

Using a Data-Informed Approach for Developing a Stronger Workforce: San Francisco County's Workforce Excellence Change Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the heart of an organization are the people working to meet the mission of the agency. San Francisco's Human Services Agency's Family and Children Services Division embarked on a three-year Workforce Excellence Initiative with the goal of building a stronger agency and improving outcomes for children and families. This study shares some of the positive outcomes achieved and lessons learned through this change initiative. Furthermore, child

welfare agencies in the Bay Area are always looking to learn from one another about implementing initiatives, developing programs, and overcoming challenges that communities face. The information from this project serves as a resource for Santa Clara County as they continue their innovative thinking around supporting a healthier workforce as a foundation for children's safety, permanency, and families' well-being.

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Introduction

In January 2017, Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) welcomed a new Director, Francesca Le Rue, to lead the agency in its mission to keep children safe and families strong. In her vision, Ms. Le Rue shared that in order to reach the agency's goals of safety, permanency and well-being for families and children in our community, it was necessary to work on the foundation of the agency: the well-being of the workforce. Child welfare agencies across the nation have struggled to maintain staffing levels and morale in a field where there is a great deal of vicarious trauma stemming from efforts to protect children and keep families together.

What successful steps can child welfare agencies take and what efforts are necessary to build a higher quality workforce? San Francisco's Department of Family and Children's Services (FCS) took a proactive step toward gaining further knowledge in this area by applying for a grant through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institution (NCWWI) to enter into a Workforce Excellence (WE) Initiative. This initiative was a three-year study on their organization which utilized a data-informed approach to help the agency improve. This initiative began in 2014 and provided recommendations with a focus on the *theory of change*. According to the theory of change, by changing the culture of their agency to be more "evidence-driven, performance-orientated and team-focused," staff would become more responsive to the needs of families and children, leading to

improved services and greater progress towards the agency's goals (NCWWI Change Initiative, 2014).

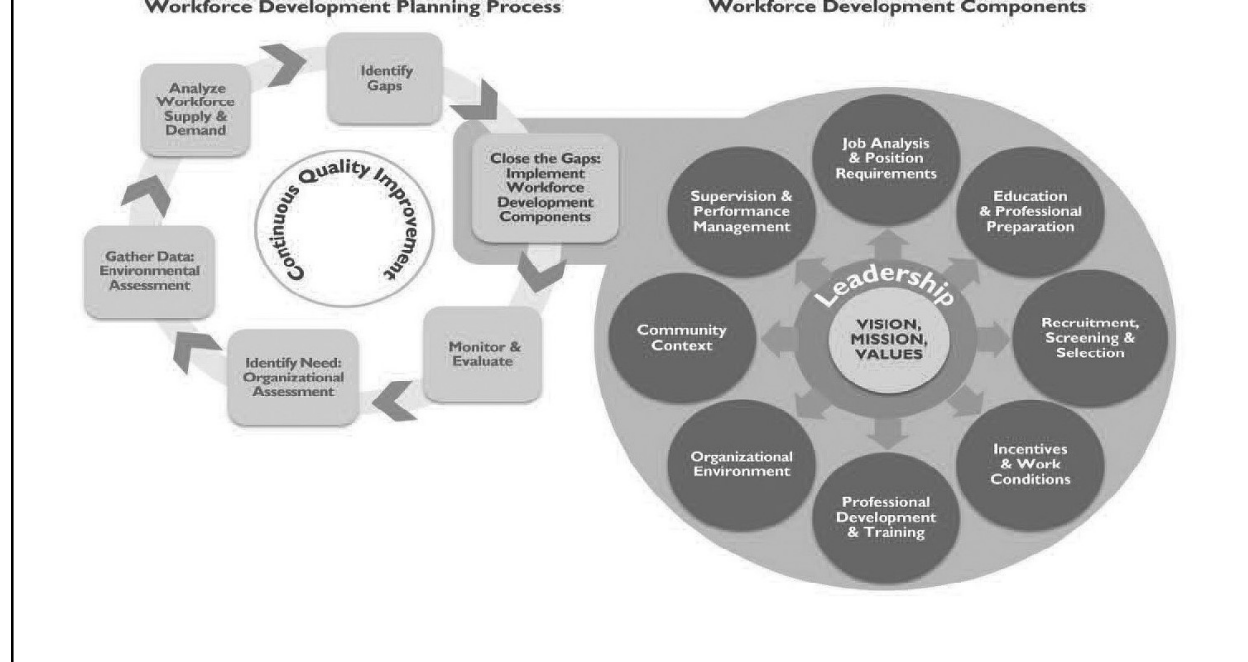
Short-Term and Long-Term Outcomes

The short-term goals of the WE Initiative were for all staff to understand and embrace Continuous Quality Improvement principles and activities, integrate Continuous Quality Improvement into their practice, be more responsive to client needs, and improve engagement of children, youth and families. Long-term goals included improved agency culture and climate in the areas of: job satisfaction, leadership, learning culture, professional sharing and support, readiness for change, and shared vision, as well as more effective services delivered to children, youth and families (NCWWI Change Initiative, 2014).

As part of the WE Initiative, The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) developed a comprehensive Workforce Development Framework (WDF). The visual graphic (*Figure 1*) reflects the essential elements of the framework.

Not only does the WDF reflect the importance of an agency's mission and vision, but it also demonstrates that an agency's values are central to its future direction and expectations set for staff. Research has demonstrated that an organization's culture and climate play a significant role in the ability to attract, recruit, and retain a competent and qualified workforce. Organizational health influences overall staff well-being, how staff feel about their job, their agency, their supervisors, and colleagues; and the resources and support staff have to do the

FIGURE 1:
Workforce Development Framework



work. These factors are important because they can directly impact service delivery and overall achievement of an organization's mission (NCWWI.org).

Costs

The NCWWI grant helped cover the primary costs associated with this initiative, which included the comprehensive organizational health assessment, training for mid-level managers and supervisors, consultants for the senior leadership team, and the development of Site Teams. The most significant expense incurred by San Francisco's FCS was that related to adding to the staffing infrastructure. The Human Services Agency's Executive Director, Trent Rhorer, shared that the agency had previously experienced cutbacks, and adding middle-level management mirrored a structure that they previously had.

Successes

One of the goals of this initiative was to improve outcomes for children and families. According to the

data in the *NCWWI Results Report* (February 2018), San Francisco's FCS showed a decline in number of children in care, from 2,239 in 2002 to 650 in 2017. The re-entry rate into foster care also decreased from 20% in 2013 to 9% in 2017. According to manager Melissa Connelly, the recidivism outcomes cannot be strictly attributed to the Initiative; however, these results have been a positive outcome that should be highlighted.

Another success that San Francisco's FCS had as a part of this Initiative was expanding its workforce. As a result of the recommendations from this initiative, various positions were added and some re-organization occurred. The positions included four Program Managers in the case-carrying units. These managers oversee the supervisors, who previously reported directly to the program directors. This created another tier to the reporting structure, to allow for program directors to focus on macro-level activities. *The Results Report* (February 2018) showed that supervisors held mostly favorable opinions about the

change, as they felt supported by managers with the extra layer of leadership. San Francisco's FCS also added an analyst, who acts as an 'Implementation Coordinator' and is responsible for coordinating new initiatives and workgroups, as well as three 'Supervisor Coaches', and one additional 'Training Coordinator'. These roles make up their Workforce Development Team, which exists internally within the FCS division. They also developed a Continuous Quality Improvement Unit to help in the effort of utilizing data to inform practice. Directors and managers reported more intentional use of data for decision-making supported by CQI and hopefully that will continue to drive future initiatives.

As part of the WE Initiative, NCWWI offered a Leadership Academy for Middle Managers (LAMM) which included a 3-day in-person training focused on a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) framework and workforce development strategies, followed by coaching over the course of the three-year study. In addition, training included a Leadership Academy for Supervisors (LAS), a 7- to 9-month training curriculum based on the NCWWI leadership model. Over the three-year period they were able to have 42 Supervisors complete the curriculum.

The 'Supervisor Coaches' that were hired help identify goals related to key practice improvements. For example, providing unit trainings on behavioral-based case plans versus service-based case plans. There were also individual recommendations that managers were able to share with the supervisors on skill-building and utilization of the 'Supervisor Coaches' to help support their growth in areas that were identified. Supervisors also led Site Teams which involved line staff in developing strategies for improving staff morale, such as organizing staff morale-boosting events and helping organize a retreat for supervisors. In order to address burnout and vicarious trauma of their staff, FCS also implemented the strategy of bringing in a Licensed Clinical Social Worker on a quarterly basis to facilitate a "Healing Circle" for staff (M. Connelly, interview, March 22, 2018).

The other gain from participating in the WE Initiative was the development of competencies for the different levels of positions, which provided further guidance in hiring practices. The Initiative also included self-assessments for new employees after 3 months with FCS, to help them identify areas of professional growth. These goals are then revisited during performance evaluations.

Overall, FCS was able to benefit from tools already developed by NCWWI, templates on competencies, and ideas for overcoming challenges. Managers found these tools helpful, as NCWWI is an organization that studies child welfare agencies at a national level. The hiring manager with FCS shared that their hiring and selection processes improved as a result of the identified competencies, and they are seeing a workforce with higher-level skill sets.

Challenges

One of the goals was for FCS social workers to use data to help improve their practice. Although the data demonstrated improved staff compliance measures, workers felt that data were being used primarily to "punish non-compliance" and created a "punitive" agency climate around performance accountability that lacked consideration for increased work demands. Supervisors felt that data-driven practice had not penetrated to the frontline. Furthermore, staff felt data needed to capture quality of practice. (*NCWWI Results Report*, Feb. 2018)

The final report also reflected staff expressing an "us versus them" divide, a strong perception of top-down leadership, a lack of transparency and staff not being included in decision-making, and a feeling amongst staff that they were under-appreciated and under-valued. There was also increased turnover; in 2014 the turnover rate was 9%, and in 2017 it was 16%. The results showed that staff was using fewer coping strategies compared to 2014. Another challenge was that the 'Supervisor Coaches' were hired to work directly with supervisors and staff wanted to have coaches available for their own coaching. The data show that work-related burnout was higher for caseworkers and supervisors, compared to

client-related burnout. Despite these results, when satisfaction was measured for those still at San Francisco's FCS in 2017, the results demonstrated that there was increased job satisfaction for caseworkers and supervisors. In addition, data showed the Division climate was more team-based, there were higher levels of peer support, and there was improvement in the overall psychological climate. The data also indicated that workers gave high overall ratings of Supervisors and of their Managers (*NCWWI Results Report*, Feb. 2018).

Next Steps

NCWWI provided recommendations for San Francisco's FCS division in its final report, including to involve staff in implementation, to have better supports for workers to manage job demands, and to strengthen support services to reduce workload of frontline staff. In addition, NCWWI recommended FCS staff work to create a positive organizational climate by building trust and mutual respect through the fostering of relationships between management and frontline staff, and build stronger communication systems across the agency. Finally, they recommended FCS build a data-driven CQI culture for frontline workers and supervisors as well as leadership (*NCWWI Results Report*, Feb. 2018).

In the most recent report received from NCWWI (February 2018), the data showed perceptions of racial inequity, organizational bias, and lack of fairness and equity. These are new findings, and San Francisco's Human Services Agency Executive team and the leadership team of FCS are in the process of developing a plan to counteract these perceptions. The massive organizational workforce changes are still in the early stages of implementation. San Francisco's FCS agency is also in the process of having the Chapin Hall research and policy center conduct a workload study to help them better understand workloads and equity, and to develop strategies for addressing those findings.

Recommendations for Santa Clara County

Research indicates that organizational culture and the organizational environment have a significant impact on outcomes for clients (NCWWI.org). Santa Clara County's DFCS has at times endured a culture of frontline staff, supervisors, and managers operating as adversaries, instead of as partners and teammates working toward the common goal of strengthening the Santa Clara County community. Removing barriers between direct service workers and management can help strengthen the agency and improve outcomes for children and families. Over the last year, the current director and administration have implemented strategies including: the facilitation of Well-Being focus groups for supervisors and managers led by an organization named Alia, as well as micro-learning by Alia on well-being that are made available to all staff; a bi-annual Visioning message from the director to the staff; Employee of the Month recognition, running clubs, a further effort to break down silos within the agency, and consistent messaging that they are a Child Family Practice Model organization. The implementation of Unit-Based Teams involving staff at all levels has also provided an opportunity for two-way communication between line staff and management, and core training for the management team which included follow-up sessions called "Managers Coming Together". There have also been further efforts with the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) data that teaches the workforce about the strengths and challenges in how staff is working with families and a focus on lessons learned to improve the interventions and outcomes for children and families.

Similar to NCWWI, Alia has, in its work with the agency, also captured themes from meeting with DFCS' leaders as part of an organizational well-being project and provided recommendations. Given that data have already been gathered, it would not be necessary to engage in another assessment of DFCS, as that could negatively impact staff asking them to

be surveyed again when they have already been providing feedback through Alia. There have also been past studies on the organizational climate where staff have shared feedback with management. During the most recent survey conducted in March 2018, staff indicated that the top priority was encouraging relationship development between leadership and line staff, and paying attention to how communication is delivered, with a focus on transparency and connection.

There is no single strategy or simple solution to building a stronger workforce. The efforts and findings from San Francisco's FCS' participation in the NCWWI study can be helpful to Santa Clara County's DFCS, and there are components of the Workforce Development Framework that could be lifted within the organization. The workforce is the heart of Child Welfare that directly touches the lives of children and families, and social workers rally with community partners to help in this effort. Strengthening DFCS staff is key to supporting outcomes.

As a result of this case study, the following is a summary of recommendations for Santa Clara County's DFCS: hiring supervisor-level internal coaches who can be readily available to work with the supervisors in the continued practice of Child and Family Practice Model behaviors and to continue to work at becoming a coaching organization. In order to support frontline social workers, their foundation must be strong. Social workers rely heavily on their supervisors to guide them, teach them, and support the work they do. Providing internal coaches that are readily available for supervisors will help build their skill set.

The implementation of Skill-Building Labs by the internal coaches would help increase skills for staff at all levels. The strategy of having these trainings in-house and for only two-hour increments provides an opportunity for staff to readily attend, as they do not have to take an entire day from work as with most trainings, and the trainings are focused on building targeted skills. In addition, supervisors should be provided the opportunity to participate

in the Leadership Academy, which is available online at no cost. Another recommendation would be to create a DFCS Workforce Development Team/Unit, which would include the 'Supervisor Coaches', the hiring team, and a partnership with a project manager overseeing recruitment efforts. This team would focus on strategies for improving organizational culture as well as the creation of site teams for the different DFCS offices, which would include participation from managers, supervisors, and line staff, and focus on activities and efforts to boost staff morale.

Lastly, at the core of the Workforce Development Framework lies the vision, mission, and values of an agency which drives leadership. It is critical for each of those components to be defined and integrated in relation to employee well-being and for leadership to discuss those during supervision. If the mission of Santa Clara County's DFCS is to keep children safe and families strong, the agency needs to also look at keeping staff feeling safe and strong. Sylvia Deporto, Deputy Director of San Francisco's FCS, said, "Ultimately how we are treated is how we tend to treat others. If we are listening to our workforce and creating an environment where they can thrive professionally, then that will show up in how they treat our families." (Balancing Head and Heart California's Child Welfare Workforce). In the Visioning message, the DFCS Director shared that one of the goals is well-being for children and families. In thinking of parallel process, it is important to define employee well-being and to develop strategies for how those principles of well-being can be supported by the organization. Finally, in the center of the Workforce Development Framework there were identified values of an organization. Developing a slogan can be helpful to re-inforce the message to staff that their wellness matters and that it is an important value that Santa Clara County's DFCS promotes.

The quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and

supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload, and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

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