

Teaching Real World Social Work Skills in a Simulation Lab – Implications of Alameda County’s SimLab Model for Contra Costa County

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

County human services departments have an interest in training staff to apply complex regulations in real world settings, to train safety protocols, to onboard and assess new staff quickly, and to effectively train soft skills, communication, cultural awareness and empathy. Simulation Laboratories (SimLabs) provide a venue to closely approximate real-world settings in a training environment. This learning model provides feedback on learning objectives related to identifying and responding to safety concerns, providing empathic service, focusing and conducting an effective interview, and applying regulations accurately to concrete tasks. SimLabs can be created with low start-up costs (a dedicated space and \$600-\$5000 in equipment). Virtual Training tools also provide simulation practice and consistent evidence-based feedback that staff can compare to future performance. Virtual Training requires capital investment and a selection of pre-made or custom-created scenarios. High- and low-tech models for simulation training boost staff readiness for work in human services.

Introduction

In Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD), a core value is "Excellence in All We Do." To that end, EHSD has an interest in exploring best practices and emerging models in social services training to support staff in doing their best work, delivering exceptional customer experience, and communicating effectively, openly, and with cultural competence. Success in training is reflected in staff's ability to complete concrete eligibility, social work, clerical, and supervisory related tasks with the high-quality standard of public service. Contra Costa continuously builds on its strategies: to bolster competence of staff in program knowledge, soft skills, and safety protocols; to increase efficiency in onboarding new staff to new programs; to train skills related to empathy, guiding interviews and customer service; to promote staff confidence and satisfaction in performing job duties; and to evaluate job performance. EHSD, with safety as its priority, has a particular interest in models to train staff in identifying and mitigating safety risks. Social work is a field in which there is a need to specifically train about safety protocols as they relate to daily tasks. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, between 2011 and 2013, three out of four workplace assaults took place in a health care or social services setting. (Reardon 2016).

Contra Costa EHSD has an interest in continuously improving training models for adult learners, including building on the Staff Development division's training tools to engage common adult learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. (Post, 2015). It is well-established that role play, also called simulation, is a best practice in training social workers (Banach, 2020). Role play is an effective training tool to strengthen relational competence, to cultivate empathy, and to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Gjestivang, 2021). A wide range of studies have shown the effectiveness of simulation in developing competence in students in social work settings. (Bogo et al., [2014](#); Kourgiantakis et al., [2019](#), [2020](#)). Trainees can try different responses to a scenario and use different approaches to verbal and non-verbal communication in a simulation to develop competence without the risk of lowering service levels to real clients. Student participation in simulation and debriefing is consistent with best practices in active and experiential learning theory, neuroscience research findings, and deliberate practice. (Kolb, [1984](#); Schenck & Cruickshank, [2015](#); Sousa, [2017](#); Taylor & Lamoreaux, [2008](#); Rousmaniere, [2017](#)). The ability to observe others' performance and to have one's performance observed, followed by immediate and focused feedback, is a best practice based on social learning theory. (Bandura, [1986](#)). Video recordings of students role playing scenarios allow the learner to reflect on their performance and self-identify points of improvement, and the trainer can link learning objectives and feedback to the performance for further reflection of the learner and the observers. (Schon, [1987](#)).

Through the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC), Alameda County's simulation laboratory (SimLab) was identified as an established training model that uses scenarios with live actors who are video recorded to train defined learning objectives and to provide focused feedback on those objectives.

Alameda County's SimLab

In 2017, the Training and Consulting Team (TACT) in Alameda County's Social Services Agency established a Simulation Laboratory (SimLab) that is utilized for eligibility, supervisory, social work, and outside department training to allow staff to practice skills and receive feedback related to identified learning objectives in real-world-based scenarios.

The SimLab is a dedicated training room used to create replicas of real-world settings for role playing scenarios that are recorded for the trainee to observe their performance, provide self-coaching, and to discuss and get feedback from a training group, trainer or supervisor. The recordings are saved so that the trainee can complete the scenario again in the future (after more job experience) and compare their performances. The scenarios are created by trainers with input from program management. The scenarios are based on a curriculum to train new material or to address knowledge/skill gaps that have been identified. The specific skill or knowledge to be developed is identified as part of the scenario. Because the scenarios are developed in-house, content is very flexible to the department's needs and can be developed responsively and efficiently as needs change. The scenarios are approved by the department before use. The scenarios have clearly defined learning objectives and are designed to be conducted in a short time—there is a goal of under seven minutes per scenario. Typically, there are a maximum of three learning objectives per session and the staff members participate in several scenarios during their training. The scenarios are written to coordinate with and build on each other and the scenario uses the same characters (the same client or family.)

The SimLab is used to train CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and CalWORKs eligibility staff, social workers in Welfare-to-Work, In Home Supportive Services, Child Welfare and Adult Protective Services, eligibility and social work supervisors, and managers. SimLab is used as part of eligibility worker induction training. SimLab is also available for use by other departments through the SharePoint reservation system at TACT. The SimLab manager (a TACT staff member) maintains a catalog of available props and scenery that can be requested for a scenario. For example, staging includes a living room, a kitchen setting, a courtroom setting, a workstation setting, and props to enhance the “real” appearance of the scenes or for specific learning objectives. This includes a flag for the court scene and items related to safety, such as a prop knife, alcohol, pill bottles, etc.

The SimLab manager also maintains a list of volunteer “actors” (county staff), who volunteer to act out scenarios with trainees. These volunteers receive training in SimLab and are certified to participate. The SimLab certification is managed by a committee and is part of onboarding new Staff Development Specialists. The SimLab Certification requirements have evolved since the inception of the SimLab. Originally, certification and training for SimLab was contracted to UC Davis and included acting coaching in addition to SimLab processes. The current certification is conducted in-house and has been simplified to reduce the acting classes and emphasize the SimLab processes, the actor's role, participating in learning objectives, and how to develop the

scene. The SimLab manager emphasizes to the actors the importance of consistency and being the same character each time the scenario is conducted. Before acting in an individual scenario, the actor is given a script that describes the character and learning objectives. The day before the scenario is played out, the SimLab manager sets up the scene, including any props, ensures the room is in order, reviews that all parties have the necessary materials, and tests the IT equipment to ensure that it is functional. Specifically, the SimLab manager does sound tests to ensure the microphones are set up to pick up sound well in the area(s) of the room where the scenario will be conducted.

The SimLab has six (6) continuously recording cameras (RioLink Security Cameras) that capture all angles of the SimLab and can be viewed on any desktop computer, Smart Phone, or tablet through a free downloadable app. Scenarios taking place in the SimLab can be viewed from any location and footage can be downloaded to share with participants, trainers, and supervisors for discussion, self-critique, and feedback. Footage expires after ten days and is automatically overwritten, unless downloaded and saved for future viewing. Footage can be downloaded in 30-minute or one-hour increments. All actors and participants sign a media release before participating in the SimLab.

Once trainees have completed participation in a scenario, a structured feedback process follows. The participant writes notes to reflect on the learning objectives. The scenario recording is viewed by all in the learning group, and feedback expectations and guidelines are explained to all. The participant is the first person to self-reflect on the scenario, and any feedback identified by the participant cannot be provided again by others. This is to eliminate excessive focus on any one item and to prevent feedback of which the participant is already aware. All members of the training group share their feedback, with the trainer providing feedback last, to emphasize items related to the learning objective.

Main challenges that have been identified—and that have been mitigated—in the SimLab are ensuring that the microphones have consistent audio in all areas of the room, obtaining a consistent number of volunteer actors, maintaining the consistency of the actors' performance for each participant's scenario if a large training group is conducting back-to-back scenarios, and the consistency of quality feedback tailored to the learning objective.

To create a SimLab, start-up equipment would include: 6 security cameras (such as Riolink), a two-terabyte hard drive, a microphone, cables, and basic props. Current costs to start a SimLab are estimated under \$5000, in addition to a dedicated space to conduct scenarios and store props.

Items being explored by Alameda County to build on the existing SimLab model are expanding the prop catalog and evaluating software from the University of Utah, The Virtual Social Work Trainer (VSWT). The VSWT has two types of training available: Virtual Home Simulation (VHS) and Virtual Motivational Interviewing (VMI). The VHS is a virtual home visit with a catalog of scenarios to select from. Additional scenarios are being developed on an ongoing

basis. The VHS can be played on a virtual reality headset or a computer. The VHS teaches the identification of risks and protective factors in a home and begins with reviewing a case file and approaching a home, including entering the home, interacting with people inside, and eventually concluding the visit. At each action choice the participant makes, feedback is given on evidence-based best practices for that action. For example, if the trainee approaches the home without reviewing the case file, instant feedback is given for reviewing the file for safety aspects, and the system prohibits the trainee from entering the home. As the trainee approaches the home and parks the car, if the trainee parks the virtual car by pulling forward into the parking space instead of backing into the space, feedback is given about the safety implications for being able to leave efficiently. During the visit, the trainee selects what to observe and who to interact with. The VHS system saves feedback and scores for later reference.

The scenarios for VHS are currently Child Welfare-based, with plans for additional programs to be added. Los Angeles County has currently implemented the use of VSWT in social worker training. Alameda County has secured the VHS Software to test through a mutual agreement with the University of Utah and Alameda County's IT Department. The agreement allows free use of the software in exchange for providing data to continue to improve the system. Custom scenarios for VSWT, including programs outside of Child Welfare, can be created for under \$100,000 with an overall commercial pricing structure for VSWT currently being established, to be publicly published in approximately July 2025.

Implications and Recommendations for Contra Costa County

The SimLab provides kinesthetic learning related to job tasks that serve vulnerable community members. The SimLab model is a tool that could provide Contra Costa Staff Development and program trainers with additional resources, at a low cost, to effectively train staff to apply program regulations, business processes, and soft skills to core job tasks. The potential for learning objectives in a SimLab is wide-ranging, including:

- identifying safety concerns and following safety protocol
- introducing oneself to and building rapport with a client
- responding to difficult information
- building cultural awareness and competence
- topical matters related to changes in program regulations or business practice

The SimLab can be used to train empathy, practice tasks, build confidence, rehearse safety protocols, provide an opportunity for self-reflection, observe/evaluate staff performance on tasks that are main components of the job function, and to explore and gain feedback related to cultural competencies.

A SimLab has many benefits in training human services staff and is a cost-effective model for providing an engaging training setting. The main costs of the SimLab startup are:

- the cost of equipment and props
- the cost of space usage
- the cost of Full Time Employees (FTEs) to manage SimLab, procure equipment and props, write and approve scenarios and volunteer as actors, and to act as IT support to install and maintain the cameras and the hard drive

Because of the many benefits of SimLab, it is recommended that a SimLab Committee be established to plan and implement a SimLab for Contra Costa County, and that a contact at the Staff Development division be identified as a coordinator for SimLab. It is recommended that the SimLab Committee be structured with thought partners to contribute expertise:

- in training methodology, current training practices, and logistics for training
- in information technology, including electronic equipment procurement, setup, network/hardware, and maintenance
- in operations from the major eligibility and social work programs, who can assist in tailoring learning objectives, identifying learning gaps that current staff experience, and providing scenarios that are commonly encountered in practice

It is recommended that the SimLab committee include representation from staff development, Information Technology, and program operations staff, ideally with subject matter experts from each major eligibility and social work program (CalWORKs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal, General Assistance, In Home Supportive Services, Adult Protective Services, Child Protective Services).

The SimLab Committee would identify space and complete the procurement process for equipment, such as the cameras, hard drive, and props. The committee would establish SimLab processes, like guidelines for use of the SimLab, the reservation process, actor qualifications/training/certification, and draft scenarios with learning objectives to use in a soft launch to evaluate SimLab processes. The committee would be responsible for assessing the model on an ongoing basis to determine if there are necessary maintenance, equipment upgrades, or process improvements.

The committee would develop processes for establishing a volunteer list of staff to contribute as actors and would determine the onboarding process. Possible classifications that may contribute include current EHSD Staff Development employees, eligibility and social work staff, clerical staff, Workforce Services Specialists, program analysts, supervisors, and managers. The committee may explore whether other staffing resources, such as WEX trainees (work experience or internship programs), could contribute to the pool of actors. WEX trainees could

staff actor roles and be empowered to take an active role assisting to train workers from their lived experience as customers.

A timeline for the launch of SimLab over the next fiscal year could take place as follows:

- Quarter 1: Establish SimLab Committee. Identify space, whether pre-existing in staff development or to be identified in another location. Procurement plan for equipment and props. Develop SimLab guidelines, reservation process, actor staffing, and certification process
 - Approximately 6-8 hours in committee (whole committee)
 - Approximately 1-2 hours for IT staff to identify equipment and initiate procurement
 - Approximately 40 hours for process drafting (SimLab Coordinator or designee)
- Quarter 2: Develop 4-5 scenarios with defined learning objectives in multiple programs across the benefits and social work spectrum. Establish a volunteer actor list
 - Approximately 6-8 hours in committee (whole committee)
 - Approximately 20 hours for refining drafts of scenarios and volunteer outreach (SimLab Coordinator or designee)
- Quarter 3: Set up equipment in SimLab, develop prop catalog. Conduct actor onboarding and certification
 - Approximately 1-2 hours in committee (whole committee)
 - Approximately 2 hours (IT staff)
 - Approximately 8-16 hours (SimLab Coordinator or designee)
 - At the committee's recommendation, possible coordination of training for "actors", i.e., improv/acting seminar, training on the substance of learning objectives, and guidelines for acting in a scenario
- Quarter 4: Soft launch of SimLab. Potential testers may be ETU, On-the-Job Training for CalFresh/Medi-Cal/CalWORKs, IHSS Social Worker Induction, or another learning group identified by the Staff Development/SimLab Committee. Feedback on soft launch to be provided to the SimLab committee to refine the process
 - Approximately 1-2 hours in committee (whole committee)

- o Approximately 20 minutes per SimLab participant (5 minutes for scenario and 15 minutes for feedback)
- o trainer/SimLab Coordinator time to manage the process for each scenario completed (20 min x number of participants)

It is further recommended that the SimLab Committee research the cost and software availability from the University of Utah's VSWT once the public-facing website is published for VHS in approximately late summer 2025, to determine the feasibility of VHS in Contra Costa County. If a new simulation tool could be construed as evaluating job performance, labor implications should be mitigated through engagement. Communication should include the benefits of supportive and realistic training to support skill development and of practicing safety protocols in a controlled setting without risk to staff or customers.

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