Using Simulation Labs to Improve Customer Service and Deliver Consistent Outcomes for Santa Clara County's Department of Adult and Aging Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social service agencies throughout California are creating Simulation Labs as innovative tools for social work training. Research has shown Simulation Labs are cost-effective, develop confident social workers, improve critical thinking, produce consistent outcomes, and deliver improved customer service. Several members of Santa Clara County's Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS) Executive Management team recognized the benefits of a Simulation Lab and envision staff benefiting from its implementation. Incorporating a Simulation Lab can lead to improved service delivery, dependable outcome measures, consistent data gathering, and enhanced quality of work. Staff can develop interviewing and case management skills in a safe and positive environment, where they receive immediate feedback and support. In July 2018, Adult Protective Services is implementing a new database and case management system. A third social service agency building is being constructed on the Julian Street campus and expected to be completed in Fall 2019. As Santa Clara County Social Services continues to grow, a new Simulation Lab could be beneficial to DAAS and other social service departments.

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Introduction

Traditional social worker trainings usually occur in a classroom setting, where Subject Matter Experts (SME's) educate staff about policies, procedures, and expectations. Training methods typically use lecture formats with PowerPoint presentations, anecdotal stories, exercises, and group discussions. When newly hired social workers report to their assigned jobs, they are often asked to accompany veteran social workers in the field, and are eventually provided their own caseloads. One drawback from traditional training methods is the lack of meeting individual needs. Generally, traditional trainings do not account for the varying levels of professional and life experiences of its attendees (Grzyb, 2012).

Training methods for social workers are changing. The concepts of Simulation Labs and role-playing scenarios are becoming increasingly popular. Simulation Labs create a real, but safe, environment for social workers at all levels (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015). Simulation Labs are being created throughout California and are becoming a popular training tool for social workers in county social service agencies. Simulation Labs allow social workers to experience real-life situations in a safe, educational, and supportive environment (Iverson-Hitchcock, 2018). Simulation Labs mimic real-life settings, which are created to replicate homes, offices, or courtrooms. Simulation Labs involve numerous scenarios which case-carrying social workers could encounter as part of their job assignments. In addition to preparing social workers for routine policy, procedural tasks, and job expectations, Simulation Labs prepare social workers for when they encounter difficult situations. These may include, but are not limited to, the presence of drugs or weapons, engaging difficult clients, threats to physical safety, and interviewing suspected abusers. Social workers have the opportunity to receive immediate feedback from trained field experts, instructors, and colleagues. Debriefing sessions create psychologically safe environments for social workers, provide the time and space to process the simulation, model supervision, and allow consultation (Iverson-Hitchcock, 2018).

There are several essential elements to Simulation Labs (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015). They include:

- Establishing a baseline of competencies and skills
- Applying critical thinking in real-life scenarios
- Establishing desired behaviors and practices of trainees
- Integrating and sequencing learning
- Having facilitators model strength-based feedback
- Supporting peer-to-peer learning
- Using desired learning objectives to drive design and development
- Involving Subject Matter Experts (SME's) who can serve as role players and influence learning

Simulation Labs allow trainees to practice their knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. Participants are allowed to feel safe, make mistakes, and correct those mistakes. Additional benefits include increasing social workers' confidence, the

development of multidisciplinary teams, and promotion of critical thinking (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015).

Alameda County's Simulation Lab

Los Angeles County appears to have developed the first Social Service Simulation Lab in California (Favot, 2015). Since 2013, several other county social service agencies have implemented Simulation Labs. Alameda County's Staff Development Program is also known as the Training and Consulting Team (TACT). The Simulation Lab is one of several training tools being utilized by TACT, and has received rave reviews by social service managers, supervisors, social workers, and their community partners. Initially, there were doubts from experienced social work staff, but Staff Development Manager Larry Sanchez indicated he has not received any negative feedback regarding the Simulation Lab. Alameda County is not able to produce quantifiable measurable outcomes, but Mr. Sanchez noted 100% of staff who participated in the Simulation Lab found the training valuable in helping with daily duties and responsibilities. Participants expressed that receiving immediate feedback from trainers and colleagues was beneficial. TACT primarily uses Simulation Labs for induction trainings, but they are also used for compliance trainings and/or addressing identified areas of need.

The Simulation Lab consists of a 255-square-foot room furnished with donated and purchased items. The room replicates a studio apartment, which consists of a sofa, a coffee table, two end tables, a kitchen table, and kitchen chairs. A printed backdrop resembles a full kitchen with utilities and appliances. Inside the room cameras are positioned throughout the room, which are broadcast into a nearby training room. Alameda County's estimated set-up cost for its Simulation Lab was $4,000. Mr. Sanchez said most of the furniture was donated, and the majority of the cost came from the camera system, software, and printing of the backdrop.

There is no need for outside vendors or trainers, as all of the Simulation Labs are facilitated by TACT employees. Alameda County has a contract with UC–Davis, where trainers are taught improvisation and acting skills. The trainers learn how to maintain character and transform into the personalities in the scenarios. TACT trainers play the role of clients, suspected abusers, children, family members, or any other person a social worker may encounter on their caseload.

Simulations Labs for Department of Adult and Aging Services (DAAS)

For the past two years, Santa Clara County's Adult Protective Services (APS) has been working with the Information and Systems Department to develop a new case management database system. The system is near its completion and expected to be implemented in July 2018. The new database system will be able to produce quantifiable statistics around safety, risk, and the effectiveness of APS interventions. While these statistics are important for evaluation of the APS program, these numbers will not have true meaning without consistency from APS staff.

During the research process, APS program managers and supervisors expressed the need for consistency in their investigations and services provided. Program managers from Santa Clara County's In-Home Supportive Services and the Chief Deputy Public Administrator/Guardian/Conservator also recognized inconsistencies from staff with regard to delivering services to their customers. These inconsistencies include differences in gathering information, data collection, engagement of clients, interviewing family members, conversations with suspected abusers, and communication among internal and external partners.

When presented with the idea of a Simulation Lab as a training tool, all four DAAS Executive Team members expressed intrigue. The Simulation Lab can provide an opportunity for staff to develop interview skills in a safe environment, role play multiple scenarios, and receive immediate feedback. The Simulation Lab is a benefit to any social services staff who interact with clients, families, suspected abusers, community partners, and Court. Scenarios

can address safety concerns during home visits, de-escalating volatile situations, and establishing job expectations. The DAAS Executive Team recognized the benefits of increased workers' confidence, comfort levels, assessment skills, investigations, and service delivery.

Implementation

Marie Sanders, Santa Clara County's Staff Development Program Manager indicated that Staff Development will have a training room in the new building on the Julian Street Campus, which is currently under construction and expected to be completed in Fall 2019. The current plan is for all Department of Adult and Aging Services Programs (Adult Protective Services, In-Home Supportive Services, Public Guardian, Senior Nutrition, and Seniors' Agenda) to be housed in the new building. There is potential to have a Simulation Lab developed, connected to the Staff Development Training Room, which could be utilized by all social service agency departments.

Ms. Sanders acknowledged the need for at least ten trained Staff Development employees to facilitate Simulation Lab trainings. There is no extra cost for staffing as one of the job requirements for current Staff Development employees is to facilitate trainings. The only additional cost for Staff Development would be improvisation trainings, as Santa Clara County does not have any current contracts with local colleges or universities. Ms. Sanders confirmed there would be a need to retain services from an outside vendor for Staff Development trainers. Michael Rice, DAAS Financial Analyst, was presented with a Simulation Lab proposal with an anticipated cost of $4000, and potential cost savings. The DAAS budget has money allocated for training and staff development. According to Mr. Rice, based on previous budgets and expenditures, money could be made available for the development of a Simulation Lab.

Conclusion

Simulation Labs are being recognized as a popular and effective tool for training social workers and all social service staff who have direct interaction with clients and customers. Instead of sitting in a classroom and listening to a lecture, individuals become directly engaged in the learning process. Trainees are able to develop strengths, while addressing weaknesses in a safe and supportive setting. In addition to producing successful, confident staff, Simulation Labs are a cost-saving tool due to low overhead costs and a reduced need to hire outside trainers.

A Santa Clara County Simulation Lab would be beneficial for all social service agency staff who interact with clients, families, and community partners. Simulation Labs can prepare social service agency staff for home visits, office visits, and court testifying. Scenarios are able to prepare employees for a variety of interactions they may encounter in their work capacity. The number of scenarios are endless, as they can focus on safety (e.g., weapons, drugs, violence), interviewing difficult clients, interactions with suspected abusers, providing customer service, and reinforcing county's policies and procedures. Ultimately, a Simulation Lab can improve the consistency of services being provided to customers, deliver reliable measurable outcomes, increase employee confidence, and improve staff morale. It is hoped that a Simulation Lab for Santa Clara County can be implemented by Fall 2019, in conjunction with the completion of the new social services agency building on the Julian Street campus.

Acknowledgements

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