

Implementing CalWORKs The Timing of Job Club

In response to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), California created the California Work and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program—a “work-first” program that provides support services to help recipients move from welfare to work (WTW) and toward self-sufficiency. To encourage prompt transitions to work and self-sufficiency, CalWORKs also imposes lifetime limits on receipt of cash assistance by adults. Finally, CalWORKs devolves much of the responsibility and authority for implementation to California’s 58 counties, increasing their flexibility and financial accountability in designing welfare programs.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) contracted with RAND to independently evaluate both the process (implementation) of CalWORKs and its impact (outcomes), at both the state and county levels. The results of the second process analysis, which focused on implementation through early December 1999, emphasize the importance of moving recipients promptly to Job Club—a structured group process to help welfare recipients find a first job—and, as needed, to the later steps in CalWORKs’ sequence of activities.

WHY SHOULD JOB CLUB BEGIN PROMPTLY?

The key reason for getting recipients to Job Club quickly is that the program works: The counties tell us that a large proportion of those who participate in Job Club get a job. These reports are consistent with earlier experimental evidence from Riverside and Los Angeles Counties under Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN)—California’s previous welfare program—that clearly showed that participation in Job Club leads to more employment, higher wages, and less time on aid.

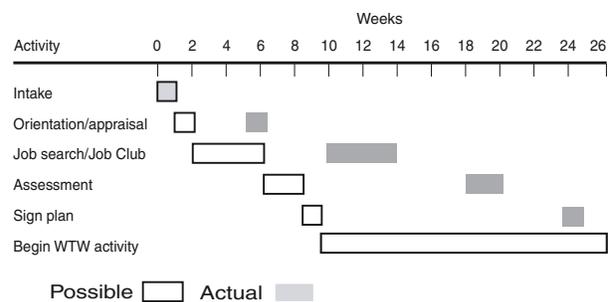
Moreover, since CalWORKs is a work-first program, the need for more-intensive services, such as education, training or treatment for substance abuse or mental health prob-

lems, is primarily identified during Job Club and in the assessment that follows for those who do not find a job. Thus, the faster recipients get to Job Club, the faster needs can be identified and the faster recipients can begin receiving services, leaving more time for receipt of the services before the time limit is reached.

Finally, getting people promptly into Job Club reinforces CalWORKs’ “message” that time on aid is limited and recipients should therefore use the time effectively. If there are long delays before entry into Job Club (or between subsequent steps), the county’s own actions are not consistent with what it says to recipients.

WHEN COULD RECIPIENTS ENTER JOB CLUB . . . AND WHEN DID THEY?

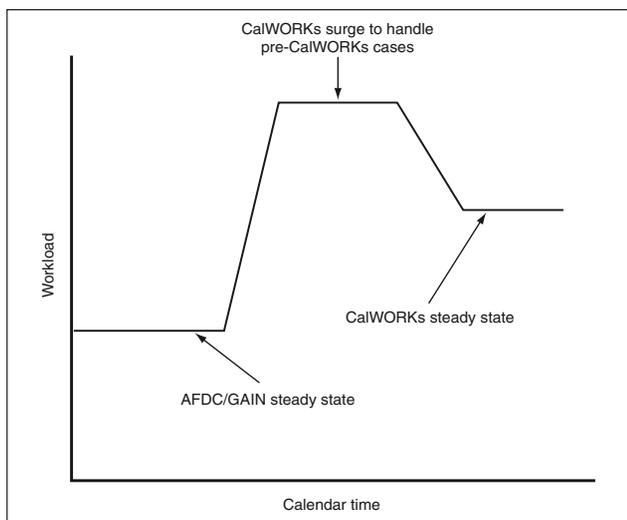
With minimal gaps between steps, how fast could a recipient enter Job Club and, as necessary, begin the first postassessment activity? The unshaded boxes in the timeline below show a possible schedule—based on interviews with senior officials in several counties—for a compliant recipient (i.e., one who cooperates, appearing at each scheduled meeting or activity) without major barriers (e.g., difficulty finding child care, illness, or special language issues). Given these conditions, the possible schedule reflects a virtually seamless movement between steps.



The actual pace through the steps—based on interviews with senior officials and line workers in many counties and limited analyses of county data systems—was often considerably slower than what was possible. Comparing the shaded and unshaded boxes shows the steps take about the same length of time: The difference is in the “seams”—the gaps between steps.

WHAT CAUSES THE GAPS BETWEEN STEPS?

The gaps appear to result from interrelated start-up issues and longer-term, more systemic problems. First, under the CalWORKs legislation, each case receives more services, and more cases are to participate in WTW activities. Thus, as illustrated conceptually in the figure, the “steady state” under CalWORKs involves a larger workload than under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/GAIN. As a result, implementation required bringing more capacity—workers or contractors—on-line to deal with an increased workload. Doing so took time; until then, recipients had to wait for appointments and activities.



Furthermore, the counties faced an intractable short-term management problem. These more-intensive services were to be provided both to new cases and to the entire existing caseload. Ideally, all the existing cases would have been immediately moved through each step of the process. However, counties simply could not move both the new cases and all the old cases through the steps instantaneously. Instead, the block of existing cases induced a “pig in the

python” problem through each step. Until the backlog was worked off, some (often considerable) delays between steps were inevitable. In some counties, the backlog was worked off by late 1998; most counties reached that point by the summer 1999; and some counties reached it later.

Second, beyond these start-up issues, some counties have systemic problems and continue to have flows through the initial steps closer to the actual than the possible. In some counties, this seems to result from insufficient capacity. Attaining the possible schedule requires enough excess capacity that at each step, an appointment is always available within the next week. However, some counties do not have that much capacity, sometimes because of deliberate decisions not to hire, sometimes because of difficulty in hiring, and sometimes because the needed staff is still in training.

The potential for long delays is greater in counties with separate eligibility and WTW workers. While this structure has benefits, it can lengthen the time to Job Club. Before recipients start Job Club, they must receive a general orientation from an eligibility worker. Then, often at a separate location and on a different day, they must meet with a WTW worker and receive an orientation to the WTW program. A combined worker structure may allow combining the meetings and orientations, thus reducing the time to Job Club.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

By late 1999, almost all counties had worked through their backlog. However, in some counties, systemic problems still remain. The centrality of Job Club and the pressure of time limits argues that counties should monitor time to Job Club and time to the first postassessment activity for each case and for the system as a whole (for an office, for a county). Supervisors can regularly review cases with caseworkers, and managers can regularly review cases with supervisors.

At the county level, long gaps or large numbers of recipients awaiting the start of an activity may be a signal that there is a systemic problem. In such cases, careful review of the process is indicated. Where are the gaps and why? Is there a capacity problem or a problem of too many handoffs between existing staff? Once a problem is identified, the process can be redesigned to move recipients more quickly to Job Club and then, as appropriate, to postassessment activities.

The research summarized in this Research Brief was carried out within RAND’s Labor & Population Program. Research results are described in detail in MR-1177-CDSS, Welfare Reform in California: State and County Implementation of CalWORKs in the Second Year, Jacob Klerman et al., 2000 (416 pp., \$25) and its accompanying Executive Summary, MR-1177/1-CDSS, (28 pp., \$8). Both documents are available electronically at <http://www.rand.org/CalWORKs> or through RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX 310-451-6915; Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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