

Human Services Brief

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Using CalWORKs 2.0 to Improve Programs and the Lives of Families Experiencing Poverty

How the County Welfare Directors Association of California is leading an evidence-driven transformation of human services and workforce programs

In 2016, the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) of California, in partnership with a steering committee of county leaders, envisioned transforming the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program. CWDA and its collaborators sought to transform CalWORKs from compliance-oriented, directive case management to participant-led case management focused on goals. Motivated by promising research on the effects of poverty on self-regulation and goal attainment in adults, CWDA set out to apply this evidence to practice.¹ Under contract with CWDA, Mathematica partnered with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Global Learning Partners, Economic Mobility Pathways, and CalWORKs counties to design and implement CalWORKs 2.0. This brief describes how counties might use CalWORKs 2.0 to transform human services and workforce programs to improve the lives of families experiencing poverty.

What is CalWORKs 2.0?

CalWORKs 2.0 represents a shift in CalWORKs—the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program—from compliance-oriented, transactional service delivery to an **evidence-driven** program informed by research on self-regulation and goal attainment. Self-regulation is defined as, “a person’s ability to control their actions, thoughts, and emotions,” and it includes a set of cognitive skills, emotional skills, and aspects of personality that might influence goal attainment.^{2,3} Self-regulation is necessary to succeed in work, education, and life more broadly. Environmental factors, including too much stress, can impede a person’s ability to self-regulate and accomplish their goals. CalWORKs draws from this and other sources of evidence, including strategies for building self-regulation skills, how scarcity of resources and time affects self-regulation, goal achievement practices, and how adults learn (see www.calworksnextgen.org). These sources of evidence align with research on strategies for improving outcomes for children and families with low incomes.⁴

The CalWORKs 2.0 **core practice model** includes a set of tools and practices to help direct service staff activate a person’s inner motivation and engage them in a nondirective process to set and achieve their goals. Participants can use the tools and practices on their own to build core self-regulation skills, such as planning, prioritization, time management, and selective attention that can improve career, education, and parenting outcomes over time.

Leaders—such as agency directors, program managers, supervisors, and lead workers—are critical to the success of CalWORKs 2.0. They are instrumental in creating an agency culture and structure, including policies and procedures, that support a science-informed approach and help families address their basic service needs. CalWORKs 2.0 includes a **leadership practice** to foster the organization change necessary to integrate and sustain the CalWORKs 2.0 core practice model (see Box 1).⁵

Box 1. CalWORKs Leadership Initiative

In 2021, Mathematica, under the direction of the County Welfare Directors Association, launched the CalWORKs 2.0 Leadership Initiative. The initiative included:

- / An eight-week virtual course (90-minute sessions each week), including topics such as strategic and visionary leadership, operational management, developmental supervision, and strategies to advance leaders of color
- / Twenty-minute Equip and Practice in Community (EPiC) sessions that included interviews with CalWORKs leaders
- / Three-week design challenge sprints to help CalWORKs leaders think about how they might apply training concepts in practice

All recordings are available on the CalWORKs 2.0 Leadership Initiative [Vimeo](#) page. Corresponding resources (for example, handouts, curricula, and facilitation agendas) are available in the Initiative's [Google Drive](#) folder.

CalWORKs 2.0 was cocreated with practitioners using **Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²)**—a framework and process model used to design and test evidence-informed solutions (see LI² [brief](#) and LI² [practice guide](#)).⁶ Counties, in turn, learned to use LI² to improve implementation quality.

What are the benefits of CalWORKs 2.0?

CalWORKs 2.0 aims to evoke the motivation of leaders, staff, and participants and increase their capabilities to achieve the goals that are meaningful to them. Program leaders use a supervision practice with staff they supervise that parallels the process for goal pursuit that staff use with program participants. This parallel process **builds staff skills, balances power** between staff and participants, and **cultivates staff empathy** for participants.

Along with regular practice of self-regulation skills, CalWORKs 2.0 has the potential to transform the lives of program participants. CalWORKs 2.0 takes neurobehavioral psychology's understanding of self-regulation (as a way to solve problems) and converts it into a simple four-step process that staff and participants alike can use to pursue their goals:

Goal, Plan, Do, Review/Revise (GPDRR). The approach uses the participant's goal as the means to practice and strengthen self-regulation skills, rooted in research that shows people can build these skills by practicing them in situations that matter.⁷

CalWORKs 2.0 is **trauma informed**, in that participants focus on the future rather than dwelling on their past. Common transactional approaches include in-depth assessments of barriers and past (often traumatizing) experiences; CalWORKs 2.0 reorients the assessment to identifying the individual's motivation and ability to act. In addition, it is **culturally responsive**. Rather than predetermining participants' pathways and activities based on a general assessment, participants define their goals and desired activities in a way that represents their needs and cultural identity.

Opportunity to act

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented disruptions in TANF and other work-based programs across the country. The stress of balancing work and family responsibilities, lack of social connections, and managing an uncertain future have left program leaders and staff experiencing the effects of scarcity and depleted self-regulation skills. In response to these challenges, programs across the country have transformed services in a way that might improve participant outcomes.⁸ CalWORKs 2.0 offers a unique opportunity to meet the needs of staff and participants by focusing on setting and achieving personally meaningful goals, while considering strengths and obstacles. To adopt the CalWORKs 2.0 approach, we encourage leaders to do the following:



Commit. Program leaders must first commit to the CalWORKs 2.0 approach by allocating time and resources to support the change. Then, they can engage staff in the change process. Direct service staff are more likely to adopt new practices if leaders include them in the early stages and invite them to help shape the approach in their office.⁹



Look for adjacencies. By exploring incremental steps within, and at the edge of, existing practices, program leaders and staff can pursue meaningful change. Debra Meyerson, associate professor of education and organizational behavior at Stanford University, described adjacencies as, "gentle, incremental, decentralized, and over time [able to] produce a broad and lasting shift with less upheaval."¹⁰



Create routines. Building CalWORKs 2.0 into everyday practices increases the likelihood of lasting organizational and individual change. Leaders can piggyback on existing routines or create new routines that incorporate CalWORKs 2.0 practices. For example, leaders might use the goal-setting approach during regular staff development conversations. They might also revise the process for onboarding new participants from a focus on compliance and paperwork to highlighting the opportunities available to participants to set and achieve their career goals.



Build community. Program leaders and staff might look for opportunities to build communities of practice within or across counties and programs, focused on CalWORKs 2.0. For example, one program county created coaching circles for direct service staff to troubleshoot challenging situations and practice their skills for implementing GPDRR. Practicing in community creates opportunities to collectively tackle challenging problems, develop innovative solutions, and share best practices.¹¹



Celebrate successes. Highlight and celebrate short-term wins with staff and participants. For example, share participant successes during a staff meeting or in a monthly newsletter, or hold celebrations with participants who complete a workshop, earn a credential, or get a job. To highlight program accomplishments, create a dashboard with key successes in meeting agency goals related to CalWORKs 2.0 and share it with program staff and community partners.



Persist. People respond differently to change; in particular, changes that require a shift in program culture can be challenging to implement. Expect resistance from some leaders and staff. Table 1 outlines a few of the most common points of resistance and lessons learned from implementing CalWORKs 2.0. Our advice is to persist!

Table 1. Addressing resistance to change

| What we've heard | What we've learned |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| We don't have enough time or resources to implement CalWORKs 2.0. | Commit and take small, intentional steps. |
| Staff are resistant to change. | Expect staff resistance—it is a natural part of change; success comes when leaders reinforce a consistent message and commitment to 2.0. |
| Staff are already doing this. | Encourage staff to follow the steps in the process—no shortcuts. They will soon feel a difference. |
| Our staff are tired of all these changes. | Intentional change, using Learn, Innovate, Improve, can energize staff, create buy-in, and transform culture. |

How counties have used CalWORKs 2.0

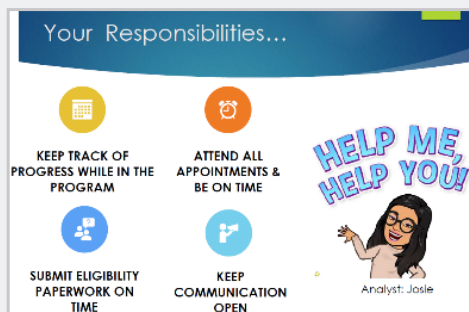
In 2019, more than 500 people representing 45 counties were trained in the CalWORKs 2.0 approach. Nearly 700 California county leaders participated in the CalWORKs Leadership Initiative, and 66 leaders signed up for the design challenge sprints (see Box 1). The following are some examples of how counties have applied this work in practice.

The County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department adopted CalWORKs 2.0, which included renaming the county program: **Ready, Set, Goal**. Applying the principles of CalWORKs 2.0, the team created a new orientation that is motivating, inspiring, and goal directed (see Figure 1). According to staff, the orientation sets a different tone for the program in which participants are eager to engage and hopeful about the opportunities available to them.

Humboldt County Social Services instituted a supervision practice among county leaders built on the CalWORKs 2.0 approach and tools. In setting professional development goals, one administrator modeled specific skills staff could use in working with participants. The administrator shared, "The beauty of [CalWORKs 2.0] is that it works for everyone, it's not just something to do with clients, but also with staff; it's easy to adapt, you just have to get there."

In **Santa Barbara County**, the Department of Social Services implemented the CalWORKs 2.0 approach with staff and participants across several human services programs. One administrator shared, "We draw from behavioral science evidence to help evoke [staff and participants'] motivation to change. We do that by showing them the bigger picture; when they know what they're working toward, their behavior is more intrinsic."

Figure 1. Santa Cruz's Ready, Set, Goal (CalWORKs 2.0) orientation



Learn more about CalWORKs 2.0

For more information about CalWORKs 2.0 or the Leadership Initiative, contact Mark Ezzo at mezzo@mathematica-mpr.com or (609) 297-4522.

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