

Child Welfare magazine

Child Welfare and Technology

For child welfare agencies in the digital age, technology is only as revolutionary as the plan that drives it.

By Mary Bissell and Jennifer Miller

WHEN ARLENE KING GOES ON A CASE VISIT, she brings experience, compassion, and a handheld device that rivals James Bond's. Her pocket-sized PDA (personal data assistant) lets her take notes and photographs, record interviews, and file forms electronically. Using a voice recognition program, she has her conversations with clients automatically transcribed and downloaded into her case files.

Like the handhelds used by rental car companies and overnight delivery services, the customized computer, standard issue to King and her colleagues, helps her agency capture the most accurate, up-to-the-minute data possible. With reliable information, her agency can identify existing services gaps, comply with federal reporting requirements, and make the case for additional state funding.

Most important, King's child welfare agency is already linked to all other human service agencies in the county. Interagency data sharing means the children and families on her caseload are more likely to receive the full range of services they need, when they need them.

Allegheny County Data Warehouse: Improving Decisionmaking Across Agencies

By Marc Cherna

More jurisdictions nationwide are recognizing the value of collecting and using data across all social service agencies. This coordination allows agencies to consolidate information, eliminate duplication, and most important, achieve better outcomes for the children and families they serve. A promising example of this coordinated approach to service delivery is the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Delivery Warehouse (DHSDW) in Pittsburgh.

Created in partnership with the private sector, local universities, and other community stakeholders, the DHSDW is a central repository of 15 million client records, 17 internal sources, and eight outside sources. Using unique identifiers, the data warehouse matches information with DHS-contracted providers and programs to understand and coordinate services. The data can be analyzed to produce aggregate or group information, client-specific, provider-specific, or program-specific reports. Authorized DHS staff can also use the data to identify and coordinate services for consumers who are being served by multiple program offices.

As it has grown, the DHSDW has become a significant community resource, encouraging partnerships and research projects with RAND, the Center for Disease Control, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the U.S. Department of Justice. With community support, DHS has designed and implemented a public website containing up-to-date information on DHS-provided services and other community resources. Soon, the Allegheny County DHS will roll out a department-wide master client registration system to allow immediate updates and real time reporting from the data warehouse.

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Sound too good to be true? In this case it is. “Arlene King” and her agency are fictional, for the purpose of this article, but law enforcement, health care providers, and businesses across the globe are already using technology similar to what is described in this scenario. The technology is making organizations more efficient and improving the lives of workers and their clients. Despite rapid technological advances, however, many of these innovations have not yet made their way to the nation’s child welfare agencies.

According to a recent Annie E. Casey Foundation report, federal, state, and local agencies have spent more than \$2.8 billion on child welfare technologies over the past 10 years, with little measurable impact on the lives of vulnerable children and families. A 2003 General Accounting Office (GAO) report found that “despite efforts to implement comprehensive information systems [in child welfare], several factors affected states’ ability to collect reliable data,” including inaccurate data entry, insufficient caseworker training, disparities between state and federal data requirements, and lack of federal guidance on implementing reliable systems.

Progress has been made in integrating technology at both the federal level and in specific jurisdictions, but child welfare still lags behind business and other social service fields in harnessing information technology (IT) solutions that improve day-to-day decisionmaking, optimize case plans, and maximize children’s safety and stability. Even for states awash in data, appropriate expertise or strategic guidance is not always available so that it can be used most effectively for improving outcomes for children and families. In many states, child welfare agencies can be data rich and knowledge poor.

Leveraging Cutting-Edge Technologies

With generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Stewards of Change, a new organization dedicated to cross-sector innovation in the child welfare field, and the Yale School of Management brought together a dynamic team of business, technology, and child welfare leaders to explore more effective ways to apply emerging IT to child welfare management and practice. During a conference in New Haven, Connecticut, last year, Stewards of Change leaders and conference participants identified several guiding principles to drive technological and strategic change in the child welfare field and beyond.

What is Stewards of Change?

Stewards of Change (SOC) is a business with a social mission: to deliver and take to scale the newest cross-sector innovations to help the child welfare system achieve improved outcomes for the nation’s most vulnerable children and families.

Working closely with entrepreneurs from public child welfare agencies, nonprofit organizations, business and technology industries, foundations, and academia, SOC explores new ways to maximize the effectiveness of child welfare services through the use of cutting-edge technologies and business strategies.

For the past two years, SOC has teamed with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Yale School of Management to host a multi-disciplinary conference focusing on using business practice and technology to influence and support ongoing change in the child welfare field. For more information, visit www.stewardsofchange.org.

Participants confirmed what child welfare leaders are already learning. Technology, no matter how transformative, is not a panacea for the complex challenges facing today’s child protection system. Responding to unpredictable human behavior in the most difficult circumstances, child welfare leaders have been able to integrate technology effectively only when they are able to craft and implement a strong strategic vision to shape the agency’s overall philosophy, operations, and practice.

A successful blueprint requires the entire agency, from senior administrators to frontline caseworkers, understand and support the mission. “Agencies need a strategic business plan to drive the technology, not the other way around,” explains Daniel Stein, a former

corporate marketing executive and co-founder of Stewards of Change. “Technology can be a powerful tool, but it’s only one of many that successful child welfare leaders are using to create and sustain change.”

New Solutions for Old Systems

Responding to federal funding opportunities and evolving strategic priorities, most states (42) and the District of Columbia have started working on planning, developing, and implementing their Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS) to report on federal outcome requirements for children in care. While sporadic progress has been made to streamline and integrate child welfare agency IT systems, many states still struggle with the legacy of antiquated systems unable to satisfy multiple reporting requirements and day-to-day data needs.

“The reality is that many states are still ‘making do’ with IT systems that weren’t created with their specific needs in mind,” says Kathleen Feely, Managing Director of Casey Strategic Consulting. “As a result, many agencies are spending a lot of time and money maintaining and updating systems that were never designed for them in the first place.”

But there is good news. Dissatisfaction with current systems, along with growing federal demand for more system accountability, has led to increased reliance on “commercial off the shelf” (COTS) products already being used for SACWIS upgrades and, in newer systems, to improve data analysis and reporting tools. Because they are much less expensive and require less specialized maintenance than traditional government systems, COTS products, used in combination with other emerging technologies, offer a promising alternative for streamlining older systems to better meet current child welfare technology and system needs.

Child Welfare’s Alphabet Soup: A Beginner’s Guide to SACWIS, AFCARS & NCANDS

Just what do all those acronyms stand for? To clear up any confusion, following is a brief overview of SACWIS, AFCARS and NCANDS, some of the most commonly used child welfare data terms.

The Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), funded by both the federal government and the states, is a centralized data system used by the states to manage child welfare programs, track clients, providers and services, and comply with federal data requirements. SACWIS is intended to provide a comprehensive, automated case management tool designed to support all aspects of foster care and adoption assistance case management practice. States can also integrate other data management programs into SACWIS, such as TANF, emergency assistance, juvenile justice, and child care.

As a condition of federal funding, all states must provide the federal government with data under the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS). The required data set includes case-level information for all children for whom state level agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision, as well as information for all children adopted from state care. States must submit AFCARS data twice annually to the federal Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) is a national data collection and analysis system authorized by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. Though voluntary, almost all states, including the District of Columbia, participate. NCANDS has two parts: (1) a compilation of all child abuse and neglect statistics from each reporting state, including data on all child protection reports, investigations, victims, and perpetrators; and (2) case-level information from those child protective service agencies currently able to provide electronic child abuse and neglect records.

Interoperability: Breaking Down Social Service Silos

Another significant challenge in using technology effectively to improve child and family outcomes is the widespread “silozation” of human services technology within state governments. Different funding sources, accountability measures, and competing agency priorities can result in dozens of separate technology systems serving the very same families. Incompatible systems result in duplication, poor service delivery, and wasted taxpayer dollars.

“Most states and counties have a patchwork of agencies and IT systems that can’t talk to each other,” notes Vernon Brown, CEO of Moss Beach Homes, a child welfare services agency with 31 sites throughout California. “It doesn’t make sense for the agencies, and the lack of coordination hurts children and families.”

To remedy this problem, Stewards of Change conference participants recommended the next phase of child welfare technology innovation focus on interoperability—allowing IT systems across multiple social services agencies to share information. With the advent of relatively inexpensive “data dictionaries,” some child welfare agencies are already using these new technologies to “translate” information between disparate computer systems.

Strong Leadership for a Data Driven Culture

As with all efforts to transform the child welfare system, strong leadership is essential to support a management team and workforce that understands, values, and actively integrates data into policies and practices.

In too many cases, frontline workers have little investment or confidence in collecting data because they have never been given a meaningful opportunity to see its impact on their daily lives. As a result, individuals who are required to input the data on the ground level have no ownership in the process and no evidence to prove the information was worth gathering in the first place.

CWLA Teams with States to Provide Data Analysis System

The National Data Analysis System (NDAS) is a free online service started in 1999 by CWLA and sponsoring states. The NDAS website, <http://ndas.cwla.org/>, enables child welfare workers to access the most recent statistics on adoption, children’s health, child care services, juvenile justice, out-of-home care, and other related topics.

All data on the site can be downloaded directly to a desktop, and graphs can be created online in minutes. User-defined reports enable visitors to view data according to their specific needs. Web users can also browse the State Data Trends page, providing links to state’s child welfare data over a period of time. One state’s data can also be compared against another state’s data.

The NDAS site also contains hard-to-find data on agency administration, caseloads, salaries, and child welfare staff education and training. Last winter, NDAS added a kinship care section featuring information on kinship care demographics, funding, policies, and providers.

NDAS works with each state to ensure data are comparable across states through the National Working Group to Improve Child Welfare Data (NWG). A state-driven effort, NWG has focused on the federal outcome measures and standards used as part of the Child and Family Services Reviews. So far, its work includes surveying states and creating common definitions for areas related to child maltreatment, foster care, and adoption, including new definitions for foster care entry and re-entry, and revised definitions for reunification.

“Most caseworkers who spend time gathering information, don’t necessarily see how it can really be used to make their jobs easier or improve the lives of their clients” explains Stewards of Change Co-founder, Michael Smith. “Child welfare leaders need to provide the training and tools to build a culture that shows ‘data in action.’”

To create a data-driven culture, agency heads must also do what businesses have done effectively for years: invest in and empower a Chief Information Officer (CIO)—a top level manager responsible for shaping the agency’s technology vision and overseeing its implementation at all management levels. That means fully integrating the CIO into overall management of and strategic planning for the agency, not just to solve technical glitches or update systems.

“CIOs need to become trusted advisers to decisionmakers responding to the pressures to modify business strategies,” explains Bill O’Leary, Director of Health and Human Service at Microsoft. “CIOs can help agency director sort through approaches to meet their most pressing demands.”

Connecting with Courts

Like child welfare agencies, dependency courts are also running to catch up with technologies to better track cases, manage caseloads, and communicate with human services agencies more effectively.

“Too often permanency for a child is put on hold because judges can’t get basic, reliable information,” says Nancy Sidote Salyers, a retired judge and Co-Director of Fostering Results, a national education and outreach campaign to support foster care reform. “The information exists, but it’s a matter of making it easily accessible to those who need it to make decisions. Eliminating delay with timely information always translates into better decisions.”

Fully integrated technology systems ensure courts, agencies, and other social service providers are able to access immediate information on children and families to reduce the current backlogs of children waiting on court decisions and vital services.

Empowering Workers

In addition to data collection and analysis, cutting-edge technology must also be adapted to serve the needs and workloads of frontline administrators and caseworkers. Just as businesses have made upfront investments in customizing equipment for workers, state policy makers and child welfare workers must also receive targeted technological support so they can spend less time on paperwork and more time with children and families.

New integrated handheld technologies, Tablet PCs, web smart phones, and verification technologies are widely and successfully used in other fields with proven results, but haven’t yet made it to the child welfare frontlines. Making these devices available would not only save caseworker time, it would help recruit and retain young caseworkers who have grown up to expect cutting-edge technology in their homes and workplaces.

In some cases, concern about protecting the confidentiality of children and families discourages the use of new technologies that allow child welfare agencies to communicate more effectively with other social service systems and the courts. As a result, child welfare leaders and workers may not have access to accurate, real time data to help them make better decisions on behalf of children in care. And just as timely data is not available to workers, it is also unavailable to the public and policy makers responsible for holding agencies accountable for their child and family outcomes. Political leaders considering child welfare reforms are often forced to rely on two-year old data when new technologies provide more capacity to share legally protected information and other sensitive data without compromising the families’ privacy.

Using Data to Predict and Improve Outcomes

While many jurisdictions are using technology more effectively than ever to collect and analyze data, few are using it to help predict and change outcomes for children and families.

The business world uses “predictive analytics” to forecast consumer behavior and modify products to meet anticipated needs and challenges. Some hospitality chains, for example, currently analyze their consumer data to predict which customers might switch hotels and then customize a promotional package to prevent their “defection.”

“In the same way that an insurance company can predict outcomes based upon hundreds or even thousands of factors, the child welfare field can also use data points to build new models for more proactive case management,” says Michael Smith of Stewards of Change.

The use of predictive analytics could be used as a supportive tool to help caseworkers determine a child’s risk level, the type of services that would be most helpful to a family, and a case plan to maximize a family’s chances of staying together safely.

Helping Child Welfare Reach It’s Technology Potential

Efforts to use technology to improve outcomes for children and families at risk, both inside and outside the child welfare system, are complex, especially given the laws and regulations designed to protect private information. But just as health care providers and financial institutions have determined that the advantages of well-designed technologies outweigh their risks, the child welfare field must also continue to pursue new strategies to inject creativity and connectivity into its operating systems.

To order a copy of the technology materials from the most recent Stewards of Change conference at the Yale School of Management, e-mail Michael Smith at michael@stewardsofchange.org.

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