

Child Welfare System Boosts Oversight of New Jersey Foster Care and Adoption

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A June 2003 *Government Technology* article revealed how inadequate data systems contributed to severe problems at New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS), which is responsible for foster care and adoption programs.

A 1999 lawsuit filed by advocacy group Children's Rights Inc. had shone an unwelcome spotlight on several shortcomings of the legacy systems employed by DYFS. Among other limitations, caseworkers had difficulty using the software, which lacked a user-friendly graphical interface, and the system required clerical staff for data inputs and updates.

Another difficulty was the piecemeal approach to technology. DYFS used 40 PC applications to bolster deficiencies in four mainframe systems. As the *Government Technology* article noted, "The lack of a unified system allows crucial information to slip through electronic gaps too easily. When that happens, children's lives are put in jeopardy."

In 2003, with the lawsuit still unsettled and the media spotlight focused on horror stories about lax oversight of the foster care system, New Jersey began the arduous task of selecting and implementing a modern statewide automated child welfare information system (SACWIS) by issuing an RFP.

Flash forward to the summer of 2007. Although the lawsuit filed in 1999 was settled in 2003 and the settlement agreement modified in 2006, many challenges remain, including implementing a new case practice model, and improving the network of health-care units and services for kids under state supervision. But New Jersey has taken several important steps toward rectifying the situation, not the least of which was the August 2007 rollout of the state's SACWIS software to its caseworkers.

Automation and Integration

Dubbed NJ SPIRIT (New Jersey Statewide Protective Investigation Reporting and Information Tool), the \$70 million project - 50 percent of development costs were funded by the federal government while the state Legislature appropriated funds for the rest - was released in stages, starting with a centralized state call center in November 2005. Previously calls went to more than 40 locations around the state, with a lack of consistency in coding referrals.

"Citizens weren't clear who they should call to report a child at risk," said John Ducoff, director of the Office of Legal and Regulatory Oversight and acting CIO for the Department of Children and Families, the Cabinet-level agency created in 2006 to address child welfare issues. The department is composed of all agencies related to child welfare, including DYFS.

The new statewide call center uses a central registry that allows employees to receive and document calls, and send information out to field workers to investigate.

Ducock, project manager for the SACWIS rollout, worked with Montreal-based software vendor CGI Group Inc. on design, development and testing. Although the state is pleased with the software, he said there were times when executives had concerns that the project was falling behind schedule. "CGI stepped up with additional resources toward the end to meet our goals," he said.

After a three-month pilot in spring 2007 and the training of more than 5,000 staff members, Ducock described the August 2007 rollout as a milestone for the agency. "This type of system is a huge change," he said. "It's a new Web-based application that we're introducing to people who have been using an old mainframe system for 28 to 29 years."

Matt Hogan, vice president of the state and local solutions group at CGI, said the SACWIS software eliminates the tedious parts of case management. "We had one state exec who actually counted and noted her caseworkers were writing down a family's name 20 to 25 times in different paper-based forms, and that is not uncommon," he said. "With the Web-based software, that kind of form-based work is left behind."

Although CGI can build on the SACWIS projects it's done in other states, each system must be customized for individual needs. One implementation challenge, Hogan said, is writing interfaces to other state data systems. For instance, federal foster care eligibility guidelines require collecting data from state welfare systems.

Caseworkers Get New Tools

NJ SPIRIT merges case management and data collection tools to help Department of Children and Families executives more easily produce reports on the aggregate condition of the child welfare system.

A caseworker placing children in foster homes can pull up on her NJ SPIRIT screen a list of which foster homes are available in her geographic region. In addition to seeing the number of beds currently available, the caseworker can also get descriptions of characteristics of children and families to do better matching.

The system also automates tasks, such as requesting a child be transferred from one foster home to another, that used to require filing paper forms with several different offices.

Another advantage of the new system is better connectivity between the state attorney general's office and DYFS. Attorneys now have much broader access to DYFS records. "When one has a court date, he can access the system directly and see every case note," Ducock said. "Previously he would have had to call our staff and ask them to make a paper copy of a file."

Although it's too early to assess the impact of the new software on the day-to-day experience of caseworkers, Ducock is convinced that the system will not only do a better job of supporting their work, it will also help agency executives better manage their resources. "The advantage of the new system is that it is built to collect and track more data," he said. "The potential is huge to help us manage the agency better."

As an example, the system allows caseworkers to document unmet needs, Ducoff said. "In other words, if they tried to offer a service to a client and it wasn't available, they can document that in the system. The theory is that this will help us understand where to build more capacity."

Ducoff said the creation of a Cabinet-level agency to deal with child welfare and the appointment of Kevin Ryan, the former head of the state Department of Human Services, as its first commissioner has elevated the focus on child welfare issues.

Ryan himself sees better data systems as key to the agency's turnaround. Although the state tried to make incremental improvements to its data systems while the SACWIS project was unfolding, progress was limited. Testifying before a state legislative committee in February 2006, Ryan described many of the agency's ongoing shortcomings, and he called its legacy data systems "terrible."

"I recently received several conflicting reports on the same data request for caseloads," he said. "We cannot identify and address our problems if we don't have good data systems."

Making Use of the Data

New Jersey's well documented difficulties are not unique. About a dozen states are in some form of litigation about the inadequacies of their child welfare programs, and a major problem of almost every state is that their data is not very good, said Judith Meltzer, deputy director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for the Study of Social Policy.

Meltzer, who serves as the court-appointed monitor of the 2006 revised settlement between Children's Rights and New Jersey, calls the SACWIS implementation a "tremendous challenge" for New Jersey.

"First, it has to be customized and designed to match the business processes of the state," she explained. That requires standardizing those business processes, which can be different from region to region or office to office. Older data has to be put into a format for use by the new system. Making the transition is another issue for a work force that is either new and has to be trained, or old and resistant to change, she said.

"The last challenge, which is where they are now, is working out the bugs, making sure you have online help available, and figuring out where you pull data from to help managers make decisions," she added. "That is really the dessert. They still have a ways to go, but they have passed several important hurdles."

Meltzer said she believes it will take more than a year of use before agency executives realize the impact the software can have. "Then it will be up to the managers to make good use of the data," she said.

Although she believes the state still has a lot to prove, Meltzer is encouraged by the direction the agency has taken. "It's not fixed yet, but I am supportive of their leadership and the urgency they are showing," she said. The litigation has been a long and torturous process, she added, but ever since the creation of the Department of Children and Families, state officials "have lived up to all their commitments, have brought in the type of strong leadership and management they need, and they have focused on data."

Ducoff and Meltzer agree that any improvements the state eventually makes will be more because of people than technology. "I see this IT system can be a valuable tool," Ducoff said, "but it's not driving change in our case management practices. Our work is people engaging with kids and families and building a system that responds to their needs. The technology is only a tool that supports those efforts."