Ventura Welfare Offices'
Labor Intensive System

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

During the 1995/96 Ventura County Grand Jury investigation of personnel safety and security at the Public Social Services Agency's (PSSA) welfare offices it was observed that the workers were keeping voluminous records using paper and pencil instead of using computerized record keeping methods.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

- Visited welfare offices in Santa Paula and Oxnard to interview managers and several supervisors.

- Interviewed PSSA Director and his staff.

- Met with Information Systems Department (ISD) staff who maintain current Agency systems and are responsible for new system developments.

- Visited Santa Barbara PSSA office to observe their record keeping and office procedures.

FINDINGS

- The welfare offices in Ventura administers assistance mandated by federal, state and county agencies: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), General Relief, Food Stamps, Medi-Cal, and Foster Care payments. These programs require multiple actions to issue Homeless Assistance (same date benefits), immediate need (24 hour) or less urgent benefits like Food Stamps. Each case is processed at the initial application and reviewed during annual renewals, however, some cases require attention at least once a month.

- For any action relating to an individual AFDC and Food Stamps client a case file is pulled and processed. There are over 230 different forms from which the workers pull the appropriate forms for any particular case. The Medi-Cal program is burdened with almost as many forms.

- The same client information is manually recorded by the workers on the many forms that make up a single case. The manual processing of forms and calculations is error prone.

- Paper files fill the shelves in the workers' cubicles, are stacked against the walls, and are in boxes on the floor. This results in loss of work efficiency, worker frustration, slow service and higher costs in processing cases.

- There are only three PCs for five supervisors and 50 workers in the Santa Paula office. The situation in Oxnard is the same.

- PSSA stated that they are short of money and are hoping that eventually state funds will enable Ventura to develop the ultimate welfare system after the year 2000.

- The future of a state sponsored system remains unclear however. The Grand Jury found no immediate plans by PSSA to address the manual record keeping procedures in its

district offices.

- The county developed and operates its own Welfare Income Computations and Reporting system (WICAR). The system was designed to authorize state welfare payments and maintain a ledger for these payments. Eligibility workers are using WICAR to input new welfare clients and display client data. However, workers can not update data on-line, perform benefit eligibility and benefit calculations, or check client welfare qualifications.

- ISD employs six programmers to maintain WICAR computer programs current with Federal and State changes and regulations. PSSA meets with ISD twice a month to review these maintenance changes as mandated by government agencies. The high cost of maintaining WICAR leaves little or no funds for incorporating enhancements into WICAR which would ease the workers' paper workload. Improvements to WICAR which would simplify the workers' tasks are assigned low priority and are not implemented in deference to the maintenance effort.

- Because WICAR was developed with programming technologies which are now obsolete, it is cumbersome and costly to maintain and improve. PSSA is actively engaged with other counties in developing new welfare automation concepts, however the timeline for future implementation is uncertain.

- The above findings, as related to the lack of modern record keeping system, are also addressed in the reports published by the 1990/1991 Grand Jury and by the 1993/1994 Grand Jury.

COMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury commends the district office workers and their immediate supervisors for their dedication, and for their extraordinary enthusiasm towards their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1995/96 Grand Jury recommends:

1. County Supervisors should determine the accountability for the continued problems with welfare eligibility and payments operations **reported by two previous Grand Juries.**

2. PSSA should work with ISD to study documentation, paper flow and procedures, and then build a district office business model for forms automation, record keeping and case information system. To contain system costs and keep it efficient each office should be treated as a small self contained enterprise. Small systems are easy to maintain and can be cost-effective within the district office. The office system can be networked with the other offices to exchange clients information. The office system may be designed as a front window to WICAR, thereby eliminating the terminals while presenting to the workers a single standard interface. The Grand Jury, in recommending computer systems, is not recommending that the offices eliminate paper forms all together. Most of the daily activities could be carried out on computers with critical data also recorded on paper for meeting legal, operational, security and backup requirements.

3. PSSA should fund ISD to add justifiable enhancements to the WICAR system beyond just maintaining the system. PSSA should actively solicit suggestions from its welfare

workers and prioritize them for ISD implementation without delay.

4. PSSA should purchase additional WICAR terminals until they can be replaced with PCs as requested by district offices. The terminals at $700 a piece, with telephone line charges and mainframe hookup costs should be justified with direct labor savings.

5. California plans to develop state-wide welfare automation systems should not deter PSSA from implementing the above measures as soon as possible. The experience to be gained from an interim system will facilitate the ultimate transition to a state wide system.

   With vision, creative thinking and genuine county support the cost of an automated record keeping and information system will be far less than the present labor intensive system. PC-based technology offers cost effective tools to develop small office systems which can automate paper files and also exchange data with ISD computers.

6. PSSA should allocate money for more PCs. At a minimum, each working group in all district offices should receive three PCs. One for supervisors use and two for the employees in the group. These PCs are needed for the immediate requirements of management tasks, collection and evaluation of performance data, project tracking, scheduling work activities/meetings and preparing reports.

RESPONSES REQUIRED

Board of Supervisors

Director of Public Social Services Agency