

PLANNING AMIDST CHANGE: THE OFFICE OF AGENCY PLANNING IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

Micky Leung*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alameda is one of Bay Area's larger counties. On any given day, over 4,000 children are in foster care, and over 80,000 individuals rely on food stamps. Every year, SSA receives almost 15,000 reports of child abuse, serves over 11,000 victims of domestic violence, and provide emergency shelter to hundred of people. To plan for serving such a substantial population is a demanding task. The 1999-2004 Strategic Plan laid the foundation but somehow the visions described in the Plan will have to be transformed into tangible operational programs. The objective of my 15-day interagency project is to find out how.

I visited the Office of Agency Planning (OAP) of SSA in April 2000. OAP is responsible for agency strategic planning, performance planning, legislative analysis, demonstration projects, interdepartmental coordination and community planning. The unit currently handles a wide range of agency-wide and system re-engineering planning projects. For the purpose of this paper, I studied in greater detail the development of a Master Plan for Language Accessibility (MPLA) as an example to demonstrate OAP's planning approach.

MPLA strives to ensure that information on services, benefits, consent forms, waivers of rights, financial obligations, etc. are communicated to limited English proficiency (LEP) persons in a language which they understand. A workgroup led by OAP started meeting weekly since July 1999. All

operating departments and units in the agency are represented in this workgroup.

The workgroup adopted an elaborated process to identify the project objectives, reviewed existing process and resources, identified issues and needs, proposed action steps to address such issues and needs, then worked out the implementation timeline and evaluation mechanism. The final report was published in March 2000.

The success factors of OAP's planning approach include:

- Centralized and focused approach enables compliance with the agency's overall strategic goals.
- Consistency in program design and implementation across the agency.
- Establishment of early buy-in from all stakeholders of the project.
- Maintainance of a full documentation for future reference.

The challenges of this approach, on the other hand, are:

- Limitation of a top-down planning approach.
- Difficulties in balancing multiple or even conflicting needs from different programs/clients.
- The need for deeper involvement of the financial team.
- Slowing momentum from planning to implementation.

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- Clearer definition of OAP's role in the agency organizational structure.

OAP illustrates the merit of an institutionalized planning approach and its applicability towards agency- and system-wide planning tasks. It is particularly applicable in a large county like Alameda. By studying the challenges of this approach, complementary planning processes can be worked out to address the full spectrum of planning needs.

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PREAMBLE—SEASON OF CHANGES

The welfare reform of the middle and late 1990s have challenged the fundamental philosophy behind the design and delivery of government social services to the needy. The traditional “welfare department” approach of allocating resources to those eligible for cash assistance and supportive services is now replaced by the emphasis on “welfare to work” and family self-sufficiency.

Meanwhile, the American economy is experiencing its strongest growth in decades. The internet age and technology boom have pushed equity and property prices to a record high, widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. The very low unemployment rate nationally, and particularly in the Bay Area, is a fallacy to those who are on the wrong side of the “digital divide.” A paycheck from a job paying minimum wage is not going to completely move a “working” family from welfare to self-sufficiency.

While traditional caseloads of welfare families are dropping steadily (which may lead to a resulting reduction in funding for social services agencies from some revenue sources), a new generation of needy families in the form of “working poor” have emerged. These changes have prompted a series of substantial and rapid changes in program design and organizational structures in social services agencies.

In 1998, Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) undertook an ambitious self-assessment and planning process that has led to the development of

an Agency Strategic Plan, covering the period of 1999 through 2004.

OBJECTIVE— HOW DO THEY PLAN IN ALAMEDA ?

Coming from the private sector and with little background in social service programs, I am interested in assessing how a conceptual vision is transformed into actual implementation in the public sector. In the private sector, the bottom line of profit offers a non-ambiguous goal and measurement of success, and thereby dictates how a business should be planned—minimize costs and maximize revenue.

In contrast, social service programs have to balance the interest of all stakeholders, including federal, state and local authorities, the customers, community based organizations, advocacy groups, unions, and agency staff. There are multiple reporting and fiscal requirements to comply with. Availability of financial and human resources have to be considered. Last, but certainly not least, political dynamics always play a role.

Alameda is one of the Bay Area’s larger counties. On any given day, over 4,000 children are in foster care, and over 80,000 individuals rely on Food Stamps. Every year, SSA receives almost 15,000 reports of child abuse, serves over 11,000 victims of domestic violence, and provide emergency shelter to hundreds of people. Planning to serve such a substantial population is a demanding task. The 1999-2004 Strategic Plan laid the foundation for achieving this grand vision of transforming innovative approaches into tangible, operational programs.

The objective of my 15-day interagency project was to find out how.

INTRODUCING OAP— OFFICE OF AGENCY PLANNING

SSA has five departments: Adult & Aging Services, Children & Family Services, Welfare to Work, Workforce & Resource Development, and the Agency Administration & Finance (AAF). The Office of Agency Planning (OAP) is a team within the AAF. An organization chart of SSA is attached at Exhibit 1.

OAP is responsible for agency strategic planning, performance planning, legislative analysis, demonstration projects, interdepartmental coordination and community planning. The head of OAP is the Agency Planning Director and is supported by a team of seven management analysts and program specialists. The Planning Director position has been vacant since 1999 and the recruitment process is ongoing. The Deputy Director and a Program Manager for Service Integration, another unit within AAF, have been designated as the acting team leaders for OAP.

The OAP team members are new to their role and are energetic. Team members take turns in leading new and ongoing planning projects. These projects include re-engineering of business processes for case management at the Benefit Center, the Information Service Department and Medi-Cal. OAP also facilitates the Inter-departmental Planning Workgroup (IPW) which reviews performance planning, audits, strategic update/annual reports, a mid-level managers meeting and case studies. Other

OAP projects include the development of a CD-ROM of the 5-year strategic plan, developing and maintaining of the Agency web site, legislative analysis to formulate lobbying strategy at state and federal levels, development of the Mentoring Program, the Protecting Alameda County Children (PACC) initiative, development of the Master Plan for Language Access (MPLA), and Agency Service Integration.

For the purpose of this project, I studied the development of MPLA as a case study on the planning process adopted by OAP. The planning for MPLA started in July 1999 and the final report was completed in March 2000. Program implementation began on April 1, 2000.

MASTER PLAN FOR LANGUAGE ACCESS— A QUICK DESCRIPTION

SSA identified four key guiding principles for its work in the 5-year Strategic Plan—valuing innovation, increasing accountability, honoring diversity and taking pride in accomplishment. In line with these principles, MPLA responds to the challenge of delivering linguistically and culturally competent services to all social service programs for clients with limited-English proficiency (LEP). MPLA strives to ensure that information on services, benefits, consent forms, waivers of rights, financial obligations, etc. are communicated to LEP persons in a language that they understand. The plan also provides for an effective exchange of information between staff and customers while services are being provided. SSA plans to operate beyond the mandatory 5% threshold of the Dymally-Alatorre Act¹ and expands the translation of County-gen-

¹The Dymally-Alatorre Bilingual Services Act directs state and local agencies to provide appropriate translation services. This Act required that agencies translate materials explaining their services into language spoken by 5% or more of the populations that they serve and employ sufficient numbers of bilingual persons to ensure access for non-English speaking persons.

erated written materials to include Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Farsi and Cambodian.

HAMMERING OUT THE DETAILS— THE PLANNING PROCESS

Project Inception

The inception of MPLA can be attributed to two sources. As mentioned above, the plan is a direct response to the 1999-2004 Strategic Plan's call for innovative service approaches and client-centered care. The development of a language access master plan is the illustration of SSA's commitment to honoring the diversity of its clients. According to an analysis conducted by SSA, LEP clients represent a significant portion of its total caseload. Spanish and Vietnamese speaking clients currently exceed the 5% threshold of the Dymally Act in CalWORKs, General Assistance and MediCal. Additionally, LEP clients who require language services in Cantonese, Farsi and Cambodian are represented in large numbers. Please refer to Exhibit 2 for the breakdown of the LEP cases in various SSA programs. The inception of the MPLA project was also expedited by the comments and suggestions given by community-based client advocacy groups. In the course of developing the MPLA, these comments and suggestions have been fully considered and incorporated when appropriate.

Formation of Project Workgroup

The MPLA Committee was convened in July 1999. Facilitated and coordinated by the staff of OAP, the committee included stakeholders from all of the Agency's operations, including Adult & Aging Services, Children & Family Services, Welfare to Work, Workforce & Resources, and Agency Administration & Finance. The committee met weekly.

Review of Existing Practice & Resources

The committee conducted studies on existing legal requirements on language accessibility to establish the required service baseline. Representatives from respective operation departments were asked to review existing processes and resources already available in serving LEPs. Result of these reviews were used to help identify key issues and needs that the MPLA would address. A series of client and contractors surveys on need assessment were also conducted.

Definition of Project Objectives

The committee identified seven principal objectives for the project:

Facilities—Display appropriate signage regarding Civil Rights and the right to interpretation services in multiple languages at all SSA facilities with public contact.

Interpretation—Expand language interpretation services via staff and outside resources.

Translation of Materials—Provide language-appropriate translated materials.

Dissemination of Translated Materials—create a centralized system to acquire translated materials in manual and electronic formats, and install an automated worker alert system to highlight LEP needs.

Staff—Promote recruitment and retention of bilingual/multilingual staff.

Documentation—Develop a monitoring system on programmatic compliance to the MPLA.

Demonstration Program Development—Test the effectiveness of two pilot programs for on-call, on-demand interpretation.

Formation of Subcommittee

Once the project objectives were established, subcommittees led by a representative from the relevant departments were formed to work further on Action Steps that would address the key issues and needs (what) identified in the seven objectives. The Action Steps would include process (how), responsible department/unit (who), implementation timeline (when) and the evaluation process. Throughout this stage, OAP remained as the overall coordinator to ensure all subcommittees are on the right track and on time.

Draft Master Plan for Comments

The work of the subcommittees were consolidated in authoring a draft master plan. The draft was circulated to SSA management and community-based organizations for comments. The MPLA Committee also organized a series of focus groups for language-specific clients in different languages to verify the validity of the draft master plan. Various feedback and comments were subsequently reviewed and incorporated if applicable.

Final Master Plan and the Handshake to Implementation Phase

The final master plan was published in March 2000. The project then entered its implementation phase with respective operational departments/units assuming primary responsibility in carrying out the Action Plans according to the prescribed timeline. OAP relinquished its facilitator's role and became more of a consultant providing primarily technical support.

Program Evaluation

Under the Final Master Plan, the monitoring and evaluation of the project is to be handled by the Office of Human Relations and Diversity Affairs (OHRDA). OHRDA will ensure all agency personnel are accountable for programmatic compliance with the developed policies and procedures as well as programmatic effectiveness. The results of these efforts will be summarized in an MPLA Annual Report. OAP will provide technical assistance during the evaluation process.

SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE OAP PLANNING APPROACH

Centralized and Focused

OAP is a centralized unit within SSA that is designated to focus on planning system-wide projects. This positioning has enabled OAP to ensure all its planning projects are resonant with the Agency's overall strategic goals. OAP is also prepared to design programs with a global and broader view of how different resources within the agency can work together to achieve the Agency's mission. In the MPLA project, while different departments and units have varying issues and needs, OAP as the facilitator and centralized planner is able to keep the planning process focused and on track.

Consistency in Program Design and Implementation

Given the geographical size of Alameda County and its large and diversified number of client population, it is important for SSA to maintain consistency in its program design and implementation across widespread service locations and departments. The OAP planning approach allows various operating

units within the agency to work together in the planning of a project so that all involved share the same vision and knowledge. Standardized implementation processes are easier to achieve.

Early Buy-in from Stakeholders

The OAP planning approach includes representatives from all concerned departments/units to form the planning workgroup. This helps to create early buy-in from the stakeholders of a project. Issues and needs of different perspectives can be more adequately addressed and resolved during the planning phase. Even if not all of these issues and needs can be fully covered, the planning process at least offer the opportunity for these unique problems to surface.

Detailed Documentation

Very often when a planning project is conducted on an ad hoc basis, the planning phase is unconsciously treated as the “pre-game show” of the implementation phase. Once the action begins, especially with new staff stepping into the project, the original rationale of certain program features might be lost. The OAP planning approach, on the other hand, maintains full documentation of the planning process. The implementation plan in the form of a final report contains descriptions of the why’s, how’s, and what’s related to the action steps. This detailed documentation greatly facilitates program evaluation and re-engineering in the future; Alameda County is attempting to harness agency learning through this process.

THE FLIP SIDE—CHALLENGES OF THE OAP PLANNING APPROACH

Top-down versus Bottom-up

OAP uses a top-down planning approach. Conceptual development of a planning project happens at a senior management level. OAP will then perform the function as a centralized facilitator, rallying supports and assistance from operating departments and units. The merits of this approach, as mentioned above in the Success Factors section, are more applicable to agency-wide and system issues that are more general in nature, such as the MPLA project. However, this top-down approach may not be as suitable in addressing specific programmatic planning needs at department/unit level. Because this function is not within the purview of OAP, individual department/units within SSA continue to maintain their own programmatic planning functions via designated Program Specialists.

Tough Balancing Act

As mentioned earlier, one of OAP’s primary roles as facilitator is to balance the needs of various stakeholders so that their issues/needs can be adequately addressed and resolved in the planning phase. The hard fact is that this balancing act is difficult to maintain. Constraints on resources and time may hinder the adoption of certain suggested action plans that are geared towards addressing one unique concern. Meanwhile, certain seemingly simple and reasonable proposed action plans might be difficult to implement for a particular program and/or client group. In the case of the MPLA project, it was generally agreed by all stakeholders that readily available translated signage, documents, forms, bilingual staff etc. should be made available to LEP clients. However, this line of thinking is

based more on center-based service delivery, which does not necessarily apply to the primarily home-based and on-demand Children & Family Services, In-Home Supportive Services, and Welfare Fraud Investigations.

Where is the Money Person?

As discussed in the Preamble section, welfare reform has changed the environment and how social services are to be delivered. The old “welfare department” and its traditional categorical programs are giving way to the new holistic approach of more integrated services delivered in one-stop centers, yet many federal and state funding remains categorical and limits flexibility in permissible uses. It is, therefore, critical for any planning process to bring in the financial team as early on as possible to ensure that designed program features, whether integrated or categorical, can be appropriately paid for. For the MPLA project, OAP did include representatives from the Finance Office early in the project. The fact that SSA already determined a fixed dollar amount for the implementation of MPLA has made the participation of the Finance team less crucial. Subsequently, attendance of the Finance representative was only optional. This convenience most likely will not be available to all planning projects.

Slowing Momentum from Planning to Implementation

When the planning phase is completed and implementation begins, OAP changes its role from being a centralized planner and facilitator to become a support unit which offers technical assistance in the interpretation of proposed action steps. In this model, the operating departments and units will assume the leading role implementing and evaluat-

ing efforts as outlined in the plan. The once highly focused and time-pressed workgroup would be dissolved. OAP’s leadership in the project would change into a supportive role as the effectiveness of the action steps would take some time to manifest. The big push to complete the final report was over. A possible result is that the momentum of achieving the implementation objectives may shift down a notch. Because a majority of OAP’s projects are agency-wide or system-wide, some projects will not have a single programmatic department/unit that would emerge as the leading force to nurture its implementation. The MPLA Committee identified the newly established OHRDA as the appropriate entity to monitor and evaluate the implementation. For other planning projects where there would be no single monitoring and evaluating authority, the loss of momentum during implementation could be a real threat to the success of the project.

To Define a Position in the Organization Chart

OAP is a relatively new unit in SSA. Its staff have been involved in a wide range of planning projects and worked closely with other departments and units in the agency. Due to the nature of the placement of OAP as global planner, it is not absolutely clear to all departments/units what projects are within their purview. Which endeavors are considered “appropriate” OAP projects and which are not? How involved should OAP staff be in various projects? Should OAP be an active facilitator or a passive one? How much weight does “technical advice” offered by OAP carry? Does OAP have any leverage in determining the allocation of agency’s resources in meeting the needs of a planning project? I can imagine these questions challenging the staff of OAP every now and then, and all the while, the position of Agency Planning Director, the per-

manent unit head of OAP, has been vacant for almost a year. Recruitment is ongoing.

CLOSING REMARKS— LESSONS LEARNED

The planning approach adopted by OAP demonstrates the merits of an systemized, process of turning concepts into action. An infrastructure is established in the organization to centralize planning efforts. The process is focused with the agency's strategic goals in mind. The product is consistent and well documented. All concerned stakeholders are included from the beginning to cover all bases. Evaluation mechanisms are built into the implementation plans.

This approach works better for planning projects at the agency level and system-wide issues than for specific programmatic projects. SSA shows its management flexibility in maintaining programmatic planning capability at department/unit level, thus complementing the centralized OAP approach.

More clarity in the division of labor between centralized and other planning staff at the department/unit level will further improve the effectiveness of this two-pronged planning approach. OAP should enhance its position as an expert in the planning process—a well-oiled machine that can assist those with programmatic knowledge to put ideas into a realistic action plan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Exhibit 1

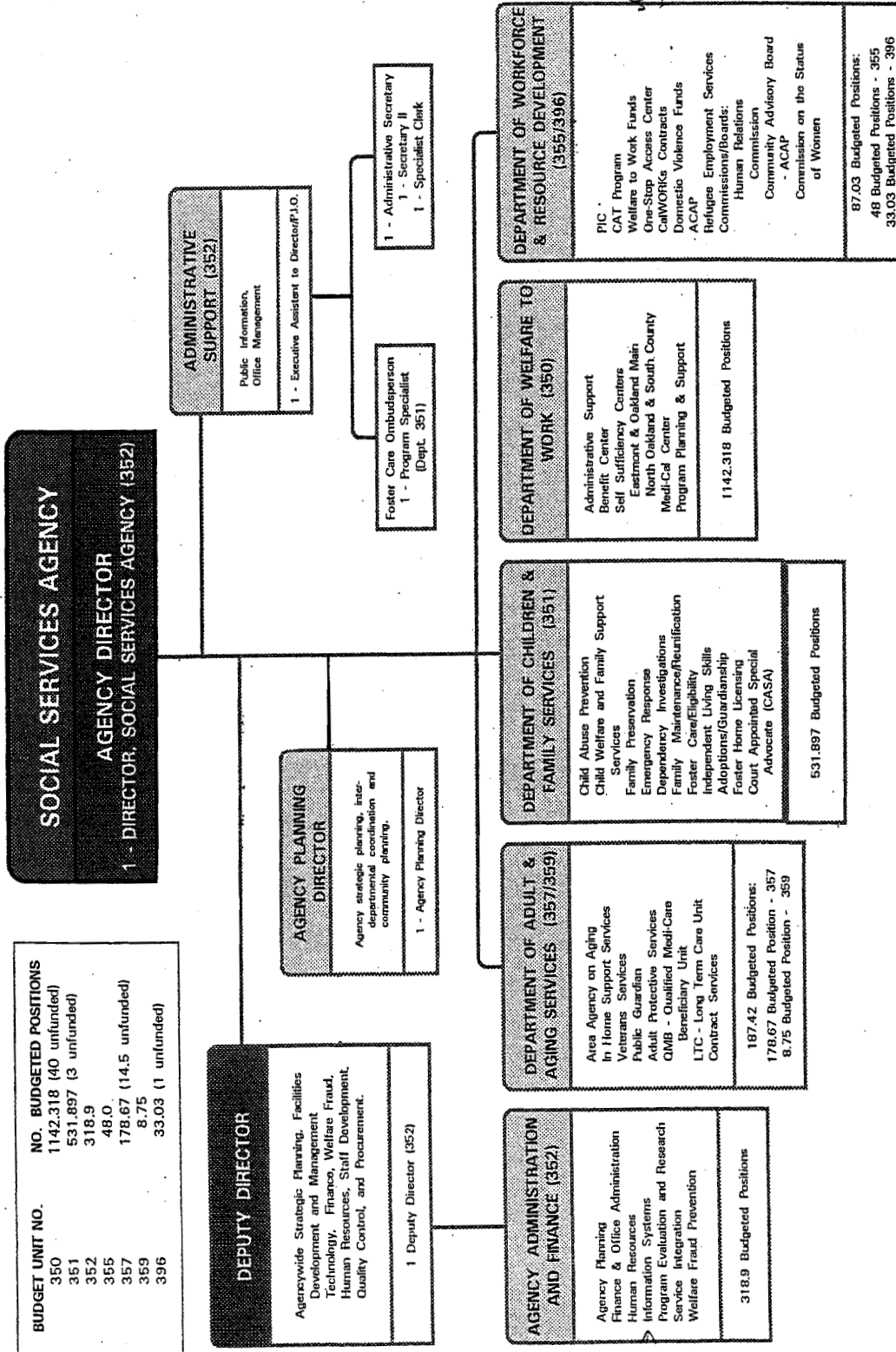


Exhibit 2

PROGRAM NAME	PRIMARY LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF CASES	PERCENTAGE OF ALL PROGRAM CASES
CalWORKS	Spanish	1,606	7.6%
	Vietnamese	1,326	6.2%
	Cantonese	528	2.5%
	Farsi	511	2.4%
	Cambodian	363	1.7%
	Mien	155	0.7%
	Laotian	102	0.5%
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		22,724	
MediCal	Spanish	10997	19.82%
	Cantonese	4645	8.37%
	Tagalog	684	1.23%
	Farsi	626	1.13%
	Korean	327	0.59%
	Mandarin	319	0.57%
	Cambodian	264	0.48%
	Russian	235	0.42%
	Laotian	172	0.31%
	Mien	119	0.21%
	TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		55,485
Refugee Cash Assistance Program	Other Non-English	12	33%
	Vietnamese	10	28%
	Russian	7	19%
	Farsi	6	17%
	English	1	3%
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		36	
Food Stamps - Non Assistance	Spanish	289	5%
	Cantonese	175	3%
	Vietnamese	153	3%
	Farsi	29	1%
	Tagalog	28	1%
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		5,532	
In-Home Supportive Services	Cantonese	591	5.9%
	Farsi	497	4.9%
	Spanish	446	4.4%
	Vietnamese	229	2.3%
	Russian	214	2.1%
	Mandarin	168	1.7%
	Tagalog	112	1.1%
	Korean	74	0.7%
	Cambodian	62	0.6%
Mien	59	0.6%	
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		10,071	
Child Welfare System- LEP Children's Cases	Spanish	128	2.15%
	Vietnamese	15	0.25%
TOTAL NUMBER OF CASES		5,948	