

San Bernardino Sanctioned Home-Call Project

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Abstract

The County of San Bernardino, CA is located in a state that does not administer full family sanctions. If an aided adult does not meet work requirements, they are disregarded when calculating grant amount, however; these individuals are not disregarded when calculating federally mandated work participation rates.

Approximately 15% of the cash-aid cases that are subject to work requirements in San Bernardino County have at least 1 adult in sanction. In an attempt to increase work participation rates and facilitate our clients' movement toward self-sufficiency, home-call workers were assigned to visit clients' homes and ask them some questions about why they choose not to participate in work activities and to counsel them on ways that they can remove their sanction.

Because of the counseling aspect of the home-call, **the group of questions asked by the home-call worker cannot be considered a scientific survey.** Information from the questionnaires that were completed during home-calls has been included in this report, but it must be considered anecdotal at best.

An investigation of administrative records has revealed that **families that have an adult in sanction have a significantly larger portion of their grant remaining after paying rent even after their grant has been reduced.**

The outcomes of this project have been positive thus far. Among those that received a home-call, 34% were, at the time of follow up, either out of sanction or actively working to remove themselves from sanction compared to a rate of 13.5% among those that did not receive a home-call.

Introduction

The County of San Bernardino is located in the desert region of Southern California. It encompasses a larger area than any other county in the Continental U.S. Although much of the area within the County is sparsely inhabited desert, there are urban areas that can be considered as depressed inner city. There are also pockets of very low cost housing that are isolated from areas of major employment, as they are located in the desert regions. Because of these conditions, San Bernardino County has the second highest welfare population in California after Los Angeles. The total cash-aid caseload for the County in June was 37,900 with 107,955 eligible persons.

The State of California's welfare program, CalWORKs, is a state regulated, county administered program. San Bernardino's CalWORKs plan was the first county plan to be approved within California. Implementation began January 1998. At that time, enrollment with Jobs and Employment Services and participation in work activities were required from an increasing number of clients. Many of these clients did not participate, leading to an increase in the number of cases to which a sanction has been applied. Presently, there are about 5,000 adults in sanctioned status within San Bernardino County. Under CalWORKs, a sanction does not result in case closure, instead; the sanctioned individual's needs are removed from grant calculations. This results in a grant reduction of around 120 dollars a month for the average case but varies according to income and family size.

The large number of sanctioned adults has caused concern among county administrators for three reasons. The first is that there was concern that the reduction of grants was leading to greater poverty among the children of sanctioned clients. Secondly, those in sanction are often making no progress toward self-sufficiency. And finally, open cases with a sanctioned individual have the effect of lowering an agency's overall Work Participation Rate.

Under CalWORKs, if an individual has been sanctioned more than once, their grant must be dispersed as a voucher to pay housing costs. This necessitated the development of procedures to verify landlord information and rent amount. Specially trained case-workers attached to the county's fraud prevention unit were dispatched to verify this information by visiting the client in their home. In an attempt to encourage clients to participate in work activities, it was decided to expand this practice to include all clients in sanctioned status.

Although workers attached to the fraud prevention bureau are used to administer the home-calls, fraud identification is not the focus of this program. Administrators felt that these workers were the most qualified as they possess both knowledge of eligibility issues and home-call skills. Due to the fact that the home-call workers are employed by a welfare agency, they are legally required to report fraud if it is evident. To insure that clients do not confuse the questionnaire administered by the home-call worker as a confidential survey, all home-calls begin with the worker informing the client that he/she is attached to the fraud prevention bureau. Because of this, it is assumed that responses to the questionnaire are biased.

Implementation

The first clients visited were those in a second or subsequent sanction episode. This was necessitated by the availability of trained workers and the requirement to verify landlord information. The project was originally envisioned by research staff as an administration of a scientifically valid survey to investigate the reasons that clients are in sanction and the effect those sanctions have on their living conditions. A survey was developed and pre-tested on this first group of second or subsequent sanctions. Due to a lack of training in formal survey techniques, quite a bit of counseling by the home-call worker about how to remove sanctions took place during the pre-testing period. Initial outcome evaluations were very positive in that many clients took action to remove their sanction after being visited, so the decision was made to encourage the home-call workers to emphasize counseling during their visits. This caused a metamorphosis of the project from survey to intervention. After the initial evaluation, the decision was made to expand the project to include all sanctioned adults.

The pre-testing of the questionnaire continued while additional workers were hired for the project. The process of hiring and training new workers took about 6 months, which caused the pre-testing period to reach almost a year in length. The project has been using the questionnaire in its present form since February 2000.

At the time of expansion, there was a backlog of approximately 5,000 adults in sanction. The Home-Call unit began visiting those that had been in sanction for more than a year first. Presently, most of those that have been in sanction for a lengthy period have been visited, and workers are beginning to visit some people that have only recently been sanctioned. A future goal is to visit people that are in the process of being, but have not yet been, sanctioned. This may take

a while, as the county's Jobs and Employment Services issues approximately 800 new sanctions a month.

The hiring of additional workers is currently being approved. Presently, twelve workers are assigned full time to home-calls, and over 1,500 clients have been visited.

Demographics

The ethnic make up of San Bernardino County's sanctioned population is 31% white, 41% Latino, and 24% African American. This ratio is almost identical to that of the cash-aid caseload in general

A review of administrative data used to determine eligibility and grant amount revealed that the average grant amount, after the sanctioned adult's needs are removed from grant calculations is \$467. This is larger than the average grant amount of \$460 among the cash-aid population in general. The average amount paid in rent, among those who pay rent, is \$353 for families that have a sanctioned adult compared to \$354 among the cash-aid population in general. This results in the average quantity (grant – rent) to be significantly higher ($p_{\text{value}} = .0166$) among cases with an adult in sanction than among the caseload in general even after a sanction and grant reduction have been applied.

Questionnaire Results

As previously stated, results from the questionnaire administered by the home-call workers must be viewed with suspicion. Bias due to different styles of questioning/counseling between the home-call workers and client concerns about sharing information with a worker attached to fraud prevention surely exists.

n = 1204

Knowledge of Welfare Reform:

- 58% state that they have heard of Welfare Reform.
- 79% state that they have heard about time limits.
- 64% say that they understand that community service will be required after 18 or 24 months on aid.
- 69% say they understand that they are limited to 60 months aid over their lifetime.

Knowledge of Sanction:

- 98% indicate they realize that they must cooperate with Jobs and Employment Services in order for their needs to be included in grant calculations.
- 95% understand why their grant was reduced.
- 92% understand why they are in sanction.
- 14% do not understand notices and materials received from the county.

Knowledge of Jobs and Employment Services:

- 93% are aware that the county will pay for child-care while working or attending work activities.
- 90% are aware that transportation costs associated with work activities are paid by the County.

- 37% are aware that treatment for domestic violence, substance abuse, or mental health counts as a work activity.
- 45% indicate they know about earned income exemptions and disregards.

Most common reasons for not cooperating:

- 12% state that they are unable to find child-care.
- 9% state that they have no transportation.
- 6% state that work activities interfere with current employment.
- 5% indicate that a family crisis interfered with their participation.
- 4% indicate that participation in work activities is too much trouble.
- 3% do not understand what is happening.
- 2% state their physical health interferes with their participation.
- 40% state that they do not have a reason for their lack of cooperation.

Family Wellbeing:

- 81% report that they do not have trouble paying their rent on time.
- 12% report that they have been at risk of eviction at some point after their sanction.
- 96% report that their utilities are on.
- 30% report that they run out of food before the end of the month.
- 54 % report that they buy all of their food with food stamps.

Outcomes

As previously stated, the initial outcome evaluation of the Sanctioned Home-Call Project was very positive. Initial indications were that 40% of those that received a home-call had taken action to have their sanctioned removed.

Although expansion of the project was authorized on these initial outcomes, it was decided that a quasi-experimental evaluation should be undertaken. A random sample of 200 sanctioned individuals that had not received a home-call was drawn. Three months later, narratives contained on the county's Jobs and Employment Services database were reviewed to see if the client had taken any action to remove their sanction. The same evaluation was done on a sample of 200 sanctioned persons that received a home-call.

Checking free form narratives was a rather subjective process. Research staff would have preferred to check administrative records for the existence or absence of a sanction, however; the inclusion of second and subsequent sanctioned individuals made this problematic. Individuals in a second sanction episode must wait at least 3 months from sanction application before their sanction can be removed. Those in their third sanction episode must wait 6 months. It was felt that waiting 4 to 6 months after intervention to check outcomes would introduce too many confounding factors into the evaluation. Much effort was taken to avoid a pro-intervention bias from entering the narrative review process. Some observations are missing due to the fact that in some instances the sanction had been removed prior to the home-call, or a home-call was performed on a control.

Sanctioned Home-Call Project Outcomes:

	Home-Called	Not Home-Called
No Action	76	125
Out of Sanction or Actively Working to Remove Sanction	57	26
Case Discontinued	35	41

$$\bar{\alpha}^2 = 22.559$$

$$p_{\text{value}} < .001$$

Conclusion:

The Sanctioned Home-Call Project was originally envisioned as a process to gather information about the causes for non-participation in work activities. It has since evolved into a seemingly successful intervention with respect to moving people out of sanction and into work or work activities. It has also been a useful tool for management as a means to identify areas in which more research or additional interventions may be of value.

Aside from the obvious social benefits realized by moving recipients toward self-sufficiency, states and counties that do not apply full-family sanctions can improve their Work Participation

Questions or further discussion can be directed to:
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San Bernardino's Sanction goal.