

# **Santa Cruz County Referral Maker Application: an Innovative and Time-Saving Solution**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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In 2016, the California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA) launched a strategic initiative named “CalWORKs 2.0”. The goal was to transform the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility for Kids (CalWORKs) program to better meet the needs of individual families in a more holistic way. The holistic approach was to build upon Assembly Bill 74, introduced in 2013, which established three new barrier removal programs, including Expanded Subsidized Employment (ESE), the Family Stabilization Program (FSP), and the Online CalWORKs Appraisal Tool (OCAT). One result of CalWORKs 2.0 and AB 74 was a significant increase in the amount of referrals that Employment and Training Workers (E&Ts) would make to new services and service providers.

Prior to CalWORKs 2.0 and AB 74, the County of Monterey made about seven referrals to services and service providers that were available to assist CalWORKs families including: Job Search Workshop (JSW), General Education Development (GED) or High School Equivalency Testing (HiSET), Behavioral Health Services, Community Service, Vocational Education (Voc-Ed), and Subsidized Employment. Following CalWORKs 2.0 and AB 74, the number of services and service providers more than doubled. Services were added for housing and homelessness, legal services including expungement of felony records, improved domestic violence and substance abuse services, partnerships with Family and Children’s linkages programs, parenting classes, and most recently, referrals to agencies supporting the Home Visiting Program (HVP) launched in 2018.

While it is unarguable that the increase in services and service providers has made a profound impact on families participating in the Welfare-to-Work (WTW) program, E&Ts have also been significantly impacted by the increase in resource knowledge and time required to make the referrals to the expansive list of available services. This is where Santa Cruz County’s Referral Maker Application (RMA) is positioned to be an innovative and time-saving solution. The RMA

allows E&Ts to use one web-based referral form that auto-populates customer information and is electronically emailed to multiple service providers in less than half the time needed to complete a standard referral. The RMA is being explored as a potential time-saving solution for the County of Monterey's E&T workers at CalWORKs Employment Services (CWES).

## **Introduction**

*“The first rule of any technology used in a business is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency.” - Bill Gates*

The RMA was discovered while researching Santa Cruz County’s Youth Employment Program (YEP) partnership between the Santa Cruz Work Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the CalWORKs Employment Services (CWES) programs. During the third partner meeting, Katy Chevalier, Santa Cruz County CWES Program Manager, elaborated on a single line of text in the CWES YEP desk aid which stated “Referrals will be sent to partner agencies using the Referral Maker app.” She shared that the RMA was developed by the Santa Cruz County Information Technology (IT) team and has become a “huge time saver” for her Employment Specialists (ESs).

A research meeting was scheduled and conducted with the Santa Cruz County IT team on May 10, 2024. The purpose of this paper is to capture the opportunities and limitations of the RMA project and to provide recommendations for implementing the RMA for the County of Monterey CWES program.

## **Background**

During induction training, new E&Ts are taught that every WTW service begins with entering the need and a referral in CalSAWS. Each service requires a unique referral, and each unique referral has a specific referral template. The referral templates require several fields of customer information to be gathered and entered. This information is located within different CalSAWS pages in the customer’s case file. Depending on the

service to be provided, a referral may require - in addition to customer name and case number- a phone number, email address, language preference, race, marital status, time remaining on the CalWORKs time clock, childrens’ names and ages, special accommodations, education level, employment status, place of birth, and hours required to participate, just to name a few. Navigating through the various CalSAWS pages and copying and pasting the required customer information takes approximately 20 minutes on average per referral. E&Ts make an average of 2.5 referrals per customer.

The County of Monterey CWES branch has developed a policy and procedure document that contains each of the referral templates needed for each service provider. The document has over 20 templates and is more than 40 pages long. The breadth and length of the document makes it challenging for E&Ts to memorize the different customer information fields needed for each referral. E&Ts must access the template document for each referral, locate the template, copy the template into the referral, and then gather the necessary customer information in CalSAWS to complete all of the fields in each template. E&Ts have been asking for a more efficient process for completing referrals to save them time and to reduce the chance of errors and delayed services.

## **Need for a Solution**

The County of Monterey E&Ts have demonstrated their desire to streamline the referral process. In a January 2024 staff survey, when asked about negative detractors from job satisfaction, 42% of CWES line staff disagreed with the statement, “I have enough time to do my

work.” When asked to elaborate, several E&T staff explained that there are more services and service providers than ever before. Those staff requested innovative solutions to the impact that this increase has had on their ability to provide efficient case management services. To further explore E&T concerns regarding the impact of increased services and service providers, staff were asked to complete a CWES Referral Efficiency Project survey. Fourteen E&Ts were asked to complete the survey and the results leaned toward a preference for a Referral Maker Application solution (see Appendix Figure 1). The E&Ts had a collectively negative view of the current CWES referral process in place. A majority of E&Ts (42%) spend between ten to twenty minutes on a general referral on average (see Appendix Figure 2). Another 28% reported spending twenty minutes or more per referral. Although over a quarter of the E&Ts spend between five and 10 minutes on a referral, not a single E&T was able to complete a general referral in five minutes or less. The component of the referral process that took the longest to complete was identified by 40% of E&Ts as the “gathering of template information from various CalSAWS pages” (see Appendix Figure 3). The RMA solution automates this process by pulling all necessary information into the referral instantly. Finally, more than half of the E&Ts surveyed (64%) indicated a preference for the Referral Maker Application solution with 35% in the “Maybe” category and zero E&Ts indicating “No” interest (see Appendix Figure 4).

### **The Referral Maker Application (RMA)**

Santa Cruz County began working on the Referral Maker Application (RMA) in late 2018. The project goal was to streamline

the many internal and external referrals required for Adult Protective Services (APS), In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS), and Employment and Benefits Services Division (EBSD) and to improve the tracking of those referrals. The solution was a web-based application that is accessed through the County’s intranet web portal (see Appendix Figure 5). The RMA is programmed to seamlessly retrieve data from the California Statewide Automated Welfare System (CalSAWS), the Case Management Information and Payrolling System (CMIPS), LEAPS, and a future expansion to Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) for Family and Children’s Services (FCS).

The RMA was in production in early 2019 and the first referral was created on April 17th, 2019, after 18 months of development. Features like PDF file creation were added “on the fly” to prevent the need for a file storage system or database. Key contributors to the project development included staff from the Adult and Long-Term Care Division, EBSD, and FCS as well as the Applications Development and Business Analytics team.

As shown on the graph in Appendix Figure 6, the number of referrals made through the RMA increased by about 500 per year from implementation in 2019 to a peak of 2,216 referrals made in 2023. A conservative estimate of referral time-savings reveals that the RMA is saving about 740 personnel work hours per year (approximately .36 FTE equivalent). More liberal estimates are twice as high suggesting the ability to save nearly a full FTE each year.

The RMA can be updated and modified via Information Technology (IT) service

requests. Requests allow for the addition of new services and service providers, the addition or removal of staff, and updating tables and/or data locations. Although some modifications can be completed quickly, programming modifications require between one to three weeks to complete. Since the RMA is developed as an “in-house” application, IT staff are able to repair and resolve software issues efficiently, ensuring that the application is almost always operational and available to end users. It includes a “client not found” feature that allows staff to manually complete a referral when client information is not available in the database applications.

The RMA also has helpful reports available to supervisors and managers. The reports allow for the detailed tracking and reporting of the various referrals by worker, service provider, and division. Reports are monitored regularly to ensure the timely submission of referrals and timely service delivery (see Appendix Figure 7).

There are currently 30 different types of referrals programmed into the RMA. The RMA is able to pull information instantly from 94 data fields in CalSAWS, LEAPS, and CMIPS. The data fields are current from the prior day's data backup file.

### **Recommendations for the County of Monterey**

The County of Monterey is well positioned to adopt a version of the RMA developed by Santa Cruz County. The Department of Information Systems Manager, Michael Borgeson, stated that “the core of the (RMA) application is already available.” By this, he was referring to the coding required to pull specific data field information from CalSAWS. This coding or query is the most

time-consuming component of the RMA development. With the coding readily available, the County of Monterey could reasonably program an RMA solution in as little as six months.

An RMA solution that supports APS, IHSS, CWES, and FCS, in addition to internal referral form solutions between Community Benefits (CB) and CWES should be pursued. To maximize the efficiency of the RMA, it is recommended to develop one internal web-based solution accessed by multiple Department of Social Services (DSS) branches. Currently, the various branches may be seeking individual commercial solutions that may be much more costly and pose an administrative contract burden as well as ongoing system support challenges. An added benefit of a joint solution would be the ability to cross-reference customers between branches to maximize shared service opportunities. Access to the ability to cross-reference customers between services could be restricted to those managers entrusted to protect sensitive service information.

The most important reason to adopt and implement an RMA is the reduction of the staff time required to make an internal or external referral. Rarely are there opportunities to increase a process efficiency by as much as 90%. An efficiency of this magnitude will have a direct impact on E&T job satisfaction in addition to the job satisfaction of line staff in APS, IHSS, FCS, and CB if a joint solution is pursued. The efficiency also benefits customers directly as the ability to complete a referral in one or two minutes permits the referral to be made with the customer present as opposed to completing a 20 minute referral process after meeting with a customer.

Additionally, the increased tracking of referrals by each branch individually, as well as the total referrals from all branches collectively, provides managers and senior managers with a picture of daily, weekly, monthly, and annual services being sought by customers. This allows for more informed programmatic decision-making for contracting and staffing.

The next step would be to prioritize this solution with DSS System Support and IT staff. It is recommended that this paper be discussed with the MCDSS Executive Team and considered for green-lighting for each branch that has an existing cumbersome internal or external referral system. Even if support for the project is limited to a single branch, the project still has considerable value in implementation. CWES alone is positioned to save a partial FTE while facing ongoing staffing challenges. With current and future budget reductions, it is imperative to capitalize on any untapped efficiencies. The RMA project developed by Santa Cruz County is truly an innovative and

time-saving solution that can benefit the County of Monterey and other counties using a manual referral process.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Appendix

Figure 1: E&T Survey Results 1

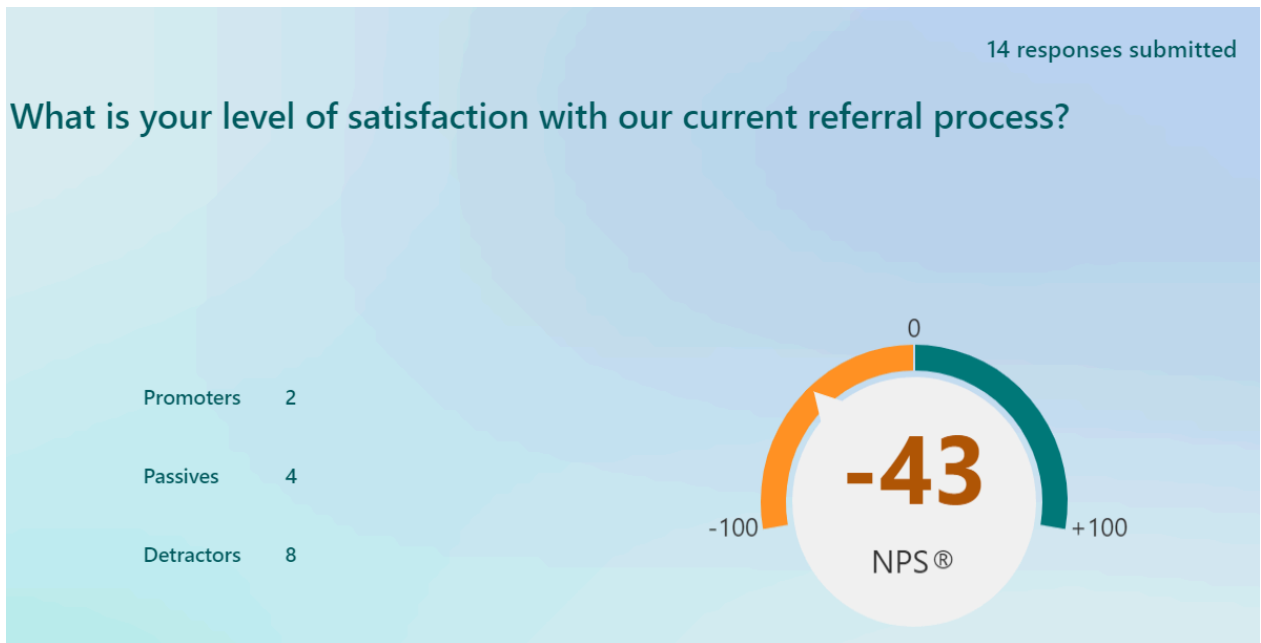


Figure 2: E&T Survey Results 2



Figure 3: E&T Survey Results 3

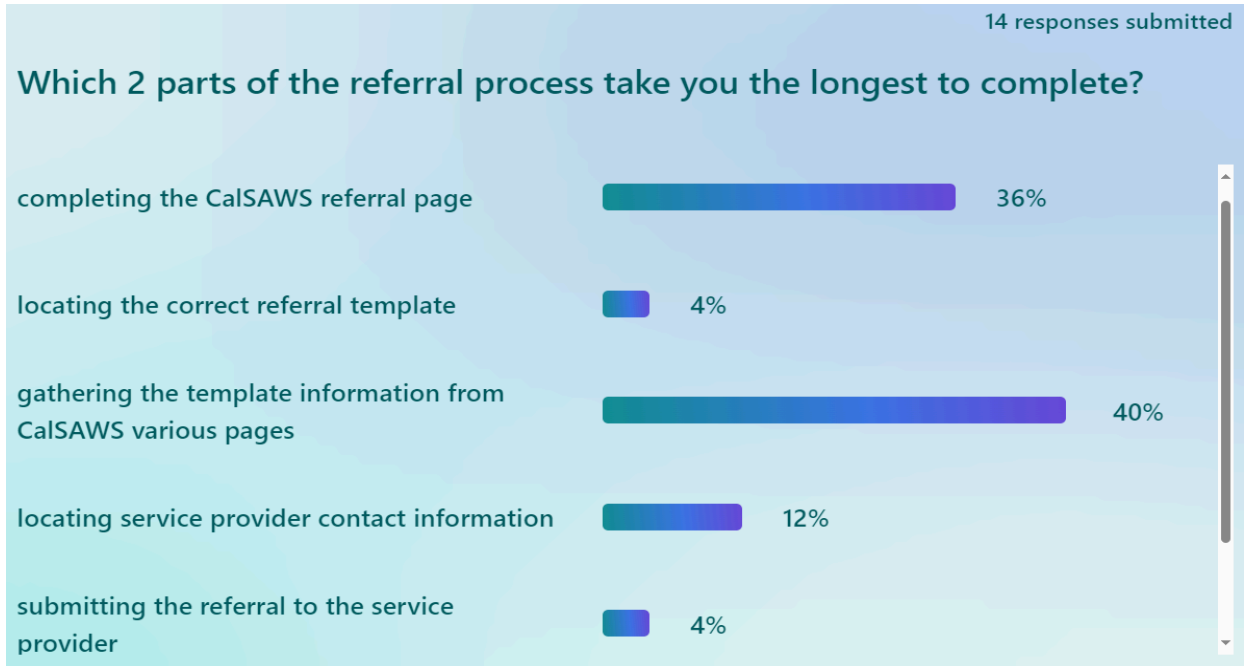


Figure 4: E&T Survey Results 4

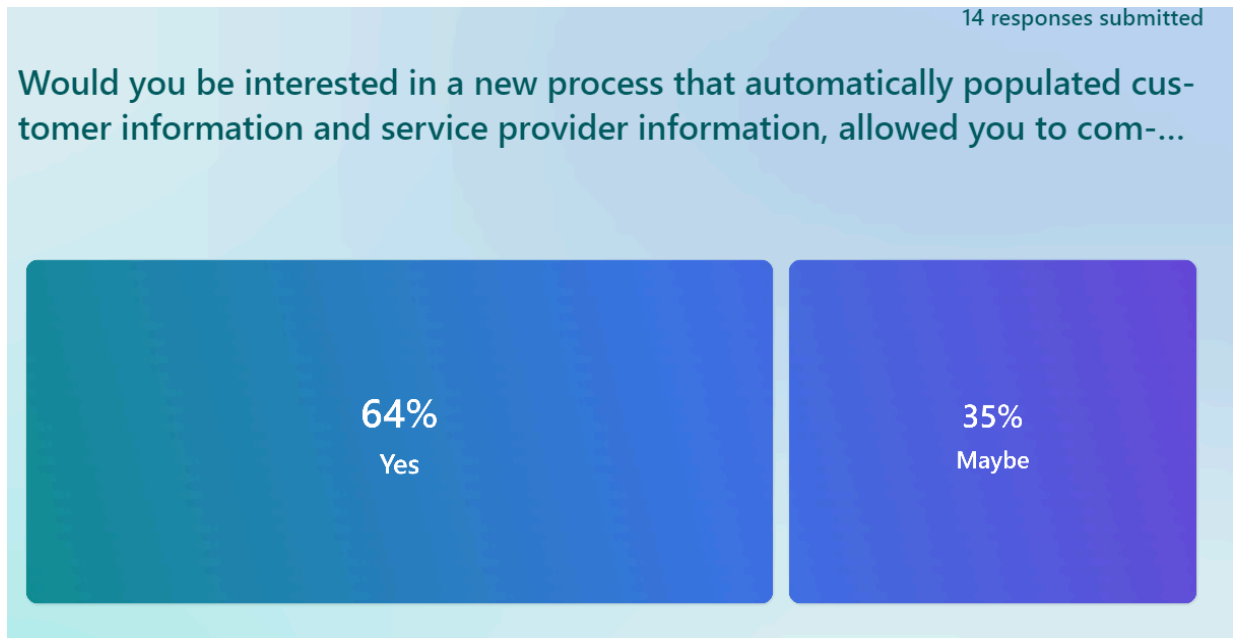


Figure 5: Santa Cruz County Referral Maker Application



Figure 6: Number of RMA Referrals by Year

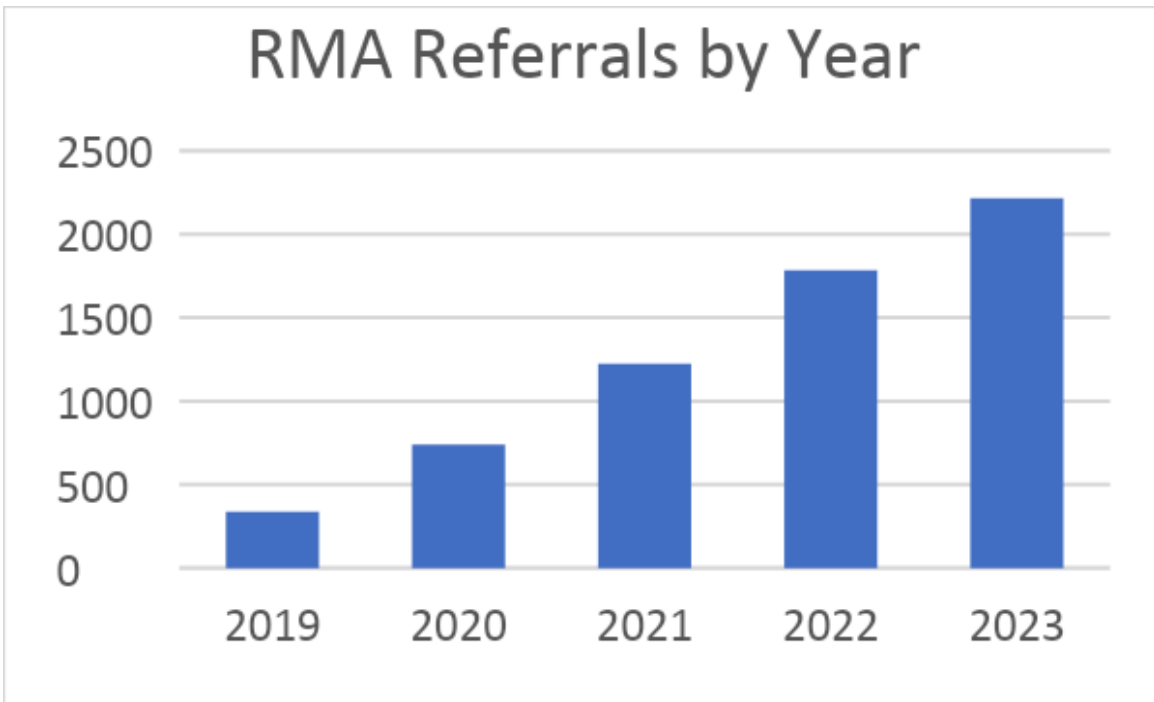


Figure 7: Referral Report for Cabrillo College 1/2024-5/2024

