

San Diego County OWRA Case Study

September 2018

Introduction

In the last decade, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs have begun to undertake redesign efforts that increase their focus on front-end services and assessments. In light of changing caseloads and labor force demands, TANF programs have begun to explore and develop new and improved methods for moving all work eligible individuals into more stable career pathways. Programs are working to better identify unobserved barriers to employment, use modern technologies, and implement multi-faceted approaches to address increasingly complex client challenges.

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (OFA), contracted with ICF to develop and deliver an online strengths assessment tool to better address these issues and help TANF and human service providers assess the strengths and work readiness of low-income clients.

As a go-to resource that supports clients as they move toward sustainable self-sufficiency, the Online Work Readiness Assessment (OWRA) is a specialized, web-based suite of tools and assessments that help human service agency staff make important decisions about client readiness to secure employment and meet work participation targets.

Today, a range of TANF, workforce, and Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs are using OWRA. To date, over 1,000 state and local programs have downloaded OWRA and adopted or adapted the tool to meet their organization's assessment needs.

OWRA's web-based platform offers an innovative approach to creating a plan for clients that summarizes their strengths and barriers and makes recommendations on placement into work activities and work supports. It offers social service agency caseworkers and staff services for clients through five modules. OWRA's modules include:

The Benefits of OWRA

- A specialized, comprehensive online resource.
- Promotes better understanding of client needs.
- Streamlines intake process.
- Moves participants into work activities faster and with better results.
- Helps program administrators make better and more effective resource decisions.
- Provides applicable recommendations based on data collected and customized to the organization.

Intake Module	Data is collected on client demographics, employment and educational background, household composition, and finances.
Assessment Module	Organizes the information collected in the Intake Module and develops a comprehensive "snapshot" of barriers and strengths to work. This module serves as the foundation for the resulting SSP.

Self-Sufficiency Plan (SSP) and Work Readiness Resource	The SSP highlights client strengths, suggests recommendations for reducing client barriers, and allows for customized referrals and recommendations to address barriers and develop a career pathway. In addition, a portal of Work Readiness Resources is available to help caseworkers and participants explore resume writing, soft skill development, interests, abilities, and labor market information.
Employment Projections	Provides participants with state and local labor market information for occupations in line with their educational backgrounds, interests, and skills.
Reporting Module	Streamlines business processes by providing aggregated information over a specified time period regarding client population demographics, employment and education history, barriers, and career preferences. Enables organizations to make data-based decisions about referral strategies, services, partners, and programs based on client needs.

This profile shares the experiences of the Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) of San Diego County, California in customizing their use of the Online CalWORKs Appraisal Tool (OCAT), the California-specific version of OWRA, to improve the outcomes of clients using the county’s TANF program, CalWORKs. In 2015, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) adopted OWRA, creating the Online CalWORKS Appraisal Tool (OCAT) to assess strengths and identify barriers to employment for CalWORKS clients. Counties in the state were tasked with implementing and adapting OCAT to best address their clients’ needs.

Background

The state of California has a state-supervised, county-administered, TANF program called CalWORKs. In 2013, California passed legislation requiring all counties use a standardized assessment tool to ensure every CalWORKs participant received the same level of assessment. The Health and Human Services Agency of San Diego County switched from their old tool to OCAT in 2015. The county’s previous tool, a simple, two-page form that largely focused on employment history, was subject to inconsistent interpretation by case managers.

How OWRA Was Adapted

California utilized a phased approach to adapt and implement OCAT in counties, including early use and feedback on OWRA. California pilot tested OWRA initially to gather lessons learned, including requested changes and modifications to make the tool more specific to California’s CalWORKS population. San Diego County participated as a pilot site. As a pilot, this county participated in requirement discussions with stakeholders, multiple rounds of feedback from state and county users, and a structured process for incorporating user recommendations. Prior to implementing OCAT, San Diego County first required HHSA staff to attend the “train-the-trainer” workshop offered by CDSS.

The county of San Diego wanted OCAT to improve rapport between clients and caseworkers. The tool’s in-depth assessment lent itself well to strengthen relationships between clients and staff, but staff needed to be

comfortable enough with the tool to complete questionnaires with clients in a conversational way. Through additional trainings, including trainings in Motivational Interviewing (MI) and role playing activities, staff became more familiar with the tool and comfortable in their interactions with clients. Added trainings and time to familiarize staff with the tool helped to improve client-staff relationships and the identification of clients' unique needs and significant barriers. The sensitive nature of many of the questions in OCAT made clear to county staff the need for trainings in trauma informed care practices. These trainings improved staff's knowledge of the tool, increased caseworkers' ability to build rapport with clients, and developed staff's understanding of how to best address and help individuals with traumatic histories.

Outcomes

With more than 22,000 assessments as of September 2018, San Diego County HHSA is very pleased with the consistency OCAT has brought to clients' intake experience and believes that the detailed questionnaire has led to better client outcomes, greater HHSA knowledge of challenges in San Diego County, and an overall shift in the greater San Diego community. The introduction of OCAT has made a significant difference in client outcomes. With the implementation of OCAT, San Diego has seen a higher percentage of Welfare to Work participants who have gained employment. In addition, participants have experienced a ten percent increase in wages, as compared to prior to OCAT's implementation. Furthermore, San Diego has seen less recidivism with OCAT. The number of clients still enrolled in the program after two years has dropped by 15%.

As TANF program participants typically have multiple barriers to self-sufficiency, OCAT's comprehensiveness has made it effective in helping caseworkers create successful plans to address these barriers. Caseworkers are also pleased with OCAT as a guide for future work. Many of HHSA's community partners are working together with HHSA to better address community needs that went unacknowledged prior to OCAT.

OCAT allows greater engagement with clients, which HHSA staff recognize as a significant improvement over the county's previous, simplistic tool. OCAT enables staff to track clients' progress overtime and re-engage with clients even if they have not met with County staff for months. The introduction of the tool has resulted in an increase in client employment and a ten percent increase in client wages, as compared to OCAT's predecessors. Improved employment outcomes are a result of OCAT's comprehensive nature and ability to prompt important conversations between clients and staff.

"I did not understand the true challenges facing the community I live in until I used OCAT."

- HHSA County of San Diego Supervisor

County workers believe OCAT has improved client-staff relationships. The conversational nature of the tool's questionnaire, combined with the sensitive subject matter of many of the questions, allows caseworkers to

get to the root of clients' barriers, make plans to best address these issues, and build trust with clients in the process. OCAT also aids caseworkers in getting client buy-in, since the tool asks about clients' work preferences. Improved relationships and greater client drive have increased client confidence as well.

OCAT aids communication and trust between clients and staff, resulting in better client outcomes, as shared by HHSA staff. San Diego County HHSA staff note that many clients have sought and received treatment and services because of OCAT.

San Diego County HHSA staff note that OCAT has facilitated a family-centered goal achievement approach to serving families and has improved client outcomes. The tool's thoroughness and attention to domestic violence and human trafficking – areas previously overlooked by the county's old tool – allow caseworkers to better understand clients' unique needs and home life dynamics. With this information, staff provide resources to heal the whole family. In potential safety risk situations, OCAT has improved San Diego County staff's ability to provide useful resources to clients at risk of human trafficking and domestic violence, as well as place current victims of domestic violence (DV) in safe environments. Clients who are current DV victims do not always open up immediately. For instance, county staff shared that a previous client disclosed current domestic violence but did not wish to discuss it further. The client later recognized DV as a hindrance to their ability to become self-sufficient and sought help from HHSA staff.

The use of OCAT has substantially improved the county's knowledge of barriers within the community, allowing HHSA to address these issues in future work. The tool's thoroughness has given staff a better understanding of barriers and their prevalence in the population served. Specifically, OCAT has brought a greater understanding of the prevalence of human trafficking and DV in the community. As a result, trauma informed care and practices have been implemented in the county's TANF program. Not only does the tool clarify when there is a client need for additional resources (to which HHSA staff does not currently have access), but also the tool helps County staff to strengthen their relationships with service providers. Enhanced relationships and collaboration with providers, combined with better insight into client needs, has allowed San Diego County to utilize new and different resources to better serve clients.

The perspective and community dynamic has changed within San Diego County. HHSA staff see OCAT as driving the recent increase in collaboration, partnerships, and networking between HHSA and community partners to address pertinent and pervasive issues in the county. Now, in an environment of greater awareness of community barriers and increased collaboration between county staff and community resources, welfare is seen as an approach to help individuals towards self-sufficiency while they work to remove barriers.

San Diego County believes OCAT has improved client outcomes.

Kim*, a HHSA client in San Diego County, worked with HHSA staff after her mom and sister passed away within a two-year period. A significant barrier to self-sufficiency for Kim was her mental health; OCAT enabled HHSA staff to better assist Kim and refer her to needed resources. Kim was recently celebrated in HHSA's annual Champions Event which highlights participants who have overcome obstacles and now have a closed case with the county. Kim's case is just one example of improved client outcomes in San Diego County after the implementation of OCAT.

Lessons Learned

San Diego County notes the importance of familiarizing staff with OCAT prior to the tool's use with clients, so it can be utilized in a conversational way. HHSA staff went through many trainings when the county began using OCAT, and employees who started after the initial trainings when the tool was adopted go through multiple days of OCAT training upon starting. These trainings, which help staff familiarize themselves with questions and navigation within the tool, are crucial to success. County staff also noted the importance of pairing OCAT trainings with MI and trauma informed care trainings to best connect with clients and help them on their paths to self-sufficiency. A primary success the county has achieved through their use of OCAT is improved rapport between clients and caseworkers; this would not have been possible without the trainings.

The county also learned that by introducing OCAT early in the process with a client – such as during intake – clients can benefit more from the tool. Utilizing OCAT early on allows caseworkers and clients to identify barriers and set practical goals sooner, which moves clients towards self-sufficiency more quickly. Utilizing the tool towards the beginning of the process also familiarizes clients with OCAT and the available resources earlier, which can in turn promote clients to better utilize these resources.

Conclusion

Even though San Diego County was mandated by state legislation to implement the state's version of OWRA, the county is very pleased with how the tool is working for CalWORKS participants. The county made a significant effort to learn the tool, MI techniques, and trauma informed care practices, so questionnaires could proceed as genuine conversations which strengthen relationships between clients and caseworkers. Allowing staff the time to familiarize themselves with the tool before using it with clients proved critical to best utilize OCAT and improve client outcomes. The county has noticed a change in community perspective and strengthened community partnerships since the introduction of OCAT. Addressing overlooked needs in the county is now a community effort.