

Santa Clara County's Medi-Cal Caseload Management: A Unit-Based Model

Maribelt Balderas

Program Manager

Alameda County Social Services Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study of Santa Clara County's Medi-Cal Caseload Management Model offers valuable insights into the strategies used to successfully manage increasing public assistance demands. The model emphasizes shared caseloads within dedicated units, allowing Eligibility Workers (EW) to collaborate on tasks rather than managing individual caseloads. This approach promotes efficiency, consistency, and teamwork, ensuring that work is distributed more equitably across staff.

By examining Santa Clara's implementation, this case study highlights how the Unit-Based Model supports workload distribution, reduces processing delays, improves timeliness and accuracy in service delivery. Additionally, the model fosters a supportive team environment, which leads to higher staff morale and better client outcomes.

The goal of this case study is to assess the feasibility of implementing a similar model in Alameda County, considering staffing levels, operational needs, and client service goals. Findings from this analysis will inform potential recommendations for transitioning from an individual caseload approach to a unit-based, task-driven structure that better meets the needs of both staff and clients.

Introduction

In April 2017, the Alameda County Social Services Agency's (ACSSA) Workforce and Benefits Administration Department (WBA) implemented a district case action-based business model to streamline workload management. This model utilized the Work Distribution Tool (WDT) to assign case actions for CalFresh, CalWORKs, General Assistance, and Medi-Cal programs. Under this task-based system, Eligibility Services Technicians (ESTs) completed assigned case actions pulled from CalWIN (CalWORKs Information Network), allowing for an equitable distribution of work across the Workforce and Benefits Administration Department.

By June 2023, in preparation for the transition to CalSAWS (California Statewide Automated Welfare System), Alameda County discontinued the task-based model and returned to individual caseloads, rendering WDT obsolete.

Implemented in September 2023, CalSAWS is a unified, modern platform that integrates public assistance programs across all 58 California counties. It offers enhanced features such as streamlined workflows, comprehensive case management, improved interdepartmental collaboration, and data-informed decision-making tools.

Alameda County has experienced an increase in public assistance cases, rising from 218,371 in May 2024 to 301,400 May 2025, a 37.5% increase. Meanwhile, the agency continues to face a critical staffing shortage, with a 30% vacancy rate, that hinders its ability to maintain manageable caseloads and ensure timely, high-quality service. This widening gap between service demand and staffing capacity strains the current operational model and places both clients and staff at a significant disadvantage.

With only 138 (ongoing) district Eligibility Services Technicians III (EST III) responsible for managing an average of 3,000 cases, staff are stretched thin. This has led to decreased productivity, delays in service delivery, and a decline in the overall quality of client support. Managing such high caseloads has become increasingly unsustainable.

This staffing gap underscores the urgent need to:

- Explore alternative workload models to support equitable task distribution,
- Identify ways to improve timeliness, accuracy, and staff morale, and
- Assess the feasibility of implementing a Unit-Based Model in Alameda County to strengthen service delivery and operational efficiency.

The Unit-Based Model

To address the growing Medi-Cal caseloads, Santa Clara County's Benefits Service Center (BSC) adopted a Unit-Based Model of caseload management in 2012 and adapted this model to CalSAWS. This new

model was developed collaboratively through a work group that included staff at all levels of the organization, including management, line staff, and labor representatives. The BSC facility is responsible for providing continuing case maintenance for Medi-Cal only cases. As of April 1, 2025, the BSC was handling 189,635 Medi-Cal cases. The BSC is comprised of:

Eligibility Staff:

- 1 Social Services Program Manager III
- 3 Social Services Program Manager Is
- 25 Continuing Units (Comprised of 1 EWS, 1 EW III (lead) and up to 8 EW III)
- 25 Eligibility Worker Supervisors (EWS)
- 25 Eligibility Worker III (Leads)
- 144 Eligibility Worker II

Clerical Staff:

- Social Services Program Manager II
- 2 Office Management Coordinators
- 7 Leads
- 40 Clerks

Under the Unit-Based Model, each unit jointly manages a shared caseload. Tasks related to that caseload are generated and distributed daily in a balanced way within the unit members, promoting both collaboration and shared accountability.

To monitor progress and performance, the department utilizes a range of daily and weekly reports that track key performance metrics such as task assignment and completion, call volume, wait times, and service responsiveness.

The implementation of the Unit-Based Model has played a significant role in helping Santa Clara County resolve a substantial backlog and improve overall accuracy, accountability, collaboration and effectiveness in service delivery.

Santa Clara's Unit-Based Model within the CalSAWS system is designed to improve caseload management by segmenting cases into 50 banks, divided into two main categories:

- 25 Control Banks
- 25 Unit Ghost Banks

In CalSAWS, counties can assign tasks to a shared bank created for a specified office and unit. Workers from that office and unit, as well as other designated staff, can be associated with the Bank, allowing them to enable task assignments either automatically through a recurring nightly batch based on predefined criteria, or manually. Manual assignment allows for more equitable distribution. Tasks can be assigned to an individual worker, a bank, or both.

Control Banks

Control Banks serve as a management and oversight tool within the CalSAWS system. They hold cases that do not require action and are regularly monitored by Management Analysts (MA) to track case status and support effective workload distribution. As work is received for cases in the Control Banks, they are assigned to the Unit Ghost Banks for assignment. Control Banks are not linked to specific units, allowing for strategic workload assessment and higher-level monitoring.

Ghost Banks

Ghost Banks are directly connected to a unit caseload bank. These banks contain specific tasks and cases that assigned staff are responsible for managing. When a case is assigned to the unit caseload bank, the task follows, ensuring seamless alignment between case ownership and task responsibility. All day-to-day operations, such as eligibility determinations, document verifications, and ongoing case management, occur within these banks.

Task Assignment and Companion Tasks

To promote efficiency, CalSAWS utilizes a companion task feature. This functionality ensures that related tasks, such as document review and eligibility determination for the same case, are grouped together and assigned to the same worker. This allows for more cohesive and streamlined case handling, reducing the likelihood of missed actions or delays in processing.

This Unit-Based Model structure enables a more organized, systematic approach to case management, ensuring that tasks are distributed efficiently and are easily traceable. The use of companion tasks and the Ghost Bank mechanism further enhances workflow and accountability, improving overall service delivery.

Management Analyst Role

To support operational oversight, Management Analysts play a key role by generating weekly Business Objects reports. These reports are essential for identifying processing delays, promoting timely service delivery, and maintaining accountability. To monitor the unit banks as well as productivity, the MA team provides weekly reports:

- Medi-Cal task distribution
- Pending tasks

- Tasks completed the previous week
- Aging Tasks (pending over 30 days)
- Daily Phone Report
- Daily Lobby Report
- Monthly Dashboard

The Business Objects' reports and the MediCal Renewal Listing Report in CalSAWS are used to assess staff productivity. Program Managers meet weekly with Management Analysts to review these reports. These sessions serve as a dedicated forum to analyze trends, evaluate performance by unit or individual worker, and develop strategies for improvement or targeted support within the Benefit Service Center. The executive team also shares weekly Bureau minutes as well as monthly dashboards with line staff. This focus on data reporting, staff engagement, and transparency is essential to effective case management. By involving staff in the process and maintaining open communication, management fosters buy-in and boosts morale, ultimately supporting overall productivity.

Additionally, Management Analysts monitor and adjust Unit Banks according to each unit's composition and operational needs, reassigning cases as necessary to maintain balance. The team conducts regular sweeps of pending tasks, ensuring they are allocated to the appropriate units based on workload capacity and available staffing. Language preferences are also considered to support equitable task distribution and ensure that clients receive appropriate language-specific assistance.

Quality Assurance

As part of the department's internal quality assurance process, Eligibility Worker Supervisors (EWS) are expected to conduct 16 case audits monthly.

These case audits are carefully selected to evaluate how well front-line staff are adhering to critical program standards. Specifically, the reviews assess:

- **Eligibility Guidelines:** ensuring workers are applying program rules and eligibility criteria correctly
- **Documentation Standards:** verifying that case files are complete, accurate, and include all necessary client verifications and journal entries
- **Policy Application:** checking that state, federal, and county policies are consistently and correctly applied in the decision-making process

Once these reviews are completed, the results are shared with the Quality Assurance (QA) Coordinator via the Case Accuracy Review Monitoring Application (CARMA). This is an ancillary automated case

review system developed by Santa Clara to conduct and document case reviews efficiently. It helps ensure quality control and supports data-driven performance evaluations. The system sends email notifications to staff, prompting them to log into CARMA to take corrective action, including details on deadlines and required corrections.

The QA Coordinator plays a key role in analyzing the findings to identify patterns or trends, such as recurring errors, gaps in documentation, or training needs.

Based on these trends, the EWSs work collaboratively with the QA staff to address concerns. This collaboration may involve:

- Developing refresher training or guidance for staff
- Implementing corrective action plans
- Providing coaching to individual workers
- Updating internal processes or job aids for clarity

This structured and data-informed approach ensures that quality assurance is not just about identifying errors, but also about improving service delivery, strengthening compliance, and supporting continuous staff development.

Maintaining Accountability

Supervisors maintain accountability and support performance through structured check-ins and performance monitoring. Each Eligibility Worker participates in quarterly, individual conferences with their supervisor to review key performance areas such as task management (including overdue and aging tasks), attendance, Officer of the Day (OD) responsibilities, and phone performance.

In addition to individual quarterly conferences, supervisors increase the frequency of meetings if an EW exhibits performance concerns. Depending on the severity and nature of the issue, these conferences may occur monthly or even weekly. Biweekly team meetings are also held to provide updates, clarify expectations, address challenges, and promote consistent communication across the unit. This structure allows for closer support, timely feedback, and targeted coaching.

These touchpoints help ensure that all staff receive the same information, reinforcing equity, transparency, and team cohesion.

Task Management

During the CalSAWS implementation, Santa Clara's executive team conducted a thorough review of all task types. Many tasks were identified as redundant or unnecessary and were eliminated to streamline workflows. Each task was carefully evaluated, and decisions were made to retain only those that were essential and actionable.

One key challenge involved document submissions through BenefitsCal. The system previously generated a separate task for each page submitted, resulting in an excessive number of tasks for a single client action. To address this, supervisors now review and monitor tasks daily, voiding duplicates and unnecessary entries to maintain efficiency.

Auto-Assign Process

CalSAWS includes an automated task distribution feature that assigns tasks based on predefined criteria, such as language preferences. While this promotes efficient routing, it often results in bilingual workers receiving a disproportionately high volume of tasks, creating potential workload imbalances.

Manual Assignment Process

To maintain equitable workload distribution and ensure task appropriateness, supervisors manually review and assign tasks, particularly those that appear in the "Ghost Bank" overnight. Manual assignments are used for:

- Distributing tasks evenly within their unit
- Matching tasks to staff with the appropriate expertise
- Addressing urgent or complex tasks
- Reducing delays and improving workflow efficiency
- Balancing Automation and Oversight

By combining auto-assignment and manual assignments, Santa Clara County strives to maintain a balanced and responsive task management system. This hybrid approach supports both operational consistency and the flexibility needed to address staffing challenges and varying case complexities.

Officer of the Day

A key element of the Unit-Based Model is the use of Officer of the Day (OD). Client walk-ins or in-person visits are handled by a designated OD from each unit, ensuring consistent coverage and timely service.

Supervisors are responsible for maintaining the OD rotation calendar, which includes 25 workers daily, one from each unit. On average, each worker serves as OD approximately three times per month.

Officers of the Day are responsible for managing time-sensitive or urgent requests that arise throughout the day. To support this role and ensure responsiveness, ODs do not receive additional case-related tasks while serving in this capacity, allowing them to focus on walk-ins, urgent client needs, or same-day actions.

The OD process not only promotes accountability but also ensures that urgent matters and client walk-in needs are addressed promptly and efficiently, without overburdening the rest of the units. If any errors are identified during OD duties, the task is either returned to the originating unit for correction or reassigned using a round-robin method to ensure timely resolution.

Contact Center Support

A core component of this model is the shared responsibility for Contact Center support. Each EW completes a daily phone shift to address client inquiries. EWs handle all eligibility-related questions and act on requests that do not require eligibility determination, such as issuing Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, Benefit Identification Cards (BIC) or sending documents.

The structure of phone coverage has evolved to better balance client service with task processing responsibilities. Previously, the schedule allowed for more flexibility and broader participation. Currently, all 25 units participate in daily phone coverage. To optimize workflow, seven units are assigned to cover shifts each day. Each unit is responsible for designated 2-hour and 15-minute shifts, ensuring consistent client access while effectively managing staff capacity.

The Contact Center schedule rotates every six months and is divided into four daily shifts:

- 8:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m
- 10:15 a.m. – 12:30 p.m
- 12:30 p.m. – 2:45 p.m
- 2:45 p.m. – 5:00 p.m

This rotation promotes equitable participation across units and maintains seamless client support throughout business hours.

While on phone duty, EWs continue to receive and manage case-related tasks, requiring strong time management and prioritization skills. To support oversight and improve performance tracking, management uses Amazon Connect to monitor real-time Contact Center operations. The platform provides detailed metrics including call volume, average wait times, number of calls answered, call duration, and agent availability. These analytics enable supervisors to evaluate workload distribution, identify bottlenecks, and make data-driven decisions to enhance service delivery and operational efficiency.

Induction

Santa Clara County has implemented a structured and program-specific Induction Training Program for newly hired EWs, designed to ensure a smooth transition into their roles and promote long-term success.

Their Eligibility Induction period spans six months and is tailored to the program area the EW is assigned to, such as Medi-Cal, CalFresh, or CalWORKs. This focused approach ensures that training is relevant and aligned with the policies, procedures, and case management tools unique to each program.

During this period, new staff receive on-the-job (OJT) training for the last 4 months and gradually build their responsibilities over time. During OJT, trainees shadow experienced staff, including Contact Center representatives, and participate in the Officer of the Day rotation. These experiences provide practical exposure to client interactions, task navigation, system use, and customer service protocols.

Before joining a unit or taking on independent responsibilities, trainees are given opportunities to practice key functions in a supported environment, gradually increasing their task assignment and service delivery. This phased approach fosters confidence and competence, allowing new EWs to develop the foundational skills necessary for success.

The training model emphasizes real-time learning and accountability, and is complemented by ongoing support from supervisors, trainers, and peers throughout the induction period.

Conclusion

The case study of Santa Clara County's Unit-Based Caseload Management Model demonstrates a strategic and effective approach to addressing the operational challenges posed by increasing caseloads and staffing shortages. By shifting from individual caseloads to a collaborative, unit-based model, Santa Clara has achieved improved workload distribution, enhanced team accountability, and increased service efficiency—while maintaining quality and timeliness of client support. The integration of technology tools such as CalSAWS and Amazon Connect has further streamlined operations, enabling better tracking, performance monitoring, and resource allocation.

Recommendation

Given the sustained growth in public assistance demand and the ongoing staff shortages, it is recommended that Alameda County strongly consider implementing a Unit-Based Caseload Management Model like the one used by Santa Clara County. This model has successfully shown improvements to improve efficiency, timeliness, and accountability by promoting shared responsibility, enhancing collaboration, and streamlining task distribution through both automated and manual processes.

Key Benefits for Alameda County

- **Improved Efficiency:** Tasks are distributed across a team, allowing units to complete casework faster and more flexibly based on workload fluctuations
- **Enhanced Timeliness:** With daily task monitoring and shared accountability, client needs can be addressed more promptly, reducing backlogs
- **Increased Accountability:** Clearly defined roles, daily tracking, and supervisory oversight ensure timely and accurate processing, even with limited staff

Operational Support Enhancements

To ensure successful implementation and sustainability of this model, the following support mechanisms are recommended:

- **Transition to Program Specific Units:** Assigning ESTs to program specific units such as Medi-Cal, rather than requiring them to manage an All-Aid caseload encompassing CalWORKs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and General Assistance, offers several operational and performance benefits:
 - **Greater Expertise:** Focusing on one program allows ESTs to build stronger knowledge, improve accuracy and confidence
 - **Improved Efficiency:** Specialization reduces the complexity of juggling multiple program regulations, enabling faster, more consistent case processing
 - **Targeted Induction:** Induction is more focused and efficient, with more relevant ongoing support
 - **Fewer Errors:** With fewer variables to manage, mistakes decrease, reducing the need for corrective actions and oversight
 - **Higher Staff Morale:** Workers feel more confident and less overwhelmed, boosting job satisfaction and retention
 - **Simplified Supervision:** Supervisors can more easily monitor performance and provide targeted coaching when teams focus on one program
- **Leverage a system comparable to CARMA:** Implement a centralized case management review system to streamline and standardize case audits. It can be used to track eligibility performance, flag overdue or incomplete tasks, and identify trends in case processing. The system enhances accountability while equipping supervisors with the tools needed for timely feedback, consistent coaching, and continuous quality improvement.

- **Utilize Management Analysts:** Assign analysts to assist program managers by generating and interpreting reports such as aging tasks, contact center metrics, and productivity summaries. This ensures leadership has the insights needed to monitor effectiveness and make timely adjustments.
- **Revise Supervisory Oversight:** Modify the supervisors' expectations to 16 case reviews per month to allow them more time to provide oversight, coach staff, and focus on quality assurance and equitable task assignment. Additionally, modify their responsibilities to include quarterly one-on-one conferences with staff to review performance metrics (e.g., overdue tasks, phone coverage, attendance, and case review data), and establish biweekly team meetings to promote communication, clarify expectations, and provide timely feedback and coaching.

Implementation Challenges and Considerations

Despite the promising benefits, the following challenges must be addressed proactively:

- **Labor Buy-In:** Transitioning to a unit-based model may raise concerns around role clarity and workload fairness. Early and transparent engagement with labor representatives, along with inclusive planning sessions, will be critical for securing buy-in.
- **Cost of Ancillary Programs:** Implementing support technologies may require upfront investment. However, the long-term cost savings from increased efficiency and reduced overtime/backlogs can offset these expenses over time.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following individuals and teams who supported my participation in the BASSC Executive Development Training Program.

Thank you to Andrea Ford, Director of the Alameda County Social Services Agency, and Hannia Casaw-Barnell, Enterprise Division Director, for the opportunity to attend the training program and for their continued support of executive leadership development.

I am also grateful to the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency for hosting my visit and sharing their time and insights. Special thanks to:

- **Daniel Little**, Agency Director, for providing an overview of the County's priorities and initiatives
- **Gabriella Ortiz**, Program Manager III, for coordinating the visit and sharing her expertise. I appreciate her time and the thoughtful conversations she facilitated
- **Angelica Acosta**, Program Manager I, for sharing practical approaches and operational strategies
- **Ahmed Abdi**, Eligibility Worker Supervisor, for offering a valuable frontline perspective

- **Thao Phan**, Management Analyst, for providing valuable insights into the reporting and oversight process that supports operational efficiency
- **Wendy Merklingshaus**, Staff Development and Training, BASSC Liaison, for graciously facilitating my visit and for reviewing and providing thoughtful feedback on my project

Last but not least, I'd like to thank my Alameda County colleagues for their inspiration and support: Sharon Moore, Chief Departmental Human Resources Administrator; Christina Nguyen, Fund Development & Grant Specialist; Dr. Pamela Powell, Executive Program Coordinator; and Michael Little, Staff Development Manager, for his time, dedication as BASSC Liaison, and for providing valuable, encouraging feedback.

References

Alameda County Social Services Agency. (2025, May 25). *Power BI report on Caseload Management Report*.

Balderas, M., Ortiz, G., Acosta, A., & Abdi, A. (2025, April 1). Unit Based Model. Personal.

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. (n.d.). Department of Employment and Benefit Services.
<https://ssa.santaclaracounty.gov/departments/departament-employment-and-benefit-services>