

Using a Data-Informed Approach for Developing a Strong Agency:

San Francisco County's Workforce Excellence Change Initiative

Tracy Lacey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With a movement towards outcome and performance-based federal and state funding, government organizations—including child welfare agencies—are increasingly more invested in building the infrastructure necessary to meet the newly imposed demands. This includes both a quality assurance approach as well as a continuous quality improvement (CQI) approach. The core of any child welfare agency's infrastructure is the people working within the organization. In 2014, San Francisco County Human Services Agency - Family and Children Services Division (SFHSA-FCS) entered into a Workforce Excellence (WE) change initiative partnership with a goal to build a stronger agency to improve outcomes for children and families.

Protecting children from neglect and abuse requires a team of individuals working towards a shared vision. The "WE" in the Workforce Excellence change initiative encompasses the spirit of the project whereby staff at all levels of the organization are empowered to have a voice and shared accountability.

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Introduction

For child welfare agencies, the overarching desired outcome is to ensure the safety of children and build healthier families, which in turn, builds healthier communities. In order to achieve such an outcome, a team approach is required. Ultimately, line staff, working directly with children and families, are uniquely posed to make the most impact as they are working with the families to apply the interventions that can produce the change that will lead to the desired outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative that the workforce is strong, and that the organization has an infrastructure to support the workforce in doing the very challenging and complex work related to public child welfare. For the workforce to be strong and stable, child welfare agencies need to promote positive organizational environments to maintain staff morale, prevent burnout and reduce retention issues that are common for child welfare agencies.

The Solano County Health and Social Services Child Welfare Services Division (SCHSS-CWS) has made significant efforts over the last several years to address staff retention and workforce morale issues. During fiscal year (FY) 2015-2016 the average vacancy rate for the SCHSS-CWS Social Worker III position was 20% with an outlier of 29%. Efforts to begin to address this have included SCHSS conducting a departmental Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) in 2014 and again in 2016, as well the SCHSS-CWS Division working closely with Human Resources (HR) to conduct one-on-one in-person interviews with the Social Worker III level staff. In addition to workforce development efforts, SCHSS-CWS has made an effort to transition towards a

continuous quality improvement (CQI) lens by creating a small CQI Unit. This case study examines the successes and challenges San Francisco County Human Services Agency - Family and Children Services (SFHSA-FCS) has had in implementing a Workforce Excellence (WE) change initiative focused on a data-informed approach to child welfare. The case study then explores how this may inform how Solano County approaches workforce development and the demands of performance-based funding.

SFHSA-FCS Project Development & Implementation

SFHSA-FCS and Seneca Family of Agencies – San Francisco (Seneca) were selected to receive a federal grant from the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) to engage in a three-year partnership with University of California Berkeley, School of Social Welfare (UCB), whereby a comprehensive Workforce Development Framework (WDF) will be implemented. Together these organizations will participate in the WE change initiative to move towards organizational environments that are more data-driven, performance-oriented, and team-focused. Core elements of the change initiative include fostering a learning environment that values accountability as well as innovative thinking. The WE change initiative partners identified an overarching goal to “improve the safety, permanency and well-being of children, youth and families through organizational interventions, leadership and workforce development” (NCWWI, San Francisco/Bay Area Logic Model). While the partnership with Seneca is vital for the overall project, for the purposes of this case study the focus will be on SFHSA-FCS’s role in the WE change initiative.

Like other child welfare agencies SFHSA-FCS has had a long history of difficulties related to the organizational environment and culture. Additionally, prior to initiating the WE change initiative, San Francisco County had high rates of foster care entry and re-entry into care, longer

lengths of stay and fewer reunification successes compared to other California counties (NCWWI, *COHA* 2014, pg.31). While these outcomes are significantly impacted by county level socio-economic factors and disparity issues, there are factors within the division's control such as ensuring adherence to a standard practice model and compliance regarding timely documentation and reporting. SFHSA-FCS leadership recognized that in order to address poor outcomes and compliance issues they had to focus their attention on the workforce and developing an infrastructure that would both support the staff and infuse accountability into the work. Therefore, when the opportunity came to participate in the first cohort of the WE change initiative, SFHSA-FCS viewed this as an opportunity to try a new approach.

In July of 2014, SFHSA-FCS underwent a Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) conducted by NCWWI that was intended to identify critical workforce strengths and challenges. The COHA conducted in 2014 was used as baseline data to strategically target interventions to improve the workforce culture and climate. The COHA will be re-administered after three years in November of 2017 and the final report is expected to be completed by March of 2018. A mixed methodology approach was utilized to conduct the COHA including an electronic survey, key informant interviews, and focus groups with staff members from all levels of the organization to gather information from key organizational stakeholders.

In addition to the COHA, the following training and development strategies have been facilitated and supported by NCWWI: senior leadership support via monthly conference calls to troubleshoot challenges and to support successes; Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM) which was a 3-day in-person training focused on a CQI framework and workforce development strategies followed by coaching over the course of the three-year project; Leadership Academy for Supervisors (LAS) whereby selected supervisors participated in a 9-month online training

curriculum based on the NCWWI leadership model; and the formation of Decision “Site” Teams at each of the three SFHSA-FCS offices. Site Teams are led by a team of supervisors and include line staff as well as a NCWWI consultant who facilitates the process and helps the group utilize a CQI framework. These Site Teams use data to plan and then implement smaller change initiatives to improve processes as well as morale and communication. Meetings are held monthly for a four-hour block of time, and the work is done during the allotted meeting time.

SFHSA-FCS is utilizing the findings of the COHA and the workforce development strategies to advance and integrate multiple change initiatives in the agency. Considerable effort has been made to institutionalize the concept of a data-informed approach by incorporating a shared data-rich language with staff at all levels. Additionally, efforts are being made to incorporate the data-informed approach in hiring practices as well as performance evaluations at all levels.

Ultimately change is expected to take place at two levels: individually and jurisdictionally.

Individual change initiatives include middle managers and supervisors incorporating what they have learned about CQI and workforce development strategies with their teams. Line staff and support staff are being encouraged to join Site Teams, utilize data in their own work, and set personal performance goals for themselves. By fostering opportunities for engagement, particularly the participation in Site Teams, staff is being empowered to be part of the planning process to identify solutions rather than feeling frustrated about system changes. Both representatives interviewed from UCB and NCWWI highlighted the importance of a new concept for the department in which both management and workers are empowered and, more importantly, are jointly responsible to carry out needed changes together.

The jurisdictional change initiative will be accomplished through the collaboration between SFHSA-FCS, Seneca and UCB to develop a local workforce that embraces the use of data to

inform the difficult work that child welfare social workers do day-to-day in order to move towards outcome and performance driven service delivery.

Agency Resources & Infrastructure

The NCWWI grant covered the cost of the core components of the WE change initiative including: the COHA, in-person training for mid-level managers, training for supervisors, and consultants for the senior leadership conference calls and the Site Teams. The most significant expense incurred by SFHSA-FCS was related to staff resources at all levels participating in the components of the WE change initiative. Title IV-E waiver flex funding was leveraged to fund new positions that ultimately supported this change initiative. New positions included: four Program Managers in the case carrying units (previously the Supervisors reported directly to the Program Directors); one Analyst to act as an Implementation Coordinator responsible to coordinate new initiatives and workgroups; and finally one Manager and one Supervisor coach position to augment a Workforce Development Team. Due to a decrease in caseloads SFHSA-FCS was also able to re-purpose several positions to support the WE change initiative. These changes included adding two additional Supervisor level coaches for the Workforce Development Team and one additional Training Coordinator. Additionally, prior to the NCWWI project, the department had re-purposed other positions to create a Policy Unit that consists of five Protective Service Workers as well as creating a CQI Unit staffed by one Supervisor and five mid-level Analysts (separate from the QA Unit).

To further support the integration of a data-driven approach and to address concerns around the need to integrate change initiatives, SFHSA-FCS restructured various workgroups to report out to an Implementation Team which meets every other month. All workgroups—including the Site

Teams—are able to report back progress and barriers related to various change initiatives, which creates a two-way feedback loop between the line staff and management.

Successes and Challenges

The agency as a whole has embraced a data-informed approach resulting in a shift to being more team-based and performance-oriented which were goals of this WE change initiative. Feedback from SFHSA-FCS staff members and leadership indicated that the Site Teams have been instrumental in empowering the staff to provide input regarding changes in processes and larger change initiatives in addition to contributing to improved morale.

SFHSA-FCS reported that initially following the COHA and the initiation of both the leadership trainings and Site Teams, staff morale improved significantly. Simultaneously, efforts were made to address a particular COHA finding related to the lack of opportunities for promotions and career tracks that then led to rapid staff transitions leaving vacancies, which resulted in increased caseloads for workers in case carrying units. Additionally, new managers were hired. Keeping in line with the shift to a data-informed approach, staff performance issues were addressed in a different manner, resulting in some veteran staff opting to leave the agency. While staff retention was a strength identified by the COHA at the onset of the project, since then SFHSA-FCS has experienced turnover of staff which has made it difficult to implement and sustain changes. At the time of the COHA report in 2014, SFHSA-FCS turnover rate for Protective Services Workers was 7.5% and 9.8% for Bachelor's level social workers, which was low compared to national averages: 20-40% (NCWWI, *COHA*, 2014, pg.21). At the writing of this case study the turnover rate for Protective Services Worker classification is now 9% and Bachelor Level Social Work Specialist is 25%. Staff retention issues, coupled with significant statewide regulatory changes

impacting child welfare, have unfortunately resulted in a drop in the staff morale for SFHSA-FCS.

While a fair amount of attention was placed on training and support for the supervisory level of the organization, SFHSA-FCS has identified that the supervisors continue to struggle with balancing the shift to using data to monitor staff performance while also supporting staff.

Per the UCB partner, SFHSA-FCS has made great strides in regards to moving towards a more data-driven system, and all the partners agree that the focus will now need to shift to how to better engage children and families. SFHSA-FCS reported that it tracks outcomes and compliance-process measures closely and have noted improved outcomes, including performing above the state averages. That being said, SFHSA-FCS is not comfortable linking these changes directly to the WE change initiative interventions without more data regarding the current organizational culture which will be available after the final COHA is completed in November of 2017.

Recommendations for Solano County

As previously indicated, SCHSS-CWS has been challenged with staff retention and morale issues. For FY 2016/17 the average year to date (July 2016-March 2017) vacancy rate for Social Worker III positions has dropped from 20% to 17%, and as of March was at 15%. The decrease may in part be a result of the efforts SCHSS-CWS made to take the findings from both the OCI conducted at the departmental level and the HR survey to develop strategies to address the concerns raised by line staff. Strategies implemented thus far include but are not limited to: the facilitation of an all-staff workshop to collaboratively look for solutions, the formation of both an

Organizational Culture Workgroup and a monthly drop-in Resiliency Group, schedule changes, and the provision of additional training opportunities.

In comparing the themes that were identified by the COHA conducted for SFHSA-FCS with the findings from the SCHSS-CWS HR survey, there were very common themes that included, but were not limited to: shared vision, change management, leadership, communication, and inclusivity. Given the similar findings, SCHSS-CWS could benefit from components of the NCWWI Workforce Development Framework. SCHSS-CWS has already gathered the data related to what the problem is in terms of workforce retention and morale; therefore, it would not be necessary to engage in the COHA process. In fact, continuing to survey the staff could be viewed as obstructive by the line staff and may negatively impact morale further. The SCHSS-CWS workforce is prime for targeted interventions.

As a result of this case study and the opportunity to review and compare the workforce development efforts and the current infrastructures in place to support outcome and performance-based service delivery for both SFHSA-FCS and SCHSS-CWS, the following is a summary of the recommendations for SCHSS-CWS. Specifically, Solano County would benefit from the trainings for managers and supervisors as well as the NCWWI facilitation of Site Teams. The LAMM and LAS training curriculums are available on-line at no cost. Given the training curriculums are available at no cost, SCHSS-CWS could initiate this training by July 1, 2017. Pending the availability of funding, it is recommended that SCHSS-CWS invest in the consultation services available through NCWWI to initiate Site Teams. NCWWI consultation fees for facilitation of monthly four-hour Site Teams meetings range from approximately \$100-\$150 per hour. Furthermore, the division should consider the “Implementation Team” model used by SFHSA-FCS to build in the structure for a two-way feedback loop regarding agency

change initiatives. In addition SCHSS-CWS staff identified the need for staff with project management skills and increased staffing for the CQI Unit, which would be highly recommended.

Given the current requirements for outcome and performance-based service delivery and the pending regulatory changes such as AB 403 Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), SCHSS-CWS appears to be under-resourced. This will significantly impact the division's ability to meet the needs of children and the community as a whole. In comparing the current number of dependents per total current child welfare staff in FTE's, SCHSS-CWS has 4.39 dependents per FTE while SFHSA-FCS has 2.94 dependents per FTE, a 40% difference. Without additional staff resources and the infrastructure related to QA, CQI, workforce development, training, and policy making, the division will have a difficult time meeting mandates. This could lead to loss of state and federal funding and, more importantly, could result in adverse outcomes for children that can impact the community from both a moral and fiscal standpoint.

Solano County is not a Title IV-E waiver county and therefore does not have access to the Title IV-E flex funding. That being said, it is recommended that Solano County evaluate whether there is any other funding available that could be used to fund new positions to support and sustain the efforts towards workforce development, CQI practices, and adequate care for children and families in Solano County.

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