Barack Obama, July 18, 2007

As California’s economy continues to improve and more people get back to work, many people in our state—particularly those who are lower-income, lower-skilled, and less educated—continue to struggle in the aftermath of recession. They have not experienced the same rebound and regained prosperity as higher skilled, more educated workers, resulting in a widening economic and opportunity gap. As a result, more people are accessing public supports to make ends meet, which is putting additional stress on an already fragile safety net. As demand for services grow, human services organizations will need new tools to deliver efficient and effective services to meet the multidimensional needs of individuals and families in communities of high need.

Sonoma County is characterized as a community with an enviable quality of life. The level of educational attainment in the county is high,

unemployment is lower than the state average, and the percentage of residents living below the poverty line has been on the decline.

While these trends are positive, other data reveal some concerning trends that will impact the ability of the county’s Human Services Department to meet the growing needs of a changing community. In Sonoma County, there are more adults aged 60 and over than children under the age of eighteen. Over 40,000 seniors aged 60 and over live below the Elder Economic Security Index, a measure that takes into account housing, health, and other cost of living factors. There are significant disparities in educational attainment between residents who are white and those who are Hispanic or Latino. Among adults aged 25 and over, 95 percent of white residents have a high school diploma or GED, compared to 54% of Hispanic or Latino residents. Additionally,

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**Oscar Chavez, Assistant Director, Sonoma County  
Department of Human Services**

the poverty rate among Hispanics of any race is 19 percent, double that of non-Hispanic whites at 9 percent (Sonoma County Human Services Department TRENDEX: Census Edition 2013). The changing demographics, along with the widening economic and achievement gaps, pose some unique challenges and opportunities for the Sonoma County Department of Human Services and its ability to address growing community needs under the current service delivery structure.

These trends are not just unique to Sonoma County. Other San Francisco Bay Area counties are dealing with similar challenges and are looking for new and innovative ways to address these challenges. This case study examines the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) framing document, and its applicability to Sonoma County Department of Human Services as it begins its own strategic planning process.

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## Introduction

In 2013, the Alameda County Social Services Agency published a framing document design to articulate a new future for the agency; a future focused on achieving significant and measureable impact on the lives of individuals and families, and in creating large scale social change affecting whole communities. This new direction or paradigm shift was rooted in the belief that if we want to move people out of poverty and toward a path of well-being and economic security, we have to deliver services that address the multidimensional needs of families and prioritize communities of high need.

The Alameda County Social Services Agency framing document is intended to generate meaningful dialogue both within and outside the agency about the future direction of the organization. The framing document puts forth some provocative ideas and challenges current assumptions about what is needed to address poverty, racial disparities, and income inequality within a human services delivery system. By prioritizing public/private place-based investments, data-driven service delivery and outcomes based contracting, Alameda Social Services Agency hopes to begin laying a strong foundation for equitable and sustainable change over the next three to five years.

The agency's framing document has its origins in the Federal Neighborhood Revitalizing Initiative. The initiative, funded under the Obama administration, recognizes that the interconnected challenges in high-poverty neighborhoods require interconnected solutions. Poorly funded and failing schools, little access to capital, high unemployment, poor housing, persistent crime, and other challenges that feed

into and perpetuate each other, call for an integrated approach so residents can reach their full potential (White House Neighborhood Revitalization Report, July 2011).

A key tenant of this initiative is to invest in place-based strategies to help neighborhoods in distress transform themselves into neighborhoods of opportunity. By working strategically with other government and community-based organizations with purpose and intentionality, place-based strategic investments can begin to address the needs of people in low-wealth communities.

## Charting the way

The origins of the Alameda County Social Services Agency framing document began in 2011, with the appointment of Lori Cox to agency director. She came to the position with a passion and commitment to improve the customer services experience through the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, expansion of workforce development to promote job creation and retention, and greater attention to the needs of men and fathers served by the agency. The agency contemplated leading a strategic planning process to begin moving the agency in a new direction, but after many internal discussions it was determined that the agency needed a document to serve as a conversation piece to engage stakeholders and county leadership. The leadership of the agency, headed by Director Lori Cox and Deputy Director Spanos, recognized that these new ideas would take time to root and gain acceptance given the complexity and regulatory nature of state and federal funding, existing labor agreements, competing county priorities, and growing community need. Their

approach and strategy to garner support has been to slowly build momentum through direct engagement and participation around the strategic priorities.

To build additional support for change, the agency had the opportunity to make several strategic hires at the senior leadership level, and combined some administrative functions to align with the future direction of the agency. A policy department that once existed prior to the recession was reinstated to focus on policy and legislative issues, and to develop program recommendations to meet the needs of local communities. The policy department was combined with the Planning, Evaluation and Research Unit to further the strategic priorities of the agency and to support program evaluation. To fund innovative and emerging practices, an inter-agency office was established to focus on resource development among the probation, human services, and health departments. By leveraging resources and talent, Alameda County Social Services Agency has been successful in securing extra dollars to fund programs not funded by traditional agency sources.

### **Initial Strategies for Change**

The Alameda County Social Services Agency has identified seven initial priority strategies for action. For example, under priority strategy #1, the agency policy and contracts departments have begun working together to improve the contracting process. Some of the changes have included embedding Results Based Accountability (RBA) measures in the contracting process, and linking the Planning, Evaluation, and Research Unit (PERU) with the contracts department and program staff both at the front end and throughout the procurement process to assess, design, and evaluate contracts from beginning to end. The agency has also partnered with UC Davis to develop a training curriculum designed to maximize the effectiveness of the team and to expand their learning in the use of Results-Based Accountability. To advance priority strategies #3 and #5, the agency piloted two wage subsidy programs and recently released a request for proposal to study the role of anchor institutions in job creation and

poverty alleviation. Over the next several years, the Alameda County Social Services Agency plans to fully implement the seven strategies outlined below.

#### **1. Data Driven and Best Practice Informed – Increase our data, evaluation and policy capacities by:**

1. Initiating the use of mapping for spatial analysis of services, implementing departmental client outcome metrics, utilizing results-based accountability processes to inform program initiatives, contracts, and the publication of the data for the public, elected officials, staff and other stakeholders; and
2. Enhancing use of best practice reviews, and policy and legislative analysis and advocacy to inform program design and the contracting process.

#### **2. Outreach, Eligibility and Retention – Expand outreach, eligibility and retention efforts for all programs by:**

1. Looking to continue the shift of moving the eligibility process more into the community and enhancing program access; and
2. Targeting our efforts strategically in communities with concentrated poverty and develop metrics to gauge need and utilization.

#### **3. Workforce – Improve our employment services and supports for county residents by:**

1. Identifying core internal SSA capacities and improving the quality of the programming through our strengths;
2. Enhancing the agency's capacity to match prospective employers with potential employees through the implementation of employment software;
3. Partnering with results-proven community-based providers to increase client engagement, enhance cultural relevancy, and improve the quality of the programs and supports;

4. Identifying workforce strategies to specifically engage fathers and offer program supports that encourage full family participation;
5. Collaborating with private sector partners to better understand regional workforce needs, identify strategic investment opportunities in training, support business expansion, and support job creation through related supply chain markets; and
6. Looking to leverage county and other public sector partners who are major employers by identifying current and future employment opportunities due to succession planning or key initiatives, e.g. the Bus Rapid Transit project on International Boulevard, the Oakland Army Base, and Alameda County courthouse construction.

**4. Contract and Procurement Reform – Target and invest our resources in the community to ensure the greatest impact by:**

1. Implementing First Source for SSA contracts and procurements, requiring a percentage of employees, by contract and purchasing partners, to be locally hired from the neighborhoods in which they serve and/or are of the designated priority population, e.g., unemployed or participant of a cash assistance program; and
2. Targeting programmatic contract investment in communities with the highest need and/or utilization by service area.

**5. Place-Based Initiatives – Support the increased flow of capital and investments in low to moderate income communities by:**

1. Supporting the development of a county banking ordinance to direct investment, spending and lending by financial institutions in low to moderate income communities;
2. Working across systems and sectors to identify projects that will increase community assets that can provide both a neighborhood benefit and employment opportunities, e.g., grocery

stores, child development facilities, business support and expansion, and commercial corridor improvement; and

3. Collaborating with cities, banks, and other stakeholders around land use policies, the donation of land or low-cost rent agreements, particularly for blighted or vacant parcels, in an effort to develop cost-efficient strategies for the development of community-based assets within low to moderate income communities.

**6. Community Engagement – Enhance community engagement to inform initiative development, improve services, and guide policy/programmatic decision making by:**

1. Continuing to convene and partner with stakeholders on key issues; and
2. Developing community engagement strategies to inform local initiatives and federal and state budget and legislative analysis.

**7. Continuation of the IV-E Waiver – Enhance some of the existing place-based initiatives and develop new strategies to leverage the success and connection between child, family, and community well-being by:**

1. Continuing to develop community-based programming such as mentoring, culturally relevant mental health services, educational supports, employment, and housing in neighborhoods with comparatively high family/youth involvement in child welfare and/or probation;
2. Developing family support strategies that engage all members of the family, with a particular sensitivity toward engaging and supporting fathers; and
3. Implementing an employment training program for emancipating foster care youth.

**Recommendation**

In Sonoma County, we have a vision to become the healthiest county in the state by the year 2020. We envision a place where we can all work, play, and

achieve our full potential. This vision, supported by the county Board of Supervisors, has been embraced by various countywide initiatives focused on improving the well-being of all county residents. Efforts like Health Action, Upstream Investments, Cradle-to-Career, and the Innovation Action Council are working under the collective impact framework to address poverty, educational disparities, and income inequality. For Sonoma County, the opportunity at hand is to further leverage the resources and capacity of our health and human services systems for greater impact.

As we get ready to launch our own strategic planning process, the Alameda County Social Services Agency framing document can serve as a powerful tool to guide our thinking in the development of our strategic plan. Alameda County's seven initial strategies for action align very well with our Upstream

Investments Initiative, Health Action, and our county's interest in supporting place-based investments in communities of high need. To facilitate the sharing of best practices, it is recommended that we develop a regional learning community to learn and share best practices in programming and policies related Alameda County's framing document and their strategic priorities.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Alameda County Social Services Agency staff for sharing their time, wisdom, and passion to improve the lives of low-income families. I especially want to thank Director Lori Cox, Deputy Director Kristin Spanos, Laura Schroeder, Kathy Chen, and the entire PERU team.