



**The Linkages Project**  
***Statewide Evaluation***  
***Final Report***

September 2011

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## table of contents

Executive Summary	i
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
A Description of Linkages Participation	2
Evaluation Overview	4
Chapter 2: Implementing Linkages	7
What Is Linkages?	8
How Linkages Works	9
Implementation: A Growing Success	14
Perseverance in a Challenging Economic Environment	15
Chapter 3: Achieving Organizational Change	17
Changes to the System	18
Improved Job Satisfaction	21
Factors for Linkages Success	22
Chapter 4: Making a Difference for Families	26
Family Outcomes	26
Staff Perspectives on Family Success	30
Chapter 5: Sustainability & Lessons for the Future	33
Conclusions	35

# Executive Summary

The Linkages Project is a federally-funded demonstration project aimed at improving outcomes for clients co-served by county CalWORKs (TANF) and Child Welfare Services (CWS) in California. The requirements of these complex programs sometimes conflict, forcing families to choose between meeting CalWORKs requirements and losing custody of their children, or meeting CWS requirements and losing their CalWORKs cash aid. Counties participating in The Linkages Project attempt to alleviate these conflicts by coordinating services and requirements between CalWORKs and CWS with the intention of improving family achievement of both programs' requirements and better supporting successful family outcomes.

This report includes evaluation findings and lessons learned from the participation of 35 counties in the five-year demonstration. The evaluation addressed three primary questions:

- *How—and how successfully—have counties implemented Linkages?*
- *What kinds of organizational changes have occurred during the implementation process?*
- *How are families benefitting from Linkages?*

The evaluation team collected information through surveys with county Linkages coordinators and

case workers, case study interviews with three counties, and requests of county data on family-level outcomes.

## Implementing Linkages

### What does Linkages implementation mean?

Counties tailored their Linkages initiatives to fit their agency structure and county demographics, but in Spring 2011 most identified the following **five key practices** in coordinating between CalWORKs and CWS:

1. Mutual identification of clients (96%)
2. Coordinated case planning (87%)
3. Sharing resources (74%)
4. Joint case conferences or TDMs (65%)
5. Joint case management (52%)

### Extent of implementation

Over the course of the project, nine of the 35 counties discontinued their participation in Linkages at the statewide level, although five reported that Linkages coordination was continuing locally. These counties exited the statewide project based upon decisions not to commit resources to participating in statewide activities and conferences, or generating data reports for the statewide evaluation.

**“Building relationships across departments would not have been possible without taking a number of years from pilot to full implementation like we did.”**

– County Leader

During the period of the grant, a severe economic recession and state budget crisis meant that counties faced an increase in their social services caseloads coinciding with government hiring freezes, layoffs, and furloughs. In this context, the fact that most of the participating counties persevered in implementing Linkages shows they are strongly committed to improving services to families.

Of the 26 counties that remained active participants through the completion of the statewide demonstration, 61 percent reported in Spring 2011 that they had fully implemented Linkages, with another 22 percent reporting most Linkages policies and procedures in place.

## Organizational Change

Larger than a set of policies and procedures, Linkages entails a systems-level shift from a focus only on the goals within CalWORKs or CWS to a broader recognition of the complex experiences of mutually-served families. Indeed for Linkages to succeed, the evaluation found that county Child Welfare and CalWORKs programs must align their goals and strategies. Achieving alignment usually requires adjustment within both programs—including staff at all levels—in how they view their work in light of the family’s larger context. The shifts that counties undergo during the planning and implementation of their Linkages initiatives constitute *organizational change*.

Linkages contributed to substantial changes in county social services systems. Some major changes include:

- According to Linkages Coordinators, only 26 percent of counties’ CWS and CalWORKs programs had a history of working together prior to Linkages, yet by Spring 2011 all programs had adopted each others’ goals.
- Nearly all counties (96 percent) reported that Linkages had moderately or greatly improved their internal operations.
- Ninety-one percent of counties agreed that Linkages always or usually enables cost sharing and maximizing of resources between CWS and CalWORKs.
- Eighty-three percent of counties reported that staff effectiveness improved due to Linkages.
- A full three quarters of case workers reported that Linkages increased their ability to be successful with their clients, and a similar percentage reported having higher job satisfaction as a result of Linkages.

**“Start with strong leadership that really believes in working together. Here, it comes from the top about this being the right thing to do.”**

**– County Linkages Coordinator**

## Factors for Linkages Success

These **top five factors important for Linkages success** have consistently been rated “Very Important” by more than two thirds of Linkages Coordinators during the past three years:

- Strong leadership in favor of Linkages,
- Workplace culture of willingness to try new things,
- Belief that families will be better off with Linkages,
- Clear communication between CWS and CalWORKs staff, and

- Compatible procedures between CWS and CalWORKs.

## Benefits to Families

Although the organizational changes that resulted from Linkages implementation were substantial and compelling, the primary intent of county initiatives was to positively impact the families served. The Linkages statewide outcomes are a set of nine measures intended to show some of the ways in which families might benefit from Linkages. Counties were asked to submit data on a minimum of two of these outcomes, providing numbers on their Linkages population and on a comparison group in order to look at how Linkages clients were doing compared to clients not receiving Linkages coordinated services.

The table below shows the statewide outcomes and a summary of their results.

Statewide Linkages Outcomes	Results
<b>Child Welfare</b>	
▪ Percent of children with a substantiated recurrence	<i>Promising</i>
▪ Percent of children not removed from home with substantiated recurrence	<i>Promising, but insufficient data</i>
▪ Percent of families that achieve reunification	<i>Inconclusive</i>
▪ Time to reunification	<i>Unpromising, but insufficient data</i>
▪ Percent of children who do not re-enter foster care	<i>Inconclusive</i>
<b>CalWORKs</b>	
▪ Percent of parents who have CalWORKs sanctions resolved	<i>Promising</i>
▪ Amount of monthly cash grant (without sanctions)	<i>Inconclusive</i>
▪ Amount of parents' monthly earnings and wages	<i>Inconclusive</i>
▪ Length of time parents receive cash aid	<i>Promising</i>

The outcome data do not show the same level of success as the implementation and organizational change components of the evaluation. In large part, this is likely due to major technical challenges counties faced in tracking clients and generating data reports. Another contributing factor may be that because Linkages was serving some of the neediest families in the social services system who were simultaneously struggling with the worst job market in many years, progress on outcomes can be slow.

Staff perspectives on family success were more positive. Every single county Linkages Coordinator surveyed in spring 2011 stated that Linkages makes the system better for families. Further, over 90 percent of those surveyed agreed that Linkages:

- Improves outcomes for families,
- Helps identify special issues like domestic violence, and
- Helps families better address mental health and substance abuse.

## Looking Ahead

As evidenced in this report, the 26 counties that currently have active Linkages initiatives have taken ownership of the project by realigning program goals, co-locating staff, and establishing new cultures of collaboration. All 23 counties that responded to the spring 2011 survey reported that Linkages was at least somewhat successful in their counties. A full 91 percent of counties report that their Linkages initiatives will “definitely” continue beyond the completion of the statewide demonstration, and the remaining 9 percent expect that their initiatives will “probably” continue.

Although statewide evaluation efforts are not slated to continue beyond the demonstration project, guidance for counties to implement local evaluations has been assembled for public access via the Linkages Toolkit, to be hosted online by the

## Conclusions

By identifying strategies to reduce the burden on jointly-served families and supporting counties in implementing those strategies, the Statewide Linkages Project has produced a strong set of organizational, administrative, and family outcomes that demonstrate success. Perhaps the most remarkable outcome is the high level of commitment shown by the counties that have implemented the Linkages framework despite the formidable challenges of the economic environment.

Though there were some meaningful changes in client outcomes demonstrated by some of the participating counties, the family-level results were disappointingly—though perhaps not surprisingly—less positive than the implementation and organizational results. Where Linkages achieved its greatest success was at the intersection of consistent county-level leadership communicating and supporting policy change with the Linkages Project’s assistance through trainings, convenings, planning, and evaluation. Challenges facing California and its vulnerable populations are far from over, but the Linkages demonstration has shown that, with adequate support and consistent leadership, Linkages has become an essential element of county response to families in need.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

**T**he Linkages Project is a federally-funded demonstration project aimed at improving outcomes for clients co-served by county CalWORKs (TANF) and Child Welfare Services (CWS) in dozens of counties across California. The requirements of these complex programs sometimes conflict, forcing families to choose between meeting CalWORKs requirements and losing custody of their children, or meeting CWS requirements and losing their CalWORKs cash aid. Counties participating in The Linkages Project attempt to alleviate these conflicts by coordinating services and requirements between CalWORKs and CWS with the intention of improving family achievement of both programs' requirements and better supporting successful family outcomes.

Beginning in 2007, a five-year discretionary federal grant from the Administration for Children and Families to the State of California Department of Social Services (CDSS) supplied funding for a demonstration of The Linkages Project. The project was administered by the Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC), which provided technical assistance, training, convening and media to support voluntary county-level implementation of Linkages. The goal of The Linkages Project was to strengthen interagency partnerships to increase the effectiveness of services for clients and improve family outcomes.

**“When I was a [CWS] worker, I wondered, ‘How can these families hear me about parenting classes when they can’t even get food on their tables and find a place to sleep?’”**

**– Linkages county leader**

Linking services for families that face the dual—and formidable—challenges of needing to establish both child safety and economic stability makes a great deal of sense. Families that can meet these standards will be in a better position to be productive members of society, benefiting all of us. In California, however, where social services are primarily administered at the county level and in many cases CWS and CalWORKs programs have no history of working together, there is no simple solution to bring about coordination of services. For this reason, a demonstration of the Linkages approach was an appropriate and important step in establishing evidence of the initiative’s potential for success.

A demonstration of Linkages allows an approach of coordinating practices across programs to be tested in the varied settings of multiple

California counties. Demonstrations are important for determining appropriate settings and readiness criteria for implementation, honing in on successful implementation strategies, and ascertaining the potential of an

intervention to achieve meaningful outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in a context of complex social service delivery such as the intersection between CWS and CalWORKs, a multi-year demonstration of full implementation is a vital process to understand whether a systems change approach can take hold amid the regulated structure of county government. This report summarizes findings from an evaluation of the demonstration of Linkages.

## A Description of Linkages Participation

### Which Counties Participated?

Over the course of the Linkages demonstration project, 35 of California's 58 counties participated in implementation, and 26 of those counties (74 percent) still had active Linkages initiatives as of spring 2011. Counties joined the effort in three phases as illustrated by different colors of shading on the map below. In the first phase, 12 Pioneer Counties began their Linkages initiatives in 2002. These counties were joined by 14 Phase II Counties in 2005, and an additional nine Phase III Counties began in 2007-2009.

As evidenced by the map, the participating counties were broadly representative of the state in geography, covering both Northern and Southern California, rural and urban areas, and coastal and inland regions. Importantly as well, very high percentages of the populations targeted by Linkages reside in these counties. In 2008, participating counties included a full 80 percent of California's CalWORKs cases<sup>2</sup> and 75 percent of the state's Child Welfare cases (substantiated referrals).<sup>3</sup>

**Counties Involved in the Linkages Demonstration**



### What Linkages Participation Means: A General Outline

Counties in California differ broadly in terms of the size of their populations, their demographics, and the structures of their county services. To account for these

<sup>1</sup>Barbee, A. 2011. The Interactive Systems Framework: Lessons in Implementing Demonstration Projects and Disseminating Results. Presentation at 2011 Children's Bureau Combined Discretionary Grantees Meeting.

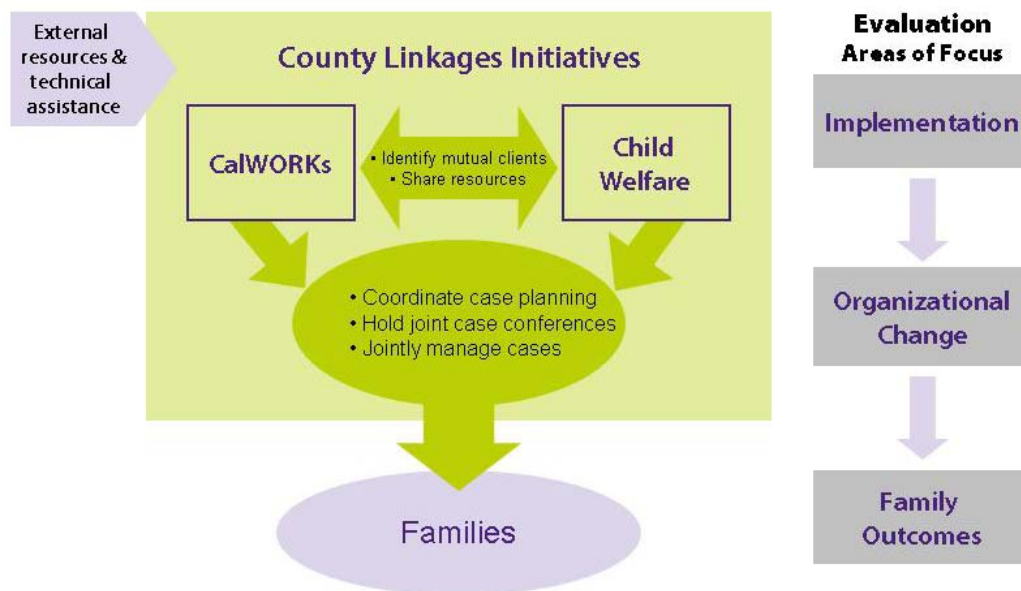
<sup>2</sup>CDSS Federal Data Reporting and Analysis Bureau, All Families Cases for Federal Fiscal Year 2008 (Oct 2007 – Sep 2008). [www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/res/pdf/AB1808/TanfAnnual/TANFannualFFY2008.pdf](http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/res/pdf/AB1808/TanfAnnual/TANFannualFFY2008.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Center for Social Services Research, University of California at Berkeley: Children with one or more Allegations for Apr 1, 2008 to Mar 31, 2009.

differences, counties tailored their Linkages approaches, selecting different target populations and strategies to focus on. The practices and procedures that counties implemented are a primary topic of the evaluation and will be described later in this report. However, the general outline of county Linkages initiatives is described below and illustrated in the schematic following.

- In general, county CalWORKs and Child Welfare programs incorporated into their Linkages initiatives the following **five key practices** that allowed them to work towards a common goal of family success:
  1. Identifying mutual clients,
  2. Sharing resources between CalWORKs and CWS,
  3. Coordinating case planning,
  4. Holding joint case conferences with the family as well as staff from both CalWORKs and Child Welfare, and
  5. Jointly managing cases.
- The Statewide Linkages Project provided to participating counties external resources and technical assistance, such as planning guidance, media outreach tools, training opportunities, and forums for peer sharing.
- All participating counties provided information to the statewide evaluation. The areas of focus of the evaluation are shown on the right-hand side of the schematic, below, and are described in greater detail in the next section.

### Linkages Statewide Project - Schematic



## Evaluation Overview

The Child and Family Policy Institute of California engaged Harder+Company Community Research to evaluate The Linkages Project demonstration throughout the five-year grant period. The original evaluation design was focused on the measurement of individual outcomes for the participating families, intending to investigate the impact of better coordination on a set of standard outcomes. Early in the planning process, it became clear that technical barriers in the state's client information systems for CWS and CalWORKS would not support that approach at the statewide level. The evaluation team eventually determined to support individual counties in extracting outcome data from their own data systems, while tracking organizational and implementation activities on a statewide basis. The evaluation team designed and oversaw a longitudinal prospective study using surveys with county staff, case studies in three counties, and analysis of secondary indicator data collected as part of routine service delivery for jointly served CalWORKs and CWS clients. The evaluation focused on examining the following primary questions:

- How—and how successfully—have counties implemented Linkages?
- What kinds of organizational changes have occurred during the implementation process?
- How are families benefitting from Linkages?

Data collection components and methods are described below.

### Implementation & Organizational Change Surveys

The evaluation team designed and administered three annual surveys with participating counties: the Implementation Survey, the Organizational Change Survey, and the Staff Survey. Together, these surveys gathered data on Linkages implementation approaches in different counties, as well as on the organizational changes that took place at all levels of staff and leadership during the process of coordinating services. Additionally, the surveys collected feedback on the challenges and successes regarding the implementation of county-level Linkages initiatives.

**Implementation Survey.** This online survey was sent to Linkages Coordinators in all Linkages counties. It was focused on determining each county's level of Linkages implementation and understanding counties' different approaches to putting Linkages in place. Coordinators were asked to provide information on many Linkages-related procedures, from client identification and tracking to staff training to case management strategies.

**Organizational Change Survey.** The Organizational Change Survey was also designed for all Linkages Coordinators to complete. This online survey examined the extent to which Linkages was integrated into the procedures of county CWS and CalWORKs at leadership and line staff levels. It also explored factors necessary for making Linkages a success, as well as challenges including effects of the widespread fiscal challenges in California.

In spring 2011, at the culmination of statewide evaluation data collection, the evaluation team conducted a final online survey that combined questions from the Implementation and Organizational Change surveys as well as solicited insights on sustainability and lessons learned.

**Staff Survey.** The Staff Survey was designed to solicit feedback from case workers working directly with families. The survey collected information from both CWS and CalWORKs staff about their Linkages experiences with case coordination activities and their observations of how families' experiences have changed as a result of Linkages. To reduce the time burden on these case workers, the survey was implemented twice instead of three times.

### Survey Administration Timeframe

FY 2008-2009	FY 2009-2010	FY 2010-2011
Implementation Fall 2008	Implementation Fall 2009	Combined Implementation and Organizational Change
Organizational Change Summer 2009	Organizational Change Summer 2010	Final Survey Spring 2011
Staff Survey Spring 2009		Staff Survey Fall 2010

In addition, exit interviews were conducted with counties that made the decision to pull out of the statewide demonstration project. These interviews were designed to gather information on challenges, successes, and lessons learned from counties that exited the project.

### Family Outcomes Evaluation

In its early work with participating counties, Harder+Company determined that most counties faced major challenges in identifying Linkages clients and tracking them consistently due to the inability of CalWORKs and CWS data systems to communicate. The evaluation team also determined, through its work with counties, with state agencies, and with experts at the University of California at Berkeley where the state's Child Welfare Dynamic Report System is housed, that data on Linkages clients could not be identified and assembled at the statewide level as had been anticipated at the project's start. Instead, the evaluation team turned to individual counties to report the data they collected as part of their service delivery procedures.

To assist counties with their data collection and reporting tasks, the evaluation team provided technical assistance to counties throughout the project to help with techniques and planning for data collection that would support their local tracking and evaluation efforts as well as provide Linkages-specific outcomes data on the statewide Child Welfare and CalWORKs outcomes listed at right. Specifically, Harder+Company developed detailed worksheets to provide step-by-step

### Statewide Linkages Outcomes

#### Child Welfare

- Percent of children with a substantiated recurrence (3m, 6m, 9m)
- Percent of children not removed from home with substantiated recurrence (3m, 6m, 9m)
- Percent of families that achieve reunification
- Time to reunification
- Percent of children who do not re-enter foster care

#### CalWORKs

- Percent of parents who have CalWORKs sanctions resolved
- Amount of monthly cash grant (without sanctions)
- Amount of parents' monthly earnings and wages
- Length of time parents receive cash aid

instructions for providing data to measure the statewide outcomes. In addition, technical assistance conference calls were held to field questions and verbally walk county staff through the process. One-on-one assistance was offered to all and provided on an as-needed basis to many counties. Because counties lacked enough staff and other resources to address all the outcomes (and in many cases did not have sufficient data to examine them), they were encouraged to select a minimum of 2 outcomes to address.

In addition, a Data/Evaluation Peer Cluster—a group of county representatives interested in focusing on improving data collection and evaluation procedures—was established to provide ongoing regular support to counties via conference call. The calls provided opportunities for participants to raise questions and concerns about data collection, analysis, and other aspects of evaluation. The evaluation team in turn provided explanations and assistance, and facilitated county-to-county peer sharing of ideas and solutions.

### **Case Studies**

Harder+Company conducted multi-year case studies with three Linkages counties: Stanislaus (Pioneer), Los Angeles (Phase II), and San Bernardino (Phase III). Case study site visits and in-person interviews occurred in 2009. Phone interviews were conducted in 2010 and 2011 to follow up on initial findings as well as discuss changes and developments that had occurred in each intervening year regarding Linkages roll-out and organizational change. The case studies provided a contextual narrative to the other evaluation results and allowed for a more in-depth examination of Linkages approaches, success, lessons learned, and both organizational and family-level changes.

The remaining chapters in this report present the findings from the evaluation.

## Chapter 2: Implementing Linkages

**T**hirty-five California counties participated in implementing coordinated services between their Child Welfare and CalWORKs programs as a part of the Linkages Statewide Project. Because California counties differ widely in regard to the sizes of their populations, their demographics, and their governments' organizational structures, however, each of these counties developed its own Linkages policies and procedures. The statewide evaluation team was tasked with identifying counties' different approaches to Linkages and defining the extent to which counties completed implementation.

To measure implementation, the evaluation team surveyed county Linkages Coordinators to gather information on the strategies, target populations, and coordination activities that each county utilized. From this input, a series of key practices emerged that define Linkages. Further, counties' progress on implementation was assessed annually so that challenges and extent of implementation could be identified. In-depth interview data from the three county case studies served to provide contextual explanation to the survey findings and descriptions of how Linkages works in practice.

### Background on Implementation

Implementation of a systems change initiative in a complex social services setting is a complicated endeavor. The National Implementation Research Network, or NIRN, conducts, disseminates, and applies research on program implementation. NIRN researchers have articulated six stages of implementation, listed in the box at right.<sup>4</sup> The initial planning of what a Linkages initiative would look like, and the subsequent recruitment of counties to adopt the idea (Exploration and Adoption Stage) was not trivial. However, these efforts took place prior to the launch of the Linkages demonstration project and are not a subject of this evaluation. This study does look at the remaining stages of implementation. This chapter covers findings related to the stages of Program Installation and Initial Implementation all the way through Full Operation, in its review and summary of findings that span multiple years of Linkages efforts at the county level. The next two chapters, on organizational change and family outcomes, examine the effects of implementing Linkages. The chapter on sustainability that follows covers both the stages of Innovation and Sustainability.

#### NIRN Stages of Implementation

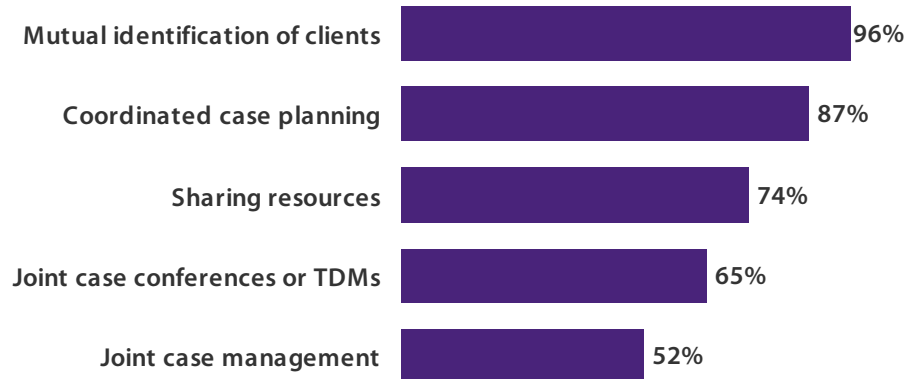
- Exploration and Adoption
- Program Installation
- Initial implementation
- Full Operation
- Innovation
- Sustainability

<sup>4</sup> Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231). Available at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/).

## What Is Linkages?

On the Final Survey in spring 2011, Linkages Coordinators were asked to identify the key practices of their Linkages initiatives. Most of the collaborative practices listed in the figure below were reported by at least two thirds of respondents. Joint case management—perhaps the most intensive of the Linkages practices listed—was reported by roughly half of respondents.

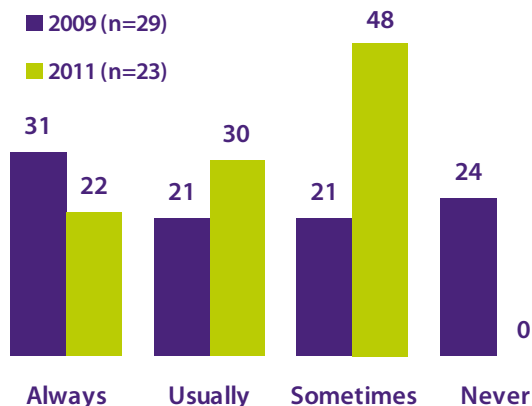
**Key Linkages Practices, According to Linkages Coordinators (n=23)**



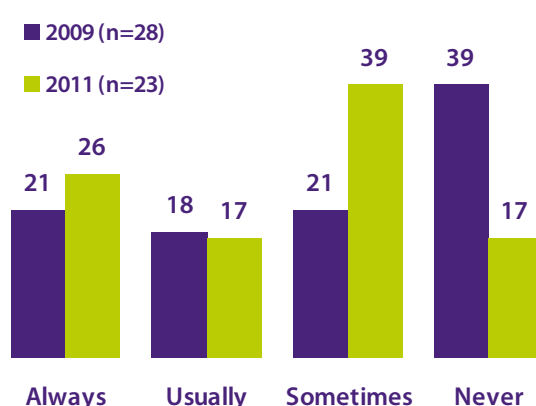
From the perspective of working directly with families, case workers were asked about the same practices (data not shown). A full 83 percent reported sharing resources as a key component of their county’s Linkages initiatives. Results for the remaining Linkages practices were similar.

In addition to the nuts and bolts of Linkages procedures, the initiative is defined by its purposes. Linkages Coordinators were asked how often Linkages practices are used for the purpose of achieving certain results for the family, namely curing CalWORKs sanctions, augmenting services beyond what is usually provided by CalWORKs or CWS, or enabling further support after permanency is established in the Child Welfare case. As shown in the three figures below, Linkages was intentionally used for these purposes more consistently in 2011 (green bars) than in 2009 (purple bars). The data on curing CalWORKs sanctions (upper left-hand figure) are

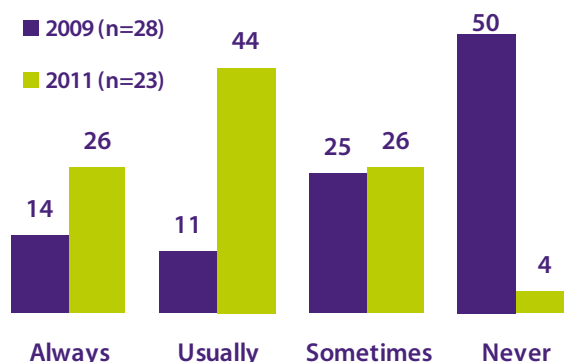
**How often is Linkages used to help cure CalWORKs sanctions? (Percent of counties)**



**How often is Linkages used to augment services beyond those usually provided by CalWORKs or CWS? (Percent of counties)**



**How often does Linkages enable transitional support or after-care services provided by CalWORKs after permanency is established for mutual clients? (Percent of counties)**



less conclusive, since a lower percentage of respondents reported “Always” in 2011, but no respondents reported “Never” in that year, indicating that all counties are employing Linkages practices to cure CalWORKs sanctions at least some of the time.

## How Linkages Works

### Identifying Linkages Cases

Historically, staff in CWS do not necessarily know if their clients are CalWORKs eligible, and CalWORKs staff do not necessarily know if their clients have Child Welfare cases open. Within Linkages, a key part of implementation is to systematically identify clients that are mutually-served by both programs so that Linkages coordinated services can take place. Linkages Coordinators were asked about the specifics of when and how mutually-served clients are identified in their county. The table that follows shows that the most common points at which mutual clients are identified are through the hotline, during emergency response, and during Child Welfare case management.

### Time Stage at which Mutually-Served Clients Are Identified, Spring 2011

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
Through the hotline (n=22)	<b>41</b>	9	23	27
During emergency response (n=22)	<b>46</b>	36	14	5
When family applies for CalWORKs benefits (n=22)	23	14	<b>36</b>	27
During Child Welfare case management (n=22)	<b>36</b>	23	<b>36</b>	5
During CalWORKs case management (n=22)	27	18	<b>50</b>	5
Upon closure of Child Welfare case (n=21)	14	10	24	<b>52</b>
Upon closure of CalWORKs case (n=21)	10	10	19	<b>62</b>

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% across each row due to rounding.

Furthermore, as shown in the next two tables, most counties report that they have designated staff in CWS and in CalWORKs who check all cases to see if the client has an open case in the other program, and then informs workers about their mutually-served cases. They complete these checks by accessing the data systems of both programs to compare client records.

### County Methods of Identifying Mutually-Served Clients, Spring 2011 (n=23)<sup>a</sup>

	Percent of Counties
Each case worker is responsible for checking her/his clients.	39
Designated person(s) in the Child Welfare program checks and informs all case workers.	<b>70</b>
Designated person(s) in the CalWORKs program checks and informs all case workers.	<b>65</b>
Designated person(s) outside of the programs checks and informs all case workers.	13

<sup>a</sup>Multiple responses accepted.

### How Client Identification Checking Occurs, Spring 2011 (n=23)<sup>a</sup>

	Percent of Counties
Automated case matching is done on a daily or weekly basis.	4
Designated staff member(s) have access to both CWS/CMS and the county CalWORKs data system and compares client records.	<b>74</b>
Client lists are compared in person at Linkages team meetings.	44
Case workers ask the clients.	39

<sup>a</sup>Multiple responses accepted.

Sharing client data between programs is an administrative and legal hurdle in many counties, involving attorneys and memoranda of understanding. Though the data sharing process has proven to be a formidable barrier to client identification in some counties, other see change occurring. A leader in one county remarked, “There’s a long way to go [to get data sharing fully in place], but we’re getting much better. Linkages is a catalyst that pushes the envelope on this.” Also, for counties whose operations are under the same administrative roof, data sharing is not always a major legal problem. As a Linkages Coordinator shared, “We’re in the same agency, so we didn’t have cross-agency confidentiality problems. We had one release of information they had to sign, and that was it – it was fine.”

**“Linkages is a catalyst that pushes the envelope on [data sharing].”**

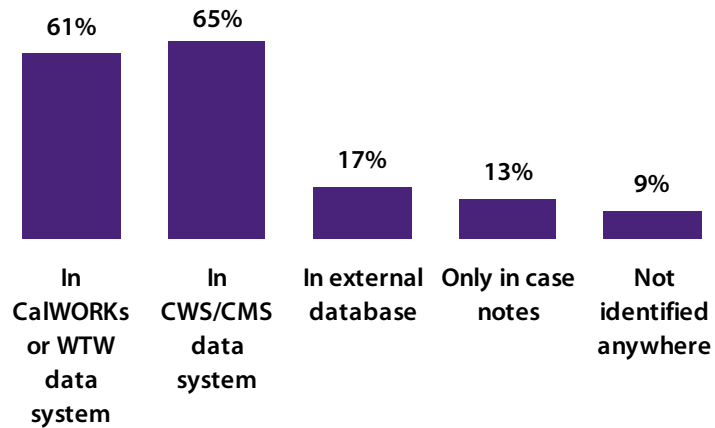
– County leader

### Tracking Linkages Clients

Once mutually-served clients are identified, counties must label them as Linkages cases so that they can track them in their systems. This data-tracking step is crucial to the county’s ability to know how many Linkages cases they are serving and how those families fare in comparison to non-Linkages clients. The figure below shows that approximately two thirds of counties were tracking their Linkages cases in their Child Welfare or CalWORKs data

systems as of Spring 2011. These findings are similar to those from 2009 except for a substantial increase in the percentage of counties that reported identifying clients in their CalWORKs system (only 33 percent in 2009, data not shown). Seventeen of 22 counties (77 percent) reported using special project codes or flags to track Linkages clients in their CWS/CMS data system, and nine of 22 counties (41 percent) reported flagging Linkages clients in their CalWORKs or Welfare-to-Work data system (data not shown).

**Extent of Computer Data System Tracking of Linkages Cases<sup>a</sup>, Spring 2011 (n=23)**



<sup>a</sup>Multiple responses accepted

When asked about major challenges with Linkages data, the overwhelmingly common response from counties was that the CWS and CalWORKs data systems do not communicate with one another. This data system incompatibility has been a known frustration for counties from early on in Linkages implementation. Although a few counties have set up work-around systems, designating staff and computer programming resources to enable data to be matched from both systems in a more automated fashion, there is no system that can be easily replicated across counties, and lack of staff time and technological resources remain barriers for most.

Due to the data tracking challenges that counties face, many were able to provide only estimates of the percentages of mutual clients they have served through Linkages. These estimates demonstrate that the majority of counties still have ample potential to grow their Linkages initiatives and reach more clients with coordinated services. Even in spring 2011, almost half of participating counties (44 percent) reported that they estimate providing Linkages coordinated services to fewer than 20 percent of their mutually-served population. Just 13 percent of counties report serving more than 80 percent of their mutual population.

### Workplace Practices

Beyond identifying and tracking mutually-served clients, Linkages practices involve the coordination of services between CWS and CalWORKs. Linkages Coordinators were asked how case workers manage cross-program communication, which case management strategies they employ, and the extent to which offices and personnel are co-located to better enable these practices. As shown in the table below, counties are diverse in the degree to which they have formalized communication procedures between CalWORKs and CWS case workers. Though most counties (70 percent) have a required process in place, the process can range from progress check-ins as needed to closely working in a team throughout the case.

**“[Linkages has] changed the thought process that county agencies can’t work well together.”**  
 –County leader

**Communication Management between CalWORKs and CWS Case Workers, Spring 2011 (n=23)**

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>
Staff are encouraged, but not required, to discuss the case with the other program worker as needed.	26
There is a required process to evaluate progress by both case workers (but regular contact is not required).	22
Staff are required to have regular contact with the other case workers to track the progress of the two case plans.	<b>35</b>
Staff are required to work in a team with the other program on all aspects of the case, from assessment to case resolution..	13

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Additional 2011 survey data on Linkages workplace practices include the following:

- When asked how frequently staff from both sides of the house typically meet to discuss a mutual client, the most common response (48 percent) was **once a month**. Another 26 percent reported that such meetings typically occur more than once a month.
- As in previous years, respondents most commonly reported (70 percent) that for Linkages clients, **two case plans** are developed (one for CalWORKs and one for CWS), but case plan **goals, services, and timelines are coordinated** to meet the prioritized needs of the family.
- Also similar to previous years, most counties (74 percent) stated that there are **two different case managers** for a Linkages case, one from each program.
- When case workers were asked on the fall 2010 Staff Survey about the involvement of families in team decision making meetings or other case conferences, **65 percent said they always involve families** and another 32 percent said families are sometimes present.

**“Sharing information has been very helpful. We no longer have a duplication of efforts and resources.”**

**-Linkages case worker**

The table below shows how commonly counties are utilizing different case management strategies for their Linkages cases. Approximately two thirds of counties report that they always employ coordinated case planning to serve Linkages clients, and a full 87 percent use this strategy at least most of the time. Over half of counties also commonly (“always” or “usually”) incorporate Linkages in Team Decision Making meetings, use parent engagement strategies to include parents in the Linkages case plans, and incorporate Linkages in Multi-Disciplinary Teams. The least-used case management strategy is joint home visits, which 30 percent of counties employ most of the time.

## Linkages Case Management Strategies, Spring 2011

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
Coordinated case planning (n=23)	<b>65</b>	22	13	0
Incorporating Linkages in Team Decision Making (n=23)	<b>44</b>	22	22	13
Using parent engagement strategies to include parents in case plan with CWS and CalWORKs (n=22)	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>	23	5
Incorporating Linkages in Multi-Disciplinary Teams (n=22)	27	<b>36</b>	14	23
Joint home visits between CWS and CalWORKs staff (n=23)	17	13	<b>52</b>	17

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% across each row due to rounding.

Typically, co-location within Linkages refers to a CalWORKs staff member (often an eligibility worker that determines clients' eligibility to receive CalWORKs benefits) being sited in a CWS office. Co-location serves many purposes that build the sustainability of coordination, including:

- Reducing barriers to communication between CalWORKs and CWS workers,
- Physically reminding workers to discuss cases they have in common,
- Encouraging inclusion of both CalWORKs and CWS workers in meetings with the family,
- Allowing strong professional relationships to develop between CalWORKs and CWS workers, and
- Enabling workers to understand each others' jobs more fully.

A regional coordinator in CWS shared, "The feedback I get from the social workers is that, especially in the Team Decision Making meetings, it's extremely helpful to have that [CalWORKs] worker there. They can find out status on aid, and in situations where families are homeless they can refer them to homeless services. The feedback is really, really good." The table below shows the percentages of counties that have co-located offices and staff.

### Co-location of CalWORKs and Child Welfare Agency Offices & Personnel

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>		
	All	Some	None
Co-location of CalWORKs and CWS agency offices (n=22)	27	<b>55</b>	18
Co-location of CalWORKs and CWS personnel (n=23)	30	<b>48</b>	22

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% across each row due to rounding.

## Differential Response

Differential Response (DR) is an approach to Child Welfare Services adopted by many California counties that allows social workers to employ a broader set of responses to reports of child maltreatment, including earlier involvement and community partnerships. Sixteen counties (70 percent) in 2011 reported being DR counties.

## Integration of Differential Response, Spring 2011

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>			
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
Linkages services are provided to families being served by Differential Response. (n=14)	14	21	<b>50</b>	14
Families in all pathways of Differential Response are periodically reassessed for CalWORKs eligibility or involvement. (n=15)	0	27	<b>40</b>	33

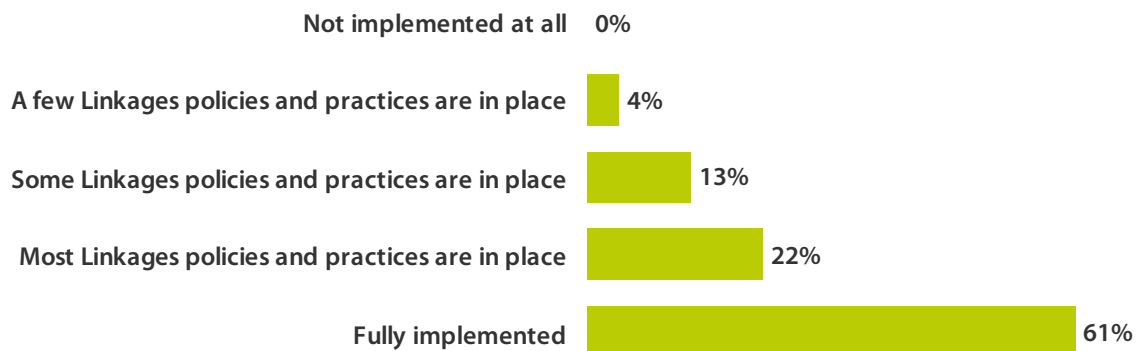
<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% across each row due to rounding.

Results from all three years suggest that the integration of DR and Linkages cases has been limited, though growing. Whereas in previous years, over 50% of the counties responded “Never” to the above items, the largest proportion of respondents in 2011 reported “Sometimes” integrating Differential Response.

## Implementation: A Growing Success

According to county reports, Linkages has clearly taken root. On the Final Survey, respondents were asked the extent to which Linkages had been implemented in their county. Most (61 percent) reported it had been fully implemented, as shown below.

### Extent of Linkages Implementation (Percent of counties, n=23)



### Counties that Discontinued Statewide Participation in Linkages

- Marin
- Mendocino
- Napa
- Nevada
- Sacramento
- San Benito
- San Bernardino
- Sierra
- Ventura

Over the course of the five-year demonstration of The Linkages Project, nine of the 35 counties discontinued their participation in the statewide project. The list of those counties is shown at left (in alphabetical order). However, of the eight discontinued counties that completed exit interviews with the evaluation team, five reported that their Linkages coordination activities are continuing on a local level. These counties exited the statewide project based upon decisions not to commit resources to

participating in statewide project activities and conferences or to generating statewide evaluation data reports. Thus, 26 counties remained active through the completion of the statewide project, and an additional five

continued at least some Linkages coordination on their own. Lessons learned from these exited counties are presented in Chapter 3.

The past year has seen a jump in the percentage of respondents who see Linkages as “business as usual” (see chart at right), although the numbers of participating counties have also declined somewhat, so 2011 results reflect counties that are more dedicated to putting Linkages in place.

### Perseverance in a Challenging Economic Environment

During the period of the grant, California’s state budget declined precipitously, causing fiscal pressure on counties.

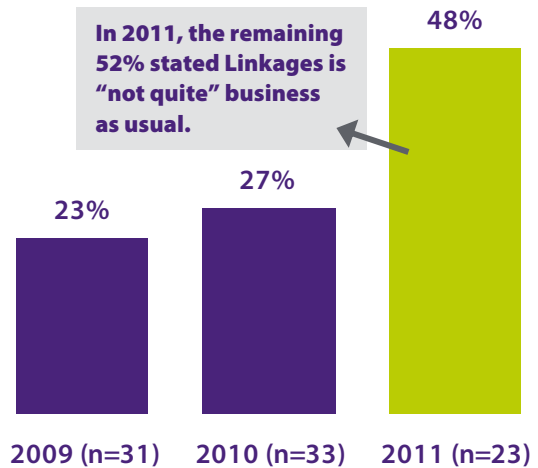
The severe economic recession meant that counties faced an increase in their social services caseloads coinciding with government hiring freezes, layoffs, and furloughs. In this context, some counties viewed Linkages as a strategy for cost savings through improved interoperability while others were concerned that it would entail additional costs and staff resources. One county leader offered her perspective on why Linkages remained important during an economic crisis. “A lot of families that never were on welfare before are coming into the system because they’ve lost their jobs,” she said. “When you have things going on like this, . . . you have to consolidate your resources, and that is what [Linkages] is doing.”

**The fact that most participating counties have persevered in implementing Linkages through the economic recession is a testament to their conviction that Linkages really works.**

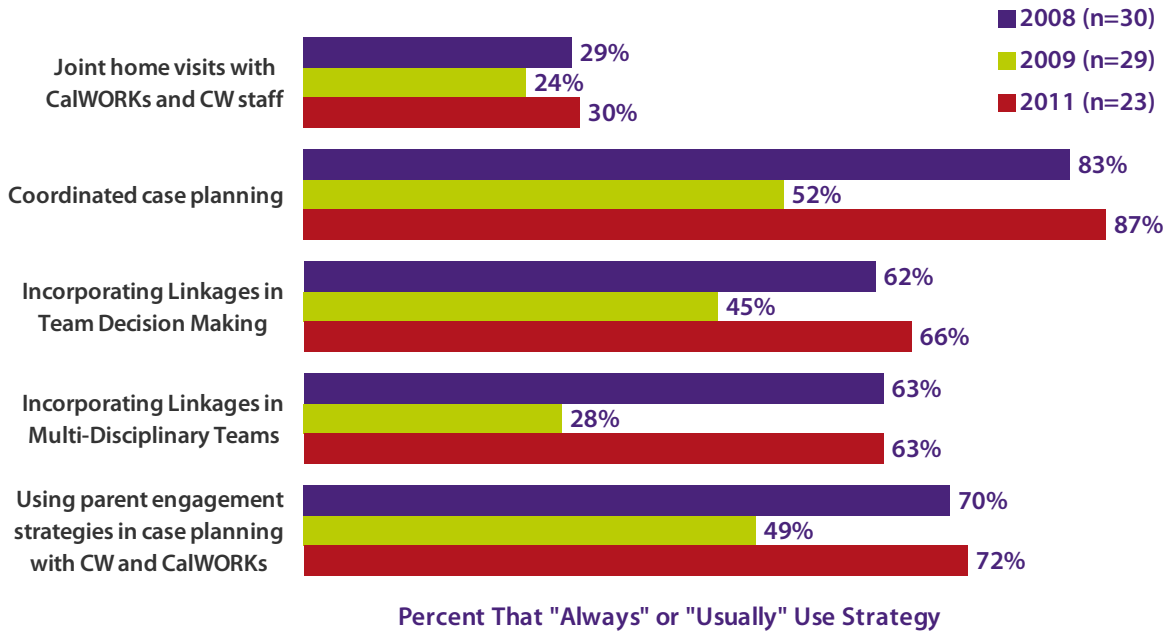
The recession clearly influenced county-level implementation. The chart on the next page shows reported implementation of a range of case management strategies, comparing responses over different years. The chart demonstrates that the economic recession challenged Linkages counties in their efforts to continue collaborative case management practices that had been implemented in 2008. In 2009 (green bars), Linkages engagement in these case management strategies dipped. However, by 2011 (red bars) participation was strong again.

Indeed, asking counties under these difficult circumstances to continue to hold planning meetings, implement staff trainings, and embrace changes in procedure and practice was a tall order. The fact that most of the participating counties persevered in implementing Linkages demonstrates their commitment to improve services to families. Furthermore, it is a testament to their conviction that Linkages really works.

**Linkages is “Business as Usual”  
(Percent of counties)**



### Counties' Reported Implementation of Linkages Case Management Strategies



## Chapter 3: Achieving Organizational Change

Linkages is much more than a set of policies and procedures. It is a change to counties' deep-seated systems of social service delivery, requiring for many a shift from a focus only on the goals within CalWORKs or CWS to a broader recognition of the complex experiences of mutually-served families. Indeed, for Linkages to succeed, the evaluation found that county Child Welfare and CalWORKs programs must align their goals and strategies. Achieving alignment usually requires adjustment within both programs—including staff at all levels—in how they view their work in light of the family's larger context. The shifts that counties undergo during the planning and implementation of their Linkages initiatives constitute *organizational change*.

A helpful framework for understanding the organizational issues related to the implementation of Linkages across California's counties is the recent work from NIRN and others on implementation science. This framework supports the importance of an understanding of the barriers to wide-scale implementation of innovative practice in the complex environment of public social services. Linkages is a set of practices and procedures intended to increase effectiveness, reduce costs and improve outcomes. However, these practices, to affect jointly-served families in California, must take root and thrive in very different county systems. According to Fixsen et al, successful implementation requires:<sup>5</sup>

- Changes in behavior (knowledge and skills of practitioners and other key staff members within an organization or system),
- Changes in organizational structures and cultures, both formal and informal (values, philosophies, ethics, policies, procedures, decision making), to routinely bring about and support the changes in adult professional behavior, and
- Changes in relationships to consumers, stakeholders (location and nature of engagement, inclusion, satisfaction), and systems partners.

**“Linkages has  
torn down the  
walls that were  
built up between  
Child Welfare and  
CalWORKs.”**

– Linkages case worker

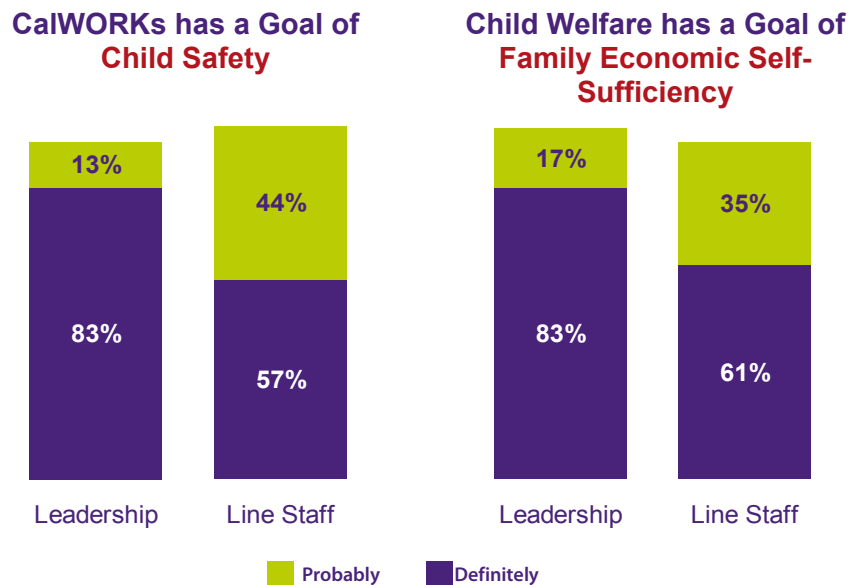
During the Linkages demonstration project, the statewide evaluation measured organizational change by posing questions to counties about changes in the philosophies and approaches of county CalWORKs and Child Welfare programs such as adopting the other program's goals as their own. This chapter presents these findings and covers the effects of implementation on county agencies in terms of staff job satisfaction and effectiveness, evidence of cost savings, and smoother internal operations. Finally, the chapter discusses findings on key factors for Linkages success.

<sup>5</sup>Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231). Available at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/).

## Changes to the System

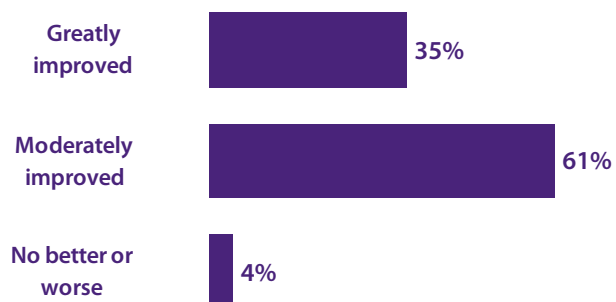
As the federal grant for the statewide Linkages project draws to a close this year, Linkages advocates and hard-working staff at the county and state levels alike can take credit for making substantial—and sustainable—systems changes to bring about county CWS and CalWORKs collaboration in many California counties. A survey of Linkages Coordinators (spring 2011, n=23) revealed that only 26 percent of counties' Child Welfare and CalWORKs programs had a history of working together prior to Linkages. Yet as the graphic below shows, all programs now have adopted each others' goals. The two bars on the left show that CalWORKs leadership and line staff have adopted the CWS goal of child safety as one that is important for them to work towards. The two bars on the right show likewise that Child Welfare leadership and line staff now see the CalWORKs goal of family economic self-sufficiency as one of their own.

**Under Linkages, Programs Now Have Shared Goals  
According to Linkages Coordinators, 2011 (n=23)**



Systems change is also reflected in improved internal operations. As shown in the chart below, nearly all counties (96 percent) report that Linkages has moderately or greatly improved their internal operations. Moreover, these operational improvements have had a positive effect on costs. As early as 2009, three quarters of counties (n=27) agreed that Linkages always or usually enables cost sharing and maximizing of resources between CWS and CalWORKs. By 2011, the percentage of counties that agreed had jumped to 91% (n=23, data not shown).

**Linkages Effect on County Internal Operations, 2011 (Percent of counties, n=23)**



## A Culture of Partnership

*The three case study counties—Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Stanislaus—shared insights about the importance of establishing not only collaborative policies and procedures, but a deeper culture of partnership.*

### Stanislaus

Stanislaus County had a pre-existing culture of collaboration that provided a supportive context for Linkages. As a Linkages Coordinator there commented, “We were already a county that had relationships and came to the table to work together on different teams.” Within Linkages, she noted, the two programs are now “sharing the same lens.”

Leadership on both sides of the house concurred, pointing out strong shared values across the organization. “We work together,” explained one. “We were fortunate to have that culture prior to Linkages. It’s a standard within our community.” Another added, “It’s known at all levels that our directors, managers, supervisors, and line staff are all aligned in this important way. There’s a message from the top down that... it’s all about the family and looking for resources to help that family.”

Indeed, this culture of collaboration makes a difference for families. “We show we trust each other and work together and that benefits families, too,” remarked a Stanislaus Linkages Coordinator. “It becomes a partnership of the workers from both sides *and* the families, and that’s a real success.” Her co-Coordinator added, “It’s not just shared trust, but shared accountability.”

### Los Angeles

In Los Angeles County, a new culture of partnership was created under Linkages. One member of the Linkages leadership described how cross-departmental work had changed. “We now have faces with the names and we’ve formed relationships,” she said, continuing, “When we’re talking about working with other county agencies now, we can use this example of Linkages and look how well it’s worked out. It’s changed the thought process that county agencies can’t work well together.” A regional CWS coordinator in the county added her description of how the culture had changed under Linkages. ““All we knew was [CalWORKs workers] were the food stamps and the money people,” she said. “In hindsight it’s crazy that we didn’t know much about it, but that’s just how it was. People now see it as a collaboration.”

Another county leader involved in Linkages but working outside of the Child Welfare and CalWORKs programs spoke of the cultural shift, saying, “The work is done more efficiently. The collaboration is there that didn’t exist before. It’s become second nature for them to work together.”

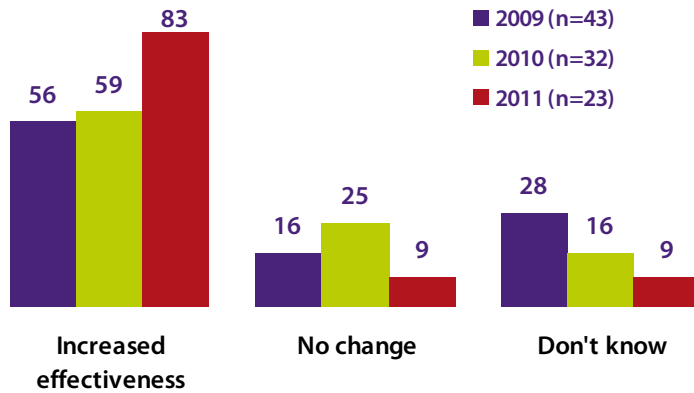
### San Bernardino

San Bernardino County ultimately decided not to continue with Linkages implementation, but during their active participation, they did enjoy good partnership among those involved in day-to-day Linkages implementation. A Coordinator noted, “The [Linkages] committee was great. We had cooperation between the departments.” Yet, she continued, at the upper manager level she “never really felt there was full buy-in on either side.” In this case, county leadership in both programs did not feel that the benefits of Linkages collaboration merited a continued commitment of resources to the initiative, and in the end Linkages proved unsustainable in San Bernardino County.

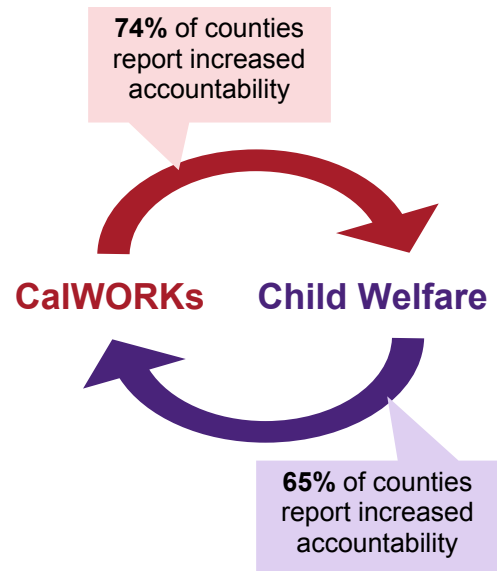
Most county Linkages Coordinators say that Linkages has improved staff effectiveness, with the percentage jumping from under 60 percent in 2010 to 83 percent in 2011 (see bar chart below). Most also say that staff accountability has increased, meaning that CalWORKs staff are more accountable to Child Welfare and Child Welfare staff are more accountable to CalWORKs, as illustrated in the figure below at right. Increased

accountability is another systems-level change related to the idea that staff in the two programs begin to have shared goals when they are working within the Linkages framework.

### Changes in Staff Effectiveness due to Linkages



### Staff Accountability has Increased, Spring 2011 (n=23)



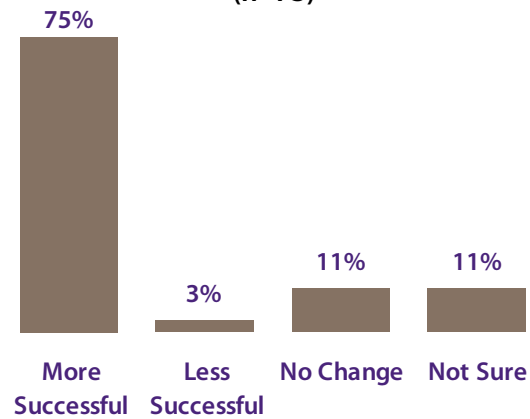
Case workers who work directly with Linkages families agree that changes have occurred in the way they approach their work. A case worker in CWS remarked, “I can coordinate the services much more rapidly [under Linkages]. We only have six months to do this and if we blow through a month figuring things out, there’s less time we can help the client.”

As summarized below, results from the Staff Survey confirm that case workers also feel a growing sense of accountability between CalWORKs and Child Welfare. They also increasingly feel they are part of a Linkages team.

- The percentage of case workers that reported they “always” or “usually” are **held accountable for following coordinated service protocols for all Linkages cases** increased from 59 percent in 2009 (n=61) to 72 percent in 2010 (n=72).
- The percentage of case workers that reported they “always” or “usually” feel they are **part of a Linkages team** when they serve clients rose from 61 percent in 2009 (n=61) to 73 percent in 2010 (n=74).

In addition, a full three quarters of case workers report that Linkages has increased their ability to be successful with their clients, as shown in the chart at right.

### Effect of Linkages on Case Workers’ Ability to be Successful with Their Clients, Fall 2010 (n=73)



Case workers were asked to describe how Linkages has changed the way they interact with staff in the other department/agency. Themes from the responses included that workers have been able to draw from a more varied pool of resources to help families,

collaborative work has made it easier to keep track of families, workers on both sides are better informed about the families they serve and able to lower stress for the families, processes happen in a more timely manner and with less duplication when the workers can easily communicate with each other, and workers enjoy the teamwork aspect. Several staff on the CalWORKs side did mention that communication is not occurring enough between CalWORKs and CWS. Representative responses included:

*We have come a long way towards opening the lines of communication... in order to provide better service and more resources for our mutual clients.*

**“We have come a long way towards opening the lines of communication.”**

**– Linkages case worker**

*In some cases, Linkages provides some of the only resources or helpful avenues these families have the option of looking into. In other situations, the Linkages support was the only thing that allowed me to locate a missing family.*

*The partnership has greatly helped our ability to find out what CalWORKs can offer to our [CWS] families and what path to take.*

*Besides having mutual respect for one another and our area of expertise, it has helped the [CalWORKs]*

*families going through the CWS process. We approach families as a team and work together for the same outcomes. This is less confusing and stressful for our families.*

*Linkages has torn down the walls that were built up between Child Welfare and CalWORKs.*

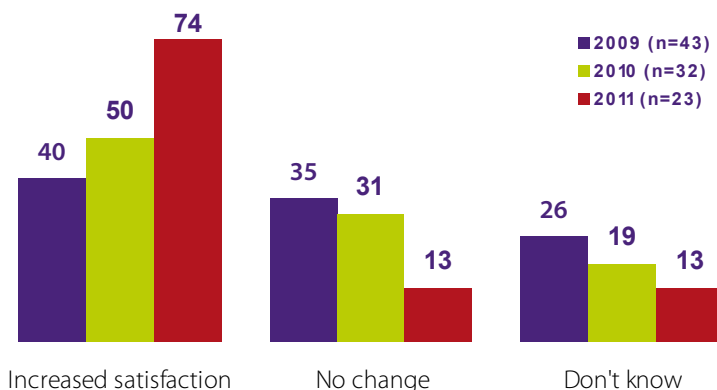
*The TDM [Team Decision Making] notification process is inconsistent and there is little follow up post-TDMs to ensure CalWORKs is aware of results of TDMs.*

*The enthusiasm of the program changes depending on how heavy our case loads are. We try to keep the motivation up by reminding everyone of the importance. Overall the communication is so much better.*

## Improved Job Satisfaction

The Linkages Project was developed as a way to benefit families by making county systems easier to navigate and the path to success more supportive. Linkages, though, does not only benefit the families in the CalWORKs and Child Welfare programs; it also improves the work life of program staff. Over several years, as Linkages implementation has progressed, Linkages Coordinators have reported increases in staff job satisfaction, as shown in the chart to the right. In 2011 (red

**Increases in Staff Job Satisfaction due to Linkages, According to Linkages Coordinators**



bars), three quarters of counties reported that their Linkages staff were more satisfied with their jobs as a result of working within Linkages.

### Self-Reported Improvements in Job Satisfaction & Success

	Case workers who agreed	
	2009	2010
Being part of a Linkages team has made me <b>more satisfied with my work.</b>	<b>64%</b> (n=61)	<b>72%</b> (n=72)
Linkages has made me <b>more successful with my clients.</b>	<b>68%</b> (n=62)	<b>75%</b> (n=73)

Linkages staff themselves confirmed this trend. A large majority of Linkages staff who responded to Staff Surveys in 2009 and 2010 reported greater personal satisfaction with their work as a result of Linkages. As shown in the table at left, these trends are improving.

On the 2010 Staff Survey, case workers were asked to explain how Linkages has changed their personal satisfaction with their work. Themes from the responses were that satisfaction came from a feeling of increased capacity on the job, from a better-working system that causes less frustration on the job, as well as from observing more positive results among families served. Increased job capacity included the ability to provide a wider range of services, more realistic case management, more efficient and effective service, and pride in knowing more about the whole system faced by the family and how to better help them navigate it. A few respondents noted that communication need to be better cultivated in their Linkages initiatives. Representative responses included:

*Sharing information has been very helpful. We no longer have a duplication of efforts and resources.*

*I am more satisfied as I get CalWORKs related questions answered a lot faster. My families are happier and less stressed since their cases are better managed.*

*I appreciate being able to provide better service and really fine tune what our families need during crisis situations. Being able to partner with other agencies really makes quality service a reality.*

*Linkages has provided me with additional support that has helped me to carry out my duties more efficiently.*

*I enjoy the team work, but more needs to be done to build communication and respect for each other and our roles.*

*It is comforting to know that there are other staff having the same issues and outcomes. Working toward a common goal helps the worker know that their efforts are not in vain.*

### Factors for Linkages Success

Counties rated the importance of multiple factors to making Linkages a success. Based upon their ratings as well as insights gathered through case study interviews, the following emerged as the **top five factors important for Linkages success**. These five factors have consistently been rated “Very Important” by more than two thirds of Linkages Coordinators during the past three years.

- + Strong leadership in favor of Linkages.**

- + Workplace culture of willingness to try new things.
- + Belief that families will be better off with Linkages.
- + Clear communication between CWS and CalWORKs staff.
- + Compatible procedures between CWS and CalWORKs.

## Achieving Success: Lessons from Case Study Counties

The following quotes from case study interviews provide advice for others interested in pursuing Linkages and serve to illustrate some key ingredients for Linkages success.

### On Leadership:

*You have to have a very committed leadership. Without that it's extremely hard to move forward.*

*It starts with the leadership: top-down and bottom-up. We look at what the family needs to succeed.*

*Start with strong leadership that really believes in working together. I've heard from other counties that there can be a battle about what program is more important. Here, it comes from the top about this being the right thing to do.*

*Get executive support and keep your executive support engaged. Without that, forget it.*

### On Building Strong Cross-Program Collaboration:

*Approach Linkages as an organizational and systems-level challenge as well as a programmatic challenge. Often organizational issues are taken for granted... It's like if one organization is blue and the other is red and the intersection is purple, you have to create a purple culture. It's hard to do and worth being conscious of the effort to do that.*

*From a staff level, the hugest thing is really understanding each others' jobs.*

*It's important for people in the middle of Linkages to learn about the other program in a deep way.... It's a sign of mutual respect and builds the foundation for a deep rather than superficial partnership.*

*[Co-location has created] more appreciation for each discipline and a relationship has been established. Once we had that relationship, everything else came together.*

*Co-location absolutely has a stronger impact than anything else. Just to be able to talk to each other and have that acceptability is huge.*

### On Implementing Wisely:

*First, start with identifying opportunities for things that would be comparatively easy to implement.... We looked for things where there was less organizational resistance.*

*Find key enthusiastic staff that are competent and have good follow through, and have them pilot it so people can see that it works and is positive.*

*We have the ability to change if change is needed.*

*The decision to roll out incrementally by geography [was key]. We wouldn't have been able to provide the support—training, monitoring—that was needed otherwise. And building relationships across the departments would not have been possible without taking a number of years from pilot to full implementation like we did.*

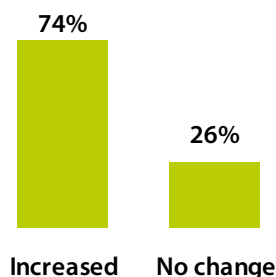
Survey evidence related to these factors shows that they are present to a large extent in the counties that have successfully remained active through the Linkages demonstration project. For example, as the table below illustrates, Linkages Coordinators in most counties report that leadership is strongly committed to Linkages practices and monitoring.

**Linkages Counties Have Committed Leadership, 2011 (n=23)**

	Counties that Agree or Strongly Agree
This county's CWS leadership makes Linkages practices a priority.	96%
This county's CalWORKs leadership makes Linkages practices a priority.	96%
Linkages leadership in this county values the use of numbers to demonstrate success.	70%

A willingness to learn, improve, and try new things is also evident. In spring 2011, 61 percent of counties reported that their county programs involve staff at all levels in decisions about how to improve their Linkages initiative. Moreover, almost three quarters of Linkages Coordinators noted that Linkages itself has increased staff tendencies to “think outside the box” in working with clients, as shown in the figure at right.

**Changes in staff tendency to “think outside the box” (Percent of counties, n=23)**



Effective communication is another factor serving to lay a foundation for Linkages success in the counties that have maintained Linkages participation throughout the demonstration project. A full 91 percent of Linkages Coordinators in those counties agree or strongly agree that their county’s program has effective ways of communicating information of value to all staff. Additional findings that can help counties prepare for involving staff in Linkages implementation are provided in the table below.

**Lessons Learned about Implementation, Spring 2011 (n=23)**

	Counties that Agree or Strongly Agree
Linkages requires a special level of personal commitment from staff.	91%
Linkages requires extra <u>ongoing</u> support and training of staff in order to succeed.	88%
Linkages requires staff who can easily think outside the box.	87%
Linkages can be implemented with any existing line staff.	61%
Having Linkages in place requires more staff time than not having Linkages in place.	26%

Finally, on the next page, interview findings from exited counties provide insights into why some counties did not continue with statewide Linkages participation—despite many of them continuing to implement Linkages on a local level.

## Lessons from Exited Counties

Of nine counties that exited the Statewide Linkages Project before its conclusion, eight agreed to conduct exit interviews with the evaluation team. Those counties fall into two general categories—those that are continuing Linkages activities locally, and those that were unable to implement successfully. Lessons from both categories can inform future cross-program coordination efforts. Findings, examples, and lessons are presented below.

### Continuing Linkages Locally: 5 Counties

**Summary Finding:** These counties had small case loads and felt that state level planning and reporting requirements were too resource-intensive, especially in the economic downturn. Some noted that small counties might do better with a tailored, pared-down Linkages plan.

- *“With our small caseload, it was hard to justify the effort [to participate in the statewide project] with shrinking budgets, shrinking staff, and work furlough.”*
- *“We were committed to the idea of Linkages, but you needed to develop a formalized plan, needed everything spelled out, you needed to attend meetings, be a peer mentor, develop best practices, it would have been a drain on resources for the size of our county.”*
- *“It’s possible that for a county of our size we don’t need that large of an endeavor. We can do things more quickly than some of these big counties.”*

**Summary Finding:** These five counties reported continuing both Linkages philosophy and practices. They provided evidence of systems changes occurring as a result of Linkages.

- *“The relationship-building remains strong in CWS and CalWORKs. It is something we value in our county. CWS and CalWORKs staff continue to be willing to engage in the collaborative case management process.”*
- *“There is support from staff from both CWS and CalWORKs. We have staffs that are very committed to the coordinated services provided under Linkages. We still implement Linkages and are devoted to making the process easy for the clients.”*
- *“We are doing a much better job [than before Linkages] of meeting on a regular basis to identify the cases in common, . . . sharing resources, . . . [and] coordinating our plans so we don’t have conflicting demands on the client. Before Linkages we would share resources on a crisis basis, now we do a coordinated approach to what is going to help the family.”*
- *“At the front end, workers [now] administer a basic needs questionnaire to determine if the family has enough money to pay the bills, feed the family, has health insurance. If they want someone to follow up, we [initiate] a warm hand-off between departments. We set up a tracking system that shows the referrals coming in, and there is a follow up feedback loop to trigger the eligibility side if they have not followed up with the client. The feedback loop has been very successful. It has been largely due to the commitment of the Deputy Director saying that we want to break down barriers to both departments, as a priority.”*

**Lesson:** Counties with small case loads see formal planning and evaluation requests as a burden, yet maintain interest and commitment to implementing coordinated practices.

### Unsuccessful Implementation: 3 Counties

**Summary Finding:** These counties did not have all necessary ingredients for organizational change, such as committed leadership and an agency culture of willingness to try new things. Although at least two of these counties had Linkages champions among their staff, broader commitment was needed to ensure implementation success.

- *“Our regulatory/policy department . . . adheres very much to the letter of the regulation, so it was difficult for us to have any wiggle room at all. We tried and got absolutely nowhere with it. I had talked to other counties who were trying really creative ways to provide services to cases that were voluntary cases. We were told here we couldn’t provide services unless they met Welfare-To-Work guidelines and were meeting WPR [Work Participation Rates]. It was unfortunate.”*
- *“The new deputy director of Protective Services didn’t want to participate. She then talked the director into wanting to pull out of it altogether. She keeps saying it’s a CalWORKs program – and it’s not a CalWORKs program. I wanted to do Linkages from the very beginning, but it became hard to fight the headwinds. Protective Services always wanted to be separated, not part of the agency.”*
- Leadership in one county was unsupportive of rolling out Linkages beyond one region, so the initiative continued to have a small case load (20-25 clients). However, many staff at different levels were putting time into regular planning meetings and implementation activities. Without scaling up, said the Coordinator, *“There was not much bang for the buck.”*
- In another county, department leaders’ attention was focused on other priorities, resulting in very little staff time being devoted to getting Linkages up and running. There was frequent turnover of Linkages Coordinators; the exit interview respondent admitted she had “never met face to face” with her latest counterpart on the other side of the house.
- In one case, worker unions were a contributing barrier, as the unions saw Linkages practices as additional work and responsibilities for their members. County leadership, meanwhile, viewed union negotiations as a drain on tight resources.

**Lesson:** Strongly committed leadership and an organizational readiness for change are necessary for Linkages success.

# Chapter 4: Making a Difference for Families

The primary impetus behind Linkages is to make county systems easier for families to navigate so that they can achieve success more easily in the areas of child safety and family self sufficiency. The evaluation collected evidence about family success in several ways. Counties were asked to track quantitative information that would allow for the analysis of nine family-level outcomes. County staff were also asked through surveys and interviews to share their perspectives on how Linkages has changed families' experiences and success in achieving child safety and economic self sufficiency.

## Family Outcomes

The Linkages statewide outcomes are a set of measures that are intended to show some of the ways in which families might benefit from Linkages. The table at right shows the outcomes that the Statewide Linkages Project asked counties to address by tracking data on their Linkages clients and reporting those data to the statewide evaluators. The outcomes examine ways that families might benefit on the Child Welfare side (Outcomes 1-5)—such as whether Linkages helps reduce the number of maltreatment recurrences—and ways that families might benefit on the CalWORKs side (Outcomes 6-9)—such as whether Linkages might help parents resolve their CalWORKs sanctions.

From county to county, Linkages addresses different target populations and employs different strategies, so not all outcomes apply to all counties. For example, counties that employ Linkages with their Family Maintenance populations in CWS work with families whose children have not been removed from the home, so outcomes concerned with reunification and foster care re-

**“Families are not being pulled in two different directions. It is less stressful for them.”**

-Linkages case worker

### Statewide Linkages Outcomes

#### Child Welfare

1. Percent of children with a substantiated recurrence (3m, 6m, 9m)
2. Percent of children not removed from home with substantiated recurrence (3m, 6m, 9m)
3. Percent of families that achieve reunification
4. Time to reunification
5. Percent of children who do not re-enter foster care

#### CalWORKs

6. Percent of parents who have CalWORKs sanctions resolved
7. Amount of monthly cash grant (without sanctions)
8. Amount of parents' monthly earnings and wages
9. Length of time parents receive cash aid

entry do not apply. For this reason and due to the technical data challenges that meant data reports were difficult for counties to generate, counties were asked to submit data on a minimum of two of the statewide outcomes based upon the focus of their initiatives and their resources. The evaluation team asked counties to provide numbers on their Linkages population and numbers on a comparison group in order to look at how Linkages clients were doing compared to clients not in Linkages.

## Challenges

Counties faced substantial hurdles in their outcomes data collection efforts. As this report has already noted, county data systems are not set up to enable easy tracking of Linkages cases. CWS and CalWORKs data systems are entirely separate and do not communicate, so even a report listing the clients mutually served by both programs is time consuming and technically challenging to generate. Data tracking and reporting within Linkages, likewise, are labor intensive activities. Because Linkages counties did not have funding support for the substantial effort required to generate outcomes data, most experienced a mismatch between what was requested and what they could feasibly provide.

Another challenge was a Linkages population that was smaller than anticipated at the outset of the Linkages Project. CalWORKs has been subject to budget cuts that are, among other things, decreasing the amount of time that adults can receive aid as well as limiting eligibility in other ways and decreasing the availability of services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment. These cuts have the effect of reducing the population of people who are eligible for CalWORKs, and thus reduce the pool of Linkages-eligible clients. Those who are still included in the mutually-served CalWORKs and CWS population may have fewer services available to them than they did when Linkages was conceived.

As a result, sample sizes for outcomes data collection were quite small in most counties, and for many of the outcomes, only a few counties reported data. These conditions mean the ability to draw broad conclusions is limited, and would benefit from further research. In a few cases, however, promising trends are emerging.

A summary of family outcomes findings is presented on the following pages.

## An Inspiring Example

As told by a Linkages eligibility worker in Stanislaus County's Families In Partnership program, a program for high-risk families in the Child Welfare system who also face drug or alcohol problems. Many of the county's Linkages clients are in the Families In Partnership program.

### The Case

*This little girl came to Families In Partnership because of a positive drug test on her newborn and on herself. She was 12.*

### History

*There was a lot of domestic violence in the home because of [her own mother's] drug use. Finally she was put in a foster home, but she ran away and lived with friends. After she gave birth and was 'pos tox' she was referred to Child Welfare.*

### An Array of Linked Services

*She told the Emergency Response social worker she wanted to stop using and wanted her son to have a better life. She moved to a clean and sober facility and started the AOD program. At first, she didn't do that well in the program – the rules and regulations were something she was uncomfortable with. She had trouble bonding with her baby. We tested and found there was no learning disability. We did a behavioral screening and she was referred to Behavioral Health Services. Shortly after that her attitude changed and she started bonding with her baby and started moving through First Step [a perinatal program for mothers addressing addiction]. She continued to thrive. When she got to the last stage of First Step, she was interested in Welfare-To-Work. I talked with her about how to get a job. She was interested in Certified Nursing Assistant (CAN) training while she was doing First Step.*

### Better Prepared for Life

*She graduated from First Step and I got an email from her supervisor. She was doing a great job in the CNA program – she graduated at the top of her class. She was terrified to be on cash aid because that's all she'd grown up with, but I said, "Don't worry, you're doing really well." She's going to be fine.*

## Family Outcomes Summary

Description	Findings	Conclusion
<p><b>Outcome 1: Percent of children with substantiated recurrences</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Promising</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages families have lower rates of substantiated recurrences than other Child Welfare clients (at 3 months, 6 months, and 9 months after the Linkages case start date). Several counties did not provide data for all three time points.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>14</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Six counties measured rates of substantiated recurrence that were either lower for the Linkages group or zero for both groups (a neutral finding) at all time points they measured.</li> <li>■ In most counties (8 of 13) with comparison data at the 3-month time point, the rate of substantiated recurrence was lower for the Linkages population than for the comparison group.</li> <li>■ In 5 of 12 counties with comparison data at the 6-month time point, the rate of substantiated recurrence was lower for the Linkages population than for the comparison group.</li> <li>■ In 4 of 11 counties with comparison data at the 9-month time point, the rate of substantiated recurrence was lower for the Linkages population than for the comparison group.</li> </ul>	<p>County data suggest that Linkages helps families avoid early recurrence of maltreatment. Among 14 counties, two thirds showed that Linkages families had fewer recurrences after 3 months than non-Linkages families.</p> <p>The same benefits did not show up at the 6-month and 9-month time points, though fewer counties reported data for these time points. Interestingly, most surveyed Linkages Coordinators reported that they see Linkages making an important difference in reducing recurrence of maltreatment. Thus, this is an area in which Linkages has a promising effect on families.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 2: Percent of children not removed from home with substantiated recurrences</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Promising, but insufficient data</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether—when maltreatment recurs—Linkages families have lower rates of children being removed from the home than other Child Welfare clients (at 3 months, 6 months, and 9 months after the Linkages case start date). Only one county provided data for all 3 time points.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>2</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ At the 3-month time point, both counties had lower rates of removal in their Linkages groups than in their comparison groups.</li> <li>■ At the 6- and 9-month time points, only one county provided data. Rates of removal were the same between their Linkages and comparison groups.</li> </ul>	<p>With data from only two counties, it is not possible to determine trends. However, lower rates of children being removed from the home at the three month time point despite a recurrence of maltreatment suggest that Linkages coordination and support may help lower the need to remove the child from the home in some cases.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 3: Percent of families that achieve reunification</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Inconclusive</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages clients have higher rates of family reunification than other Child Welfare clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>7</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Among the Linkages groups in 7 counties, four had lower rates of reunification than their comparison groups and three had higher rates of reunification (within 18 months).</li> </ul>	<p>No clear trend of positive benefits of Linkages is evident.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 4: Time to reunification</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Unpromising, but insufficient data</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages families reunified more quickly than other Child Welfare clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>3</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In all three counties, a lower percentage of Linkages families were reunified than in the comparison groups at 6 months and 12 months after the case start date.</li> <li>■ All three counties had very small Linkages group sample sizes.</li> </ul>	<p>Although the results do not show a benefit of Linkages for decreasing time to reunification, no clear conclusion is possible due to the limited data for this outcome.</p>

## Family Outcomes Summary (continued)

Description	Findings	Conclusion
<p><b>Outcome 5: Percent of children who do not re-enter foster care</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Inconclusive</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether children in Linkages families are less likely to re-enter foster care after reunification than children in other CWS families.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>2</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In one county, the Linkages group had a higher rate of foster care re-entry than the comparison group (a difference of only one case). In the other county, rates were the same.</li> <li>■ Both counties had very small Linkages group sample sizes.</li> </ul>	<p>No clear trend of positive benefits of Linkages is evident.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 6: Percent of parents who have CalWORKs sanctions resolved</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Promising</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages clients are more likely to have their CalWORKs sanctions resolved than other CalWORKs clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>11</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Out of 11 counties, nine (82 percent) demonstrated that the Linkages group had greater success resolving sanctions than the comparison group.</li> </ul>	<p>There is a trend of Linkages families having more success resolving CalWORKs sanctions than non-Linkages families. The trend suggests that Linkages effectively helps families meet their CalWORKs requirements.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 7: Amount of monthly cash grant (without sanctions)</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Inconclusive</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages clients have a different amount of monthly cash grant declines than other CalWORKs clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>6</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In three counties, monthly cash grants went down more on average in their Linkages group than in their comparison group at 6-months and 9-months after case opening.</li> <li>■ In another two counties, monthly cash grants went down less on average in their Linkages group than in their comparison group.</li> <li>■ In the remaining county, there were no cash grant declines reported after 6-months or 9-months in either the Linkages or the comparison group.</li> </ul>	<p>There is no clear trend of Linkages groups having lower or higher monthly cash grant declines (not due to sanctions) than other CalWORKs clients. Interpretation may be muddled by different reasons for cash grant declines – due to families achieving self-sufficiency (a positive result) or due to children being removed from the home (a negative result). Details to confirm the reasons for the declines were not available.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 8: Amount of parents' monthly earnings and wages</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Inconclusive</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages clients have a different amount of monthly earnings and wage increases than other CalWORKs clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>4</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In one of four counties, the Linkages group on average had higher monthly earnings than the comparison group.</li> <li>■ In two of four counties, the Linkages group on average had higher wage increases than the comparison group.</li> <li>■ In three of four counties, the Linkages group sample sizes were extremely small.</li> </ul>	<p>There is no clear evidence that Linkages groups have higher (or lower) monthly earnings or wage increases than other CalWORKs clients. Data were limited by extremely small sample sizes.</p>
<p><b>Outcome 9: Length of time parents receive cash aid</b> <span style="float: right;"><b>Result: Promising</b></span></p>		
<p><i>Measured whether Linkages clients receive cash aid for a different amount of time than other CalWORKs clients.</i></p> <p>Counties reporting Linkages and comparison data: <b>3</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ In two counties, the Linkages groups were on aid for only about half the time of the comparison groups. In the third county, average time on aid was similar between the two groups.</li> </ul>	<p>Although data are limited for this outcome, two of three counties showed the Linkages group receiving cash aid for much less time than other CalWORKs clients. This suggests Linkages may play a substantial role in helping families achieve economic stability, and deserves further research.</p>

## Staff Perspectives on Family Success

### Linkages Effects on Families

Linkages Coordinators were asked about their observations of Linkages' effects on families. Their feedback is summarized in the table below. Coordinators in all reporting Linkages counties state that Linkages has improved the system for families. The vast majority feel that the initiative improves family-level outcomes, helps identify special issues such as domestic violence, and better supports families in their efforts to deal with mental health issues and substance abuse. Over half of county Linkages Coordinators report that they believe Linkages contributes to lower rates of maltreatment recurrence.

#### Effects on Families, According to Linkages Coordinators, Spring 2011 (n=23)

Linkages...	Percent of Counties that Agree
...makes the system better for families.	100%
...improves outcomes for families.	90%
...helps identify special issues like domestic violence.	95%
...helps families better address mental health issues and substance abuse.	91%
...helps families experience fewer recurrences of child maltreatment.	61%

Coordinators were also asked to provide their perspectives on whether Linkages families would have fared on the statewide outcome measures had Linkages coordinated services not been in place. Although such questions are speculative in nature—and many coordinators responded “don’t know”—they allow respondents to reflect on the changes that occurred as a result of Linkages and how those changes likely affected families in some of the most important ways.

#### Linkages Family Outcomes Compared to How They Would Have Fared without Linkages, According to Linkages Coordinators, Spring 2011 (n=23)

	Percent of Counties <sup>a</sup>		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Fewer substantiated recurrences of maltreatment occur?	<b>61</b>	4	35
Fewer children are removed from home when substantiated recurrence occurs?	<b>48</b>	13	39
More families achieve reunification?	<b>48</b>	4	<b>48</b>
Families reunify in a shorter amount of time?	26	13	<b>61</b>
Fewer children re-enter foster care?	26	9	<b>65</b>
More parents resolve their CalWORKs sanctions?	<b>61</b>	13	26
Monthly cash grant amounts (without sanctions) are lower?	22	26	<b>52</b>
Parents' monthly earnings and wages are higher?	17	30	<b>52</b>
Parents receive cash aid for less time?	14	18	<b>69</b>

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100% across each row due to rounding.

## Family Outcomes in Los Angeles County

As part of the case study that the Linkages evaluation team conducted with Los Angeles County, county staff provided a list of positive outcomes for families based on staff experiences, including the following:

- Through service collaboration between Child Welfare and CalWORKs staff, children experience **fewer removals** from their homes due to the CalWORKs services and resources provided to families.
- Families are able to **resolve their CalWORKs sanctions** when there is Linkages coordination.
- Participation of workers from both programs in the case planning family meetings helps **increase Welfare-to-Work participation** by families because they know the two programs are working together and development of complementary case plans helps them feel **less stress**.
- Through increased communication and tighter service coordination efforts between workers, children will realize a **higher rate of reunification** with their parents and will do so in a reduced time period.

As evidenced by the bolded responses (indicating the most common response in each row) in the table above, Linkages Coordinators were much more certain that Linkages has a positive effect on families in particular areas. Namely, among all of the statewide outcomes, Coordinators were more confident overall that Linkages successfully helps families reduce recurrence of maltreatment, resolve CalWORKs sanctions, avoid children being removed from the home, and achieve family reunification. A Coordinator from one county revealed her pride at Linkages success for families, saying, “We didn’t have any of the Linkages families come back to us with a [new] Child Welfare case. That is a big success, a really big success. I think it had to do with the more intensive oversight.”

County leaders interviewed as part of the case studies agreed that family outcomes were better under Linkages. One respondent offered her view of family outcomes through a leadership lens, saying, “Having one point of contact and a coordinated case plan allows [families] to focus on the key issues they need to be successful in both Child Welfare and Welfare-To-Work.”

Another summed up some key benefits of

Linkages, commenting, “We know we helped families reunify and there were cost savings as a result. Sanctions were lifted. We were able to leverage resources from other funding streams.”

Case workers were also asked how they see families benefitting from Linkages. Themes from the responses were that parents get more complete information; parents receive a more effective, tailored, and timely set of services; coordinated planning and management helps reduce barriers and stress on families such as sanctions or conflicting requirements; families receive extra support to help them stay on track with their plan; and Linkages directly helps families reunify and stay together. Representative responses included the following:

*Families are not being pulled in two different directions. It is less stressful for them.*

*When their funding is changed there is no surprise that creates unnecessary struggles or hardships for the families. It links them with necessary supports early on.*

**“Families seem to reunify in half the time they used to.”**

**– Linkages case worker**

*The clients are not confused by trying to sort through various program requirements, so [they receive] fewer sanctions. We know more about our clients so we can really target our services.*

*Working together, CWS and CalWORKs, allows the client to become successful in completing both plans. They reunify with their children and at the same time have the opportunity to receive services from both agencies.*

*Barriers are discovered earlier. They are made aware that what is requested of them by Child Welfare can be a Welfare-to-Work activity and serve as the hours required. They appreciate the coordinated case plan that has them moving toward the same goal for both Child Welfare and CalWORKs. Families feel the support of Linkages and don't feel like they are out there alone.*

*Families seem to reunify in half the time they used to.*

# Chapter 5: Sustainability & Lessons for the Future

Given the promising findings that Linkages can bring about positive organizational changes and improvements on families’ experiences and outcomes, will the initiative continue into the future? This report has summarized many compelling reasons to sustain Linkages. Some of those include:

- + Improved county operations,
- + More effective and more satisfied staff, and
- + A better system for families.

Moreover, most Linkages Coordinators feel that the initiative is saving costs to their counties, and even more are optimistic that Linkages can save the county money in the future. Although Linkages arguably requires resources for planning and training as well as data tracking and reporting, an overall cost savings is an additional reason to continue—and grow—a promising initiative.

### Cost Savings under Linkages, Spring 2011 (n=23)

	Counties that Agree or Strongly Agree
It is my best guess that Linkages is <b>currently</b> saving our county money.	<b>61%</b>
It is my best guess that Linkages can save our county money <b>in the future</b> .	<b>87%</b>

As evidenced in this report, the 26 counties that currently have active Linkages initiatives have taken ownership of the project by realigning program goals, co-locating staff, and establishing new cultures of collaboration. There are still clear areas of potential improvement and further implementation, such as identifying more automated data sharing strategies and providing Linkages services to a greater number of mutually-served clients. In addition, challenges going forward include new state CalWORKs policies that are more restrictive, and which, according to one county leader, “will actually bar families from participating at a time when these services are needed more than ever.” Specifically, as one county Linkages Coordinator explained, “CalWORKs... will go from 60 months of aid to 48 months of aid until a client is timed out. We’ll see a decrease in the numbers [of mutual clients].”

### Overall Linkages success in counties (n=23)



At this stage, however, all 23 counties that responded to the spring 2011 survey reported that Linkages was at least somewhat successful in their counties, as shown in the chart at left. Indeed, once Linkages changes the way a

county “does business,” the likelihood of sustainability is strong. Notably, among all responding counties, the overwhelming majority are confident that Linkages will continue to be practiced beyond the completion of the

federal grant. The chart at right shows that over 90 percent state that Linkages will “definitely” continue, and the remainder state it will “probably” continue. One county leader pointed out that integrating Linkages into county operations is a clear sign of success. “It’s been a very successful program,” she remarked, “so much so that it’s an integrated part of how we do business. When something starts as a pilot project and gets ingrained in what you do, that’s how you measure that success.”

**County expectations of their Linkages initiative continuing beyond this year (n=23)**



Many county leaders have long histories of experience providing public social services, having worked their way up through the system, observing changes in policy and practice over the years, and seeing firsthand the countless initiatives and pilot projects that have been billed as the next innovative change. The fact that the leaders in over two dozen California counties have put their weight behind Linkages and used their authority to deliver remarkable changes to the system speaks to the solid logic of Linkages and the potential it has for bettering the experiences of families. Notably, one county leader commented, “I’ve worked for the county—I think I’m going on my 27<sup>th</sup> year, and this is the best program I’ve ever seen.”

### Taking it Further

Beyond their initial plans to implement Linkages, some counties are taking the initiative to a new level and thinking outside the box about how the principles can be applied more broadly in their counties. Counties, through survey responses and interviews, have mentioned the following areas of possibility and potential for expanding their Linkages practices of cross-program communication and coordinated services:

- Foster youth
- Homeless populations
- Behavioral and mental health programs
- Housing assistance

The box at right provides a small window into the culture of continuing innovation in one county: Los Angeles.

### Los Angeles County’s Commitment to Innovation

*In Los Angeles County, one of the case study counties, many of the various leaders interviewed alluded to a commitment to sustaining Linkages and growing it beyond what was initially envisioned. Some of their comments are provided here.*

Several leaders made clear that Linkages will continue into the future in LA County. As one pointed out, the success of Linkages demonstrates that it is a worthwhile investment. “We’re creating efficiencies and reducing redundancies and costs—and producing better outcomes for families,” he said. “As long as we can keep our eye on that, I don’t think we’ll reduce the resources that go into that.”

Furthermore, they spoke of moving beyond their originally planned level of implementation. “There’s a culture of innovation and continuous improvement,” one commented. “We look seriously at data to work toward improvement. We look toward opportunities for expansion.” Another leader added, “In the future, we’ll just be refining the ways we work together better – getting mutual data draws, working on short-term and long-term successes, establishing future partnerships with other county agencies. We’ll absolutely continue to enhance it and work more effectively.” Finally, a third spoke of how Linkages-type collaboration is seen as an innovation that will spread into other areas. “Now that we’re aware of the [Linkages] approach,” he remarked, “we’re connecting it elsewhere. As it continues to roll out and we intentionally connect it elsewhere, that approach will bleed over into other departments and affect how they operate.”

## Sustaining evaluation

Continuing to evaluate the success of Linkages-driven systems change and the improvement of family-level outcomes is a vital component of Linkages practice at the county level. Evaluation can allow Linkages leaders to make the case about how the initiative is succeeding. It can also allow Linkages workers to make decisions and adjust practices based on evidence. And as one county Linkages Coordinator on the CWS side described, providing feedback to both staff and leadership has a major impact on their ability to recognize the importance and effectiveness of their work.

*Being able to report data to staff and see that, wow, it really does work—that has been huge. For senior leadership, [it's seeing] dollars saved or timely exit from Child Welfare or self sufficiency in CalWORKs, or testimonies so people can seem more real... Staff are so success-motivated. There are so many sad stories with what we do. We work so hard to have that happy ending, so when you hear of those things, it helps you continue on.*

To provide guidance for counties in their efforts to continue evaluating their Linkages practices and effectiveness, the evaluation team has contributed tools and other materials to the Statewide Linkages Toolkit. The Toolkit is designed to be a comprehensive online resource available to counties interested in establishing, evaluating, growing, or sustaining a Linkages initiative. On the topic of evaluation, the Toolkit provides assistance in both implementation and outcomes evaluation, including a road map, example surveys, and tips. The Statewide Linkages Toolkit website is planned to be hosted by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC).

## Conclusions

Linkages is a California solution to a problem that was created by federal policy. The separation of social services from income support at the federal level in the 1960's came about because of a lawsuit by welfare rights advocates that did not want families receiving aid to be required also to receive social services. For many families, this has been a successful solution. But for those families who are simultaneously served by Child Welfare Services and require assistance in becoming economically self-sufficient, the burden of coordinating the two sets of procedures, programs and expectations falls on them. By identifying strategies to reduce the burden for jointly-served families, and supporting counties in implementing those strategies, Linkages has produced a strong set of organizational, administrative and family outcomes that demonstrate success.

**"I've worked for the county—I think I'm going on my 27<sup>th</sup> year, and [Linkages] is the best program I've ever seen."**

– County leader

As this report has shown, the results of this demonstration project are very good. However, the most remarkable outcomes are the high levels of commitment demonstrated by the counties that have implemented the Linkages framework. In an economic environment in California where county departments of social services have been under substantial pressure due to sharp decreases in state

support as well as reductions in funding from their own counties, one response would be to focus on core programs and reduce the investment required to try new practices. Or county administrators could prioritize

one of the many other practice innovations being promoted by foundations, researchers or policymakers. With declining administrative resources and no near-term prospects of a financial upturn, Linkages might not seem feasible. For some California county social service departments, this was a reasonable course of action and they withdrew from Linkages. But most did not. In fact, their commitment grew the longer they were involved. The organizational and implementation results show the managers and line workers experienced the benefits of this coordinated approach and it increased their feelings of confidence and effectiveness.

It is disappointing that the outcome data collected by the evaluation does not reflect the same level of success shown in the implementation and organizational components of this assessment. There were some meaningful changes in client outcomes demonstrated by some of the participating counties. This report has identified the technical challenges that reduced the usefulness of the outcome data – lack of comparability across counties, disparate data systems, variations in definitions of the target populations and service models, small sample sizes. But there may be other factors that influenced these findings. First, these are the neediest families with children who are at risk or who have been removed, who are receiving services for a wide range of serious problems and who are simultaneously competing for jobs in the worst job market in many years. Progress can come slow and grudgingly. The combination of reduced resources and increased needs for those who are by definition difficult to serve can dull the impact of even the most innovative practices. A tightly controlled design, not feasible in the context of this project, might help us to understand this question better.

Where Linkages achieved its greatest success was at the intersection of consistent county-level leadership, clearly communicated and supported through policy change with the Linkages Project's support through trainings, convenings, planning and evaluation. The Linkage Project staff provided the structure and support that helped to clarify the model, develop the skills of county staff, document promising and best practices. When an open and receptive county engaged fully with the Linkages Project structure, the barriers to implementation were more easily overcome, leading to the deep organizational support documented in this report. Equally important, the project staff and the CDSS project officers worked to maintain the visibility of Linkages at the most senior levels of CDSS. The involvement of CDSS senior management reinforced the importance of Linkages during a time of crisis in California's social service system. These challenges are far from over, but the Linkages demonstration has shown that, with adequate support and consistent leadership, Linkages has become an essential element of county response to families in need.

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