

Data and Outcomes: How Santa Cruz uses the STATS Meeting to Support a Culture of Data-Driven Management and Decision-Making

Data Practices, Cross-County Comparison, and
Recommendations for Implementation in San Francisco County

Matthew Younger, BA

Principle Analyst, Family and Children's Services

San Francisco Human Services Agency

Executive Summary

San Francisco's Family and Children's Services (FCS), operating within the Human Services Agency (HSA), maintains a well-developed data infrastructure built around four dashboards covering child safety, permanency, workforce, and racial disproportionality. A semi-annual review process places data ownership directly in the hands of program managers, who present their own dashboards to senior leadership — a model that has produced measurable improvements across key performance indicators.

To identify opportunities for strengthening FCS's data practices, this report examines Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (HSD) STATS program, a PerformanceStat-based model operating since 2011. Interviews with Santa Cruz County leadership consistently identified the breakout group format and cross-departmental information sharing as the program's highest-value components. The report also presents a demographic and child welfare comparison between the two counties, identifying structural differences that shape what San Francisco can realistically adapt from the Santa Cruz model.

The report concludes with three targeted recommendations that carry no direct financial cost and require no new staff:

- Introduce structured breakout groups into FCS's existing semi-annual dashboard meetings (ready for implementation).
- Add contextual event timelines to FCS data reports and dashboards to improve interpretive depth (ready for implementation).
- Evaluate the feasibility of an annual HSA-wide data summit led by the HSA Planning Division (requires further analysis).

Santa Cruz County's STATS Meeting Program

Background and Framework: Santa Cruz County's STATS Meeting Program

Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department has operated a PerformanceStat-based STATS program since 2011. The model is grounded in a framework developed by Robert Behn of Harvard Kennedy School, which defines PerformanceStat as an ongoing series of regular, integrated meetings in which leadership uses current data to analyze past performance, follow up on commitments, solve performance problems, and set the next performance targets (Behn, 2014). At its core, it is a leadership strategy — not merely a reporting mechanism — that requires executive ownership of data and an organizational culture in which data drives decisions.

Current Program Structure and Values

Department leadership convenes quarterly featuring rotating department presentations, full-group discussion on cross-departmental priorities, and structured breakout groups. The data team supports departments in preparing materials in advance, and all presentations are posted to an internal website accessible to leadership between meetings. The program is governed by the values of continuous improvement, customer experience, strategic thinking, partnerships, responsiveness, and staff engagement, with goals that include focusing on outcomes, making data accessible, and automating data gathering to reduce manual effort (Malachowski, personal communication, 2026).

Participant Insight: Observations from County Leadership

Engagement with leaders from multiple Santa Cruz County departments yielded substantive insights into the practical value and operational strengths of the STATS program.

Cross-Departmental Networking and Problem Solving

The most consistently cited benefit was the opportunity for leaders across departments to network and collectively problem-solve. Breakout groups were highlighted by leaders interviewed as the program's most effective feature. Leaders provided examples of other departments already having solutions and partners in place for challenges that they're currently facing. These connections would not have occurred through any other channel.

Shared Situational Awareness

A second major benefit was a general increase in cross-departmental awareness of data, policy, and program developments. Human services departments are often operationally siloed, and the STATS model creates a structured forum to broaden that perspective. This is particularly valuable given that most clients interact with multiple departments simultaneously — a family involved with child welfare may also be receiving CalFresh, housing assistance, or behavioral health services.

Cross-Program Client Matching Database

Santa Cruz maintains an internal database that creates “fuzzy matches” of clients across programs using the client’s name and date of birth, enabling aggregated service overlap data to be presented in STATS meetings. Client-level data is not shared; only aggregated counts are presented so each department can understand the cross-program footprint of its client population. Access is restricted to a single team of programmers and analysts due to privacy and data-sharing constraints. This cross-departmental awareness may improve service coordination for families engaged with multiple systems simultaneously.

Implementation of a similar system in San Francisco would require careful consideration of privacy governance, interdepartmental data-sharing agreements, and technology infrastructure.

Current Data Practices: FCS Program Dashboards

The FCS Data Team has established a structured suite of dashboards collaboratively developed with program management. The semi-annual review process requires program managers to select their own measures and present their dashboards to the Deputy Director, Program Directors and Program Managers, reinforcing direct ownership of performance data. FCS has observed measurable improvements across indicators identified as priorities for San Francisco child welfare. Prior to each senior leadership meeting, relevant program managers convene with the Data Team to review their dashboards, identify key highlights, and determine discussion priorities — ensuring that what is presented reflects the program’s own analytical priorities, not just what the data team deems important. This structure reinforces a culture in which program leadership is expected not only to review data, but to actively interpret and respond to it.

Dashboard Portfolio Overview

FCS currently maintains four distinct dashboards, each designed to monitor a specific domain of child welfare performance.

Table 1: FCS Dashboard Types

Dashboard	Cadence	Sample Measures
Safety	Quarterly	Reoccurrence of maltreatment; safety decisions by race/ethnicity; timely contacts; range of removal by PSW
Permanency	Quarterly	Exit to permanency within 12 months; reentry into care; visitation compliance; timely CFTMs
HR	Bi-Annual	Turnover rate by position; profile of current staff; vacancy rates by function
Disproportionality	Annual	Disproportionality at each decision point; mandated reporting by profession and race/ethnicity; referrals by zip code

County Comparison: San Francisco and Santa Cruz

Both counties operate within California’s child welfare framework and face shared challenges around racial disproportionality and the intersection of poverty with neglect reporting. They differ substantially, however, in population size, racial composition, and organizational scale — differences that have direct implications for what can realistically be adapted from the Santa Cruz model. These demographic differences influence service delivery complexity, cross-system involvement, and operational demands.

Table 2: San Francisco County & Santa Cruz County Demographic Data

Indicator	San Francisco County	Santa Cruz County
Total Population (2024 est.)	~830,000	~263,000
Hispanic / Latino	16.2%	35.5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	34.9%	~4.9%
White (Non-Hispanic)	36.8%	~54%
Black or African American	4.7%	~1.2%
Multiracial	6.1%	~3.2%
Median Household Income	~\$140,970	~\$109,000

Indicator	San Francisco County	Santa Cruz County
Persons Below Poverty Line	~10.4%	~11.8%
Annual Hotline Referrals	~4,194–4,970 (2021–2025)	~1,892–2,008 (2021–2025)
Primary Allegation Type	General neglect	General neglect (statewide pattern)
Children in Foster Care (1/1/2026)	599	110
Open Cases (1/1/2026)	850	141

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau ACS 2024; SF HSA/FCS Data Unit (2023); SF Children’s Trust/TONIC (2024); CCWIP, UC Berkeley; DataShare SCC (2024); SF.gov; Santa Cruz County HSD Budget (2025).

Racial and ethnic disproportionality is a documented challenge in both counties and reflects broader statewide and national patterns in child welfare. Research consistently shows that children of color are overrepresented in child welfare systems relative to their share of the general population, a disparity that persists across referral, substantiation, removal, and permanency decision points.

Assessment: The STATS Model and Its Applicability to San Francisco

Santa Cruz County’s STATS program represents a mature, well-structured, and demonstrably effective model of performance management. Over more than a decade of implementation, it has created genuine value — fostering cross-departmental collaboration, improving information sharing, and embedding a culture of data-driven accountability across human services. The program’s strengths are substantial and consistently affirmed by county leadership across departments.

However, a direct and full replication of the STATS model in San Francisco’s Human Services Agency is not feasible. The reasons are structural, organizational, and practical — and they are rooted in the fundamental differences between the two counties that this report has documented.

Why the Full STATS Program Cannot Be Directly Replicated in San Francisco

Scale and Organizational Complexity

Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department serves a population of approximately 265,000 people across a relatively unified organizational structure. San Francisco's HSA serves a population more than three times larger — over 830,000 residents — through a significantly more complex set of departments, programs, and administrative layers. The STATS model functions well in Santa Cruz in part because its size allows for a manageable number of department representatives to convene meaningfully in a single quarterly meeting. At San Francisco's scale, a comparable all-departments meeting would face substantial challenges in logistics, focus, and effective participation.

Volume of Cross-Program Clients

A cornerstone of Santa Cruz's STATS program is its cross-program client matching database, which allows aggregated data on clients receiving services across departments to be presented in STATS meetings. This database is maintained by a team of analysts due to its sensitivity and the small client volume involved. San Francisco serves a significantly larger and more demographically complex client population across its child welfare, behavioral health, benefits, housing, and employment programs. The sheer volume of clients intersecting across programs in San Francisco would require a substantially more sophisticated data infrastructure, dedicated staffing, and robust privacy governance frameworks before any comparable system could be responsibly implemented.

Meeting Cadence and Executive Capacity

The STATS model depends on regular executive participation — quarterly convening of leadership across all departments — as a structural requirement. In Santa Cruz, where the number of departments is limited, this is operationally manageable. In San Francisco, where HSA leadership is responsible for a broader range of programs and is subject to a more demanding public accountability environment, adding a quarterly all-agency data meeting at the executive level would impose meaningful capacity constraints that would need to be carefully considered.

What San Francisco Can and Should Adopt

The conclusion that the full STATS program is not directly replicable in San Francisco should not be read as a dismissal of the model's value. On the contrary — the principles underlying STATS

are sound and directly applicable to FCS's context. What is required is a thoughtful adaptation, not a wholesale adoption.

The three recommendations in this report represent precisely that adaptation. They extract the highest-value, most transferable elements of the STATS model and apply them within the constraints of San Francisco's existing structure:

- Breakout groups in FCS data meetings directly replicate the component of the Santa Cruz STATS program that county leadership identified as its most valuable feature — structured, small-group, cross-program problem solving. This can be implemented within FCS's existing semi-annual meetings with no additional infrastructure.
- Contextual event timelines mirror a practice used in Santa Cruz's data presentations to provide interpretive context for data fluctuations. This is a low-cost enhancement that significantly improves the quality of data-driven discussions.
- An annual HSA data summit, if found feasible, would be a scaled and frequency-reduced adaptation of the STATS meeting concept — replacing quarterly all-agency convenings with a single annual summit, led by the Planning Division, that focuses on cross-departmental priorities and data trends. This acknowledges San Francisco's scale while still creating the type of cross-agency information sharing that Santa Cruz's program enables.

Together, these recommendations offer San Francisco FCS and HSA a practical path toward the collaboration, shared situational awareness, and data-informed leadership that have made the Santa Cruz STATS program a model worth studying. The goal is not to become Santa Cruz — it is to bring the best of what Santa Cruz has built into the context that San Francisco actually operates in.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn on an analysis of Santa Cruz County's STATS program, direct engagement with county leadership, and a review of FCS's current data meeting structure. Recommendations are organized into two categories:

- **Ready for Implementation** — Can be adopted within FCS's current data meeting structure without additional cross-agency coordination.
- **Requires Further Analysis** — Requires feasibility review, stakeholder coordination, or cross-agency planning before implementation.

Part I: FCS Recommendations - Ready for Implementation

The following recommendations can be incorporated into FCS's existing dashboard meeting structure with minimal resource investment. Both draw directly from practices observed in Santa Cruz County's STATS program.

Recommendation 1: Introduce Breakout Groups into FCS Dashboard Meetings

FCS should incorporate structured breakout groups into its existing semi-annual data meetings with the Deputy Director, Program Directors, and Program Managers. Breakout groups should be composed of leadership from a deliberate mix of programs — including staff who do not typically participate in cross-program discussions — in order to introduce diverse perspectives and lived experience in the work.

Breakout sessions should be organized around pre-identified discussion topics relevant to multiple programs, prepared collaboratively by the FCS Data Team and management in advance of each meeting. This mirrors the Santa Cruz model, in which breakout groups were consistently identified by leadership as the highest-value component of the STATS meeting. The benefits include cross-program networking, organic problem solving, increases shared accountability, and the surfacing of solutions that already exist within the agency but are not currently being shared across program lines.

Estimated time investment: preparation of discussion questions (approximately two hours per meeting cycle, completed collaboratively by the Data Team and relevant managers).

Recommendation 2: Add Contextual Event Timelines to FCS Data Reports

FCS should incorporate a timeline of significant events — policy changes, legislative updates, public health developments, staffing transitions, and other contextual factors — into its data reports and dashboards. This practice, used in Santa Cruz County's STATS program, provides essential context for interpreting data trends and supports more informed discussion during data meetings.

Without a contextual timeline, data fluctuations can appear anomalous or unexplained, undermining confidence in the data and leading to conclusions that do not account for external factors. Adding relevant events directly into measures and reports allows leadership to understand not just what the data shows, but why patterns may be shifting at a given point in time.

The FCS Data Team would be responsible for maintaining and updating the timeline in coordination with program managers. Estimated time investment: moderate ongoing effort;

initial setup requires a collaborative review of recent significant events with program management.

Part II: HSA Recommendations — Requires Further Analysis

The following recommendation extends beyond FCS's current data meeting structure and would require coordination with the broader Human Services Agency, including the Planning Division, department leadership, and executive stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: Establish an Annual HSA Data Summit

San Francisco HSA should evaluate the feasibility of implementing an annual data summit that convenes leadership teams from all HSA departments. Modeled on Santa Cruz County's STATS program, this summit would create a structured, agency-wide forum for cross-departmental data review, collaboration, and strategic alignment.

If implemented, the summit should be designed with the following structural elements: •

Duration: A minimum of three hours to allow sufficient time for data review, discussion, and breakout sessions. •

Agenda structure: (1) an overview of high-level HSA-wide data and performance trends; (2) focused discussion on major cross-departmental initiatives and shared priorities; and (3) facilitated breakout sessions organized by topic area. •

Ownership: The HSA Planning Division is the appropriate lead for this effort, working in partnership with department data teams and analysts. • Executive participation: HSA executive leadership would be expected to attend, with an estimated annual time commitment of two to four hours.

This recommendation requires further discussion with the Planning Division to assess operational feasibility, resource requirements, and alignment with existing HSA planning cycles before a formal proposal can be advanced.

Resource and Staffing Implications

The recommendations carry no direct financial cost and require no new staff. All resource implications are limited to existing staff time, making these recommendations viable for near-term implementation without budget amendments or personnel actions. The table below summarizes estimated time commitments by organizational unit, followed by a brief breakdown of activities for each group. It is important to keep in mind that ongoing maintenance could create hidden workloads over time and will need to be monitored.

Table 6: Organizational Unit Time Commitments and Activities

Organizational Unit	Est. Annual Time	Primary Activities
FCS Data Team & Management	8-10 hrs annually	Breakout prep questions; event timeline maintenance; one additional 2-hr annual meeting
HSA Data Staff & Management	5-10 hrs annually	Data summit coordination, cross-dept. topic development
HSA Planning Department	Moderate (varies by cycle)	Cross-dept. data collection and agenda development for summit
HSA Executive Leadership	2-4 hrs annually	Data summit attendance (calendar scheduling only)

For FCS, the primary time investment involves approximately two hours of preparation per meeting cycle to develop breakout group discussion questions collaboratively with program managers, and one additional two-hour meeting annually to separate the HR and Disproportionality dashboard reviews into distinct focused sessions. Maintaining contextual event timelines requires minimal ongoing effort after an initial setup session with program management.

For HSA-level implementation of the data summit, the Planning Department would carry the primary coordination responsibility: collecting discussion items from each department, collaborating with data teams and analysts to compile relevant data, and developing structured breakout group topics. HSA executive leadership is expected to attend the summit, with an estimated annual time commitment of two to four hours beyond routine calendar scheduling.

Conclusion

Santa Cruz County's STATS meeting structure is an exceptionally well-designed and impressive program. What Santa Cruz has built over more than a decade represents a model genuinely worth learning from — a disciplined, data-driven approach to cross-departmental leadership that has created measurable value for county staff, programs, and ultimately the clients they serve. Its emphasis on regular cadence, management ownership of data, structured cross-departmental dialogue, and continuous improvement is a program worth learning from.

The differences in scale, client volume, and organizational complexity between the two counties do not diminish the relevance of what Santa Cruz has achieved; they simply require that San Francisco approach adaptation thoughtfully rather than wholesale. The recommendations in this report identify the most transferable and highest-impact elements of the Santa Cruz model: structured breakout groups that bring diverse leadership voices into data conversations, contextual event timelines that deepen the interpretive value of performance data, and a potential annual HSA data summit that could create the kind of cross-agency awareness and collaboration that the STATS program has demonstrated is both achievable and worthwhile.

FCS already operates from a strong foundation. Its dashboard infrastructure, semi-annual review process, and commitment to management-owned data reflect a serious and sustained investment in data-informed practice. The path forward is not about replacing what works — it is about building on it. By selectively adopting the principles that have made Santa Cruz's STATS program a success, San Francisco FCS and HSA can strengthen collaboration, deepen data literacy across leadership, and ultimately improve outcomes for the children and families they serve.

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible through the generous contributions of time, expertise, and insight from leaders across Santa Cruz and San Francisco counties. The author is grateful to the following individuals for their willingness to share their knowledge of data practices, cross-departmental collaboration, and child welfare systems in support of this work:

Santa Cruz County

- George Malachowski — Director, Planning and Evaluation Division
- Casey Coneway — Business Analytics Manager
- Andrew Stewart — Staff Development Program Manager
- Santa Cruz County Executive Team

San Francisco County

- Joan Miller — Deputy Director; Family and Children's Services
- Jessica Mateu-Newsome — Program Director; Family and Children's Services
- Alexis Cobbins — Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging and Accessibility Manager
- John Murray — Senior Administrative Analyst; Human Services Agency

San Francisco Family and Children's Services Data Team. The perspectives and insights shared by these individuals were instrumental in shaping the analysis and recommendations presented in this report. Their commitment to data-informed practice and continuous improvement in human services is reflected throughout.

References

- Behn, R. D. (2014). The PerformanceStat potential: A leadership strategy for producing results. Brookings Institution Press.
- California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP). (n.d.). University of California, Berkeley & California DSS. <https://ccwip.berkeley.edu>. Accessed May 2026.
- California Demographics / CUBIT. (2024). San Francisco County demographics. <https://www.california-demographics.com/san-francisco-county-demographics>
- California Demographics / CUBIT. (2024). Santa Cruz County demographics. <https://www.california-demographics.com/santa-cruz-county-demographics>
- California Legislative Analyst's Office. (2024). Racial and ethnic disproportionalities in California's child welfare system. <https://lao.ca.gov/handouts/socservices/2024/Child-Welfare-Disparities-040324.pdf>
- CASA of Santa Cruz County. (n.d.). Race & equity. <https://casaofsantacruz.org>. Accessed May 2026.
- DataShare SCC. (2024). Santa Cruz County child welfare indicators. <https://www.datasharescc.org>
- Malachowski, G. (2024). Santa Cruz County HSD STATS program: Values and goals [Personal communication]. Santa Cruz County HSD.
- San Francisco Children's Trust / TONIC. (2024). Child welfare-involved children and families in San Francisco. <https://sffamilyservicesalliance.org>
- San Francisco Human Services Agency, FCS Data Unit. (2023). San Francisco child welfare report 2023. <https://www.sfhhsa.org>
- Santa Cruz County Human Services Department. (2025). Proposed 2025–26 budget. <https://www2.santacruzcountyca.gov>
- SF.gov. (2024). Foster care & poverty in San Francisco [City performance scorecards]. <https://www.sf.gov>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). American Community Survey 1-year and 5-year estimates: San Francisco and Santa Cruz Counties, CA. <https://www.census.gov>

USAFacts. (2024). San Francisco County & Santa Cruz County, CA population.
<https://usafacts.org>

Wikipedia. (2024). Demographics of San Francisco; Santa Cruz County, California.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>