

**Overview:** CalWORKs Connect is a week-long workshop for Welfare to Work (WTW) parents designed to empower and inspire participants to make the most of their time on the Welfare to Work program.

**Challenge:** The WTW program, like any bureaucratic system, can be confusing, tedious and frustrating for participants to navigate. Parents often enter the system reluctant to engage, skeptical about the benefits beyond cash aid, and worried about being required to participate in activities they don't believe will help them or their families. Often people in poverty are used to being talked down to or being penalized for situations that feel out of their control which contributes to distrust of the system and the staff who administer it.

**Innovative Solution:** In 2015, Nevada County's Job Club participation rates had dropped so low, it was no longer cost effective to provide the training. However, we had a fabulous trainer, Nancy Jeffery, who was as passionate about helping our CalWORKs families as she was about her corporate training clients. Nancy and new CalWORKs Program Manager, Mali Dyck, started brainstorming what could be done to make the workshop more valuable to clients and CalWORKs Connect was piloted first in FY 15-16 and then fully implemented in FY16-17.

CalWORKs Connect is highly structured with Personal Development topics, led by Nancy, in the mornings and various community partner agencies presenting in the afternoons. Nancy developed custom training materials and activities covering topics to help participants succeed in life, not just employment. Topics include: emotional intelligence, goal writing, change and transition, mindfulness, building a support network, transferable skills, beliefs, perceptions and self-talk, motivation, achievement and assets, managing ourselves in times of stress, affirmations for reaching goals, communication tools, setting boundaries, using time wisely, making well-thought-out decisions, personality characteristics of self and others, and personal mottos. Nancy delivers these lessons in a warm, non-judgmental style which completely shatters the expectations of participants who expect a boring, pedantic lecture.

The afternoon sessions cover a variety of topics, some educational and some informative of specific services available to WTW families. Educational topics include: recognizing violence in relationships, nurturing parenting,

recognizing behavioral health issues in self and others, landlord/tenant relations and resources, the importance of physical health care and accessing primary care doctors, money management, eating healthy on a budget, exercise and stress management, and how to be a good employee. WTW service introductions include: Sierra College, The Business and Career Center (WIOA/One Stop), Adult Education programs, Stage 1 Childcare as well as emergency/respite child care, Family Stabilization and Housing Support Program, Subsidized Employment, job skills and job readiness program. To maximize the impact of the program, basic requirements for all presentations were developed to include: being interactive, participatory and non-lecture style. A presentation planning workshop was provided to the community group presenters and Nancy and Mali sat in on each of the presentations at least once during the pilot phase to gauge the level of interaction and offered feedback to each presenter to improve their presentations. Based on this quality review process, some presenters were not asked to continue after the Pilot phase, and new presenters were invited to join.

**Originality/Cost Effectiveness:** Nevada County contracts with community based organizations to deliver the majority of WTW services because of the cost effectiveness and agility CBOs provide. With the rapid rate of change in the WTW program, this system has allowed us to test and adjust staffing types to provide the best fit for the evolving program requirements. It also provides our clients with access to very high quality trainers and resources. In order to maximize these relationships, it is important that our families realize the value of the WTW services they have access to and CalWORKs Connect delivers that value to them.

**Results:** Participants consistently express surprise and gratitude for what they learn in this program as well as the relationships they develop with the presenters and their classmates. Participants bond during this workshop through small group discussions, sharing their goals and life stories, and witnessing each other's "aha moments." Since our pilot began in September 2015, 83% of graduates moved on to job readiness, employment, vocational education, or work experience WTW activities and 53% of CalWORKs Connect graduates are now off cash aid.

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