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CalWORKs Sanction Policies in Four Counties: Practices, Attitudes, and Knowledge

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The federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 was the most sweeping overhaul of the U.S. welfare program for poor families with children since its inception in the 1935 Social Security Act. To comply with the new federal law, California passed its Temporary Assistance to Needy Families plan in August 1997. Counties began implementing the new program, CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids), on January 1, 1998.

The federal law increased work participation requirements for able-bodied adults and restricted the circumstances under which recipients can be exempted from working or engaging in work-related activities. If adults fail to comply with program rules without good cause, states reduce or eliminate cash aid to their households. These sanctions, or the threat of these sanctions, are intended both to motivate recipients to comply with work-related program requirements and, for those under sanction, to hasten their return to compliance (generally referred to as “curing” or “lifting” the sanctions).

The federal legislation gave states some leeway in defining the terms of recipient compliance and in prescribing the severity of the sanction for non-compliance. In California, CalWORKs requires adult heads of single-parent families to engage in 32 hours a week of work and work-related activities averaged over a month (the federal minimum in order to count toward the state’s work participation rate requirement is 30 hours). As under prior law, California imposes partial-family sanctions: a reduced cash grant to children in families in which

the adult or adults have lost assistance because of noncompliance. In California, the policy did not change markedly, but sanctions are imposed more frequently than under the Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) program, the predecessor to CalWORKs.

In order to better understand how California counties administer sanctions, the University of California’s Welfare Policy Research Project commissioned a study to answer six questions:

(1) How do counties implement sanction procedures prescribed by CalWORKs? (2) How, if at all, do counties attempt to prevent sanctions, and how do they help recipients to lift a sanction once it has been imposed? (3) How knowledgeable are county welfare workers about CalWORKs sanction policies, and (4) what opinions do they hold about the purpose and efficacy of sanctions? (5) How well do recipients in these counties understand sanction policies, and (6) what have their experiences been with these policies? To address these questions, we examined in depth the sanction policies and procedures in four highly disparate counties: Alameda, Fresno, Kern, and San Diego.

Methodology

We assembled state-, county-, and individual-level data. To gather state information, we compiled data from the California Department of Social Services monthly activity reports for October 1999 through December 2002, the most recent year for which data were available



at the time of the study. Between August and December 2002 we conducted site visits to each of the welfare agencies in the four counties, where we conducted open-ended interviews with 11 administrators and 26 case managers. We also observed meetings between 17 individual case managers and recipients, the purpose of which ranged from initial recipient-worker consultations to meetings specifically aimed at helping sanctioned recipients come back into compliance. After all but two meetings that we observed, we interviewed the recipients about their perceptions of the meeting and their knowledge of sanction policies and procedures; one additional interview was conducted without an observation. Finally, we sat in on five group orientations to observe how recipients new to welfare are informed about sanction policies and practices.

Key Findings

The welfare agencies in these four counties are making reasonable efforts to reach out to recipients and to provide them with services aimed at preventing and/or curing sanctions. Since CalWORKs began, all four counties have at some point provided outreach services. For example, one county contracts with community-based organizations (CBOs) to address barriers to employment faced by sanctioned recipients or other factors that impede their finding or keeping a job. The other counties had or have home-visit programs: Case managers, other specialized county workers, or CBO-based staff schedule personal visits with recipients in their homes to try to identify and resolve any problems that could lead or have already led to sanctions. Such home-visit programs are not required by federal or state law; they reflect these counties' efforts to go beyond statutory requirements to serve recipients. In all four counties, administrators' and case managers' opinions varied regarding the value of their counties' respective efforts to prevent or cure sanctions.

Six more-specific findings emerged:

- ▶ *Almost all case managers oppose switching to full-family sanctions from the partial-family sanctions California now employs.*

Asked whether California should move from partial-family sanctions (reduction of a family's cash grant) to full-family sanctions (termination of a

family's entire cash grant)—a policy choice that 35 other states have made—the vast majority of the case managers we interviewed opposed the idea (22/26; 85%). A few supported such a change or stated that such an approach might work on a “case-by-case basis.”

Generally, the case managers opposed to full-family sanctions doubted that terminating grants would improve recipient compliance. All the case managers we interviewed said that noncompliant recipients are hindered by problems or barriers beyond their control, and about half thought that such barriers are the primary reasons for noncompliance. In their view, harsher sanctions by themselves—for example, grant reductions that ratchet up to grant terminations, or immediate grant terminations—would have little effect on compliance because they do not change these underlying barriers. A number of case managers opposed to full-family sanctions said they would “hate to see the children suffer.” While the majority of case managers said the sanction process needs to be stricter—fewer chances given to comply, a less drawn-out process—an even greater number stated that full-family sanctions will not improve rates of program compliance.

- ▶ *Case managers offer two main reasons for recipient noncompliance with welfare-to-work requirements.*

On the whole, the case managers and administrators we interviewed recognized two groups of noncompliant recipients within the welfare population: (1) those who cannot comply with welfare-to-work requirements due to barriers (personal problems or problems beyond their control), and (2) those who can comply but lack the motivation to do so. The administrators and case managers we interviewed generally agreed that recipients with significant barriers make up the larger portion of the noncompliant population. Every administrator noted that county funding constraints make it impossible for their staff to address and successfully contend with all of the barriers noncompliant recipients face.

- ▶ *Case manager beliefs about the efficacy of sanctions vary.*

The case managers we interviewed differed on whether sanctions effectively motivate recipient



compliance with program rules. Just under a third (8/26; 31%) believed the current sanction process is effective, while slightly less than half (12/26; 46%) thought that the efficacy of sanctions depends on circumstances and that sanctions achieve their purpose only sometimes. The remainder (6/26; 23%) said the sanction process is ineffective.

- *Case managers generally agree that they give noncompliant recipients extra opportunities to comply, but also believe that the sanction process is too drawn out.*

Administrative procedures provide noncompliant recipients with multiple opportunities to establish good cause for failing to comply with program rules: when the Notice of Action (NOA) is first sent; after a recipient has not responded to the NOA and the case manager attempts contact; after a recipient has agreed to meet the terms of a compliance plan but has failed to; and when a sanctioned recipient requests a hearing. Across the four counties, the case managers we interviewed went even further, stating that they usually give the benefit of the doubt to recipients making a good-faith effort to establish good cause at *any* point during the sanction and compliance process.

At the same time, half of the case managers we interviewed (13/26; 50%) also said that a weakness of the process is that it takes “too long” to impose a grant reduction. This is noteworthy because it is often the case managers who appear to be lengthening the process by opting to give recipients multiple opportunities to comply (beyond those mandated by policy). Asked about this contradiction, the case managers readily acknowledged their role in delaying the imposition of sanctions, but they also asserted that this is what the current sanction policies demand: As long as recipients can demonstrate “good cause” for failing to comply with program requirements, they cannot be sanctioned.

- *Recipients possess limited knowledge of, and sometimes misunderstand, sanction policies and procedures.*

While the 16 recipients we interviewed are not representative of the entire welfare caseload, their responses do raise some concerns about recipients’ understanding of the process of being sanctioned

and of coming back into compliance after receiving a sanction. For example, six recipients said that they had never heard the term “sanction.” Questioned further, three of the six said they knew that there would be consequences—a cut in cash aid—if they failed to participate in welfare-to-work activities, but they did not know that such a reduction is called a sanction. Thus only three of the 16 professed no knowledge of sanctions.

While 13 recipients knew something about sanctions, a large minority misunderstood key elements of the sanction policies and procedures: Seven thought that sanctions mean that the entire cash grant is terminated, and five said that county workers can impose sanctions without first notifying recipients. Six did not know what circumstances might qualify as “good cause” for not complying with program rules, and seven were unable to name any circumstances under which a recipient could be exempted from work requirements altogether (for example, being the primary caretaker for an infant.)

Contrary to what might be expected, the six recipients we interviewed who were out of compliance with program requirements or under sanction at the time of the interview did not possess a markedly better understanding of the sanction process than the 10 who were complying with program rules.

- *There also are gaps in case manager knowledge of sanction policies.*

Asked to describe the sanction and compliance processes for typical single- and two-parent families, 14 of the 26 case managers we interviewed described them accurately. There were two main areas of confusion among those who erred in their descriptions: the duration of sanctions and the procedures involved in curing sanctions for two-parent families.

When queried about their most common errors regarding sanction procedures, case managers frequently attributed their misunderstanding to two sources. In particular, they ascribed their confusion about how long second and third sanctions remain in effect to the rarity of such occurrences in practice. More generally, they told us that they could have benefited from additional training. Case managers reported that they received formal and informal



training that lasted between six weeks and three months. Training included both structured workshops as well as supervision by more-experienced workers. In every county, at least half of the case managers we interviewed felt that their training in sanction-related procedures was insufficient.

Policy Implications

► *Current sanctions are sufficiently severe.*

It seems clear from our interviews that those charged with administering CalWORKs sanctions do not believe that the state ought to increase the severity of its sanction policies.

► *Our study provides two rationales for sustaining funding of county outreach services aimed at preventing and curing sanctions.*

First, recipients appear often to be confused about what they are required to do, or misunderstand basic aspects of sanction policies. Second, most of the county officials we interviewed believe that the majority of noncompliant recipients are contending with legitimate barriers that impede their employment or participation in required work activities. At this writing, California's severe budget problems will make it difficult to maintain current outreach services, much less to expand them.

► *County CalWORKs program administrators may want to re-examine whether case managers understand and are convinced of the value of CalWORKs administrative procedures.*

It appears that a number of case managers believe that more training in the procedures and rules governing sanctions would be useful. Many have reservations about how effective the current sanction process can be, given their understanding of the roots of noncompliance with work requirements.

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The full CPRC/WPRP report can be found at <http://wprp.ucop.edu>, where readers can also consult the companion study published in conjunction with this one. That research complements the in-depth interviews completed for this study: It uses administrative data from 1999 through 2000 to review the frequency with which households were sanctioned and to explore whether recipients in the four study counties who faced barriers that may have impeded their ability to satisfy program requirements (e.g., who had young children or did not speak English as their primary language) were more likely to be sanctioned than those who did not face such potential impediments. It also examines whether sanctioned adults were more likely or less likely to work or to receive welfare during the year after their sanction than adults who were not sanctioned.

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