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CalWORKs Implementation in the IE

by Deborah Aguirre '28

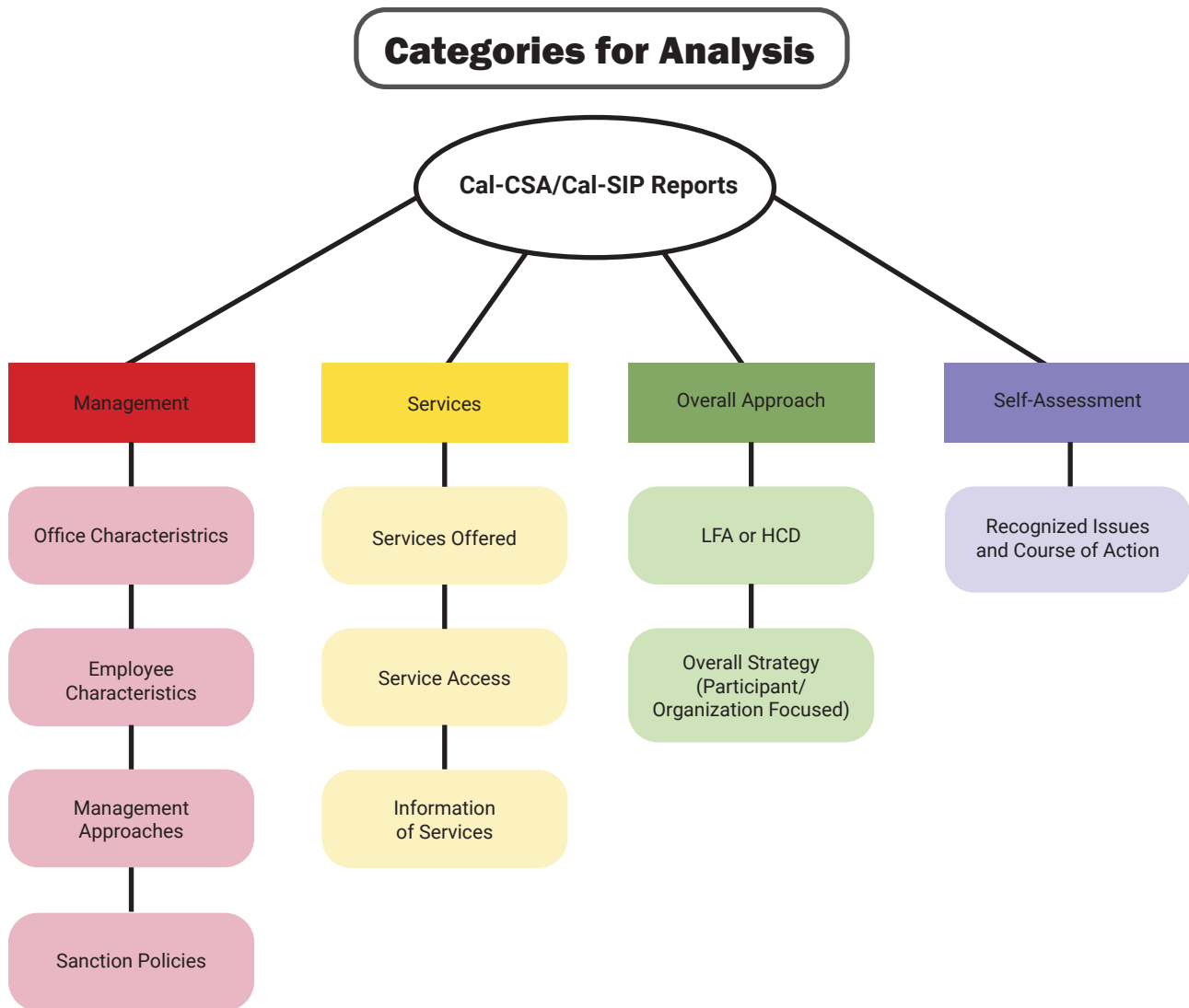
The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program has existed since 1997 as a part of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). CalWORKs is a cash assistance program to help families with housing, food, utilities, clothing, or medical care. It aims to assist low-income families to achieve self-sufficiency by promoting job preparedness and work, paralleling the same goals as its parent program. Recipients must participate in Welfare-to-Work (WTW) programs to receive CalWORKs benefits. The WTW programs help recipients seek employment through job training, career services, and other support services such as childcare and transportation.

CalWORKs has been found to help recipients achieve higher earnings and increased work opportunities through training and access to job opportunities. The program is implemented in various ways across the state. Successful programs often combine labor force attachment (LFA) strategies, prioritizing rapid employment, with human capital development (HCD) strategies, which focus on skill-building and education. Offices that emphasize engaging case management see increased employment outcomes among participants. This finding highlights the need for participant-focused strategies, which entail assessments and individual planning, and organization-focused strategies, which include information and outreach.

Despite the benefits that TANF and similar programs may offer, they still struggle to help participants achieve true self-sufficiency. Many families who transition out of TANF still earn close to minimum wage, making it difficult to achieve true self-sufficiency. Strict sanctions also make it difficult to focus on employment gains, as the stringent requirements typically lead to lower employment rates and earnings among recipients. For example, the conditions for receiving CalWORKs benefits are so burdensome to participants that they often feel discouraged to work, perceiving the costs of the program as greater than the benefits.

Recognizing the need to evaluate program effectiveness, California authorized the CalWORKs Outcomes and Accountability Review (Cal-OAR) in 2017. The initiative aims to assess the performance of various CalWORKs offices across the state, with the first five-year cycle beginning in 2021 and continuing until 2026. Cal-OAR is comprised of two main parts: (1) a county CalWORKs self-assessment (Cal-CSA) that describes how a county office works and (2) a CalWORKs System Improvement Plan (Cal-SIP) report that describes what a county will do to improve its CalWORKs program. CalWORKs operates with the same goal of self-sufficiency for families in all counties of California; thus, the reports allow for a comparison of the program’s implementation in different counties.

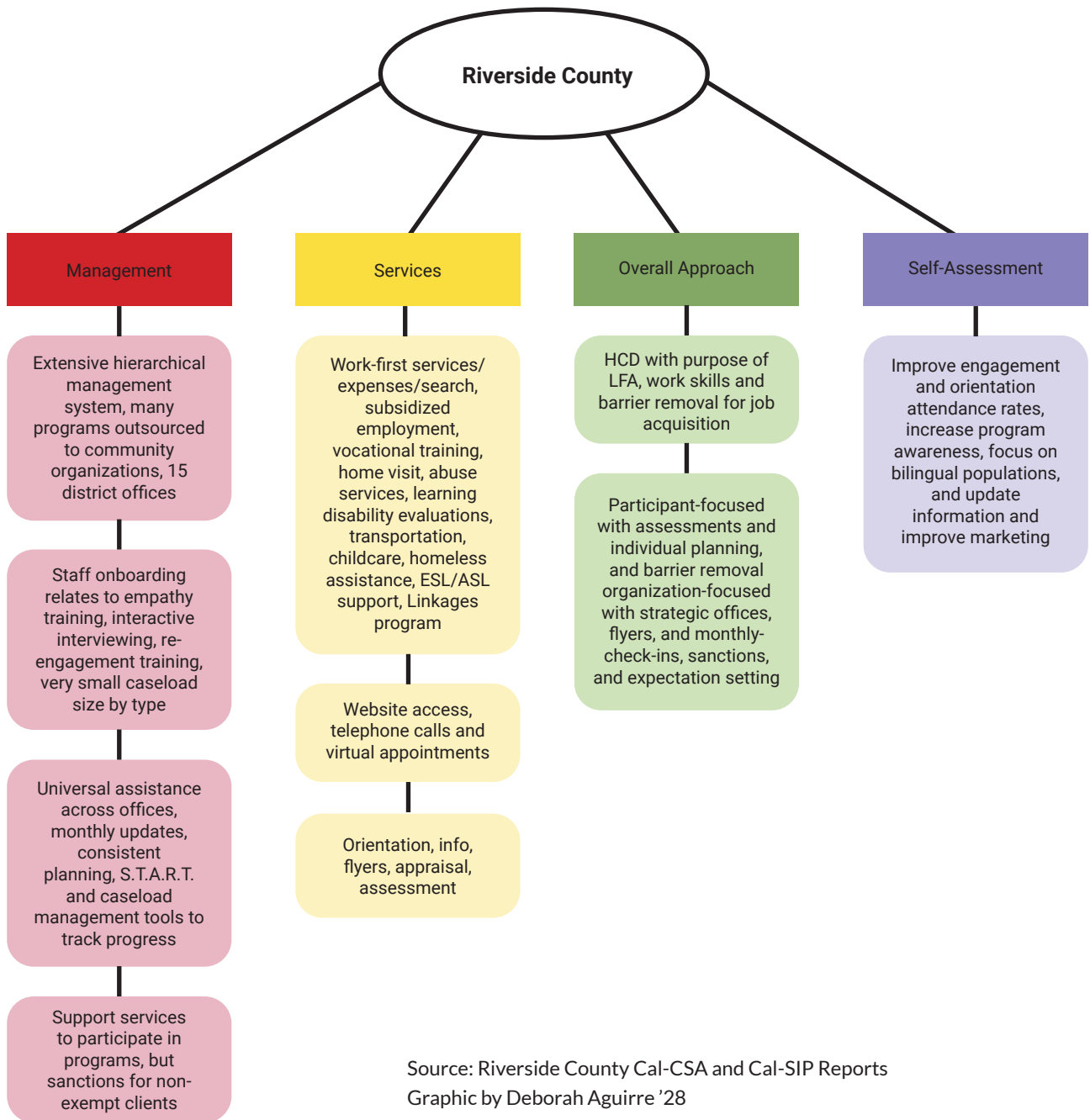
This article will use Cal-CSA and Cal-SIP reports to explore the differences in the CalWORKs WTW programs in San Bernardino County and Riverside County. These reports are a part of the first Cal-OAR cycle from 2021 to 2026; they are based on a California Department of Social Services (CDSS) template. This study evaluates the programs using four broad categories based on the work of researchers like Katherine M. Vu, Gayle Hamilton, and Allison De Marco. The management category covers the county’s CalWORKs office’s internal structure. The services category addresses the different services provided to participants, which vary by county. The overall approach category assesses the types of strategies employed in the overall program, as well as whether the county focuses on employment or human capital. The self-assessment category reflects the challenges and needed changes identified by each county. These categories provide a multifaceted assessment of the CalWORKs program in Riverside County and San Bernardino County.



Categories based on Vu et al. (2009), Hamilton (2002), De Marco et al. (2008)
 Graphic by Deborah Aguirre '28

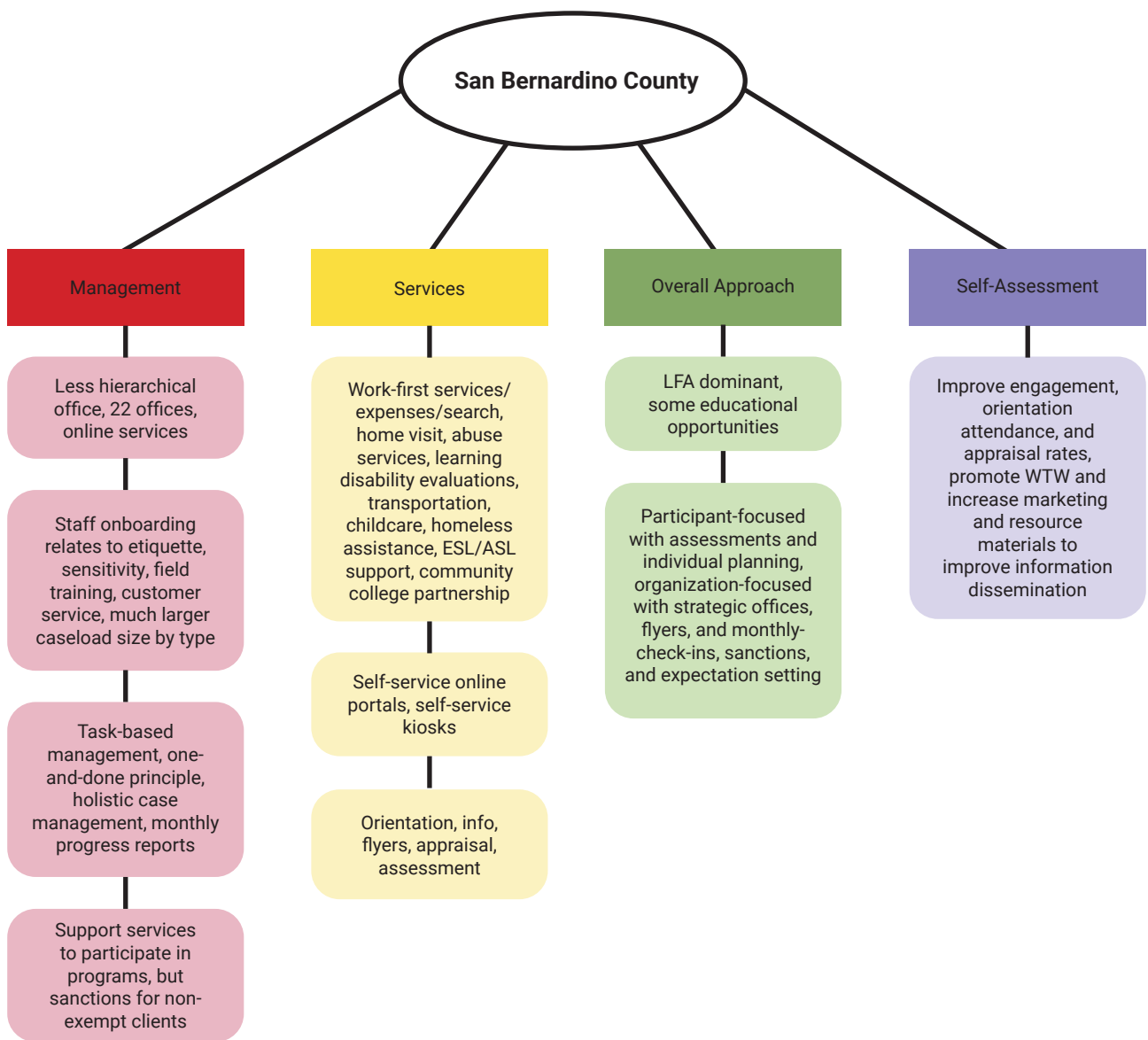
The WTW programs in both counties share many similarities. These include the services offered, information shared by case managers, accessibility in services, participant-focused strategies, organization-focused strategies, and issues recognized. Significant differences arise in the type of partnerships offered, staff training, average size of caseloads, case management approaches, types of employment opportunities, educational opportunities, and overall approach.

Many of the differences between the counties come down to management and services categories. One notable difference is the use of community partnerships, particularly in Riverside County. Riverside County outsources many of its programs, including the Home Visiting Program, housing services, and many of the services that fall into disability and special needs services. It partners with the Riverside Housing Authority, the Riverside University Health System, the Continuum of Care, and other departments within the Riverside County system. Outsourcing means that for particular services, there are separate case management systems, and less work is solely on the shoulders of those at the main CalWORKs office. Riverside County also offers its case managers a smaller average caseload per type and more tools to manage each case. Using the Caseload Management Tool and the Success Tracker and Readiness Tool, case managers in Riverside County can more easily track the activities of their clients as well as their progress toward addressing various needs.



San Bernardino County lacks similar tools to scrutinize each client. The overall management approach to each case is also significantly different, even if the frequency of interactions between case managers and their clients is the same (monthly check-ins in each county). San Bernardino County employs a “one-and-done” principle that makes each meeting with clients more task-oriented and more about going down a checklist, whereas Riverside has more emphasis on sharing resources with clients and making meaningful connections. The staff training in each county also showcases this. Riverside County prepares its staff to engage more emotionally and emphasizes empathy with clients, whereas San Bernardino County is more focused on training its staff for practical situations. The training in San Bernardino County is focused on customer service, corrective action, quality reviews, and field experience, rather than building relationships.

The focus on work services in each county is very similar, as both employ subsidized employment programs and opportunities to get the resources required to seek jobs. However, the programs used to offer employment in each county are different. San Bernardino County uses Community Employment Pathways (CEP), CalWORKs Subsidized Employment Program (CSEP), CalWORKs Youth Employment Program (CYEP), and Work Experience (WEX). Riverside County also uses a form of WEX but incorporates its own Expanded Subsidized Employment (ESE). The main difference is in the integration of services within each employment program. Riverside County incorporates vocational services and retention services



Source: San Bernardino County Cal-CSA and Cal-SIP Reports
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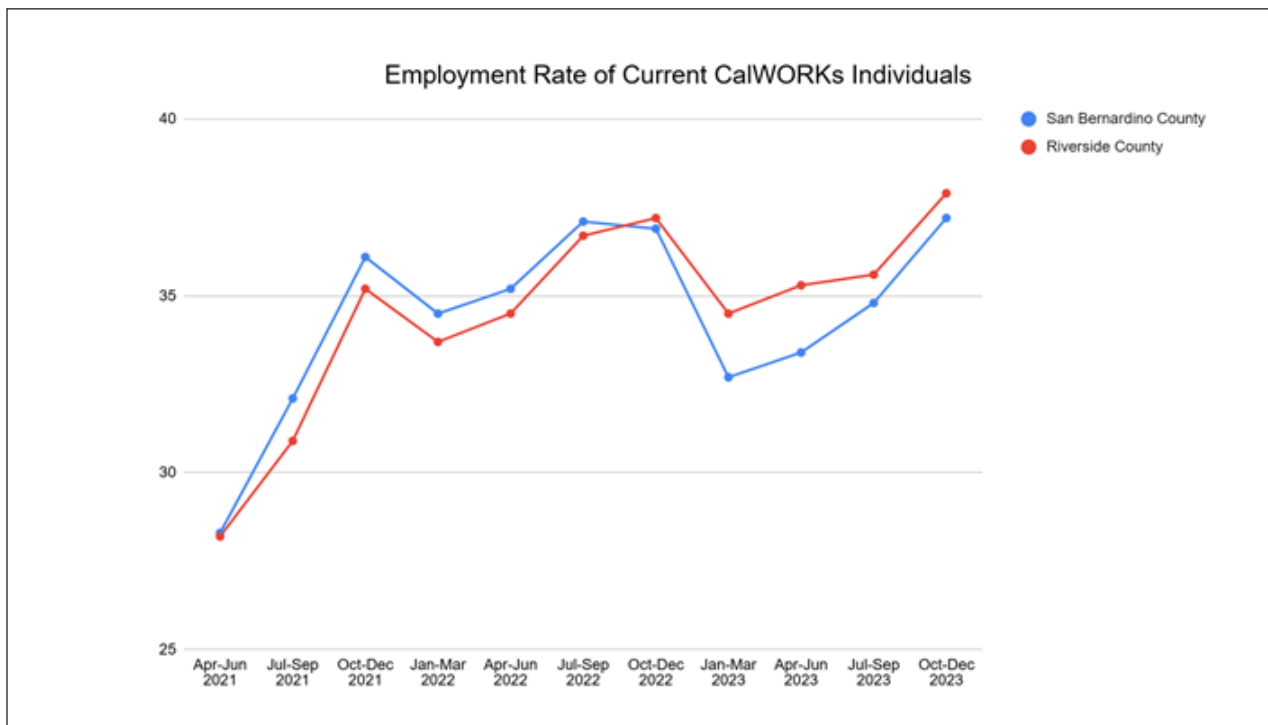
and even offers jobs through partnerships in county offices and external organizations. The program in Riverside is much more intertwined, whereas San Bernardino tends to have separate programs for each work-related service.

Most of the other support services offered by the two counties are similar, with only significant distinctions when it comes to housing, family management, and educational opportunities. Both counties offer assistance in these areas, but Riverside County collaborates with external offices and intensive case management for those in vulnerable family situations. When it comes to educational opportunities, San Bernardino County has direct partnerships with community colleges and offers practical skill training such as filing income taxes. There is also more support for English as a second language and American Sign Language in San Bernardino. Riverside County tends not to have partnerships in these areas.

Both counties have recognized that they lack adequate outreach efforts, which is the only organization-focused strategy with which they both struggle. San Bernardino has had slightly more success, managing to disseminate information through flyers in offices and resource rooms, but has recognized the need to further raise awareness in the community. Both Riverside and San Bernardino plan to work on improving the flow of information between staff and clients, as well as improving marketing to the community.

Both counties offer some elements of labor force attachment (LFA) and human capital development (HCD). Riverside County, however, has managed to blend the two more successfully. San Bernardino County, despite having aspects of HCD through educational opportunities, uses a dominantly LFA approach. The main goal as soon as clients become a part of CalWORKs is to seek employment immediately, and the support services are meant to remove barriers that might prevent the opportunity to work. San Bernardino County is less focused on developing skills than on inserting clients into the workforce. Riverside County has some LFA aspects, seeking to move clients into employment as soon as possible, but does prioritize the development of practical work skills. The use of their employment programs encourages clients to seek work that can get them started on developing skills—sometimes even through work assignments—before pushing them to seek better jobs.

How do the two counties compare in successfully connecting clients to jobs? The average employment rate for the two counties is relatively close. It has fluctuated over the years, with San Bernardino County slightly higher in 2021 and 2022.



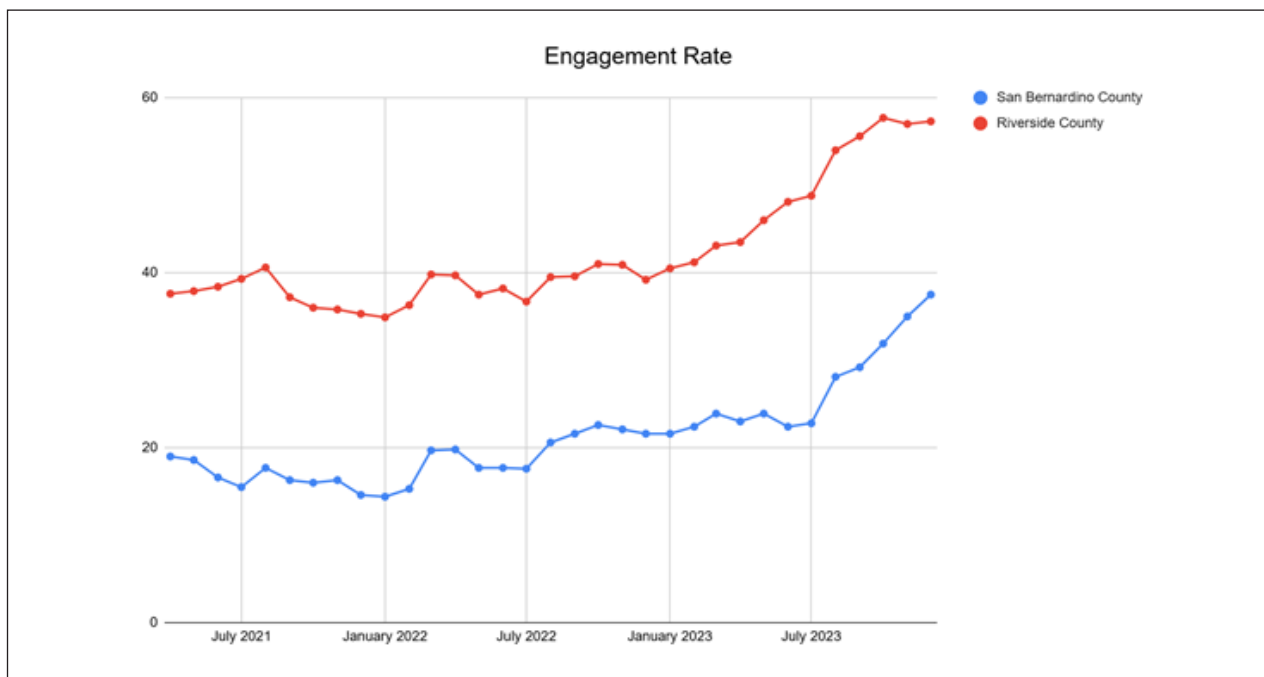
Source: CalWORKs Outcomes and Accountability Review Dashboard

Riverside County pulled ahead in the last quarter of 2022. The most recent numbers for the end of 2023 are 37.9% for Riverside County and 37.2% for San Bernardino County.

Engagement rate refers to the percentage of CalWORKs participants who are engaged in welfare-to-work activities. Riverside County consistently has a significantly higher engagement rate, some 20 percentage points above San Bernardino County. As of December 2023, engagement rates are 57.3% for Riverside County and 37.5% for San Bernardino County.

There are a few potential explanations for the large gap. The staff training and management approach in Riverside prioritizes building relationships with clients, rather than being “one-and-done” like San Bernardino. Building relationships could contribute to clients feeling more inclined to reach out for help and engage with more services, leading to higher engagement rates. The use of more interactive tools also allows for more meaningful interactions and detailed check-ins, motivating clients to perform more consistently. Outsourcing various services could also lead to more specialization within the services themselves, allowing case managers to focus on being guides to clients rather than being responsible for the delivery of multiple services. The case manager can focus on realistic goal-setting with individuals on a more detailed level, which has been found to be critical to clients’ success. Outsourcing also allows for the program to be more interconnected with the community and offers opportunities for the program to go beyond county offices.

Both counties recognize the need to improve outreach efforts and awareness in their respective Cal-SIP reports. Both want to expand their efforts on social media and marketing to make their services more known to the community. ♦



Source: CalWORKs Outcomes and Accountability Review Dashboard

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