

Site Visit Report: The Linkages Project

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Cluster: Collaboration Between TANF and Child Welfare to Improve Child Welfare Program Outcomes

Grantee: California Department of Social Services

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SUMMARY

The [California Linkages](#) project promotes collaboration between California's county-administered child welfare services (CWS) and [CalWORKs](#), the State's program for administering Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Linkages' goal is to decrease child maltreatment and improve outcomes for children and families by providing necessary services and supports through increased collaboration. The project is coordinated by the [Child and Family Policy Institute of California](#), which is under contract with the [California Department of Social Services](#) (DSS). Linkages began in 1999 with philanthropic funding from the [Stuart Foundation](#) and expanded its work in 2006 upon receiving a Children's Bureau grant. That grant ended in 2011, and Linkages currently is funded through a California DSS grant. More than 30 California counties are currently implementing Linkages strategies.

In many California counties, there is a significant overlap of children and families involved with CWS, whose primary mission is to keep children safe from maltreatment, and CalWORKs, which is responsible for providing income assistance and employment preparation services to help parents achieve financial self-sufficiency. For example, nearly half the children in Los Angeles County served through the county's Department of Children and Family Services also have received support through CalWORKs at some point. Furthermore, research has shown that parental stress, including stress from economic factors, can result in child welfare involvement (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999; Shook, 1999; Courtney, Piliavin, & Power, 2001) and that increased poverty rates correspond to a rise in child maltreatment rates (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2001).

Parents who are faced with economic hardships and the potential or actual removal of their children from their care must then navigate two separate, complex systems. Each of these systems has its own timelines, requirements, and goals. In many counties, they are housed in different locations, which may increase families' transportation challenges. Families separately involved in both systems have at least one worker in each system, and those workers often do not communicate with one another. They may even set incompatible goals for the family, leaving the family in an untenable position.

Linkages assists counties in developing CalWORKs and CWS collaborations by providing a suite of planning and implementation tools. The [Linkages Planning Guide](#) and [Linkages Tool Box](#) provide counties with the tools they need to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate Linkages in their communities. The project also has a State Linkages Oversight Committee that monitors county planning and implementation efforts, reviews relevant State policy to help counties remain

compliant with any changes, and oversees the statewide evaluation. Another key component is the initiative's biannual convenings, which provide county staff with opportunities to share best practices, receive help and support for challenging issues, and share tools, such as county policies and guidelines.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background

In 1999, the [Stuart Foundation](#) funded the exploration of an innovative program in El Paso County (Colorado) that increased collaboration between child welfare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) services. For the next 2 years, the [California Center for Research on Women and Families](#) led a large planning group that developed the policies, protocols, and templates that would become the Linkages program, a statewide effort to support counties in improving collaborations between CalWORKs (California's program for administering the TANF program) and the county-administered child welfare services (CWS). Linkages is operated through the [Child and Family Policy Institute of California](#) (CFPIC), a contracted provider of the California Department of Social Services (DSS). In 2002, 17 California counties began implementing Linkages, with a second group beginning implementation in 2005. In 2006, CFPIC received a Children's Bureau grant, which allowed for an additional expansion of Linkages, bringing the total number of counties to 32. The Children's Bureau grant ended in 2011, and Linkages currently is funded through a California DSS grant.

Linkages underpinnings are based in the literature. Research has shown that parental stress, including stress from economic factors, can result in child welfare involvement (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999; Shook, 1999; Courtney, Piliavin, & Power, 2001) and that increased poverty rates correspond to a rise in child maltreatment rates (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2001). Linkages is rooted in the belief that children and families benefit when social services programs work together. Research also shows that engaged families are more likely to collaborate and cooperate with case plans, choose services or treatments they feel will help them, follow-through with services, and make life-long changes (Dawson & Berry, 2002). Linkages promotes family engagement in CalWORKs and CWS programs by reducing or eliminating the barriers that arise from a lack of coordination between these two agencies.

Need for Service

In many California counties, there is a significant overlap of children and families involved with CWS, whose primary mission is to keep children safe from maltreatment, and CalWORKs, which is responsible for providing income assistance and employment preparation services to help parents achieve financial self-sufficiency. For example, nearly half the children in Los Angeles County served through the county's Department of Children and Family Services also have received support through CalWORKs at some point. Despite having common clients, the agencies often did not communicate and were not co-locating, leaving already stressed families to navigate two complex bureaucracies, often with inconsistent or opposing goals and timelines. Increasing collaboration between the two agencies would provide tangible benefits for both programs, and more importantly, would support improved outcomes for the children and families being served.

Project Components

Linkages seeks to ensure that families experience the following:

- A single point of entry into systems
- Simpler processes for accessing services
- Improved screening and assessment
- Increased human service system accountability, as demonstrated by improved and streamlined communications among staff in different programs
- Comprehensive services that meet their needs
- Services from each program that complement each other
- Case plans and timelines that are prioritized, integrated, and synchronized
- The best possible outcomes

Counties complete the following four steps when deciding whether they should implement Linkages:

1. **Understanding the Linkages philosophy.** Linkages believes that enhanced coordination can help CWS serve as an anti-poverty program and CaWorks prevent child abuse and neglect.
2. **Securing leadership commitment to Linkages, from start to finish.** For Linkages to succeed, top leadership within each county DSS must be willing to spend time, energy, creative thinking, service dollars, and perhaps even political capital to establish a vision, create a common mission, reconfigure service provision, and hold employees accountable.
3. **Committing to the Linkages building blocks of policy foundation, practice protocols, and administration.** The policy foundation includes drafting a mission, vision, and guiding principles; selecting a target population; identifying a model process for case coordination; and defining anticipated outcomes. Practice protocols outline the specific steps for identifying clients in the target population, developing processes for sharing information about potential and actual clients, and writing protocols for coordinated case planning. Administration involves developing tools to help plan, implement, and evaluate Linkages. In addition, it involves forming a Linkages planning committee, appointing a Linkages coordinator to facilitate planning and implementation, orienting staff at all levels to the basic philosophy of linkages, developing training, and identifying funding streams to align systems and maximize matching opportunities through title IV-E.
4. **Endorsing the Linkages work plan process.** That process is organized around the three Linkages building blocks and includes specific planning tools for several topic areas.

These steps are outlined in detail in the [Linkages Planning Guide](#).

Linkages staff hope the initiative grows from a planning and implementation project into a standard for all counties. At the State level, Linkages provides training and support to counties implementing Linkages in their jurisdictions. The Statewide Linkages Oversight Committee (SLOC) monitors the planning and implementation processes for Linkages implementation at the county level and oversees a statewide process and outcome evaluation. The SLOC also addresses policy issues related to Linkages and is responsible for ongoing sustainability at the State level.

CFPIC can assist counties, either remotely or onsite, as they consider implementing Linkages. The following are examples of CFPIC supports:

- Stakeholder consultations to educate and secure support for Linkages implementation
- Advice on the range of integrated service approaches
- Guidance for building teamwork, problem-solving, developing a common mission and vision, and establishing and supporting workgroups
- Technical assistance on issues such as successful practices and strategies

- Training with both standard and customized curricula
- Regular convenings of county staff to share best practices and learn new approaches
- Access to communications tools for various stakeholder groups

CFPIC also assists counties as they implement Linkages and offers the following support and tools:

- Identification of mutual cases
- Coordinated case planning
- Team decision meetings and family group conferencing that are attended by both CalWORKs and CWS staff
- Co-location of CalWORKs and CWS staff
- Linkages teams to handle mutual cases
- Joint case reviews
- Joint fiscal plans
- Joint and cross training

Additionally, the 2-day biannual convenings are a key program element that brings county Linkages representatives together to share ideas, network, learn new skills, and facilitate peer-to-peer exchange. Convenings can be attended by CWS and CalWORKs staff and have been extremely useful in helping some counties form meaningful collaborations among staff and leaders in those two agencies. The first day of the 2009 and 2010 convenings included clinical academies on topics such as domestic violence and substance abuse, including methamphetamine. The second day's agenda focused on system topics such as collaboration, evaluation, and sustainability.

Linkages also developed a suite of training, communications, and marketing materials that have been very valuable to counties. Two [videos](#) (one short and one long) help counties educate key stakeholders, such as DSS directors and CalWORKs and CWS program managers, supervisors, and staff, about the benefits of Linkages. The videos were designed to help garner support for Linkages at the highest levels of county leadership in the early stages of program planning and to link the program to statewide efforts. Two important components of these videos are the actual stories of families who have benefited from the program and senior leadership talking about how invaluable this project is to their work. The longer video was designed to educate frontline workers, and the shorter video was intended for use in political and other leadership meetings in which there may not be time for a longer video. These videos and other materials, such as brochures for families, save counties the time, expense, and effort of developing their own. They also help ensure that Linkages is implemented at the county level with a high degree of fidelity to the model, ensuring the best possible chance of success.

Benefits

Linkages leaders recognized early on that strengthening collaborations at the local level could provide benefits for the staff and clients of both CalWORKs and CWS. The benefits to CalWORKs include the following:

- CWS promoting employment, which can help prevent CalWORKs from receiving sanctions for not meeting its targets
- Child welfare expertise to help address families' multiple needs
- Access to services that can strengthen family interactions and help a client enter, and remain in, the job market

The benefits to CWS include the following:

- Additional resources for helping families and improving outcomes

- Reduction of poverty and stressors that contribute to child maltreatment
- Access to additional resources for families, such as child care, transportation, housing, and other poverty mitigations, that can help create a safe and stable family environment

The following are benefits to both programs:

- Coordinated and streamlined services
- A team approach to helping families
- Enriched assessment and service perspectives
- Reduced duplication and conflict
- Enhanced family participation and strengthened family engagement

Clearly articulating these potential benefits was critical to overcoming early resistance to collaboration among the agencies.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit took place September 14 and 15, 2010, during the project's Fall Convening in Sacramento, CA. The visit included the following:

- Participation in a 1-day workshop on addiction and methamphetamine with county Linkages representatives
- Participation in the following workshops and plenary sessions during the convening:
 - Resource Support Teams
 - Using Data to Show Success
 - Team Decision Making
 - Collaborative Roles Skill Building
 - Program Sustainability
 - Family Engagement
 - Peer Cluster
- A review of multiple State policies and procedures related to the implementation and operation of Linkages
- Interviews with Danna Fabella, Linkages Project Director; Stuart Oppenheim, Executive Director of the Child and Family Policy Institute of California; and other county Linkages representatives and staff
 - A review of Linkages communications materials, including the newly developed stakeholder videos

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

Detailed Planning and Implementation Tools

For the past 11 years, Linkages has developed, implemented, evaluated, and refined its approach to forming and supporting collaborations between child welfare services (CWS) and CalWORKs. The Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC) carefully documented key processes and assembled a [Linkages Planning Guide](#) and [Linkages Tool Box](#) that provide counties with the tools they need to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate Linkages in their communities. The project successfully married research demonstrating the interaction between poverty and child maltreatment with practical planning and implementation tools. As counties move forward in implementing Linkages, they have everything they need at their fingertips, freeing them to focus on local issues, such as garnering leadership and stakeholder support and adapting the Linkages model to fit their communities' needs. Extensive support from CFPIC, as

well as multiple opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers, helps county staff avoid common pitfalls while implementing Linkages with a high degree of fidelity to the model. As of the writing of this report, Linkages staff are working on a web-based toolkit that will take the place of the *Linkages Tool Box* and incorporate lessons learned regarding assessment and planning, training, communication, evaluation, fiscal issues, and sustainability.

State Linkages Oversight Committee

Linkages' State Linkages Oversight Committee (SLOC) monitors county planning and implementation efforts. This group also reviews State policy relevant to Linkages in order to provide support and guidance to counties implementing and operating Linkages. This ensures that Linkages remains compliant with any changes in State laws or policies. The SLOC oversees a statewide evaluation that can help inform program development and ensure that Linkages programs continue to support the achievement of positive outcomes for children and families. The following are SLOC members:

- CFPIC Executive Director
- Linkages Project Director
- Evaluation staff
- California Department of Social Services staff from various branches, including welfare-to-work, CWS, Medicaid, research, and data)
- County Linkages coordinators

Peer Interaction and Exchange

Linkages benefits from an 11-year history of successful implementation at the county level. The original counties remain active in Linkages and, with more than a decade of experience in the daily operations of a Linkages collaboration, are valuable resources for counties just beginning their own planning and implementation. Biannual convenings provide county staff with opportunities to share best practices, receive help and support for challenging issues, and share tools, such as county policies and guidelines. Linkages also maintains an intranet (i.e., an online space for discussion and resource sharing) that is actively used by Linkages counties and topical Peer Clusters, which are groups of county staff who communicate at convenings and via conference calls on topics of interest, including family engagement, data and evaluation, and State laws and policies.

Challenges

Garnering Support

Successful Linkages implementation requires long-term leadership and stakeholder support. Leadership turnover at the county level was a challenge for many Linkages programs and in some cases derailed implementation that had otherwise been successful. Alternatively, some struggling programs enjoyed increased success as new leaders who supported CWS/CalWORKs collaboration were added.

A siloed service environment in which CWS and CalWORKs had a long history of operating independently from one another also proved challenging to gaining support some Linkages counties. County staff reported that it could be difficult to overcome distrust between program staff, from front line workers to managers. In these counties, Linkages support was garnered by carefully detailing the benefits of Linkages for families and both agencies. In many counties, activities that helped staff from one agency understand the culture, perspective, and daily challenges of staff in the other agency led to some "aha" moments.

Identifying Shared Client Populations

Linkages cannot operate successfully unless there is a reliable mechanism in place for counties to identify clients being served by both agencies. CWS and CalWORKs used separate data systems that required the creation of ad hoc reports to identify mutually served families. Counties relied on staff-driven processes, such as checking both systems and then flagging the case in

some fashion, to identify mutual clients. There was no automatic way to track mutual cases to ensure coordination occurred. Only one county was able to create an automated way of completing this important task; others were left with a somewhat cumbersome manual process of identifying clients who could be members of Linkages' target audience. The manual process created barriers for full implementation at the local level, as well as barriers for the evaluation of outcomes.

Both CWS and CalWORKs value client confidentiality, but some counties struggled with cultures and perceptions regarding information sharing. For example, staff in different agencies were reluctant to talk about mutual clients or even acknowledge they had mutual clients. Some Linkages programs focused on clarifying misconceptions about laws and policies related to information sharing. Another helpful strategy was recognizing the shared value—respect for client confidentiality—that was the foundation for each program's information-sharing policies and then working collaboratively to address the issue. Other counties developed policies for obtaining client consent so that information could be shared across programs.

Engaging families also helped overcome information-sharing challenges. In many counties, CalWORKs and child welfare case managers already were permitted to share information. The project's [Family Engagement Guidelines](#) notes that the most effective method of authorizing information sharing is by obtaining a signed release of information from the family, which also is an essential part of establishing the trust and respect needed for meaningful engagement. Linkages urges CWS and CalWORKs staff to develop a shared information release policy or an integrated form that meets the requirements of both agencies.

Caseload/Workload Concerns

Many counties struggled with overcoming concerns about caseloads and workloads. This was particularly true in the early stages of Linkages implementation, during which collaboration with other workers was seen as additional work for an already overburdened staff. Caseworkers noted that schedules often presented challenges, particularly when they tried to arrange joint meetings with clients. This was worse in areas where CWS and CalWORKs programs were not co-located and required at least one worker to travel to meetings. However, in counties in which workers could clearly see the advantage of collaboration to their client and to their own casework responsibilities, collaboration with the worker in the other program was seen as beneficial and outweighed workload concerns. For example, a child welfare worker may be able to access services for his client that can be funded through CalWORKs, such as domestic violence treatment, transportation, mental health services, and drug and alcohol treatment. The CalWORKs worker could then use this opportunity to further engage the parent in services that will help them overcome barriers to employment, such as drug and/or alcohol abuse.

Some counties also faced challenges related to staff training. Given high caseloads, it could be a struggle to pull staff away from their daily workloads to complete training. While some training, such as an initial orientation to the Linkages philosophy, can be completed during a regularly scheduled staff meeting, other types of training, such as on the use of a new comprehensive assessment tool, requires more time and staff commitment. Leadership commitment was particularly crucial to prioritizing the necessary training to establish Linkages collaborations.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

Taking Time to Plan

An early lesson learned is the importance of detailed planning for Linkages programs, including a careful assessment of the current environment to identify roadblocks to implementation. Linkages planning works best when the planning team represents staff and leadership at all levels of the agency. While some counties were tempted to keep planning teams small and move through the process quickly, this often led to efforts that were derailed or abandoned altogether due to unforeseen challenges or lack of support for Linkages at all levels of the agency. It is important for counties to resist the urge to skip essential planning steps, such as creating a shared mission

or educating staff at all levels of the organization. Linkages is not a standalone project; it is a systems-change initiative that is meant to change the core ways a social service agency does business. This type of culture shift does not happen overnight.

Outreach Tailored to Different Audiences

Linkages relies on a suite of communications and outreach products tailored to different audiences to obtain the critical support of various stakeholders. Videos have been enormously successful in garnering support from policymakers and agency leaders, both of whom need complex information summarized for them in a short period of time. Having staff and clients participate in these videos made them more powerful to stakeholders, who often have few opportunities to interact with frontline staff and clients yet value their perspective.

Videos and print products also are useful in introducing basic Linkages principles to staff. They are particularly helpful in breaking down barriers between CWS and CalWORKs and helping staff in those programs understand the ways a lack of collaboration can prevent clients from achieving success in either or both programs. Staff in both programs often are surprised to learn that their agency's timelines, priorities, and requirements for families conflict with those from the other agency, thereby placing families in untenable positions. Hearing these stories from clients is a powerful way of sharing this information.

Ongoing Training and Peer Exchange

Convenings, conference calls, the program newsletter, and the intranet are all important factors in Linkages' success. Convenings offer opportunities for county Linkages representatives to receive current information on State laws and policies that impact programs. Peer-to-peer interaction often provides county staff with the best solutions to challenges they face. Convenings and the intranet both provide a chance for counties to share products they have created, such as assessment tools and program handbooks, with other Linkages programs.

Many Linkages staff noted that face-to-face interaction is becoming increasingly rare in the social services environment. Staff felt that face-to-face interaction is critically important for a program like Linkages, though, as it offers dedicated time to focus on the complexities of planning, implementing, and operating this type of collaboration. Many county Linkages coordinators serve in other roles, so having dedicated time is particularly valuable.

OUTCOMES

Linkages is participating in the Children's Bureau's evaluation of this grantee cluster, which is being conducted by James Bell Associates. Linkages has contracted with Harder+Company for its program-specific evaluation, which includes both implementation and outcome evaluations.

The implementation evaluation uses three surveys that are administered in each county implementing Linkages. The first survey documents the status of implementation, including the approach that the county has taken, how it has defined and established the Linkages model, and its current stage of implementation. The second survey is an organizational change instrument that gathers information on the overall needs of families (i.e., beyond just child welfare or job needs). This survey has helped Linkages understand the factors that make the initiative a success, with collaboration among the agencies being the primary factor. The third survey is administered to frontline workers and caseworkers and asks about their experiences working directly with families, including their perspectives on policies and procedures and the impact of policies on the way they conduct their daily work. All three surveys are administered on a continual basis.

The outcome evaluation has been more challenging. Counties maintain separate data systems for CWS and CalWORKs, which makes it difficult to identify mutual clients and collect outcome measures. As Linkages has gained momentum in the State, there has been more county

willingness to work through some of their data collection issues, but data collection continues to be labor intensive. Linkages leaders are hopeful that a new software tool with the capability to pull data from the CWS data system and streamline mutual client identification will support outcome evaluation efforts.

Linkages also has explored options for identifying a control group in an effort to begin to make causative statements about outcomes. As with many social services programs, this has been challenging for several reasons. First, agencies often are reluctant to withhold participation in a potentially beneficial program, such as Linkages, from clients. Second, counties have struggled with identifying mutual clients for Linkages alone, much less identifying a comparable client group that will not receive services. As Linkages gains momentum, counties have been more willing to contribute staff time to outcome evaluations that can be used to demonstrate the efficacy of the program.

To supplement the evaluation, Harder+Company is completing three intensive case studies in Stanislaus County, Los Angeles County, and San Bernardino County. These three counties began Linkages at different times and have different levels of experience implementing and operating it. The case studies include interviews and focus groups with staff and leaders at different levels and clients.

Linkages planned to complete data collection in 2011 and then compare data across the 11 years of the program's history.

- Finally, Linkages staff made note of unanticipated outcomes that appeared even though they are not formally measured in the evaluation. In counties where Linkages has been implemented successfully, anecdotal evidence suggests that staff have higher job satisfaction and feel that they meet client needs more effectively than before through this type of partnership. Some workers' past frustrations about a lack of services for families have diminished because Linkages has provided an avenue to obtain those services. Given the high staff turnover in many social services agencies, this observation about higher job satisfaction could prove to be a tangible benefit to child welfare/TANF collaborations.

ATTACHMENTS

- [Linkages Planning Guide](#)
- [Linkages Toolkit](#)
- [CalWORKs Child Abuse/Neglect Prevention Services Screening Field Test](#)

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