Kern County
County Peer Review Visit Summary

September 25, 2009

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Welfare to Work Division

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Executive Summary

Introduction
The County Peer Review (CPR) Program was created for county peers and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to perform on-site reviews of counties' Welfare-to-Work (WTW) programs to identify and share promising practices, opportunities for improvement, and strategies that could positively impact work participation rates (WPR). Kern County volunteered to host a CPR pilot in January 2009 to focus attention on areas they felt would be of interest to other service providers and benefit Kern County California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program.

Kern County Department of Human Services
Kern County's CalWORKs WTW program utilizes a Program Director, three Assistant Program Directors, Social Services Supervisors (SSS) and Social Service Workers (SSW). The SSW provides orientation, appraisal, and ongoing case management for mandatory participants through retention. Approximately 100 SSWs, in 19 units, are co-located with the eligibility worker classification of Human Service Technician (HST). Support staff includes Program Specialists (Job Development/Placement) and clerical.

Site Visit General Information
The CPR pilot was performed in Kern County on January 26 to 29, 2009. The CPR team included a caseworker and a program manager from Stanislaus County, a manager from Fresno County and staff from CDSS. A total of 17 county staff interviews were completed during the CPR visit. Ten county staff participated in job shadowing and case management observations (CMO) sessions. Approximately 14 clients participated in a client focus group discussion held in order to obtain clients' feedback on their overall CalWORKs experiences.

Scope
The focus areas included the Employment Zone (EZONE) workshop (job club and job search), the TRAC Unit, the Disability Advocate assistance process, and orientation and appraisal (O/A) home visits.

Promising Practices
Some of the significant promising practices identified include the following:

- EZONE workshop model that encourages ongoing training for EZONE staff on current topics and new techniques to motivate clients, and team meetings to discuss new ideas and suggestions to constantly enhance the workshop. The county is encouraged to submit the EZONE model to the CalWORKs Best Practices website to be shared with other counties throughout the state (see pages 4-6 for details).
- The TRAC unit monitors client exemptions to ensure appropriate action is taken in a timely manner and reduces the workload of ongoing caseworkers. The county is encouraged to submit the TRAC unit strategy to the CalWORKs Best Practices website to be shared with other counties throughout the state (see pages 7-8 for details).
- Disability Advocate that focuses primarily on client assisting clients with the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) application process (see pages 8-10 for details).

Opportunities for Improvement
Some of the areas noted as challenges include the following:

- Expanding the bilingual EZONE workshop in remote offices similar to the operation of the workshop held in the Bakersfield main office (see pages 4-6 for details).
- Consider providing regular safety awareness training to workers who perform home visits, including how to utilize equipment in safety kits and improve their ability to handle various situations better (see pages 10-12 for details).
- Consider having workers conduct home visits in pairs, which allows further observation, more thorough information to be provided, and improves safety concerns (see pages 10-12 for details).

Client Focus Group (see pages 12-16 for details)
Clients shared a variety of comments based on their experiences. Some of the notable comments include the following:

- Majority of clients said they loved the EZONE program and staff; EZONE builds their self-esteem and is very encouraging.
- Child care is a BIG issue in being able to participate in work or any assigned activity, and they need to get it set up prior to participating in assigned activity.
- Clients described home visits as “thorough and informative” and “helpful and convenient” while others noted that the worker did not seem to have access to all case file components during the home visit.
- Worker turnover and case transferring creates difficulties for clients and many feel like they start all over with next worker.

Key Recommendations

- Consider establishing set policies and procedures for the TRAC work flow process and developing reference materials for workers to ensure proper documentation (see pages 7-8 for details).
- Designing a methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of the TRAC unit may prove beneficial to measure progress toward operational goals (see pages 7-8 for details).
- Training for the Disability Advocate on WTW program objectives and developing backup support would enhance the effectiveness of this strategy (see pages 8-10 for details).

Acknowledgements
CDSS thanks Kern County Department of Human Services Assistant Program Director, Susan Price, for volunteering Kern County to serve as a pilot county for the CPR. CDSS also thanks Kern County Department of Social Services Supervisor Brandon Evans for his assistance in arranging the site visit logistics and for their contributions to the CPR materials. Lastly, CDSS thanks Stanislaus County Community Services Agency Manager III, Irene Lopez, Fresno County Department of Employment and Temporary Assistance/Adult Services WTW Work Experience Job Specialist II, Carmen Sanchez-Sauceda, and Stanislaus County Community Services Agency Employment Worker, Theresa Hasbrouck, for serving as peer county reviewers. CDSS particularly values the constructive comments and suggestions made by Kern County managers and the county peer reviewers about the CPR process and materials.

Introduction

The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) County Peer Review (CPR) program was created as a result of Assembly Bill (AB) 1808 (Chapter 75, Statutes of 2006). The purpose of the program is for county peers and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to perform on-site reviews of counties' Welfare-to-Work (WTW) programs to identify and share promising practices, opportunities for improvement, and strategies that could positively impact work participation rates (WPR). Kern volunteered to host a CPR pilot in January 2009 to focus attention on areas they felt would be of interest to other service providers and benefit Kern County's CalWORKs program.

Kern County Department of Human Services

Kern County's CalWORKs WTW program utilizes a Program Director, three Assistant Program Directors, Social Services Supervisors (SSS) and Social Service Workers (SSW). The SSW provides orientation, appraisal, and ongoing case management for mandatory participants through retention. Approximately 100 SSWs, in 19 units, are co-located with the eligibility worker classification of Human Service Technician (HST). Support staff includes Program Specialists (Job Development/Placement) and clerical staff. For the purposes of this visit summary, "workers" and "staff" refer to any combination of SSWs, SSSs, and HSTs unless otherwise specified.

After the CalWORKs case is granted, the individual is referred to WTW services. However, if the client is working, going to school, or requests to be referred before the case is granted, the individual can be fast-tracked to employment services prior to cash grant approval. Some specialized workers and units are utilized, including the following:

- Confidential caseload/partial caseloads – SSWs provide WTW case management for high profile cases (e.g., relatives of employees or employees) by utilizing the Gain Employment Management System (GEMS) confidential abilities.
- Youth Enhancement Services Unit (YES) Post Cal-Learn – those who age out of, or have completed Cal-Learn activities up to age 21.
- Spanish speaking caseloads – SSWs provide case management for Spanish speaking participants in the language most comfortable for them.
- TRAC Unit – tracks clients who are currently exempt by the end dates of the CalWORKs form 61 (CW 61).
- Disability Advocate – assists participants that have applied for or need to apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and State Supplementary Payment (SSP).
- Job Preparation and Job Search Workshop – SSW facilitators for Kern's Employment Zone (EZONE) job preparation and life skills workshop for EZONE classes.
- Job Placement "Next Step" caseloads – conduct orientation classes, then daily job club activities for those who are job ready, or have failed a previous job search.
- Job Development – consist of staff that utilizes the California Job Service (CalJOBS) to obtain information on job openings and leads on jobs available.

Site Visit General Information
The CPR pilot was performed in Kern County on January 26 to 29, 2009. The CPR team included a caseworker from Stanislaus County, a program manager from Stanislaus County, a manager from Fresno County and staff from CDSS. A total of 17 county staff interviews were completed during the CPR visit: eight focused on the O/A home visit process, five focused on the job club/job search workshop known as EZONE, and four focused on the TRAC unit that monitors exemptions and provides disability advocate assistance. Ten county staff participated in job shadowing and case management observations (CMO) sessions. Six CMOs were for the O/A home visit process, two were for EZONE, and two were for the TRAC process. Approximately 14 clients participated in a client focus group discussion held in order to obtain clients' feedback on their overall CalWORKs experiences.

Scope

The scope was determined by Kern County Department of Human Services management to focus attention on areas they felt would benefit their CalWORKs program. The scope was based on Kern County discussions with CDSS and information gathered from a self-assessment tool completed by Kern County. The scope areas included the following:

- EZONE Workshop model (job club and job search)
- TRAC Unit strategy
- Disability Advocate Assistance Process
- Orientation and Appraisal Home Visits

Focus Area 1: EZONE Workshop (job club/job search)

Observations:
During the time of the CPR, caseworkers estimated that on average approximately 60% of clients are assigned to the EZONE workshop. Some caseworkers stated that it is important to resolve client issues such as transportation and childcare as soon as possible in order for clients to be successful during the workshop. Avenues to identify and remove criminal record barriers of clients, including performing background checks through the Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS), prior to the client being assigned to EZONE increases the likelihood of client success within the workshop. In order to remind clients of their scheduled workshop, clients receive at least two reminder calls. As part of the EZONE curriculum and job searching requirement, clients are required to obtain at least eight job contacts per day. If a client fails to meet the required job contacts, the EZONE worker and client can discuss methods on how to increase the number of contacts on a daily basis to ensure adequate progress is made. The Spanish EZONE curriculum offered by the county is more flexible and accommodates clients with a wider range of issues (e.g., literacy issues, more verbal communication, deal with limited employment opportunities and provides more time one-on-one).

EZONE staff work closely with clients daily and can determine based on interaction with clients and the rapport that has between developed if participation in EZONE is needed or if they can proceed to another activity. EZONE workers expressed enjoyment regarding one-on-one involvement with clients and expressed their "buy in" on the workshop model and the many client successes. EZONE workers and SSWs noted that they can interact more easily and efficiently when located in the remote offices due to their smaller size. For example, one EZONE worker stated that when a client is a “no-show” to the workshop, it is easier to immediately communicate it to the client’s SSW in order to arrange necessary follow up. In addition, within remote offices, the EZONE facilitator can come directly to the SSWs to discuss clients. To enhance communication between remote offices and the Bakersfield main office, changes were implemented during the time of the CPR to communicate more effectively between all offices. For example, staff meetings are held weekly to keep both facilitators located at the Bakersfield main office and at the remote offices updated with information.

Many workers feel that the EZONE workshop model gives clients confidence in pursuing employment opportunities. Workers described clients that participated in the EZONE workshop as more motivated, encouraged by positive attitudes of others around them, having improved self esteem, and overall seem more able to get their personal lives in order so they can be become employed. An EZONE worker stated that clients provided positive feedback on the workshop and found the recorded video interviews that were staged to be very helpful. Clients are not usually removed from the workshop even when a client is lacking in job skills and work experience because overall workers have found that clients can usually still benefit from the workshop in some way. Several workers stated that the EZONE facilitators are strong communicators, respect clients, and provide good customer service to clients. EZONE supervisors utilize various mentoring and training techniques that include the following:

- Share and implement various “energizer” techniques that can be used in the workshops by the facilitators,
- Enhance the workshop to incorporate better ways of operating,
- Perform staff “round tables” to discuss ideas and the allocation of resources,
- Share suggestions on issues, concerns, and the variety of situations they have encountered,
- Ensure staff strive to stay current by conducting training or attending training sessions and conferences,
- Provide staff access to motivational books that can provide helpful training techniques,
- Meetings with the team every week,
- Offer encouragement by sharing client successes among staff, and
- Conduct one-on-one conferences between supervisor and staff bi-weekly.

During the CPR, one worker noted that the county is piloting a Next Step program to further enhance client job retention, provide one-on-one meetings with the job specialist, and keep clients excited and engaged in their job search. The Next Step program is a 60-day job search course for clients who did not find employment during the EZONE workshop. Next Step starts with a one-day refresher orientation class on how to perform a job search. Following orientation, clients report at least three times per week to their Next Step case manager on their job search progress.

The county also offers Spanish EZONE workshops that are very valuable for clients who speak English as a second language. Some clients who speak Spanish as their primary language were noted to be intimidated by the workshop due to the large amount of materials covered during the class and not always being able to grasp the information provided by the facilitators and other workers. Contributing factors that hamper clients who speak Spanish as their primary language could include limited literacy levels and culture shock associated with the CalWORKs process. It was mentioned by some staff that they felt there were not enough bilingual classes offered for clients who speak English as a second language, particularly the Spanish EZONE workshops. Due to the shortage of Spanish EZONE workshops, Spanish-speaking clients typically have to wait longer to reschedule when the need arises.

Various workers mentioned the biggest disadvantage of remote offices is that the workshop cycle is every three weeks, and rotates between an English workshop and a Spanish workshop, and as a result, clients may have to wait up to five weeks to begin a class. For example, one worker stated that if a client assigned to the workshop activity on a Thursday, the client can start the workshop beginning the following Monday, but if not, the client may then have to wait up to three to four weeks for the next workshop cycle to start. In addition, the workshop program lacked enough EZONE staff to fulfill client demand and needs. EZONE staff felt overwhelmed by the number of clients and classes; current class room limits were full and space for larger classes was unavailable. It was also noted that there is not always enough time for site developers to address client needs and meet with employers in the community to develop employment opportunities for clients. One remote office worker mentioned that they would like more continual EZONE training similar to training provided to EZONE staff in the Bakersfield main office.

Some workers mentioned that they would like more flexibility and support from management on obtaining and utilizing resources and trying new creative ideas with today's current work environment in mind. For example, several EZONE workers expressed an interest in teaching finance skills in more depth so clients can enhance their skills on managing money and maintaining a budget.

Recommendations:

- Based on observations and discussion with clients and workers, the EZONE workshop model is suited to the principles of a promising practice. The county is encouraged to submit the EZONE Workshop model to the CalWORKs Best Practices website to be shared with other counties throughout the state. The website can be viewed at http://www.cdss.ca.gov/calworks/bestpractices.htm.
- Enhance materials provided to clients in the Spanish EZONE workshop.
- Consider operating the bilingual EZONE workshops in remote offices in a more open-ended and flexible format similar to the style of the EZONE workshops in the Bakersfield main office.
- Develop ongoing training opportunities for EZONE staff, including those in remote offices, on topics that relate to client needs.

Focus Area 2: TRAC Unit/Exemptions

Observations:
The TRAC unit monitors client exemptions to ensure appropriate action is taken in a timely manner and reduces the workload of ongoing caseworkers. This unit consists of two workers who follow up on the status of exemptions which allows workers in other units to focus on the regular ongoing WTW cases, thus preventing client cases from become stagnant during the administrative process. The TRAC system consists of a report that is used as a guide to track clients' exemptions that are scheduled to expire in the next two months. TRAC workers track exemptions on a calendar to take appropriate action in a timely manner. Clients with exemptions that will end in 12 weeks or less are held by the TRAC worker and are referred back to the SSW two weeks prior to the end of the exemption. Clients with exemptions expected to last longer than 12 weeks are placed into "closed files" and are contacted one month prior to the end of his or her exemption to start the process of obtaining a new CW 61 or county form. If a CW 61 or county form is not returned at the two week mark, the TRAC worker will contact the client to follow up. If the client fails to provide the county form one and a half weeks prior to the expiration of the exemption, the client is referred to the WTW program.

The TRAC unit also monitors CalWORKs aided adults that have not been referred to the WTW program, or are listed in the Interim Statewide Automated Welfare System (ISAWS) but not in the Gain Employment Management System (GEMS) system. TRAC workers compare GEMS and ISAWS systems and create a list, often referred to as the "TRAC list", of cases to review and determine why the client is not currently enrolled in the WTW program. Based on feedback from staff, the most common reasons that cases are on this list is if they are enrolled in Cal-Learn, when a worker has added a person to the case and forgotten to enroll the new individual into the WTW program, when the client may have reapplied, or a sanction has been cured. In instances where the client possibly has an exemption, the TRAC worker will send a CW 61 to the client. Staff mentioned that reviewing the lists is time-consuming due to the same cases showing up every time the list is generated, but does serve as an effective tracking tool overall.

The TRAC list also serves as a second review of time limits and helps to ensure accuracy of exemptions. A review of the TRAC list sometimes brings to light that a timed-out client actually had an exemption and still has months available on their time clock, and the worker is able to correct the time clock discrepancy. Workers were measured on their progress of timely case management by supervisors who informally review a majority of the cases on a regular basis. However, during the time of the CPR there was no tracking of the overall success of the TRAC program.

As part of exemption management, the TRAC workers provide continued assistance to clients by following up with doctors, sending county forms directly to Kern Hospital for completion, and contacting clients by phone and mail when they do not bring in WTW paperwork, thus enhancing the timeliness of the process. Various workers noted that it is challenging when working with doctors offices due to receiving incomplete forms from doctors offices or not getting calls or paperwork back from doctors offices. Various TRAC workers mentioned they are more successful at tracking exemptions because they focus solely on the exemption caseload and can follow up with clients when needed. Some TRAC workers also commented that their interaction with clients takes pressure off the other caseworkers and that TRAC workers are able to work through challenges of clients along the way and to take care of all the client administrative needs. An additional service that is also performed by this unit includes making referrals to the disability advocate for clients that are potentially eligible for SSI.

Because of a lack of direct communication with SSWs, it is challenging when cases are received by the TRAC unit with errors, lacking information, or with incorrect client time clocks. Part of this unit's process when cases with errors were received includes having the TRAC supervisor email the eligibility supervisors; however, it was mentioned that confrontations had occurred regarding case discrepancies, thus hampering completion of the case in a timely manner. TRAC workers mentioned they would like to receive the entire CW 61 report, not just the first page, in order to obtain a thorough understanding on client's specific exemption. Also, when a client's exemption has ended, the case gets referred to the WTW program and transferred back to an ongoing worker. However, if verification of an exemption is received from the client later, the case is forwarded back to the TRAC unit, and results in the same case being reviewed multiple times by the TRAC unit.

Recommendations:

- The county is encouraged to submit the TRAC unit strategy to the CalWORKs Best Practices website to be shared with other counties throughout the state. The website can be viewed at http://www.cdss.ca.gov/calworks/bestpractices.htm.
- Establishing set policies and procedures for TRAC work flow processes, such as a decision file that maintains information on how special client situations were handled in the past in order to improve upon consistency in the future, or maintaining a "frequently asked questions and answers" matrix on handling special cases or client circumstances could be a good reference tool for workers. The use of reference materials for workers could also be used to ensure proper coding and correct statuses on cases and documentation.
- Designing a methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of the TRAC unit may prove beneficial to measure progress toward operational goals.
- Developing protocols for returning cases to the WTW program when there are discrepancies and missing information to ensure that TRAC workers receive the most accurate case status information. TRAC and WTW staff should have representation during the development of the process in order to determine acceptable reasons for a case to be returned to another area.
- Implement meetings with teambuilding activities to improve rapport and enhance communication between the eligibility staff, WTW workers, and TRAC workers.

Focus Area 3: Disability Advocate Assistance/Process

Observations:
The Disability Advocate is part of the TRAC unit and receives case referrals from TRAC workers that might benefit from assistance with the SSI application process. The internal

process allows ten days for the Disability Advocate to review cases and, if appropriate, open a referral to SSI. After the referral process is complete, the Disability Advocate calls the client and sends a county questionnaire to the client to obtain additional information about the client's case. If the questionnaire is not received back from the client within five business days, a courtesy call is made to answer any questions and determine the status of the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire is returned to the Disability Advocate, clients are then scheduled for an appointment to discuss their case and determine status within the SSI application process. It was noted during the time of the CPR that most clients do not get approved until the appeal process and that medical insurance does not always cover procedures required by SSI.

The Disability Advocate is the only one (other than eligibility workers) that handles the client case during the exemption process. This intimate contact often leads to providing additional referrals that the customer might need for other barriers. In order to maintain information for those clients going through the SSI application process, the Disability Advocate creates folders for each client containing all relevant correspondence and medical information. The Disability Advocate has access to other workers and to the ISAWS and GEMS systems which are useful resources for managing cases and efficiently handling client matters. The Disability Advocate prioritizes the caseload by those who turn in their completed paperwork in order to ensure that those client documents are processed timely.

Much of the Disability Advocate's position requires administrative tasks that have proven to be challenging due to the lack of clerical support. During the time of CPR, no backup staff existed for the Disability Advocate, except TRAC staff to provide a minimal level of support, which has hampered the effectiveness of this practice. An Employment Preparation Program (EPP) worker assists the Disability Advocate from time to time with clerical tasks, but the high turnover of the EPP workers requires the Disability Advocate to continually re-train new ones, thus losing their effectiveness. Several workers stated poor relations with the doctors existed due to lack of communication and doctors that do not follow through on providing documentation needed for the client's SSI application. The Disability Advocate expressed a lack of understanding of the "big picture" of WTW program objectives due to remaining focused on one main aspect of client's case. Some uncertainty existed regarding if the time spent assisting clients with the SSI application process is worth the effort as very few clients tend to get approved for SSI. During the time of the CPR, no method for tracking clients handled by the Disability Advocate existed to illustrate the success of having a dedicated Disability Advocate to assist clients with applying for and getting approved for SSI benefits.

Recommendations:

- Focus on clients that are most likely to be approved for SSI based on similar cases in the past.
- Consider the development of an Excel spreadsheet matrix or utilization of similar software that will track the SSI caseload along with the status of the client's SSI application process. Clients unable to obtain assistance through the Disability Advocate assistance process could still benefit if the county pursues efforts to create a community resource list to provide to these clients.

- Pursue the possibility of having two EPP workers that overlap work periods and can pass on job knowledge as EPPs transition in and out of the positions to maintain necessary skills and knowledge.
- Consider allowing not only TRAC workers to make disability referrals, but also other caseworkers, and to provide more training on the disability process to all involved workers to understand how to make effective referrals.

Focus Area 4: Orientation/Appraisal (O/A) Home Visit Process

Observations:
Home visits with clients for orientation/appraisal (O/A) allow staff to do the entire O/A process on a one-on-one basis, thus helping to identify barriers of clients. During the time of the CPR, preparation for O/A home visit varied among workers. Preparation for interacting with clients within their homes may include talking to the eligibility worker in person; however, sometimes eligibility and employment workers are located in different offices which makes the personal meeting with eligibility challenging. Some workers called clients in advance prior to home visit to remind them of their upcoming visit. During O/A home visits, workers made clients comfortable and shared personal experiences to connect with clients and put them at ease. Workers go over the CalWORKs handbook and some highlighted notable information for clients. A number of workers emphasized various information to clients covering absence policy, fair hearings, verification of hours, and the CalWORKs handbook. Many workers and clients felt that the CalWORKs and WTW handbooks provided are too much information for clients to comprehend at one time during the home visit.

Workers are more likely to get clients to buy into the program within their own home environment. Home visits can reduce client anxiety and remove any shame or embarrassment associated with coming into the office and the stigma some within the community associate with the welfare program. It also allows workers the opportunity to connect with clients within their community and home environment and identify barriers within the client's environment firsthand. Clients are more open to talk about their needs and feel more comfortable in their own home.

Home visits can be more convenient for clients as they require no transportation or childcare, and offer the privacy of their own home rather than at the office. Workers can also see what is important to the client within the client's home environment and also to assess transportation availability. Occasionally while visiting the home environment, workers can gather information on the neighborhood to get an understanding of where the client lives and how they function within their home. Home visits can help detect domestic abuse or other client barriers.

Workers mentioned O/A home visits can be difficult to provide services such as direct referrals and resources, and clients do not get immediate access to services available during a typical office visit. Because workers do not have access to laptop computers during home visits, this results in not being able to schedule future appointments during the O/A home visit. During office visits, clients can be shown where to find access to resources available immediately. One worker mentioned a "think and link" philosophy to mental health, domestic abuse, and child care resources available. Clients seen at home and provided with information about the program would like a stronger relationship with eligibility Staff. Also, some staff visiting clients in their home did not always bring bus tickets, which is a resource available to clients to alleviate transportation barriers since clients may need transportation services to visit the office in the future.

During the home visit, the client may have distractions in the home that interfere with the O/A process. The presence of other persons within the home potentially jeopardizes the confidentiality of the communication between the client and worker. Some workers stated that a large amount of time is lost when a client's home visit results in a "no-show". The biggest drawback occurred when the 8:30 am was a "no-show" and the worker did not have another home visit scheduled until 10:30 am, hardly leaving enough time to briefly return to the office and then leave again. Some workers liked the structured schedule of two home visits in the morning, and others appreciated the ability to reschedule missed O/A appointments for future office or home visits. Challenges also include client addresses or phone numbers that are incorrect or outdated.

Some workers did not feel safe performing home visits. Some workers felt they did not receive adequate training on safety precautions and that they felt unsafe using personal vehicles when county cars were not available.

- One worker estimated that 25 percent of clients feel like home visits are invasive and make clients feel uneasy.
- Some workers mentioned a language barrier can be an issue, and that languages other than English and Spanish made it hard to perform a home visit with client without an interpreter present. It was also mentioned that the Language Line service administered by the county is cumbersome to use (other than English and Spanish). The Language Line is a fee based organization that will interpret via telephone for clients whom Kern County does not have an employee interpreter to cover the language and the client cannot provide an interpreter.
- One worker's feedback was that home visit clients fall out of activities faster than office visit clients because client gets accustomed to their worker performing home visits, and then when the client is expected to show up for their assigned activity, the client isn't used to it and doesn't follow through.
- Some male workers mentioned an uneasiness conducting visits with female clients and are uncomfortable with the situation.

During the time of the CPR, a method of monitoring the outcomes of O/A home visits versus office visits did not exist. However, some workers expressed that they felt there is no difference in the success rate of having O/A at home versus in the office, while others felt that there is better rapport in home visits. Several workers mentioned that home visits would be more appropriate at a later point in time once rapport has been established between client and worker rather than at intake. A few workers felt that time may be better spent addressing barriers in the office during O/A and building rapport so that when a home visit is performed, the worker is more welcomed into the client's home.

Recommendations:

- Evaluate performing orientations at client homes and performing appraisals in the office. During the home visit, the worker could focus on orientation topics and on learning rules and regulations of the CalWORKs and WTW programs. When the client comes into the office, workers could then discuss client needs, e.g., focus on expectations and participation requirements and take clients to office areas so they can become familiar with services and resources available to them.
- Provide regular safety awareness training to workers who travel to homes of clients, including how to utilize equipment in safety kits. Safety training could improve workers' ability to deal with safety issues, boost comfort levels between client and workers, and enhance workers' ability to handle client situations better. Using a team approach or the "buddy system" during home visits may alleviate uncomfortable situations and would allow for a second set of eyes to observe and would lessen safety concerns.
- Allowing workers to maintain and distribute bus tickets to clients during home visits, when needed, to remove transportation barriers upfront.
- During the time of the CPR, the county planned to begin group orientation to be held in the county office. Performing a group orientation in the office followed by a one-on-one appraisal home visit could result in better rapport between client and worker and may enhance client comprehension of program material.
- Consider scheduling home visit weeks further in advance and have office visits open in the afternoon. Home visit logistics could also be improved by coordinating clients in the same area on the same day, thus avoiding driving throughout the county. To increase the likelihood of clients being present during home visits, consider implementing a "drop by" card indicating that the worker will revisit the home during a given period of time, e.g., 9:00 am - 12:00pm, as a range of time can allow the worker to move to the next client if the prior appointment is unavailable, and return later during the stated time.
- Expand use of the home visit checklist utilized by some workers for both home visits and office visits to all workers to ensure consistency of information provided to clients. Continue efforts to utilize the appraisal tool questionnaire, and provide training on how to use the appraisal tool questionnaire in a consistent manner to gather case data and to provide details and available resources about the program to clients.

Client Focus Group

The client focus group was conducted by the CPR team which included peer county staff from Fresno County, Stanislaus County and CDSS staff, and was held on January 28, 2009 with approximately 14 clients. It was performed during a regular session of the EZONE workshop. Client focus group questions and aggregate comments include the following:

<u>Home Visit: If you have had a home visit by your Welfare to Work (WTW) caseworker (SSW), why did they come to your home? What did you like or not like about this visit? Do you feel this is an effective way to take care of your WTW business?</u>

Four clients mentioned they had a home visit and discussed rights and responsibilities with their worker and their next activity. Some clients mentioned they were not told why they were having a home visit. "Workers did a thorough job explaining why (the client) was getting a home visit in advance" and called the client ahead of time. Some clients said they "liked having a home visit" and "felt connected with worker". Clients shared that their workers were "empathetic", "could relate and understand", felt "like the worker cared", were able to "get their questions answered", that "home visit was thorough and informative", and felt "motivated and focused by worker".

Some clients said their worker did not have access to the client file during the visit and could not fully assist them during the visit. Case transferring creates issues for clients because they keep having to come in with their kids and repeating the same information. One client had a home visit scheduled, but came into the office sooner. One client felt the home visit was helpful and convenient because they did not have child care.

<u>Contact: How often do you and your WTW caseworker talk, meet or have some type of contact? And do you consider it frequent enough? Who usually initiates the contact? Does this contact help you to participate in your assigned activity, and why?</u>

The majority of clients indicated that their workers communicated regularly with them. A few clients did not have workers. Six clients said they called their worker regularly. Two clients indicated they get calls back from their worker. The majority of clients said workers kept them on track, and provided them with good leads and direction. The majority of clients also said they preferred both written and verbal communication, particularly contact by phone along with a follow up by mail. Four clients communicated with their worker's supervisor, as needed. Some said that it is an even split between how often they call their worker and how often their worker calls them.

<u>How do **you** usually contact your WTW caseworker (phone, in person, mail)? What type of contact do you prefer and why?</u>

Nine clients preferred primarily phone contact. Contact can be initiated by client or worker. Contact with worker helps to keep them on track. Some clients said they "prefer phone contact followed up by a paper mail reminder with date and time". Job leads are provided by their worker, along with other good ideas. One client preferred in-person contact. The majority of clients wanted mail documentation.

<u>Is the WTW caseworker usually available if you contact them? If not, who helps you, or what do you do?</u>

The majority of clients felt their caseworker was available when they contacted them and they had no problems getting in touch. Some clients felt rushed by their worker. Some said that their caseworker's supervisor helped if their regular worker did not or was unavailable. Six clients had contacted a supervisor to discuss their case.

<u>If you leave a message, how long does it usually take for your WTW caseworker to get back to you?</u>

Ten clients said they got called back within one day; two clients said within one week; one client said their worker took over one month to call back. The majority of clients said on average it takes their worker one day to one week to call them back, but that it is typically within one day. Two clients said they never get a call back. Some clients said they felt rushed through worker's explanations on the phone.

WTW Plan/Activities: How did your WTW caseworker include you in determining and planning what WTW services would help you?

Eight clients currently have WTW plans completed already and had participated in developing their plan. Many clients felt that Ongoing Ability for Self-Improvement (OASIS), a one-week workshop that helps participants learn to identify and begin resolving participation barriers, and EZONE conflicted with each other, and several stated that they felt OASIS was less valuable to them overall. Many clients said EZONE was helping them find jobs.

Could anything have been done differently?

The majority of clients said they need supportive services in place prior to beginning EZONE (child care, transportation, etc.), and the majority also said they would like to have supportive services and other information available to them before enrolling in ANY activity. Some clients felt they were not informed of processes and supportive services available to them. Child care is a BIG issue in being able to participate in work or an assigned activity, and they need to be informed and get it set up prior to assigned activity. The majority stressed how important it is to get child care arranged before class starts, and they said they would like more time to find child care. Some clients said that workers are not providing enough information about the program to clients and all of their available options.

Clients felt that workers need to assess each person's past experience before putting them in job search. Many felt workers didn't look at education, history, past jobs, etc., and just put them in the class. Some client felt the "EZONE class is too long". Clients mentioned they that felt "robbed of time" to look for a job while doing EZONE. Several clients explained that they were self-sufficient before pregnancy and did not need to be stuck in a class, and would prefer to have independent job search assigned at their appraisal home visit to have the opportunity to look for work on their own first. One client stated that "EZONE is great but give me a chance on my own". Some clients said that "Oasis and career center are a waste of time and contradicted with what EZONE taught". Some clients said EZONE is a great program, but they didn't always feel like they needed it, although they were still able to get something out of it. The majority of clients said that EZONE was very helpful and valuable.

Cases get transferred often and regularly, which makes it difficult for the client because they feel like they start all over with the next worker. The majority said worker turnover is a big problem for them. Many said the Employment Preparation Program (EPP) was very good. Workers need to explain what the client needs to do in the WTW program in detail.

How did your WTW caseworker help you to understand what you need to do to be successful in the WTW program?

Workers informed them that must attend and complete EZONE or a sanction would occur.

Motivation: What does your WTW caseworker do that motivates you to participate in activities?

Clients said a positive attitude portrayed by their worker was encouraging, as well as when workers show interest in a client's personal life and well-being.

Is there anything else you think the WTW caseworker could do to help motivate you?

One client stated that "sometimes the worker takes a clinical approach, but they should limit doing this". Some clients would appreciate a positive call once in awhile, or regularly to check in. One client asked that workers "take the personal life of client into consideration". Clients do not want to be cut off during caseworker-client meetings and interaction. Some clients felt that clients should be treated as a person and that workers should make it a personal experience, and stated, "Don't treat us as a case number – treat me as an individual". One client said, "Don't make (a client) feel shameful to be on aid". Other client comments and suggestions included the following: "have a positive attitude", "be approachable", "follow up on calls", and "better listening skills" for workers. The majority said the worker has to be the one to initiate having a positive attitude because clients are in crisis.

Clients would like to express themselves to their worker and talk about their experiences so workers can understand where they are coming from and understand how to meet their needs and goals. Clients said, "Don't push (clients) into activities; activities need to be the right fit for each client". Clients said they appreciate when their worker "looks out for me", and that their worker should "be on my side" to "work with me not against me". Workers should not act like they have the upper hand even though they control a client's benefits and activity assignments.

Sanction: If you have ever been sanctioned or were close to being sanctioned, did your WTW caseworker do or say anything that helped you to not get sanctioned or to cure your sanction?

Some clients said they were not properly notified of a sanction. One client indicated they did not receive anything before aid was reduced. One client said they received letters but their worker never called to discuss. Another client said that their worker explained that "you can avoid a sanction by always turning in your paperwork and I will call if you forget to do it". Getting reminders by phone and mail is helpful. One client explained that they did not know why their aid was reduced and later found out they needed to attend a one-day orientation.

WTW Program: What WTW activities have you participated in? (e.g., orientation, appraisal, assessment, Employment Development Department (EDD) job search workshop) What WTW services and WTW programs do you think are the most helpful? What are the least helpful? What would you change about the WTW program and/or your WTW caseworker?

The majority of clients said they "loved the EZONE program and staff". Several clients said that “EZONE workers are great”. Some clients suggested “making EZONE a one week class”, and “making EZONE flexible so clients can apply for jobs and take care of other business at the same time”. Many clients suggested EZONE staff to train other caseworkers, and one client suggested “a pep talk by EZONE workers for the regular caseworkers so they could be more positive”. Many clients said that although they “loved EZONE but the hours for EZONE need to change”.

EZONE staff offer resources, support, and assistance to clients constantly. Client comments included the following: “EZONE staff push us to do better and to get a job sooner”, they “see our strengths”, and “treat us as individual people”. Many clients mentioned that EZONE builds their self-esteem and is very encouraging, and one client said EZONE made them feel that “now I can do it”. The majority felt OASIS was less valuable and sometimes contradicted what was being taught and done within EZONE. Many felt EDD was less valuable than EZONE. Several felt the job placement services provided by the Employers’ Training Resource (ETR) were useful, and similar to EZONE. The majority stated that they “enjoyed EZONE and got something out of it” and one client stated, “I wish I’d done EZONE sooner”.

Clients stated that they “would like more of a say in (their) activity assignment”. Clients felt the assigned activity needs to be appropriate to their needs to move them to self-sufficiency. Clients said they “need more information in advance on what the WTW classes are about”. One client stated, “Every program has worked for me”. Many clients felt that “too much worker turnover is an issue within the WTW program”. Several clients “would like more than a 12-week exemption for a new child”. Many clients mentioned that the “$25 clothes voucher is useful”. The majority felt that having transportation and child care established first is essential for success.

General Observations

In addition to observations related to the focus areas, other significant or unique information was also observed during the CPR. These general observations can cover a wide range of topics and provide a greater understanding about the operations of Kern County’s CalWORKs program.

- A training opportunity that the county provides as a bridging activity gives clients various options for topics they would like to learn more about, such as money management and independent life skills. When clients need to fill a small number of hours, the client will have the option to pick three educational books to read and answer questions that must be returned to the worker for verification. The training activity is worth three hours per book and can be utilized as a way to earn nine extra hours per week.
- Worker feels the FOSTERS assessment (the county’s contracted assessment provider) lacks good communication skills with clients, lacks fact-finding skills, and doesn’t capture or identify client needs or barriers that the worker has found, and results in differing employment goals.

- Worker was told by clients that they feel pushed into a box and feel that the assessment doesn't reflect their actual goals. Worker feels independent job search is assigned just to fill hours and is not effective.
- Improved communication between employment and eligibility workers is needed in the main office as well as in remote offices to ensure forms are being sent in a timely manner and to reduce delays in processing client claims.
- The React Unit has an established hotline for clients to call and request to cure their sanctions, and is also available in Spanish.

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