

COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA CONFERENCE
PROTECTING FAMILIES, BUILDING PROSPERITY, RESTORING HOPE
October 8-10, 2014

“Every day we wake up, we get another chance to get it right” (James Taylor)

The County Welfare Directors Association of California hosted its annual Conference in October. The Conference consisted of several keynote speakers and a multitude of sessions ranging in topics from working with immigrant families, client communication, data and dashboards to health care reform and family self-sufficiency. An underlying theme of the Conference presentations revolved around the worthiness of each individual. Tavis Smiley, Broadcaster, Author, Publisher, Advocate and Philanthropist, pointed out that our current way of life is not sustainable. He noted that when people lose hope, we have a democracy that is in trouble. Mr. Smiley believes that the United States is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world, citing the triple threat of racism, poverty and militarism. Budgets are moral documents; resources that are being spent on war are being wasted and should be spent eradicating poverty according to Mr. Smiley. One of every two Americans is in or near poverty. He cited that there are three types of poor – perennially poor, near poor and the new poor (former middle class). A conference participant from San Francisco shared that there is a ten-year plan to cut poverty in half entitled *Rise Together Bay Area* (<http://risetogetherbayarea.org/>).

The time has come for more conversation, on an executive level, about income inequality and poverty according to those discussing ‘Homelessness and Health Homes’. One presenter stated that primary cause of homelessness is income inequality. Homeless often follows hopelessness, which is both an attitude and a behavior – it is when you can’t see a way out. We need to listen actively and generously to customers, resisting the temptation to think that you are not them and that their situation is brought on by bad decisions. We need to create affordable housing solutions and coordinate housing resources. Speakers noted challenges with generational welfare families, many lacking social support networks that can provide a buffer for stress.

To ensure that all factors related to a person’s situation are considered requires coordinated processes. Centralized or coordinated entry is particularly important for homeless service systems. The use of a universal assessment is also key to ensuring a thorough understanding of what a person is dealing with. One such assessment is the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) for singles or the F-SPDAT for families (www.orgcode.com). This assessment prioritizes who to serve next and why, while at the same time identifying the areas in a person/family’s life where support is most likely necessary in order to avoid housing instability. Coupling the assessment with housing locators and housing stabilizers increases the likelihood of ending the person/family’s homelessness. The annual cost of homelessness was noted to range between \$100,000 and \$170,000 per individual, while the cost of housing the person is around \$20,000. Healthcare accounts for two-thirds of the cost of keeping someone homeless. New York and California were identified as having waiver programs to provide housing subsidies under Medicaid – managed care health plans.

Poverty creates stress on both a developmental and situational level; it compromises executive functioning according to Dr. Elizabeth Babcock, President and CEO of

Crittenton Women's Union. People experiencing the stress of poverty are often challenged in the areas of managing thoughts, behavior and health. Dr. Babcock shared the practice of implementing brain-science based practices, including training staff to understand that families respond better to smiling faces. She encouraged looking at ways to de-escalate stress that families experience by utilizing organizational tool reminders, goals contracts, incentives, and a digital based telephone texting system. We need to expect more of ourselves and our families; as they rise to our expectations, we will get better outcomes.

As Human Service Departments work with their customers, they need to look at the experience through their eyes. Human Services is in the transformation business, according to Kouji Nakata, Organizational Development Consultant. Most customers don't want to be in the Human Services office; they would prefer not to require assistance. There is a need to create a theme for this experience. The theme should relate to the experience that the Department wants to provide, such as 'enhancing lives – inspiring hope'. Mr. Nakata noted that we need to create an experience for our customers. Only from there can we move into transformation, as we guide our customers on their course towards self-sufficiency. To advance in this direction may require the creation of a Chief Customer Experience Officer position or role assignment. Examples of focusing on the customer experience include redesigning a lobby with signage, educational materials, and opportunities for customers to share experiences.

The goal of Human Services staff is to help customers, who may arrive feeling helpless to reassure them that things will be OK. Without reassurance, helplessness can turn to anger. The customer experience should be solicited, considered and mapped from their point of view. Space should be provided to meet both the needs of the worker and the customer. Staff experience models customer experience – emotions are contagious, both the negative and positive ones. When staff model empathy, caring and hope, it impacts the customer response. Staff can serve as role models for change and development; they can also model career development for their customers. Managers need to listen to employees to create a great employee experience as well. Staff need to be hired for attitude, not just aptitude. They need to be given a people purpose, not just rules.

Rachel Lloyd, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, closed the conference with a moving discussion of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Girls in the United States. She talked about the outrage felt for victims of other countries that needs to be felt for victims in the United States. Many young people in this country don't have options. She added that the zip code of your birth predicts socioeconomic outcomes. Seventy percent of the "throw away kids" have been in the child welfare system. Addressing poverty will have the greatest impact to change these young lives. Ms. Lloyd encouraged staff to be present with their customers, to listen to them, treat them with respect, and to see and value people. Staff need to be present in the moment – be real, authentic and human with their customers.

The Conference speakers were motivating and inspiring. They challenged us to be better leaders as we serve the needs of our customers. The 700 plus attendees all clearly benefited from participating in the various sessions and will hopefully bring back to their offices what they gleaned to continue to improve their customers' experience.