

SHASTA COUNTY ELIGIBILITY WORKERS ARE UNDERVALUED

2023-2024 Shasta County Grand Jury
June 6, 2024

SUMMARY

Eligibility Workers are the first contacts for the underserved population needing assistance in Shasta County. The Shasta County Grand Jury found the Shasta County Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) entry-level Eligibility Worker position has a high vacancy rate and decided to investigate the problem. In the course of its investigation, the grand jury found that Eligibility Workers express a high job satisfaction rate but leave because of low wages and job stress. “Eligibility Worker 1” (EW1) is defined as an entry level position, but the career has changed over the past few years and now requires complex special skills. The current job description has not been updated to include the complexity of the current position, nor the time and training required to learn and master the job.

Though an upper management HHS employee proposed a comprehensive reclassification almost 18 months ago, the county has not approved it. The grand jury recommends that the county reclassify the EW1 position to reflect the true complexity of the job.

The high vacancy rates for EW1s have resulted in EW staff working excessive overtime, which contributes to staff burnout and causes workers to resign or transfer to other county jobs that are less stressful. The county would benefit from doing a cost analysis to more clearly understand how the agency spends limited funds.

In addition, HHS lacks a permanent training space. The current training center is too small to train a sufficient number of new employees to fill vacancies, complicating the problem. In spite of an adequate applicant pool, only 16 new hires can be trained every four months. The grand jury recommends that the county secure a larger permanent training facility to accommodate more trainees.

BACKGROUND

Eligibility Workers are the employees who interact person-to-person with public assistance applicants of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and low economic levels. The duties of EW1s are varied and numerous. It is the EW1’s job to connect clients with needed federal and state benefit programs in a timely manner. They must learn the different programs designed for aid in Shasta County, check the eligibility of clients applying for aid, and be certain to enroll clients in some programs within a three-day period. Each program has different qualifications for aid, whether it is for a single person with or without children or a family needing housing, medical help, or food. These employees spend nine weeks learning rules, regulations, and numerous systems before they are prepared to interact with clients. EW1s are also required to attend classes in de-escalation procedures so that they are competent to compassionately support difficult clients.

EW1s are responsible to enroll clients for benefits and must be well trained, empathetic, and tireless in their efforts.

METHODOLOGY

During its investigation, the grand jury reviewed numerous documents including:

- Personnel rosters.
- Customer Service Center data.
- Graph of wait time for phone queues.
- Expedited Service Benefits chart.
- Reclassification proposal for EW positions.

Site Visits

The grand jury conducted a site visit of the EW training facility.

Interviews

The grand jury interviewed 16 people including:

- Current HHSa Eligibility Workers.
- HHSa Eligibility Worker trainers.
- Shasta County administrative and management staff.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the grand jury's investigation, it became clear that the major reason for EW1s to leave their positions is the low wage, which contributes to the high vacancy rate. The EWs who were interviewed expressed high job satisfaction and appreciation of their supervisors and colleagues, but the low pay makes it hard to make ends meet. Increasing complexity of the job, burnout from overtime, and ongoing stress to meet the needs of their clients are additional challenges for EW1s. As a result, some of these well-trained employees seek better positions elsewhere or move into different county positions at the same classification and pay scale, but with less stressful duties that do not require working with a sometimes-challenging public.

Job Description

Another factor contributing to the vacancy rate is that the job description has not been updated to reflect the greater complexity of the job. Applicants are often not aware of the requirements of the position, the complicated forms and programs they must master, and the sometimes adverse client reactions they may experience. Once the workers receive their first paychecks, many are not willing to stay through the intensive training and accompanying stress, and they drop out. According to records kept for the four 2023 induction training classes, 26% of trainees were lost in the first six months and 32% by twelve months. Attracting and retaining workers is challenging. Better documentation of the actual job duties might attract more people and benefit both applicant and county.

Complexity of the Work

The job description for an EW1 is currently listed as an entry level position, and the wages are commensurate with that description. The job has become more complex due to increased federal and state mandates. The training knowledge and skill level needed for this job have increased significantly. EW1s train for nine weeks and then are supervised by a mentor for four to six additional months. EW1s are now required to learn new plans through Covered California.

EW1s are also required to operate multiple computer systems. They need to interface between separate systems while learning to troubleshoot and do workarounds when the systems do not mesh.

The California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) release program updates to the counties, sometimes three in a week, and the county must implement the changes within a specific time to ensure clients receive their benefits in a timely manner.

Programs Available in Shasta County

Cal Fresh	Medical Services
Cal Works	Cooking and Nutrition
Government Assistance	In Home Health Services
Housing Programs	Child Care
WIC	Housing
Cash Aid	Comprehensive Perinatal Services Program
Job Skills	Maternal Depression and Anxiety
Mental Health Support	Disability Resources

The Population Requiring Services Continues to Increase

Since 2017, the number of CalWORKS and CalFresh programs increased from 66 to 127, and Health Care Programs increased from 63 to 73. In addition, the overall caseloads of the combined programs have grown from 32,290 in 2013-2014 to 55,344 in 2022-2023. The total caseload has grown 66%, while the staffing level has increased only 11% during the same time period. Processing some of the aid programs, like expedited CalFresh, requires completion within three days, or the county faces penalties. A new state mandate requires EWs to staff a 24-hour crisis center for emergency calls. Because there are not enough workers to place in that position, the current EW staff fills those slots, leading to more job-related stress and additional overtime.

Chronic Understaffing

HHSA has state funding for 160 full time Eligibility Workers 1 and 2, but it has never been fully staffed. According to personnel rosters from 2023, the number of vacant EW1 and EW2 positions ranged from 38 to 60, which results in the vacancy rate of 24% to 38% of primarily EW1s and contributes to overtime, stress, and burnout. The grand jury found that HHSA has not done a cost analysis to calculate the loss of investment due to training and probation dropouts, frequent movement of the training facility, and the cost of overtime. With a cost analysis, the county would have more data to make informed decisions.

The starting salary for EW1s has not kept up with the increases in California minimum wage. For instance, in April 2024, the minimum wage for fast food workers increased to \$20.00 per hour. The EW1 starting wage is \$18.99 per hour. Fast food restaurants train their new employees three to five days. EW1s train for nine weeks and spend an additional four to six months with a mentor.

Compliance Requirements

The shortage of EW1s delays HHSA from meeting the needs of clients and complying with state mandates to address client needs in a timely manner. Required compliance of some state mandates is 90%, but HHSA is chronically at about 70%. The state can fine HHSA for not meeting the state mandates.

Insufficient Training Space

To compound the problem, HHSAs does not have a permanent EW training center. In the past, they rented buildings for training, but on two different occasions, those facilities were rendered useless due to flood damage. Over the past six years, the training center has relocated five times.

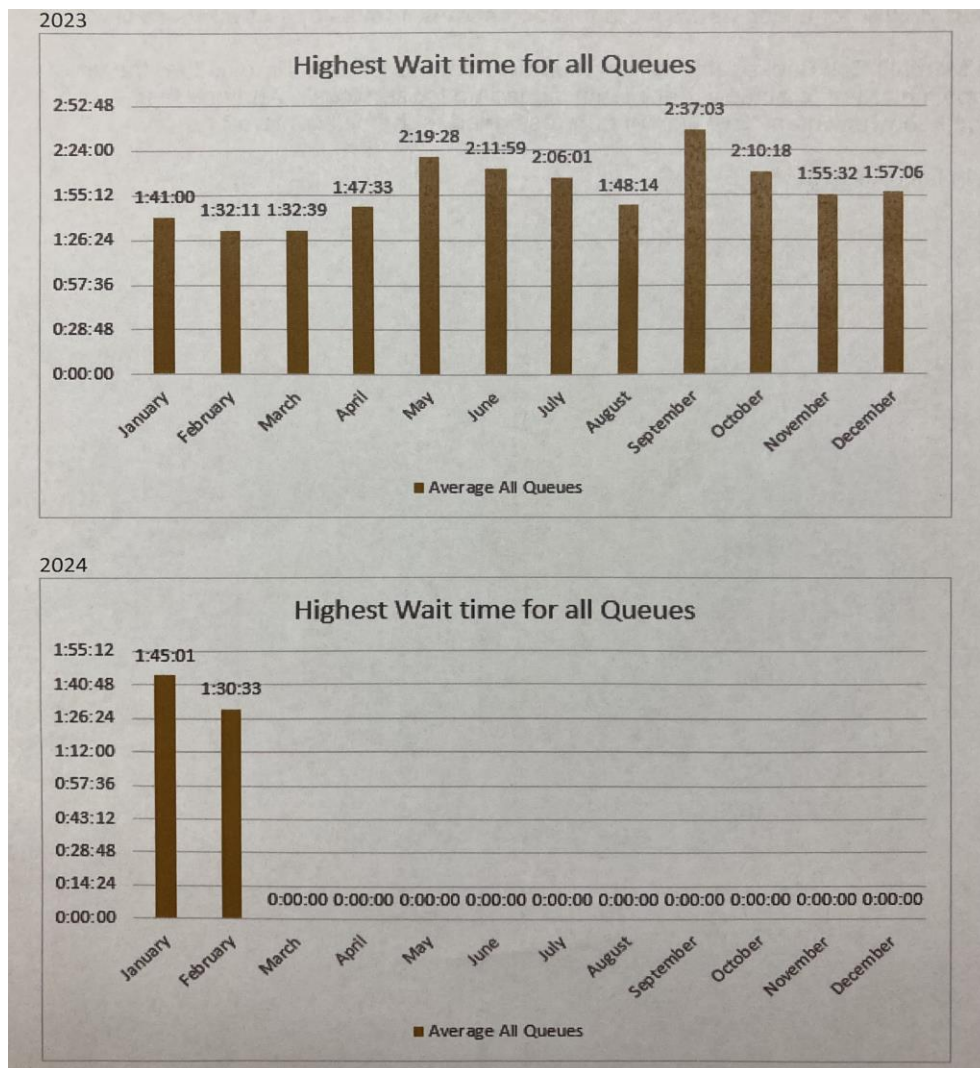
During a visit to the latest training area, the grand jury found employees using two small side-by-side rooms, requiring the trainer to move back and forth between the classrooms. Additionally, inadequate training space limits HHSAs' ability to train more than 16 new hires in a single session. Optimally 30 applicants should be trained at a time due to the attrition that occurs before, during, and after training. The eligibility worker position has never been fully staffed, but a dedicated facility to train a larger number of new hires would be a step in the right direction to correct that problem.



Eligibility Worker Training Center, March 2024

Call Center

HHSA has a call center, which it staffs with EWs, to receive inquiries and make appointments for benefits. In 2023, the center received from 4,980 to 9,630 calls monthly, averaging 600 a day. Callers abandoned the calls at a rate of 14% to 40%, due to excessive wait time, which can be as long as two and a half hours. HHSA budgeted for a fully staffed call center of 63 employees. As of March 2024, there were only 47. Long wait times have contributed to delays for clients.



Existing Proposal

During the course of its investigation, the grand jury became aware of a proposal to reclassify the Eligibility Worker position, as well as update the job description. This would increase the starting wages. This proposal, which was drawn up by an upper management HHSA employee, was presented to the county administration over a year ago, but no action was taken. The proposal was evaluated to be a true reclassification, which would address the issues of job

complexity and low wage. If implemented, the reclassification would begin to remedy the high vacancy rate and low retention rate of entry level EW1s.

FINDINGS

- F1. Reclassification of the Eligibility Worker 1 position to match the current complexity of the job is necessary to increase wages.
- F2. Increasing the wages of the Eligibility Worker 1 position to match the current complexity of the job would improve retention and lower vacancy rates.
- F3. Inadequate staffing leads to additional stress for the workers and delays services for clients.
- F4. The small training facility limits the number of trainees per class, which contributes to the insufficient number of new hires.
- F5. As a result of not tracking the cost of overtime or the loss of Eligibility Workers during training, the county is not able to calculate the investment lost every time a worker leaves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2023-2024 Shasta County Grand Jury recommends:

- R1. The Shasta County Board of Supervisors approves and implements the existing reclassification proposal of the Eligibility Worker position by December 31, 2024.
- R2. The Shasta County Board of Supervisors establishes a permanent training center, large enough to supply a full contingent of new Eligibility Workers by December 31, 2024.
- R3. By June 30, 2025, the Shasta County Board of Supervisors conducts a cost analysis of overtime and attrition of the Eligibility Worker 1 position during training and during the first year of employment.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the following responses are required within 90 days from the following governing body:

- The Shasta County Board of Supervisors as to F1, F2, F3, F4, and F5.
- The Shasta County Board of Supervisors as to R1, R2, and R3.

DISCLAIMER

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury do not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.
