

Allegheny County DHS: Extreme Makeover

After a tragic system failure, a Pennsylvania department of human services decided a nip-tuck wouldn't do. More than a decade later, the dramatic transformation to a fully integrated cross-agency system is complete, with organizational, technological and cultural lessons learned for all.

IT BEGAN IN THE MID-'90S AS A desperately needed evaluation of a seemingly irreparable child welfare system. Ultimately, though, it resulted in a massive transformation into one of the country's premier models of innovatively integrated, consumer-focused human services.

Consistently reinforcing the need to improve communications, coordination and delivery of services to children and families in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, Marc Cherna, director of the Department of Human Services, led his team of public service professionals, business executives and technologists on a 12-year odyssey that succeeded on all levels—organizational, technological, financial, political, strategic and practical—and serves as a role model for agencies putting their own interoperability programs in place. As evidenced by SOC's extensive case study (see "Building an Interoperable Human Services System: How Allegheny County Transformed Systems, Services and Outcomes for Vulnerable Children and Families," at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs), Cherna and team met their primary goals as outlined below; now they strive to surpass these goals. Deeper knowledge and understanding of their experience, as detailed in the case study, provides a practical framework for building interoperable human services systems.

The study—which serves as an invaluable tool for virtually anyone teaming up toward maximizing effectiveness and efficiency of cross-agency services—discusses a multitude of lessons learned in rebuilding a once narrowly siloed and tragically ineffective system into a client-centric model with information shared across agencies. In addition to an in-depth exploration of the critical role technology plays in enabling interoperability and ensuring agility and flexibility as the legislative and economic environment changes, the Allegheny study addresses real-world issues of organizational structure and culture; duplication of services; workforce challenges, such as recruitment, training and retention; consumer education; and development of new partnerships and sources of funding.

The Mission

- Forge a shared vision of a consumer-centric system that transcends any single leader or political appointment;
- Build the political and public will needed to bridge internal and external silos;
- Ensure openness and inclusiveness for all stakeholders in a trusting and respectful process;
- Align disparate funding streams and maximize new and existing flexible funding sources;
- Clarify the use and role of confidentiality and privacy laws;
- Establish a defined career track for human services workers and build clear lines of accountability and recognition for new functions and roles;
- Create a collaborative workforce of talented generalists and service specialists;
- Integrate and adapt technologies around new business processes;
- Build a data-driven culture that directly applies predictive analytics and other data resources to improve clinical decision-making.

Project Recap

Key to Cherna's drive to build bridges across the community was the formation by 15 local foundations of the Human Services Integration Fund (HSIF), which supported development of the two key components of the DHS's interoperable data system:

- Data Warehouse (DW) serves as a secure central repository for more than 15 million client records from 384 agencies, using nearly 30 software applications, allowing for analysis of cross-agency trends to improve services both short- and long-term; and
- Electronic Client and Provider Information System (eCAPS) streamlines the underlying hardware and software required to support such vast data analysis across formally disparate systems.

Cherna and team's efforts, backed by the HSIF and other organizations, including the Allegheny Chamber of Commerce, Carnegie Mellon University and Deloitte Consulting, led to many additional initiatives: a relocation project that physically grouped the county's DHS staff by function to foster communications; personnel audits to improve employee retention; customer satisfaction surveys and caseload studies to help ensure quality standards of care; establishment of special programs for children, disabled and prisoners; creation of a Web-based network making DHS information readily accessible to staff and clients; and more.

In the Works

Despite all that Cherna and his team have accomplished, however, more remains to be done to fulfill the vision of a transparent, consumer-centric DHS.

In 2007, after Pennsylvania abandoned plans to launch a statewide child welfare data system, the Allegheny County DHS

Food for Thought: 12 Questions for Practical Applications

As you pursue strategies to improve interoperability within your agency and across your partner organizations, ask yourself and your team members the following questions, using Allegheny County DHS as a real-world learning model:

- In what ways can innovative human service leaders organize and deliver services differently within an interoperable system?
- Does an interoperable human services system serve consumers better? How?
- What strategies are needed to help human services agencies blend disparate funding streams and align accountability and regulatory compliance measures?
- What role does effective leadership play in breaking down traditional human services silos? What are the most important leadership elements?
- What role does relationship-building play in achieving successful interoperability?
- What structural and cultural changes are needed to achieve human services interoperability and minimize risk?
- How can technology be used to support an agency's efforts to achieve interoperability?
- How can data be used most effectively to measure success and improve practice in an interoperable human services system?
- Does transparency (outside scrutiny of agency goals and performance) and increased public accountability improve human services systems?
- In addition to visionary leaders, which partners are needed to buy in to a successful interoperable human services model? What are the most effective strategies to engage key stakeholders?
- What role do public opinion and media coverage play in the transformation of a human services system? How can leaders channel these resources as a force for positive change?
- What are the best ways to measure the effectiveness of a holistic, consumer-centric human services system?

initiated adaptation of a Web-based child welfare system developed by Deloitte for the District of Columbia. That system, which will be tweaked to support other case-management functions and integrated with the Allegheny DHS payment system, is scheduled for completion in 2010.

In 2008, Allegheny County DHS issued a request for proposal to develop an organizational structure and operations that would ensure effective management, leverage the department's ability to manage information, make data-driven decisions and implement relevant technologies. The goal, essentially, is to use all the tools now in place to their maximum individual and collective client and staff benefit.

In addition, more than 200 managers participate in the yearly DHS retreat to evaluate the department's progress and explore policies, practices and technologies aimed at reinforcing the department's customer-focused culture, regulatory compliance and—bottom line—adherence to consistent quality standards.

"The ongoing challenge is to use technology as a tool to increase accessibility to information and protect client privacy and confidentiality while ultimately improving outcomes for children and families," says Michael Smith of Stewards of Change, who has worked closely with Cherna and his team.

"And technology is only one aspect of any interoperability project," Smith adds. "The fundamental issue is human interaction and communication, within and across agencies."

Read On

Learn more about Allegheny County's Human Services interoperability projects. See "Building an Interoperable Human Services System: How Allegheny County Transformed Systems, Services and Outcomes for Vulnerable Children and Families," by Michael Smith, Stewards of Change, at www.stewardsofchange.org.

By the Numbers

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| \$987M | DHS budget |
| 194 | Number of funding sources (42% federal, 55% state, 3% county, 1% foundations/grants) |
| 5+ | Percent decrease in county's contribution to funding (from 8.6% to 3%) |
| \$178M | Annual budget for Office of Children, Youth and Family |
| 280+ | Number of DHS-sponsored CYF programs |
| 57 | Percent of total 16,676 children who received support from more than one DHS office in 2007 |
| 48 | Percent of parents of children in CYF services who received support from more than one DHS office in 2007 |
| 50+ | Percent of budget for children and youth devoted to prevention and in-home services |
| 34% | Decrease in number of children placed outside their homes, from 3,318 in January 1996 to 2,180 in February 2008 |
| 33% | Decrease in average length of time children spent in out-of-home settings, from 21 months in January 1997 to 14 months in December 2007 |