



# **CalWORKs System Improvement Plan (Cal-SIP)**

**County of Orange**  
Cal-OAR Cycle: July 2021 to June 2026



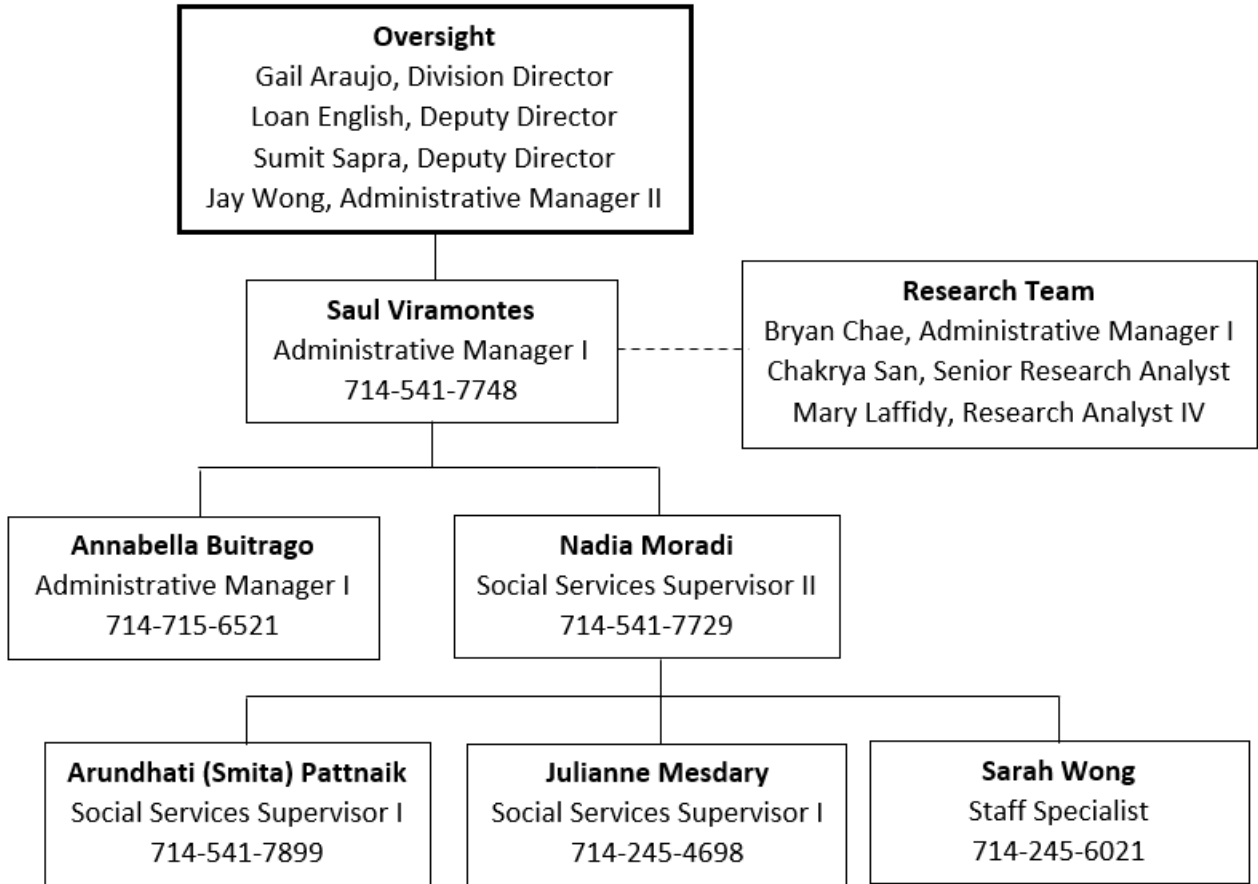
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## County of Orange Cal-OAR Team





## Executive Summary

In collaboration with internal and external stakeholders, the County of Orange Social Services Agency (Agency) has selected two CalWORKs Outcomes and Accountability Review (Cal-OAR) performance measures for improvement during the July 2021 to June 2026 Cal-OAR Cycle:

1. Engagement Rate
2. Rate of Program Reentries after Exits with Earnings

The Agency seeks to improve performance in these areas by implementing the following strategies:

### Engagement Rate

- *Strategy 1:* Convene a Cal-OAR Committee responsible for implementing strategies within the Cal-SIP (with five Action Steps)
- *Strategy 2:* Develop a responsive training curriculum for caseworkers around industry best practices such as Motivational Interviewing, Trauma-Informed Care, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Trauma (with four Action Steps)
- *Strategy 3:* Enhance Barrier Removal Services with goal of increasing utilization and earlier barrier identification (with five Action Steps)
- *Strategy 4:* Review caseworker and client facing program functions with the goal of enhancing efficiency and customer service (with four Action Steps)

### Rate of Program Re-entries after Exits with Earnings

- *Strategy 1:* Expand Post-Aid Supportive Services for clients who exit CalWORKs/WTW with earnings (with two Action Steps)
- *Strategy 2:* Develop a peer support or parent partner model to support clients exiting CalWORKs/WTW with earnings (with four Action Steps)

This Cal-SIP Report will address how these performance measures and strategies were selected and will provide more details regarding the Agency's action plan to actualize improvement.

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## Introduction

### Question 1: Describe your approach to the Cal-SIP Report.

During the development of the CalWORKs County Self-Assessment (Cal-CSA) and the related activities, the County of Orange Social Services Agency's (Agency) Cal-OAR Team in collaboration with Partners & Collaborators identified key areas within the CalWORKs/Welfare-to-Work (CW/WTW) program with opportunities for improvement. The areas for improvement were further explored by categorizing various findings from focus groups, research, surveys, and in-depth conversations with all levels of internal staff. These efforts resulted in six (6) Areas of Focus:

1. Shifting culture among staff and administrators from compliance to engagement
2. Improving the client-worker relationship
3. Enhancing barrier removal services
4. Increasing access to post-aid services
5. Increasing employment and educational pathways
6. Providing more assistance to non-Welfare-to-Work participants, including children and undocumented adults

After categorizing all feedback gathered through the Cal-CSA process, the Cal-OAR Team presented the common themes via the Areas of Focus to all Partners & Collaborators through a series of stakeholder meetings. Participants included educational partners, employment services providers, supportive services providers, internal staff, and a cohort of current and former CalWORKs clients. Overall, most Partners & Collaborators demonstrated enthusiasm and strong support for the findings. The Cal-OAR Team measured this consensus through a survey which listed various themes and statements that can be mapped to each focus area.

A total of 33 external partners and 111 of the Agency's CalWORKs staff completed the Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey and a total of 72 CalWORKs clients completed the Current and Former Client Survey. More information about these surveys can be found in the Appendix and throughout this document.

The Cal-OAR Team met with CalWORKs administrators to brainstorm strategies that could be implemented to address the Areas of Focus identified during the Cal-CSA. These strategies were then further analyzed by subject matter experts, stakeholders, and Agency leadership for viability.

### Question 2: Briefly describe past and current system improvement efforts.

#### **Service Delivery Model:**

In 2014, the Agency implemented the current Service Delivery Model to streamline and enhance the quality of services, decrease wait times, and increased capacity. The service delivery structure begins with an intake worker determining eligibility and addressing financial and basic needs via the application process. Upon approval of CalWORKs, the case is transferred expeditiously to a continuing eligibility worker for ongoing eligibility needs. The continuing eligibility workers



collaborate with case managers to address family needs, including barrier removal, employment services, and issuing related cash and supportive services benefits.

**Client Engagement System (CES):**

In 2014, the Agency implemented the CES to assist case managers, eligibility workers, supervisors, and administrators in prioritizing workloads and identifying clients needing engagement and participation in work activities. Case managers, eligibility worker, supervisors, and administrators use CES generated reports to proactively work to assist clients, conduct monthly contacts, review work participation, assess barriers, and coordinate services.

**Early Engagement Project:**

In 2015, the Agency implemented the Early Engagement Project. This initiative aims to assign WTW referrals to case managers within 24 hours of CalWORKs approval. The process begins with clerical staff issuing an appointment letter to the client with the date and time of their Orientation and Appraisal Interviews. Subsequently, case managers receive a calendar invite with the pre-scheduled appointments and are required to confirm availability for both parties within 24 hours. A day prior to the orientation appointment, clients receive a reminder to confirm their appointment.

**No Wrong Door:**

In 2015, the Agency implemented No Wrong Door to enhance services across all Agency offices. No Wrong Door is a service delivery model, which removes barriers and connects internal and external customers to services within Orange County. The County of Orange, together with the Agency, is committed to serving all who cross our threshold in a manner which exemplifies the No Wrong Door concept by removing barriers and connecting members of our community to services that lead to self-sufficiency, proper parenting, and healthier living, and all customers will be assisted with professionalism, courtesy, and respect.

**Mutual Client:**

In 2018, the Agency implemented the Mutual Client project. Mutual Client is a CW/WTW and child welfare partnership where eligibility workers, case managers, and Child Welfare Services (CWS) social workers collaborate to assist families holistically. The goal of Mutual Client is to coordinate and streamline services for families co-involved in CW/WTW and CWS by consolidating Agency points of contacts, services, and funding. Families participating in Mutual Client are evaluated for all eligible supportive services and are prioritized accordingly ensuring that barriers and activities are being addressed in coordination with child welfare programs.

**CalWORKs 2.0:**

In 2018, the Agency adopted the CalWORKs 2.0 framework – a new approach to family self-sufficiency which focuses on helping clients set and achieve goals. The framework allows for a more flexible approach to service delivery, integrating emerging research, and best practices on how adults learn and build critical skills. CalWORKs 2.0 considers the specific circumstances and needs of the whole family as they work toward self-sufficiency.



**First Contact Resolution (FCR):**

In June 2022, the Agency implemented FCR which is a multi-divisional initiative to enhance service at all regional offices by reducing the need for case follow-up and subsequent requests for service, while optimizing processes for same-day eligibility determinations. Staff received training for various scenarios along with ideal resolutions and eligibility processes to consider when serving families such as recommended procedures for Modified Adjustment Gross Income Medi-Cal (MAGI) determinations for CalWORKs denials. The eligibility tools developed helped simplify policies and procedures from multiple programs which helps workers efficiently assess client requests. Moreover, the Agency expanded the call center to provide increased access to support for CW/WTW clients.

**Family Support Assessment (FSA):**

In July 2022, the Agency implemented the FSA process. FSA aims to utilize a holistic, supportive approach to assist CalWORKs families in identifying areas of need, overcoming barriers, and promoting self-sufficiency. The FSA process includes assessing and addressing each referred family's needs and barriers like a multi-disciplinary team but with a dedicated coordinator responsible for tracking progress for all FSA involved clients by region; organizing a Family Support Team; monitoring each family's progress for 12 months; and measuring outcomes. Caseworkers (case managers and Employment & Eligibility Specialists) are encouraged to refer families to FSA when family needs include, but are not limited to domestic abuse, mental health or substance abuse services; housing and homeless resources; WTW participation concerns; and general safety concerns or legal issues.

**Question 3: Briefly describe the success or failure of those efforts at improving service delivery or programmatic outcomes.**

**Service Delivery Model:**

The Service Delivery Model change optimized efficiency by streamlining eligibility determinations in Intake (application and case approval) and Continuing (ongoing eligibility and supportive services). While many benefits were observed through this new model, an unintended consequence was losing social work/case management expertise at Intake.

**Client Engagement System (CES):**

CES provided administrators, supervisors, and staff with focused reports and clear instructions of what to do with that information. Overall, CES helped reduce the additional effort and manual process of tracking and prompting engagement efforts. An observed drawback from this effort is the maintenance related to the software system.

**Early Engagement Project:**

The Early Engagement Project has helped Orange County perform well above the State in Orientation Attendance Rate and OCAT/Appraisal Completion Timeliness Rate performance measures. This was accomplished through reducing the workload of caseworkers by shifting the responsibility of scheduling to clerical support staff.

**No Wrong Door:**

No Wrong Door created a major organizational shift in the way the Agency serves clients by clearly messaging to all levels of staff from all programs that turning away clients was not an option. This was accomplished by reframing the mindset of our first-points-of-contact from considering their responsibilities when serving clients to empowering them to solve problems and look for solutions.

**Mutual Client:**

The Mutual Client project has shown great promise in the coordination of services and communication between eligibility staff, case managers, and social workers. Families receiving CalWORKs and involved in CWS received coordinated case management services. Additionally, the Agency has maximized funding by leveraging funding sources from CalWORKs, when applicable. The Mutual Client project expanded from one to two units in early 2021.

**CalWORKs 2.0:**

CalWORKs 2.0 is a robust framework with innovative ideas and best practices, many of which the Cal-OAR Team is revisiting and will be re-implementing as part of the larger Cal-OAR and System Improvement Plan. Overall, the implementation of CalWORKs 2.0 within the Orange County CW/WTW program needs to be revisited to engage staff further and provides sustained support for the new framework.

**First Contact Resolution (FCR):**

FCR is another powerful initiative with strong support from Agency leadership as it further enhances the way we deliver services to our clients. Additionally, FCR helps reduce client fatigue by eliminating multiple follow-ups and visits to the office. Overall, there is an opportunity to revisit previous efforts and advance them within the context of Cal-OAR and CalWORKs 2.0.

**Family Support Assessment (FSA):**

The FSA Team and caseworkers are reporting positive feelings towards the implementation and overall support. The FSA Team has been identified as a partner for the Cal-OAR Team because of their ability to support many of the strategies identified in this Cal-SIP.

Note: The FCR and FSA initiatives are still in the early stages of implementation and will continue to be assessed over time to determine impacts.



**Question 4: An overview of the CWD's organizational vision and mission (optional).**

The County of Orange (County) and the Agency are committed to delivering effective and efficient public services to all Orange County residents. Orange County enjoys diversity in demographics, language, and economy; therefore, it has been a long-standing priority of the Agency to ensure that all clients receive the same level of service regardless of age, race/ethnicity, primary language, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, and legal status.

**Mission:**

To provide quality integrated services that are accessible and responsive to the whole community.

**Vision:**

A safe, resilient and healthy community for all.



## Peer Review

### Question 1: Discuss how the Peer Review process impacted Cal-SIP development.

The Peer Review process impacted the development of the SIP in that it helped the Cal-OAR Team focus efforts surrounding our approach to implementing a major culture shift. Additionally, Ventura County provided great suggestions for helping support CalWORKs clients post aid, such as a parent partner model.

The information and feedback provided by Ventura County assisted our planning efforts by ensuring that our plan accounted for ongoing culture conversations, interactive training opportunities, and setting realistic expectations for the level of effort required to implement a culture shift with the desired result of improving the client-worker relationship. Moreover, Ventura provided a history of their previous efforts, their observations, and timeframe for their efforts related to culture change over the past five (5) years.

### Question 2: Discuss steps taken to conduct peer review.

After discussions with various counties on their approach to Cal-OAR, agency priorities, team structure, and goals, Orange County partnered with Ventura. Ultimately, Ventura shares similar population demographics, performance in Cal-OAR grouping measures, and key characteristics such as cost of living, poverty rates, and median household income.

Two introductory meetings were held in January and February 2023 to familiarize each county with team members, Cal-OAR efforts, and approaches to the Cal-CSA and Cal-SIP, followed by three (3) Orange County-hosted Peer Review Meetings.

Meeting #1	March 7, 2023 9:00 – 12:00 pm	Review of Orange County's Cal-CSA, key demographics, and findings. Discussed Orange County's approach to completing the Cal-CSA and plan to complete the Cal-SIP. Discussed final performance measures for goals.
Meeting #2	March 21, 2023 1:00 – 4:00 pm	Discussing Orange County's Cal-SIP efforts including survey results, stakeholder meetings, proposed strategies, and selected performance measures. Critical analysis of Orange County's final goals and strategies. Invited broader audience with relevant experience.
Meeting #3	May 2, 2023 1:30 – 3:30 pm	Review of Draft Cal-SIP and discussed strategies in detail. Transitioned to Ventura-hosted Peer Review series.



**Question 3: Briefly summarize observations and action items from Peer Review process.**

After identifying similar interests in improvement strategies and findings throughout the Cal-OAR continuous quality improvement process, Orange and Ventura mapped out a meeting schedule for March and April. Additionally, both counties agreed that the following topics would be essential to discuss and critically analyze:

- Establishment of expectations and meeting format
- Overview of county demographics and key characteristics
- Overview of CSA, research, data gathering, and findings
- Finalization of performance measures and SIP goals
- Discussion of planning efforts for SIP
- Review of SIP strategies and action steps
- Provide feedback to each other based on experience implementing similar strategies
- Review of Draft SIP



## Measures for Improvement

### Goal 1

#### Increase Engagement Rate by 15% to 60.6% by June 2026.

- Strategy 1: Convene a Cal-OAR Committee responsible for implementing strategies within the Cal-SIP.
  - Action Step 1: Solicit membership from Policy & Quality Assurance, Divisional Operations, regional management, supervisors, and caseworkers (Cal-OAR Team mandatory).
  - Action Step 2: Establish meeting schedules, implementation expectations, and set timelines for various deliverables within this Cal-SIP.
  - Action Step 3: Lead an education campaign for all staff to help better understand client circumstances, emerging best practices, and program culture.
    - a) Highlight success stories in a more comprehensive fashion, including what type of conversations and skills were used to motivate clients, remove barriers, and what strategies were the most effective.
    - b) Educate staff on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the effects of trauma and poverty on decision-making, and revisit CalWORKs 2.0 with a stronger emphasis on healing families and in the context of Cal-OAR (include testimonials).
    - c) Clearly display and talk about program goals, our role in helping families, and provide ways to empower staff.
  - Action Step 4: Develop interactive opportunities for staff of all levels to engage in culture change.
  - Action Step 5: Propose and monitor SMART goals for various levels of staff (reception to leadership).
  
- Strategy 2: Develop a responsive training curriculum for caseworkers around industry best practices such as Motivational Interviewing, Trauma-Informed Care, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Trauma.
  - Action Step 1: Prioritize deliverables and set timelines for delivery of resources to staff.
  - Action Step 2: Recruit social workers and subject matter experts from various program and partner agencies to assist.
  - Action Step 3: Develop individual modules, exercises, and discussion tools to be utilized in formal trainings and in small groups.
  - Action Step 4: Revise recruitment postings and related material to ensure clear expectations of case managers & eligibility worker roles with the goal of attracting more customer service and people-oriented applicants.



- Strategy 3 - Enhance Barrier Removal Services with goal of increasing utilization and earlier barrier identification.
  - Action Step 1: Evaluate all services and activities related to application, orientation, appraisal, and increasing engagement through barrier removal.
  - Action Step 2: Develop strategies related to enhancing barrier screening at application, including the utilization of CW 2.0 Quality of Life Tool and further utilization of the Family Support Team.
  - Action Step 3: Explore expanded mental health services beyond the CalWORKs program for clients and children to have consistent support through the healing process (FRCs, Cal-AIM, partner agencies).
  - Action Step 4: Create a multilingual CalWORKs Services toolkit with explainer videos, infographics, and other marketing material to increase awareness of available resources.
  - Action Step 5: Create a Referral Dashboard to help caseworkers track clients involved in barrier removal services more easily which will lead to more informed support to families and activity sequencing.
  
- Strategy 4 – Review caseworker and client facing program functions with the goal of enhancing efficiency and customer service.
  - Action Step 1: Shadow various assignments to review current processes, identify opportunities, and boost Cal-OAR buy-in
  - Action Step 2: Develop intuitive and clear roadmaps to self-sufficiency and stability so staff can better assist families which will lead to more informed decisions (considerations for time clock, activity sequencing)
  - Action Step 3: Explore a Universal Referral and/or additional support from other non-caseworker staff to free up more time for the client-worker relationship
  - Action Step 4: Encourage and provide more opportunities for case managers to conduct social work



## Goal 2

### **Decrease Rate of Program Re-entries after Exits with Earnings by 1% to 11% by June 2026.**

- Strategy 1: Expand Post-Aid Supportive Services for clients who exit CalWORKs/WTW with earnings.
  - Action Step 1: Maximize awareness, understanding, and utilization of Post-Aid Supportive Services and Housing Support Program
  - Action Step 2: Monitor client exits, needs, and requests for support
  
- Strategy 2: Develop a peer support or parent partner model to support clients exiting CalWORKs/WTW with earnings.
  - Action Step 1: Provide a forum for clients exiting with earnings to share experiences and inquire about resources (peer support group or parent partner pilot)
  - Action Step 2: Provide quarterly webinar focused around accessing resources and overcoming common barriers
  - Action Step 3: Collect feedback, data on needs, and service requests to better align program services
  - Action Step 4: Track clients who re-enter to better understand circumstances that destabilize families



## Measure and Goal Narrative

### Measure-Level Descriptions

#### **Question 1: Describe the reason for selecting the measure or programmatic grouping of measures.**

##### **Engagement Rate**

After reviewing data and research collected through the development of the Cal-CSA and Cal-SIP, the Cal-OAR Team determined that most Areas of Focus and selected strategies interacted directly or indirectly with the Engagement Rate performance measure. While this statement can be said for other measures as well, the relationship was the strongest with Engagement Rate. For example, enhancing caseworker training, improving the client-worker relationship, and shifting the program culture from compliance to engagement will all have an impact on Orientation Attendance Rate; OCAT/Appraisal Completion Timeliness Rate; and Employment Rate of Current CalWORKs Individuals. However, the selected strategies are more closely associated with ongoing engagement and earlier inputs within the CalWORKs conceptual framework. Therefore, the Cal-OAR Team, along with our Partners & Collaborators, determined that a concentrated effort on Engagement Rate would be more beneficial than separate goals. Currently, Orange County is performing well above the state average (CA: 21.0%, OC 45.6%).

##### **Rate of Program Re-entries after Exits with Earnings (Re-entries after Exits with Earnings)**

For this measure, the Cal-OAR Team identified an opportunity to align recent internal efforts and key feedback from the Current & Former Client Focus Groups. The Agency implemented the Employment Services – Post Aid Supportive Services component earlier this year (January 2023) and determined that focused improvements in this service delivery will help leverage existing program infrastructure and help Orange County meet or exceed the State average (CA: 11.5%, OC 12.0%). Secondly, during client focus groups, the Cal-OAR Team identified that CalWORKs families exiting the program have an ongoing and essential need of continued counseling services and guidance on accessing community resources, which are both issues being addressed by strategies in Goal 1 – Increasing Engagement Rate.



**Question 2: Do partners and collaborators agree this is a measure or programmatic grouping of measures that should be focused on at this time?**

After reviewing survey data independently and collaboratively through the peer review process with Ventura County, the Cal-OAR Team believes there is strong consensus and support for the identified focus measures for Cal-OAR Cycle 1.

Following the submission of the Cal-CSA, the Cal-OAR Team organized all feedback provided by Partners & Collaborators and developed key Areas of Focus. Four of six (6) areas identified will be addressed in Cal-OAR Cycle 1. These Areas of Focus share the highest support among Partners & Collaborators and are achievable within the three-year period ending June 30, 2026.

Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey Results	Sum of "Very Important" and "Absolutely Essential"	Absolutely Essential	Very Important
When asked about the importance of "strengthening the skill of identifying and addressing barriers" within caseworkers	91.0%	51.0%	40.0%
When asked about the importance of "Barrier Removal Activities"	92.2%	61.0%	31.2%
	Sum of "Somewhat Agree" and "Strongly Agree"	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree
When asked if "enhancing and strengthening ongoing engagement will result in better outcomes for clients."	95.7%	67.6%	28.1%
When asked if expanding "post aid services would assist our clients in maintaining self-sufficiency and reducing re-entry to CalWORKs"	87.1%	61.9%	25.2%

*\*A total of 144 Partners & Collaborators responded to the Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey, including 111 internal staff from all levels of the Agency and 33 staff from partner agencies, contracted providers, and educational institutions.*

Current and Former Client Survey Results	Housing/Rental Assistance	Childcare	Mental and Emotional Support	Transportation
When asked to identify the "service most needed to achieve financial stability"	69.4%	54.2%	33.3%	27.8%



When asked how important "each service has been to your success"	Sum of "Very Important" and "Absolutely Essential"	Absolutely Essential	Very Important
Housing/Rental Assistance	57.8%	25.0%	32.8%
Childcare	57.1%	39.7%	17.5%
Transportation	56.5%	25.8%	30.6%
Mental Health Services	52.4%	27.0%	25.4%
Job Search	50.0%	12.9%	37.1%
Job Skills Training	43.5%	9.7%	33.9%
A Complete Review of Individual Needs and Strengths	41.3%	15.9%	25.4%
Educational Advancement	38.1%	11.1%	27.0%
Vocational/Trade School Training	32.8%	9.4%	23.4%
Substance Abuse Services	21.0%	11.3%	9.7%

*\*A total of 72 current and former clients responded to the client survey.*

### **Question 3: Describe any anticipated interactions with other measures.**

The Cal-OAR Team believes that improvement in the client-worker relationship, enhancement of barrier removal processes, training-up caseworker staff, and reducing challenges for caseworkers will have a positive impact on all Cal-OAR Performance Measures. After implementation of the selected strategies, the Cal-OAR Team anticipates many benefits including:

- Identifying high-barrier families earlier in the application/approval process.
- Higher utilization of supportive services, including a better understanding of the services and benefits to the CalWORKs family.
- Higher motivation and engagement from clients as a result of better trained workers and a stronger relationship between clients and workers.
- More appropriate activity sequencing to allow clients to resolve barriers and feel empowered on their journey to self-sufficiency.
- Higher morale among Agency staff as a result of less complicated processes, clear direction, and feeling empowered to make suggestions for client and program success.

### **Question 4: Describe how the CWD will track performance measure improvement.**

The Cal-OAR Team will use a combination of data from the Cal-OAR Dashboard, CalSAWS Reports, internal quality assurance, and internal tracking measures developed by the Agency's Research Team.



The Cal-OAR Team will monitor all data related to Cal-OAR performance measures, including the overall summarized rates, Cal-OAR 19 files, and Phase 0 and 1 reports, to detect trends and errors in data entry. Additionally, the Cal-OAR Team will be reviewing and validating samples for each report provided by the State and key CalSAWS Reports.

Moreover, the Cal-OAR Team will monitor the Cal-OAR Dashboard and compare Orange County changes in performance measures to overall State performance and key counties with similar characteristics such as population density, demographic diversity, and cost of living. Tracking performance across the State will enable the Cal-OAR Team to evaluate whether fluctuations in performance measures are a result of effective strategies or macro-economic changes.

The Research Team will support the project by ensuring consistency and validity in all metrics and supporting with in-depth data analysis such as helping establish control groups, evaluating the quality of results during the CQI process, and evaluating Orange County client demographics against the Orange County population at large with similar characteristics.

For more details, see Goal #1, Question 7 and Goal #2, Question 7.



## Goal-Level Descriptions

### Goal 1

#### **Increase Engagement Rate by 15% to 60.6% by June 2026.**

- *Strategy 1:* Convene a Cal-OAR Committee responsible for implementing strategies within the Cal-SIP.
- *Strategy 2:* Develop a responsive training curriculum for caseworkers around industry best practices such as Motivational Interviewing, Trauma-Informed Care, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Trauma.
- *Strategy 3 -* Enhance Barrier Removal Services with goal of increasing utilization and earlier barrier identification.
- *Strategy 4 –* Review caseworker and client facing program functions with the goal of enhancing efficiency and customer service.

#### **Question 1: Explain the reasoning or methodology which was used to determine this goal.**

As discussed in Measures and Goal Narrative – Question 1, the Cal-OAR Team determined that a majority of feedback and Areas of Focus could be tied to Engagement Rate. As a result, the Cal-OAR Team hypothesizes, that overall improvements in training, culture, and barrier removal processes will lead to better service delivery, client success, and engagement.

In addition to Orientation Attendance Rate, OCAT/Appraisal Timeliness Completion Rate, and First Activity Rate, the Cal-OAR Team recommends developing measures that prioritize the client experience, staff's ability to perform their roles, and intentionality in activity sequencing. Furthermore, in addition to Employment and Wages grouping, the Cal-OAR Team would like to recommend development of measures that capture sustained self-sufficiency.

Lastly, efforts to inform Orange County's Cal-CSA highlighted the importance of helping our clients gain housing wage employment. Therefore, the Cal-OAR Team determined that Goal 1 is the most appropriate place to start our improvement efforts.

#### **Question 2: What led the CWD to these improvement strategies?**

The strategies listed in this goal are a result of numerous discussions with Partners & Collaborators which include educational partners, employment services providers, supportive services providers, case managers, eligibility workers, CW administrators, CW supervisors, and current and former clients. Through the utilization of focus groups, surveys, and brainstorming sessions, the Cal-OAR Team identified the Areas of Focus with the highest conviction among all stakeholders and responsive strategies to address those areas.



Focus group participants agreed that an emphasis on developing and implementing various communication and training methods to ensure case managers understand the importance of matching service referrals with expressed and identified needs. Additionally, focus group participants noted that service referrals should be staged, allowing clients to remedy a barrier before being assigned another goal or task. The order of referrals and their relevance are essential to client success because inappropriate referrals can result in missed opportunities or interrupted treatment plans. Participants agreed that case managers need to be better trained on programs and services offered by partner agencies.

Ninety-four percent of survey respondents indicated that they at least “Somewhat Agree” that it is important for clients to receive time to address barriers before engaging in educational and work activities ([Appendix C, Figure 2: Welfare-to-Work Activities Rated \(Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey Results\)](#)). When disaggregating the survey data and analyzing responses submitted by case managers only, this percentage increased to 100%.

Similarly to the importance of creating strong communication and training methods for case managers, it is equally as important for clients to understand the availability of services within CW/WTW including how to access each service. Therefore, strategies related to Goal 1 consist of enhancing caseworker training, improving the client experience, and increasing opportunities for client education and relationship building.

**Question 3: Discuss any research or literature that supports the strategies chosen. Cite reference.**

Strategy 2 intends to reform case manager and eligibility worker training so that it better reflects current social work best practice. In recent decades, there has been a focus on the role of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adulthood. It has been shown that adults who experienced trauma as children are more likely to struggle with their mental and physical wellbeing in comparison to adults who did not (*Public Health Management Corporation*, 2013). Additionally, there is a strong association between trauma, adversity, and marginalized populations. This connection highlights the necessity of implementing trauma-informed care (TIC) in social services, which serves these populations (Voith et al., 2020). In accomplishing this, Strategies 1 and 4 would be mobilized as the Agency’s culture shifts with ongoing education and training efforts. Over a 3-year period, *The Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care* conducted a study on the outcomes of TIC training with Health & Human Services clients and staff. Employees who received TIC training reported overall improvements in collaborative work between staff, feeling fulfilled in their work roles, and physical safety. Furthermore, there was a significant decrease in unplanned client dropout and an increase in the number of clients completing the program as planned (Hales et al., 2019). As identified in Strategy 3, removing the day-to-day obstacles that marginalized populations face is key to increasing engagement rates. *The American Journal of Public Health* (Frieden, 2010) developed a “health impact pyramid” that identifies the key steps needed for a lifestyle intervention; they identify socioeconomic factors (housing, food and education access, etc.) as the foundation of population wellbeing. The health impact pyramid shows that when individuals do not have their basic needs met, it is inconceivable for them to progress to long-term lifestyle changes.



**Question 4: Describe the roles of other partners and collaborators in implementing the strategies.**

The Cal-OAR Team will enlist the help of the Agency's Training & Career Development department, Children and Family Services, and the OC Health Care Agency's Public Health Nurses to ensure trainings provided to CW/WTW case managers and eligibility workers are responsive to the needs of CalWORKs families. Specifically, the Cal-OAR Team will leverage their experience around counseling and serving individuals who have experienced trauma.

For the creation of education materials for caseworkers and clients, the Cal-OAR Team will continue to research best practices, leverage our existing network of Partners & Collaborators, and utilize the information learned through the Cal-OAR continuous quality improvement process. Additionally, the Cal-OAR Team will provide previews of the materials to the Case Manager & Eligibility Worker Focus Group as well as the Current and Former Clients Focus Group to help ensure that all deliverables are effective and engaging to the intended audience.

For the remaining strategies surrounding enhancing barrier removal services and increasing workplace efficiency, the Cal-OAR Team will work with the Agency's Family Self-Sufficiency Supportive Services, Divisional Operations, and regional teams to identify ways to automate processes, remove redundancies, and improve the client experience.

**Question 5: Identify any staff education and training needs, and include any technical assistance needed to implement strategy and achieve goal.**

Orange County, along with most counties, would benefit from a State-led training series for current and leading best practices in case management, including: Motivational Interviewing Techniques, Trauma-Informed Care, Case Management Best Practices, Whole Family Assessments, Secondary Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Cultural Competency.

Additionally, the Cal-OAR Team would appreciate support from California Department of Social Services (CDSS) related to advocating for more responsive and stable counseling services for CalWORKs families. In the Current and Former Client Focus Groups, the most popular request was for consistency in Mental Health services without regular breaks in aid and changes in therapists related to changes in program eligibility and/or entry level therapists merely focusing on completing licensure requirements. A potential connection to counseling services through Medi-Cal, Cal-AIM, and/or Department of Health Care Services may provide the consistency needed for appropriate family healing.



**Question 6: Describe how the CWD plans to mitigate and/or address both known internal and external barriers (to achieve the goal).**

*Are these new resources (i.e. grants, new program funding) or are these resources which are being redirected? Access impact of redirection.*

*What changes would the CWD like to make but cannot, due to resource availability?*

Known barriers related to strategies in Goal 1 include resource availability, caseworker workloads, and overall buy-in and adoption of selected strategies.

**Resource Availability**

A potential barrier to addressing desired training plans and enhancing barrier identification early in program participation is related to the availability of funding. While there is no shortage of strategies with great potential, resources are a concern. To help mitigate this barrier, the Cal-OAR Team will collaborate with Agency staff and Partners & Collaborators to utilize existing resources to the fullest extent possible in the absence of additional funding.

**Caseworker Workloads**

The Cal-OAR Team is aware that asking for more from caseworkers in the form of training and new processes may create mixed emotions; therefore, our priority is to invest just as much time and energy automating and simplifying as we will spend creating and amending processes.

**Overall Buy-in**

The Cal-OAR Team anticipates varying levels of adoption and support for Cal-SIP strategies initially; however, any reluctance to adoption will be mitigated through accurate articulation regarding how decisions are being made (focus groups, surveys, problem-solving discussions, etc.) and maintaining open invitations to staff, partners, and clients to participate in the CQI process.

**Question 7: Describe how your facility will continuously evaluate each action step taken to see if improvement is being achieved. (e.g., tracking tools, meetings, monitoring, etc.) Include who will be responsible for follow up and compliance.**

The Cal-OAR Team has used surveys to gather feedback from clients, caseworkers, and Partners & Collaborators. Surveys will continue to be administered as we work to improve the program. Questions will focus on how or if the culture is changing within the Agency, how individuals feel the changes are impacting their experiences (both clients and Agency/contracted staff), and any further information that would be relevant to the interventions described above. Additionally, the Cal-OAR Dashboard, CalSAWS reports, and resources made available by the Research Team will be used to track data and monitor progress toward increasing the Engagement Rate.

To account for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the Cal-OAR Team will utilize disaggregated data to better understand engagement by subpopulation and determine if there are any disparities. Whenever disparities are identified, we will evaluate contributing factors and develop new tactics to promote equity.



When collecting feedback from Partners & Collaborators, including clients, the Cal-OAR Team will ask if engagement strategies and Agency culture are meaningful based on their identity and memberships such as race, ethnicity, age, education level, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Moreover, we will evaluate our data collection processes to ensure proportionate representation of clients with diverse language, physical, and cognitive needs.

Lastly, when seeking feedback from various subpopulations, the Cal-OAR Team will partner with appropriate community-based representatives to ensure that information is being delivered in a culturally responsive and inclusive manner that is successful in soliciting open and honest feedback.



## **Goal 2**

### **Decrease Rate of Program Re-entries after Exits with Earnings by 1% to 11% by June 2026.**

- *Strategy 1:* Expand Post-Aid Supportive Services for clients who exit CalWORKs/WTW with earnings.
- *Strategy 2:* Develop a peer support or parent partner model to support clients exiting CalWORKs/WTW with earnings.

#### **Question 1: Explain the reasoning or methodology which was used to determine this goal.**

As discussed in Measures and Goal Narrative – Question 1, the Cal-OAR Team identified this as an opportunity to align recent internal efforts and key feedback from the Current & Former Client Focus Groups. The Agency implemented the Employment Services – Post Aid Supportive Services component earlier this year (January 2023) and determined that focused improvements in this service delivery will help leverage existing program infrastructure and help Orange County meet or exceed the State average of Re-entries after Exits with Earnings (CA: 11.5%, OC 12.0%).

Moreover, efforts to inform Orange County’s Cal-CSA found that the housing wage in Orange County is approximately \$36.31 per hour which is well above the CalWORKs/WTW income limits. Therefore, understanding the journey of our clients after they leave the program will be essential to helping our clients benefit from CW/WTW, remain motivated after being discontinued for earnings, and achieve financial stability. Lastly, the Cal-OAR Team determined that Goal 2 is appropriate because it will enable the Agency to better understand what factors and influences lead families to return to CW/WTW.

#### **Question 2: What led the CWD to these improvement strategies?**

As referenced in Measure-Level Descriptions Question 2, housing/rental assistance was listed as the most important service needed to achieve financial stability and the second most important service related to client success. Moreover, the Housing Support Program allows for continued support for clients exiting CalWORKs due to increased earnings which maintains eligibility for continued support.

Secondly, during a series of eight (8) small focus groups with current and former clients, the Cal-OAR Team learned that the top request from participants for strategies to improve the CW/WTW program were emotional support and enhancing mental health services due to a need for consistency in therapists and continued eligibility to counseling after leaving CalWORKs.



**Question 3: Discuss any research or literature that supports the strategies chosen. Cite reference.**

As summarized in this document and in the Cal-CSA, there is considerable stakeholder focus group and survey feedback, including those of our clients, that emphasized the difficult transition of families who leave the CalWORKs program. There is considerable evidence that supports this. Citing multiple studies, both Safawi & Pavetti (2020) and Brauner & Loprest (1999) found that while most families who left TANF were working, their incomes were so low that they still lived in poverty and faced significant hardship. Safawi & Pavetti (2020) also found that both access to transportation and childcare are some of the largest burdens impacting the ability to work once leaving TANF. While it is clear that significant supports are still critically needed after leaving TANF, there has been some promising evidence particularly regarding housing supports. A study including San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz counties found that families who received housing assistance after leaving TANF not only had lower TANF recidivism rates, but also were more likely to be working full time, live in higher quality housing, and live in less crowded environments (Mancuso et al., 2003). This research supports the necessity of the strategies identified above.

**Question 4: Describe the roles of other partners and collaborators in implementing the strategies.**

The Cal-OAR Team plans to collaborate with the Employment Services Team to help analyze data, maximize allocated resources, and identify improvements related to Post Aid Supportive Services for clients who exit CW/WTW with earnings. Maintaining a close relationship with the administrators of this service component will create a quick feedback loop and will allow the Agency to pivot as needed.

Similarly, the Cal-OAR Team will work with the Housing Support Program administrators to closely monitor clients linked to the program who exit due to earnings, including their financial and housing status up to 12 months after exiting the program. As previously mentioned in Question 1 of this section, the Cal-OAR Team believes that understanding the journey of our clients after they leave our program will be essential to helping our clients maximize their experience in CW/WTW, remain motivated after being discontinued for earnings, and achieve financial stability.

Additionally, Partners & Collaborators such as education partners and employment services providers will help gather feedback from clients currently preparing to exit the program, including their concerns and needs for ongoing stability.

**Question 5: Identify any staff education and training needs, and include any technical assistance needed to implement strategy and achieve goal.**

Orange County would appreciate training and technical assistance surrounding establishing and maintaining a support group for clients who exit CW/WTW with earnings. Specifically, best practices to maintain confidentiality and protections related to CW/WTW program participation.



Additionally, the Cal-OAR Team would appreciate support from CDSS related to advocating for more responsive and stable counseling services for CalWORKs families. In Current and Former Client Focus Groups, the most popular request was for consistency in mental health services without regular breaks in aid and changes in therapists related to changes in program eligibility and/or entry level therapists merely focusing on completing licensure requirements. A potential connection to counseling services through Medi-Cal, Cal-AIM, and/or Department of Health Care Services may provide the consistency needed for appropriate family healing.

**Question 6: Describe how the CWD plans to mitigate and/or address both known internal and external barriers (to achieve the goal).**

*Are these new resources (i.e. grants, new program funding) or are these resources which are being redirected? Access impact of redirection.*

*What changes would the CWD like to make but cannot, due to resource availability?*

The primary barrier for Goal 2 is resource availability.

**Resource Availability**

Suggestions in this category include marketing and increasing the utilization of supportive services available to clients exiting CW/WTW with earnings. While many supportive services are currently available to clients, the Cal-OAR Team anticipates that efforts related to the Cal-SIP will substantially increase service utilization. Therefore, higher than average drawdowns on program funding are reasonably anticipated. To help mitigate this barrier, the Cal-OAR Team will work closely with the Employment Services and Housing Support Program administrators to accurately monitor client participation and needs. Moreover, the Cal-OAR Team will work to create comprehensive forecasts based on real-time data to ensure availability of services throughout the fiscal year and contract terms for each service.

**Macro-economic Events/Recession**

An additional known barrier to achieving Goal 2 is the projected downturn in the economy. As a result, Goal 2 may be dramatically impacted in Orange County, with similar results statewide. If this scenario were to materialize, the Cal-OAR Team would compare overall county performance to statewide performance to establish a benchmark among other metrics to assess effectiveness of selected strategies.

**Question 7: Describe how your facility will continuously evaluate each action step taken to see if improvement is being achieved. (e.g., tracking tools, meetings, monitoring, etc.) Include who will be responsible for follow up and compliance.**

As the post aid services programs will be new to Orange County, there is still a considerable amount of development that needs to be completed, including policy specifics, data system design, expected participation, and expected rollout size. As such, the specific evaluation tools have yet to be finalized. Nonetheless, there are several performance measures that are of interest and will be utilized if applicable. These include:



- Pre and Post client surveys for those who are participating in post aid programs. Data will include measures regarding perceived needs, program satisfaction, how well they felt the services covered their needs, and additional feedback for improvements.
- Both the types and amount of post aid services provided, along with relevant demographics. Data will be evaluated monthly to determine if the program is being utilized as expected.
- Recidivism rates for those receiving post aid services compared to a similar sample of post CalWORKs clients who did not participate.
- Focus group with clients who have participated in the program.

To account for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), the Cal-OAR Team will utilize disaggregated data to better understand post-aid needs by subpopulation and determine if there are any disparities. Whenever disparities are identified, we will evaluate contributing factors and develop new tactics to promote equity.

When collecting feedback from Partners & Collaborators, including clients, the Cal-OAR Team will ask if post-aid strategies are meaningful based on their identity and memberships such as race, ethnicity, age, education level, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Moreover, we will evaluate our data collection processes to ensure proportionate representation of clients with diverse language, physical, and cognitive needs.

Lastly, when seeking feedback from various subpopulations, the Cal-OAR Team will partner with appropriate community-based representatives to ensure that information is being delivered in a culturally responsive and inclusive manner that is successful in soliciting open and honest feedback.

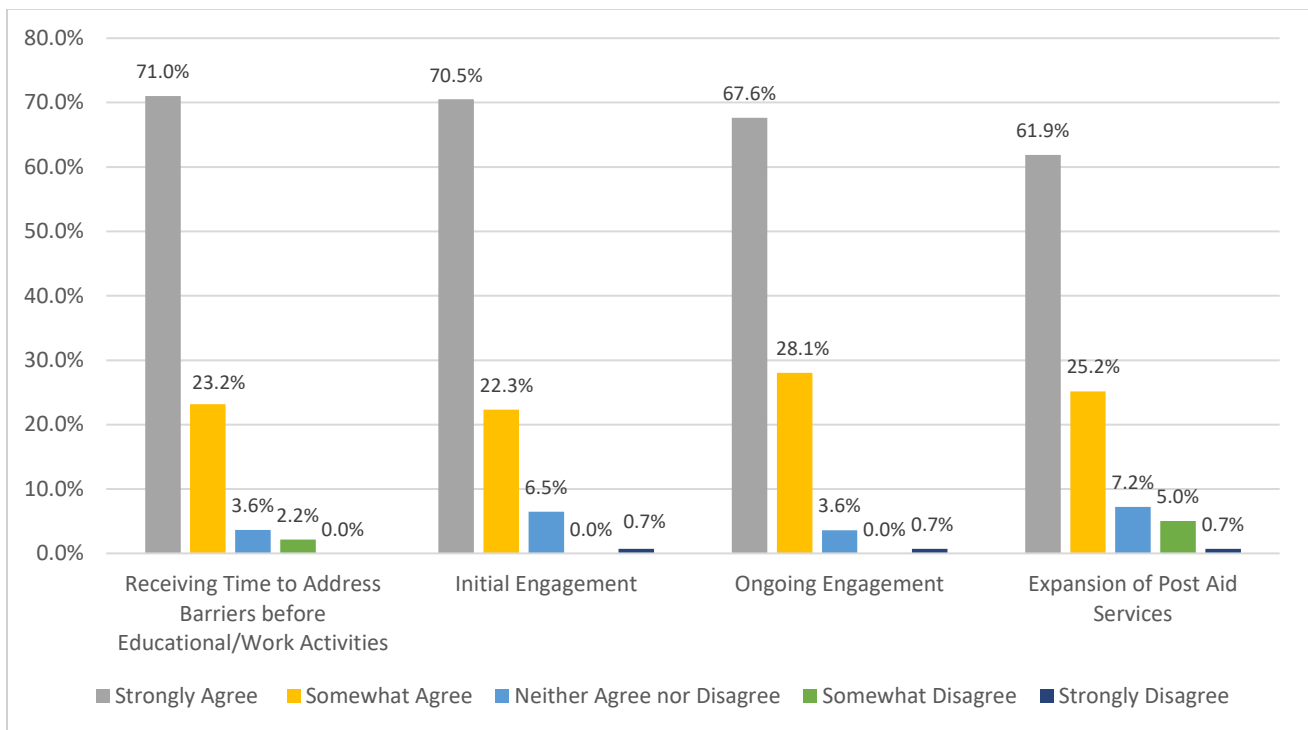


## Appendix

This appendix is organized into two sections: Charts and References. For easier navigation of this document, bookmarks have been created for the two sections and for each of the figures in the Charts section.

### Charts

**Figure 1: Strategy Consensus (Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey Results)**



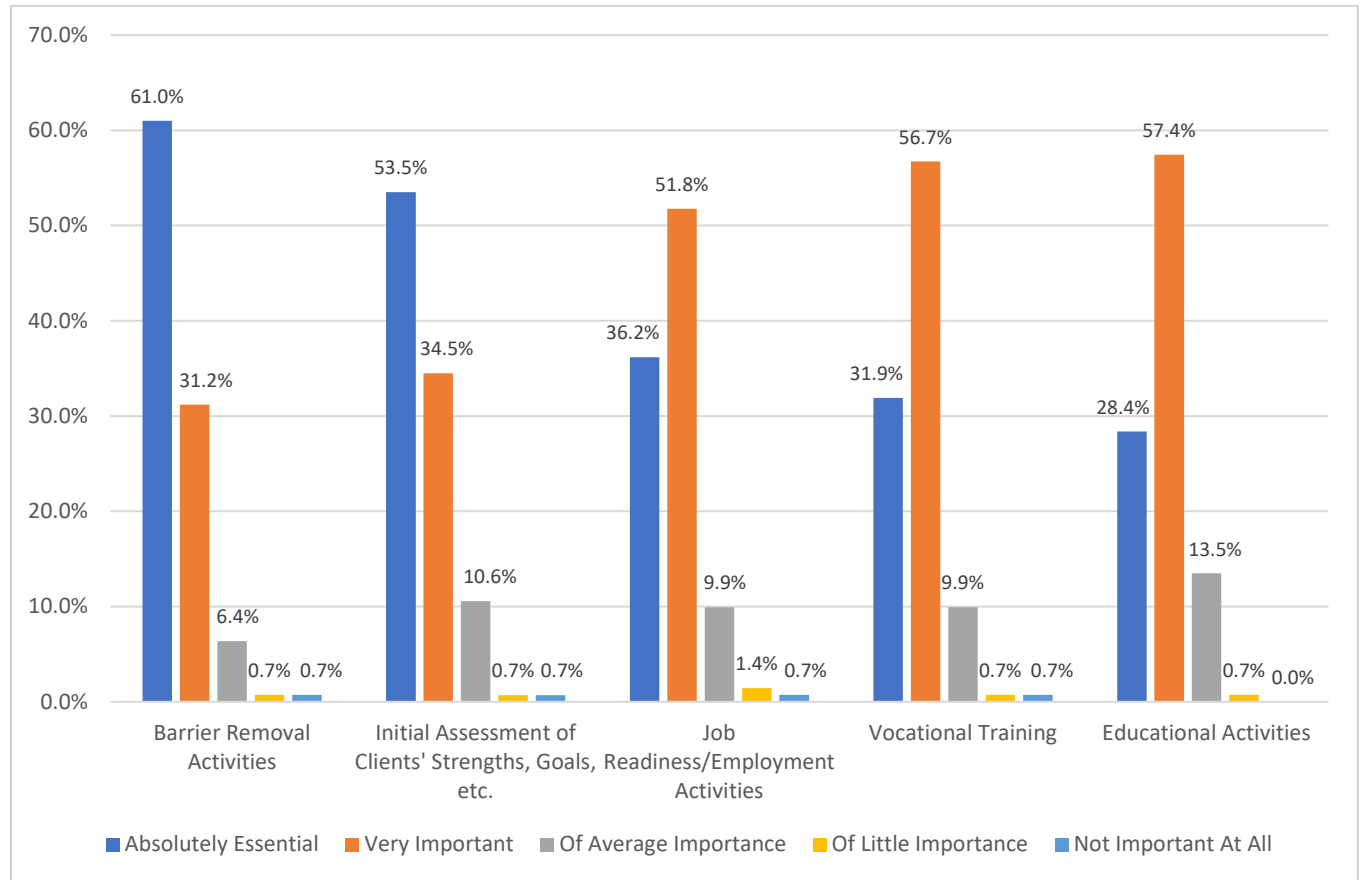
***Description:** The Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey was presented to external partners and the Agency’s CalWORKs staff in March 2023. All survey results were received in March 2023. Survey respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree that emphasis being placed on the areas of focus in the figure above would lead to better outcomes for clients.*

***Respondents:** <sup>1</sup> External partners (32 survey respondents)*

*<sup>2</sup> Agency Staff (106 survey respondents)*



**Figure 2: Welfare-to-Work Activities Rated (Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey Results)**

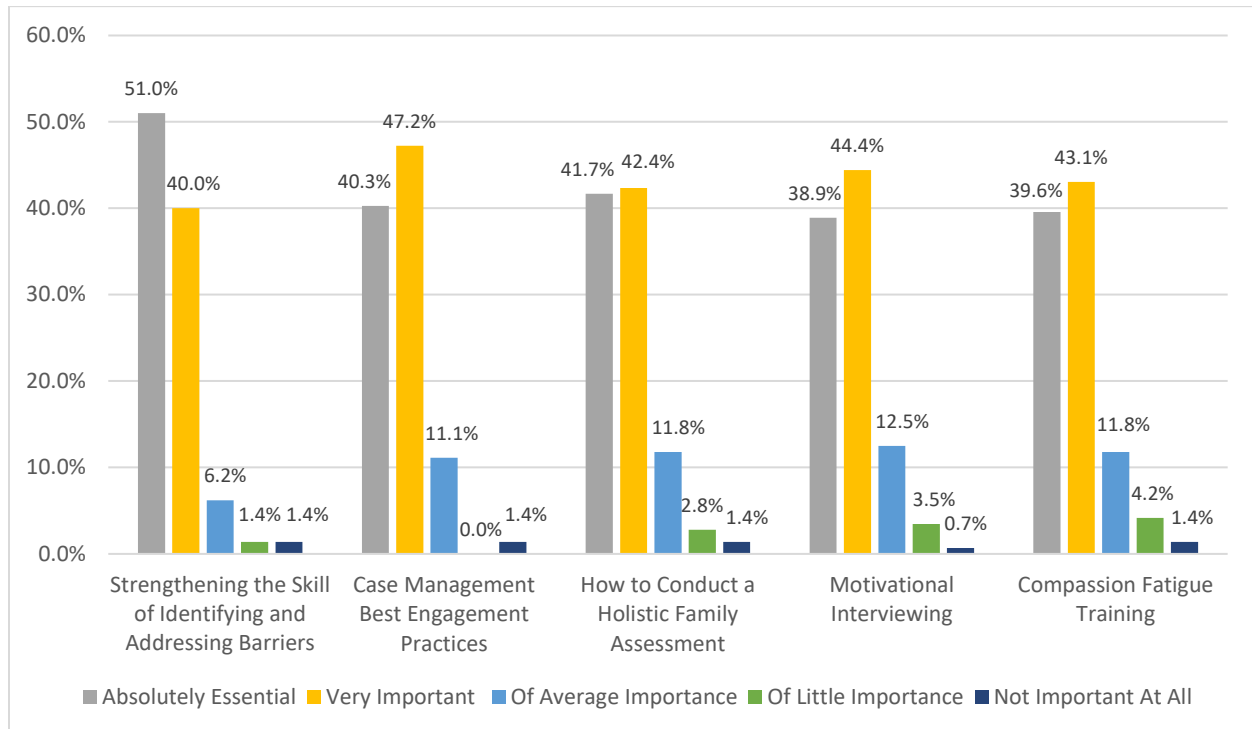


***Description:** The Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey was presented to external partners and the Agency's CalWORKs staff in March 2023. All survey results were received in March 2023. Survey respondents were asked to rate each Welfare-to-Work activity in the figure above based on its overall importance to aiding participants in achieving their goals.*

***Respondents:** <sup>1</sup> External partners (32 survey respondents)  
<sup>2</sup> Agency Staff (109 survey respondents)*



**Figure 3: Staff Training Topics Rated (Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey Results)**



*Description:* The Cal-OAR Stakeholder Survey was presented to external partners and the Agency’s CalWORKs staff in March 2023. All survey results were received in March 2023. Survey respondents were asked to rate various staff training topics by importance to caseworker success.

*Respondents:* <sup>1</sup> External partners (33 survey respondents)

<sup>2</sup> Agency Staff (111 survey respondents)



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