
Culture of Relational Engagement (CORE): Relevance and Considerations for Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department

Tuere Anderson, LCSW

Director of Administration, Internal Operations

Nicole Gremillion, MSW

Human Services Manager

Giselle McNeill, BA

Division Manager

Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department

Executive Summary

Human services agencies across California are navigating increasing operational demands, workforce challenges, fiscal pressures, and the need to deliver high-quality, equitable services in complex environments. In response to these pressures, Marin County Health and Human Services (HHS) developed the Culture of Relational Engagement (CORE) initiative, a comprehensive strategy focused on intentional relationship-building, relational leadership development, and coaching as key drivers of organizational effectiveness.

This paper examines Marin County's CORE model, with particular attention to its structured approach to strengthening workplace relationships, enhancing leadership capacity at all levels, and embedding coaching as a tool for continuous learning and improvement. Key components of the CORE initiative include Workplace Connection and Flexibility Standards, Team Connection Plans, Individual Connect/Flex Plans, leadership development efforts, and both professional and peer coaching models that support individual and team growth.

This analysis explores the relevance and applicability of Marin County's approach to other California county human services departments and offers considerations to assess county readiness for similar initiatives. While differences in size, scale, governance, and operational complexity present challenges to direct replication, the CORE model offers valuable insights that can be adapted to support workforce engagement, strengthen leadership practices, and improve cross-division collaboration.

The paper also highlights the importance of organizational readiness, operational stability, strategic alignment, and psychological safety as foundational conditions necessary to support sustainable culture change efforts. These conditions are particularly important for larger and more complex systems, where staff may experience competing operational priorities, policy changes, communication challenges, and varying degrees of trust across divisions and classifications.

Based on this analysis, this paper recommends a phased and scalable approach for Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD). Recommended strategies include leveraging BEACON to support organizational readiness assessment, using the existing Mentorship Program as a foundation for peer coaching, reassessing staff feedback tools, strengthening leadership development with targeted relational competencies, and considering fiscal, personnel, structural, and political factors before implementation. By adapting key elements of CORE rather than attempting direct replication, Contra Costa County has an opportunity to strengthen organizational culture in a way that supports both employee well-being and effective service delivery.

Introduction and Rationale

This paper is informed by the perspectives of three Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) staff representing Workforce Services, Administrative Services, and Children and Family Services. While our roles, tenure in the organization, and program areas differ, we share a common responsibility for supporting staff performance, developing and navigating complex service delivery systems, and ensuring that services are delivered effectively to the communities we serve. Through this work and our experiences, we have each observed the increasing importance of strong workplace relationships, effective leadership, and employee engagement in achieving positive organizational outcomes.

We selected Marin County Health and Human Services' Culture of Relational Engagement (CORE) initiative because it directly aligns with these observations and reflects a set of principles that we believe are critical to the future of human services organizations. At its foundation, CORE is designed to foster a connected, collaborative, and thriving workplace culture that enables staff to navigate challenges, support employee retention, and sustain high-quality service delivery. The initiative prioritizes three core areas: intentional relationship-building, meaningful professional development, and coaching for change. Together, these components aim to strengthen the relational and leadership infrastructure that supports both employee experience and organizational effectiveness.

CORE is grounded in several key assumptions that resonate with our experience in Contra Costa County. These include the understanding that strong relationships are foundational to engagement and effectiveness; that employee engagement improves when growth opportunities are accessible, purposeful, and practice-based; and that successful organizational change requires leadership at all levels. The model also emphasizes that coaching can serve as a catalyst for connection, resilience, and clarity, and that meaningful culture change requires ongoing input, communication, evaluation, and adaptation (Marin County HHS, 2026).

These principles are particularly relevant in the current workforce and operational environment, including growing service demands amid fiscal reductions. Human services agencies, including Contra Costa County, continue to operate within complex systems that require coordination across programs, disciplines, and service delivery models. At the same time, the expansion of remote and hybrid work has changed how staff connect with one another and with the clients they serve. Staff are frequently collaborating through virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams, while also managing high workloads, regulatory requirements, and the demands of systems such as CalSAWS and CWS/CMS, soon to be CWS-CARES. In this context, opportunities for

organic connection, mentorship, and relationship-building may be more limited, requiring a more intentional and structured approach.

From our perspective, this creates both a challenge and an opportunity. Without deliberate investment in relationships, leadership development, and staff support, organizations risk decreased engagement, reduced collaboration, staff recruitment and retention challenges, and impacts to service delivery. At the same time, the effectiveness of initiatives like CORE is dependent on a foundational level of trust, psychological safety, and alignment between staff and leadership. In environments where these conditions are still developing, efforts to implement structured relationship-building or coaching models may require additional groundwork to ensure they are received as supportive rather than performative.

Although Marin County is in the early stages of implementing CORE, its framework offers a promising model that may serve as a blueprint for other counties. Contra Costa County, as a larger and more complex system, would require thoughtful adaptation rather than direct replication. Contra Costa County also has existing structures that align with aspects of this approach, including initiatives that support belonging, engagement, and staff development, which may serve as a foundation for future efforts. The CORE model provides an opportunity to observe outcomes, assess impact over time, and consider how similar strategies could be implemented through a phased approach that allows for piloting, evaluation, and gradual expansion across divisions.

This paper examines Marin County's CORE initiative and explores its relevance for Contra Costa County, with a focus on workforce engagement, leadership development, and operational effectiveness. By analyzing both the strengths and key considerations of this approach, we aim to identify practical and scalable strategies that can strengthen organizational culture, support workforce resilience, and enhance long-term organizational effectiveness within complex public human services systems.

Overview of Marin County CORE Initiative

Marin County Health and Human Services (HHS) developed the Culture of Relational Engagement (CORE) initiative in recognition that the quality of services provided to the community is closely connected to the culture and capacity of the workforce delivering those services. CORE is Marin HHS's intentional response to the question of how a human services organization can build and sustain a workforce that is connected, resilient, and equipped to navigate complex public service work.

CORE is organized around three mutually reinforcing pillars: intentional relationship-building, meaningful professional development, and coaching for change. The design of the initiative is integrated rather than episodic. Relationships create the trust and psychological safety that make learning possible. Professional development gives staff tools and shared language to grow with purpose. Coaching supports the kind of leadership capacity that can be practiced across roles and levels of the organization.

A notable strength of CORE is that it was embedded into Marin HHS's 2025-2028 Strategic Plan, Future Forward, as part of the Optimize Workforce priority area. This alignment gives the initiative a formal place within the agency's broader strategic direction and helps reduce the risk that the work will be treated as separate from operational priorities. Strategic placement also supports sustainability as leadership, budget conditions, and organizational pressures evolve.

CORE also reflects a shared ownership approach. While Marin HHS leadership helped establish the vision, employees and cross-functional workgroups have been involved in developing the initiative's tools, practices, and recommendations. A contracted facilitator supports the group in maintaining structure and focus, while the work itself is shaped by those participating in the organization. This approach is consistent with the relational engagement values CORE is designed to promote.

Intentional Relationship Building

Intentional relationship-building is the first pillar of CORE. It reflects the understanding that effective workplace relationships do not happen solely through informal interactions or proximity. They require attention, structure, and consistent practice, particularly in organizations that operate across multiple programs, worksites, and service delivery models.

The foundation of this pillar is the Marin HHS Workplace Connection and Flexibility Standards, a shared set of expectations for how employees show up for one another whether they are in the office, in the field, or working remotely. These standards do not treat connection and flexibility as opposing values. Instead, they recognize that face-to-face interaction can support trust and collaboration, while flexibility can support employee focus, balance, and well-being. This is especially relevant in the post-pandemic public sector environment, where many agencies continue to define what hybrid and flexible work should look like.

Two tools bring these standards into team and individual practice: Team Connection Plans and Individual Connect/Flex Plans. Team Connection Plans are living agreements that define shared practices for collaboration, in-person engagement, communication, and team culture-building. Individual Connect/Flex Plans allow employees and supervisors to discuss how an employee will

use in-person time to build connections and how flexibility fits with operational needs and role expectations.

Together, these tools give relationship-building a practical structure. They create a shared language and process for discussing how teams work together, while allowing enough flexibility for teams and individuals to adapt the expectations to their specific context. This is particularly useful in complex human services environments where different program areas may have different operational realities.

CORE also includes relationship-building activities developed by teams, divisions, and the CORE workgroup. Examples include wellness and social connection activities, staff appreciation events, division gatherings, site visits, and time in meetings for informal connection and shared reflection. The initiative also emphasizes the importance of strengthening onboarding so that new employees experience early connection, clarity, and inclusion rather than having to navigate informal culture alone.

A key observation is that the success of these tools will depend heavily on how supervisors and teams use them. If used meaningfully, they can support real dialogue, strengthen team norms, and create a clearer sense of connection. If used primarily as compliance documents, their relational value could diminish. Ongoing support for supervisors will therefore be important as implementation continues.

Relational Leadership Development

The second pillar of CORE focuses on relational leadership development and is grounded in the belief that leadership is not limited to formal titles. Leadership is understood as a practice that occurs across roles and levels of the organization. This approach is especially relevant in human services, where frontline staff, supervisors, managers, and administrative partners all influence workplace culture and service outcomes.

Marin HHS organized this pillar around six interconnected leadership areas: relational leadership and emotional intelligence; communication and collaboration; inclusive leadership and equity in practice; team effectiveness and accountability; leadership resilience and well-being; and change leadership and continuous learning. Each area addresses a different dimension of what it takes to lead in a complex, equity-driven human services environment.

Relational leadership and emotional intelligence focus on self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to understand and navigate emotions in ways that build trust and psychological safety. Communication and collaboration emphasize active listening, feedback, constructive conflict resolution, and the ability to communicate across roles, disciplines, and divisions. These

competencies are important because public human services staff frequently operate in high-pressure environments where communication breakdowns can affect both morale and service delivery.

Inclusive leadership and equity in practice connect leadership development to Marin HHS's broader equity commitments. This component focuses on recognizing bias, supporting belonging, and aligning everyday leadership behaviors with equity principles. Team effectiveness and accountability emphasize clear expectations, healthy professional boundaries, shared norms, mutual respect, and collective responsibility. This balance is important because strong relationships must be paired with role clarity and accountability.

Leadership resilience and well-being focus on self-regulation, stress management, adaptability, and sustainable leadership practices. Change leadership and continuous learning support leaders in guiding teams through change with transparency, purpose, and reflection. These areas are particularly relevant in public human services, where staff must adjust to policy changes, fiscal shifts, technology transitions, and evolving community needs.

Leadership development through CORE is offered through multiple formats, including workshops, cohort-based experiences, facilitated discussions, applied learning opportunities, and ongoing learning communities. CORE also partners with Marin County Human Resources, Learning and Organizational Development to expand access to professional development in areas such as supervisory skills, communication, career development, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, difficult conversations, wellness, and resilience. This partnership helps connect CORE to existing county infrastructure rather than creating a parallel system.

Coaching for Change

The third pillar of CORE focuses on coaching as a strategy for strengthening reflection, problem-solving, leadership development, and connection. Coaching is positioned not as a corrective tool, but as a proactive resource for individuals, teams, and leaders navigating growth, complexity, and change.

Professional coaching through CORE provides confidential and structured support. It may be used to support individual leadership development, improve team functioning, navigate conflict, or sustain momentum through organizational change. To build this capacity, Marin HHS issued a formal Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in August 2025 to establish a pre-qualified pool of coaches, facilitators, and leadership development professionals.

The RFQ organized qualified vendors around core competency areas including social-emotional intelligence and coaching, communication style and conflict navigation, and structures,

boundaries, and relational leadership. Selection criteria emphasized Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging integration, experience building psychological safety, and public sector experience. The procurement structure allows Marin HHS to select coaches and facilitators based on specific needs across the department.

Alongside professional coaching, CORE invests in peer coaching as a sustainable and relationship-driven component. Peer coaching involves pairs or small groups of employees engaging in structured conversations to support reflection, problem-solving, accountability, and growth. This approach builds listening, inquiry, and feedback skills while creating opportunities for support that do not depend solely on external resources.

CORE provides training, tools, and facilitation to build peer coaching capacity before expecting staff to engage in it. This structure is important because peer coaching requires more than informal conversation; it depends on shared expectations, practical skills, and psychological safety. When supported well, peer coaching can reinforce the idea that learning and leadership belong across the organization, not only within formal leadership roles.

A key observation is that the combination of professional and peer coaching provides a layered support model. Professional coaching offers expertise and confidentiality, while peer coaching creates accessibility, continuity, and internal capacity. Together, these approaches may support both individual development and broader culture change.

Indicators of Progress and RBA Framework

CORE adopted a Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework to guide how progress will be tracked, understood, and communicated over time. RBA is a planning and evaluation approach that begins with desired outcomes and works backward to identify strategies and actions. It is organized around three questions: How much did we do? How well did we do it? And is anyone better off?

Using RBA for a workforce culture initiative is significant because it shifts attention beyond participation counts toward impact. For example, it is not enough to know how many trainings were held or how many employees attended; the more important question is whether those efforts improved relationships, strengthened leadership practice, increased trust, or supported engagement.

CORE identifies five areas for tracking: relationships, leadership development, professional growth, coaching engagement, and culture shift. Relationship indicators focus on cross-division collaboration and employees' sense of connection. Leadership development indicators examine whether leaders are applying coaching tools and whether staff experience benefits from those

practices. Professional growth indicators consider both participation in development opportunities and application of new skills. Coaching engagement measures access to professional and peer coaching and perceived impact. Culture shift is assessed through employee feedback related to trust, engagement, and inclusion.

The use of RBA provides CORE with a structure for asking whether the initiative is making a meaningful difference over time. It also creates an opportunity to close the feedback loop with staff by communicating what was learned, what changed, and what still requires attention. This feedback loop will be important to sustaining trust in the evaluation process.

Conditions for Initiative Success

Through our analysis of Marin HHS's CORE initiative, we identified three key preconditions for initiative success: operational continuity, articulated strategy and goals, and trauma-informed systems.

Operational Continuity

Organizational culture change initiatives address organizational values, norms, and behaviors (Einstein, 2025). These changes are embedded within, affected by, and driven in part by organizational operations. Inputs that affect operations include funding, staffing, internal processes, political context, and social environment. To launch a large organizational change initiative, there must be enough continuity of operations to provide a foundation of stability and a relatively stable field in which to practice new strategies.

If an organization is in a state of significant flux or lacks clear benchmarks, goals, and strategies, a culture change initiative may add confusion or overwhelm. In other words, there needs to be operational stability and some form of roadmap before a large culture change initiative can be launched effectively.

Agency-wide Strategy and Goals

An agency-wide strategic plan with clearly defined goals and timelines is an important guidepost for organizations to collectively work toward. Without a well-informed strategic plan that is widely communicated across the organization, the workforce may be less likely to engage in subsequent change initiatives. Staff need to understand what the organization is working toward and how additional efforts relate to their work and span of control.

Developing and adopting a strategic plan can take significant time, but this work can help establish the foundation needed for organizational culture change. Without this step, there is a

risk of introducing additional expectations without sufficient clarity, which may contribute to burnout or disengagement.

Moving from Trauma-organized to Trauma-informed

A trauma-organized organization may demonstrate characteristics such as chronic mistrust, guarded communication, high turnover, quiet quitting, emotional tension, repeated conflict, lack of psychological safety, leadership inconsistency, or resistance to change (Today's Mental Wellness, 2026). Not all conditions must be present for an organization to experience difficulty, but even one or more of these factors may make culture change more challenging.

Organizations that are overextended and under-resourced may struggle to adapt to change or may experience new initiatives as performative rather than supportive. By contrast, a trauma-informed organization is self-reflective and accountable to its workforce and service populations. It demonstrates interpersonal trust, psychological safety, equity, cultural humility, clear communication, collaboration, and iterative improvement practices.

These characteristics make organizational culture change more viable by supporting shared commitment, staff engagement, and willingness to take risks to improve outcomes for both employees and the populations served.

Recommendations for County Human Service Department Assessment of Initiative Readiness

The following considerations are intended to help County Human Service Departments assess readiness for a culture change initiative. These prompts are not exhaustive and do not replace formal organizational change assessment tools. Rather, they provide a practical starting point for determining whether the organization has sufficient capacity, alignment, and trust to support implementation.

Current Environment

Counties should begin by assessing size, complexity, and geographic scale. This includes the size of the workforce, distribution of worksites, communication structures, budget size, and where a change initiative could reasonably begin. Larger organizations may need more time and a more structured communication strategy to ensure shared understanding across classifications, divisions, and locations.

Workforce challenges should also be considered honestly. Recruitment and retention, vacancy rates, staff morale, workload concerns, and employee feedback all affect whether staff will have capacity to engage in a new initiative. Recent workforce satisfaction data, staff surveys, listening sessions, or other feedback tools can help identify whether the organization is ready for culture change or whether foundational trust-building work is needed first.

Operational demands are another important factor. Counties are managing major policy and systems changes, including operational shifts related to H.R. 1 and other state and federal requirements. Before launching a culture change initiative, leaders should assess competing priorities, critical deadlines, staff time impacts, and whether workload can be adjusted to support participation.

Opportunities

Readiness assessment should also include identifying existing programs, training structures, committees, mentorship efforts, or engagement initiatives that could be enhanced or aligned with relational engagement goals. Building upon existing structures may support sustainability and reduce duplication.

Counties should also identify champions and culture keepers across levels of the organization. This includes executive sponsors, managers, supervisors, frontline staff, administrative partners, and employees with informal influence. Positional authority is important, but so is trust and credibility with staff. Identifying people with change management skills, facilitation skills, and strong relational credibility may support more effective planning and implementation.

Challenges and Constraints

Staffing and time limitations are significant constraints for any culture change initiative. Counties should assess what would be required for staff to participate meaningfully, how workload would be managed, and whether there is capacity to support planning, training, facilitation, and evaluation. Without dedicated time and clear expectations, an initiative may be experienced as one more responsibility added to an already full workload.

Scale differences also matter. The larger the organization, the more intentional the communication, training, and implementation strategy must be. Counties should consider whether the initiative will apply to all classifications, whether certain divisions should pilot first, and how outcomes may vary across programs with different operational demands.

Another challenge is the distinction between strategy and piecemeal efforts. Culture change is always occurring, but intentional culture change requires alignment, communication, and

sustained investment. Small efforts may be useful, but without a clear strategy they can become fragmented. A comprehensive initiative may provide coherence, but it also requires greater staff time, leadership commitment, and resources.

Key Considerations

Fiscal considerations should include staff time, planning resources, supplies, communications, training costs, facilitation costs, evaluation needs, and potential procurement processes. Even a small pilot requires some level of coordination and support. Counties should consider available funding sources, sustainability of resources, and whether costs can be integrated into existing workforce development or engagement efforts.

Personnel considerations include identifying roles that could lead or coordinate the initiative as part of their existing scope of work, as well as determining whether additional staff or consultant support would be needed. Structural considerations include how decisions are made, where the initiative would live organizationally, and how information would flow to and from leadership. Political considerations include support from the Board of Supervisors, county leadership, labor partners, community stakeholders, and the broader public.

Recommendations for Contra Costa County EHSD

The following recommendations are informed by observations of Marin County's CORE initiative, as well as an assessment of Contra Costa County EHSD within its current operational and organizational context. These recommendations are not intended to suggest direct replication of the CORE model, but rather to identify practical, scalable strategies that align with existing structures and can support the gradual development of a more relational, connected, and resilient workforce.

Leverage BEACON to Drive the Organizational Assessment of Readiness

Contra Costa County EHSD has an existing framework in BEACON (Belonging, Engagement, Access, Collaboration, Opportunity, and Navigation) that closely aligns with many of the principles reflected in Marin HHS's relational engagement model. BEACON emphasizes fostering a culture of belonging, strengthening collaboration, and improving access and opportunity for both staff and the communities served.

BEACON may serve as a useful structure for assessing organizational readiness for a broader culture change effort. It could support cross-divisional dialogue, elevate staff input, identify

workforce experience themes, and help surface strengths and gaps related to engagement, communication, and trust. Because BEACON is already connected to staff input, management guidance, and strategic priorities, it may provide an opportunity to embed relational engagement concepts into existing work rather than creating a separate initiative.

Using BEACON as a central organizing structure may also reinforce transparency and shared ownership, both of which are critical to building the level of trust required for sustainable culture change.

Leverage the Existing Mentorship Program as a Foundation for Peer Coaching

Coaching is a central component of Marin HHS's CORE initiative, particularly as a mechanism for strengthening relationships, supporting staff development, and reinforcing leadership practices. Contra Costa County currently has an established Mentorship Program facilitated by Staff Development, which provides a strong foundation for exploring a more intentional peer coaching approach.

The Mentorship Program is a structured, six-month program running from May through October and supporting up to 20 mentor/mentee pairs annually, depending on mentor availability. The program includes a formal application and selection process, orientation, goal-setting between participants, expectations for ongoing engagement, and professional development opportunities for mentees. Participants are expected to dedicate approximately 4 to 6 hours per month to program activities, including meetings, professional growth opportunities, and special events. The program concludes with a graduation ceremony recognizing the mentor and mentee experience.

This existing structure reflects several elements aligned with relational engagement, including intentional relationship-building, professional development, and sustained interaction over time. EHSD may consider assessing how elements of the Mentorship Program could be expanded or adapted to support broader coaching practices across the organization. Opportunities may include increasing access to mentorship beyond current capacity, integrating coaching principles into supervisory practices, or creating additional peer-based learning opportunities.

Revisit and Reassess Staff Surveys to Evaluate Readiness

Understanding workforce experience is a necessary precursor to any large-scale culture change initiative. EHSD may benefit from revisiting existing staff surveys or implementing additional

feedback mechanisms to assess engagement, psychological safety, communication effectiveness, trust, workload concerns, and cross-divisional collaboration.

Survey and feedback efforts could be aligned with BEACON's emphasis on belonging and engagement to ensure consistency in how workforce experience is measured and understood. In addition to quantitative data, qualitative feedback should be considered to capture the complexity of staff perspectives. This information can serve as a baseline for assessing readiness, identifying areas requiring foundational work, and measuring progress over time.

Assess Fiscal, Personnel, Structural, and Political Assets and Limitations

Culture change initiatives require sustained investment and alignment across fiscal, personnel, structural, and political domains. EHSD should conduct a comprehensive assessment of available resources, including staff capacity, competing operational priorities, existing decision-making structures, potential funding sources, and alignment with priorities established by the Board of Supervisors and other county leadership.

Initial pilot efforts may require dedicated staff time for planning, coordination, training, facilitation, communication, and evaluation activities. Leveraging existing structures such as BEACON and the Mentorship Program may help reduce initial implementation costs by integrating relational engagement practices into established frameworks rather than creating entirely new systems. A phased approach also provides an opportunity to assess resource demands, staff capacity, and operational impact before broader expansion.

Focus on Strategic Alignment and Integration

A clearly defined and widely communicated strategic plan is essential to support any large-scale organizational effort. EHSD may benefit from ensuring that relational engagement, leadership development, and workforce well-being are explicitly incorporated into existing strategic priorities. This includes aligning BEACON initiatives, workforce development efforts, operational goals, and staff engagement efforts under a shared framework to reduce fragmentation.

Strategic integration can also support clearer communication to staff regarding the purpose of these efforts and how they connect to broader organizational goals. Without this alignment, efforts to strengthen organizational culture may remain decentralized and inconsistent across divisions.

Expand Leadership Development with Targeted Relational Competencies

Leadership development is a critical factor in sustaining organizational culture change. EHSD may consider expanding development opportunities that focus on relational competencies, including communication, emotional intelligence, coaching practices, inclusive leadership, conflict navigation, and change leadership.

These skills are particularly important in complex, high-demand environments where leaders are responsible for balancing operational requirements with staff support. Strengthening these competencies can help ensure greater consistency in how relational practices are modeled and reinforced across the organization. This approach also supports succession planning by preparing emerging leaders to operate effectively within a more relationship-centered organizational framework.

Use a Phased and Scalable Implementation Approach

Given the size and complexity of Contra Costa County EHSD, a phased approach to implementation is likely to be more effective than a large-scale rollout. Initial efforts could focus on specific divisions, programs, or pilot groups where there is leadership support, staff capacity, and readiness to engage in the work.

This approach allows the organization to test strategies, gather feedback, and make adjustments before expanding more broadly. It also reduces the risk of overwhelming staff and operations, particularly in an environment already managing significant workload and system demands. A phased approach further provides an opportunity to demonstrate early outcomes, which may support broader organizational buy-in over time.

Leverage Existing Structures to Strengthen Relational Engagement

EHSD has existing structures and initiatives that support elements of relational engagement, including BEACON and the Mentorship Program. Leveraging and strengthening these efforts may provide a more sustainable approach than developing entirely new systems. By aligning these programs with relational engagement principles such as belonging, collaboration, communication, and professional growth, the department can build on established practices while gradually introducing new strategies.

Over time, this may allow EHSD to move toward a more intentional and integrated model of relational engagement that reflects both organizational values and operational realities.

Potential Pilot Design and Resource Considerations

Contra Costa County EHSD could consider a small pilot rather than a department-wide launch. A pilot could be limited to one division, one bureau, or a cross-functional group of supervisors and staff already connected to BEACON, the Mentorship Program, or workforce development efforts. This would allow the department to test relational engagement practices without creating a new large-scale initiative before readiness, resources, and leadership capacity are fully assessed.

A practical pilot could include three modest components: a readiness assessment using existing survey or listening-session tools, a structured peer coaching test using a small group of mentor/mentee or supervisor participants, and intentional relationship-building practices embedded into existing team meetings. These components would not require the department to immediately procure a full professional coaching model. Instead, they would allow EHSD to learn what staff find useful, what support supervisors need, and what operational barriers would need to be addressed before expansion.

The primary costs of an initial pilot would likely be staff time, coordination, facilitation, training preparation, communication, and evaluation. If the pilot is built into existing structures, some costs may be absorbed through current staff development, BEACON, or leadership meeting structures. However, even a small pilot should identify who will coordinate the work, how much time participants will be expected to spend, whether managers can support that time, and how outcomes will be reviewed and reported.

If the department later considers professional coaching, additional fiscal analysis would be needed. Cost considerations would include whether coaching is provided by internal staff, countywide training resources, external vendors, or a hybrid model. The department would also need to consider procurement requirements, contract administration, and whether coaching would be available to all staff, supervisors only, or selected pilot participants. These decisions should be guided by readiness data, operational capacity, and alignment with departmental priorities.

A pilot approach also creates a lower-risk opportunity to assess whether relational engagement practices are experienced by staff as useful and supportive. This is particularly important in environments where trust and psychological safety may vary across divisions. Starting small allows the department to adjust language, tools, expectations, and implementation supports before scaling to a larger audience.

Conclusion

Marin County Health and Human Services' CORE initiative reflects a growing recognition within public human services that organizational culture, leadership, and workplace relationships are not secondary to operational success, but foundational to it. In increasingly complex service environments, agencies are being asked to respond to rising community needs, workforce challenges, technological change, and fiscal pressures simultaneously. Within this context, relational infrastructure including trust, communication, coaching, and shared purpose becomes essential to sustaining both employee well-being and effective service delivery.

While Contra Costa County's size, structure, and operational demands present important considerations for implementation, the CORE model offers valuable insights into how intentional investment in relationships and leadership development can support organizational resilience over time. At the same time, this analysis reinforces that successful culture change requires more than isolated programs or aspirational messaging. It requires organizational readiness, strategic alignment, leadership commitment, resource planning, and the willingness to engage in ongoing reflection and adaptation.

As public human services agencies continue navigating significant workforce and systems challenges, the ability to cultivate connected, adaptive, and psychologically safe organizational environments may increasingly influence not only employee engagement and retention, but also the quality and responsiveness of services delivered to the communities they serve.

References

- Booker, S., Young, B. & Klus, C. (2025). *Building Organizational Plasticity: A Path to Trauma-Informed Systems*. Trauma Transformed.
<https://www.traumatransformed.org/documents/Building%20Organizational%20Plasticity.pdf>
- Einstein, B. (2025). *Leading Successful Organizational Transformation Through Cultures*. Harvard Business School. <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/organizational-transformation>
- Marin County Health and Human Services. (2025). *Future Forward Strategic Plan*. Marin Health & Human Services Strategic Plan 2025-2028. Updated Jan. 16, 2025.
<https://www.marincounty.gov/your-government/hhs-strategic-planning/marin-health-human-services-strategic-plan-2025-2028>.
- Marin County Health and Human Services. (2026). CORE Strategic Initiative materials [unpublished]. HHS Strategic Planning Areas of Focus. Updated Oct 24, 2025.
- Today's Mental Wellness. (2026). *Organizational trauma: Eight warning signs you can't ignore*.
<https://www.todaysmentalwellness.com/post/organizational-trauma-eight-warning-signs>