

PA Information Portability Project Recognized by Social Work Today
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Information Portability in Child Welfare

By Juliann Schaeffer

THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM MAY SOON RECEIVE a big, and much-needed, shot of IT – with the potential to drastically improve both children’s and caseworkers’ safety.

The Information Portability Project, started by a partnership among the University of Pennsylvania’s Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research; Montgomery County, PA; Stewards of Change; Microsoft; and Motorola, is “designed to bring technology that currently exists in the business world to child welfare,” says Debra Schilling Wolfe, MEd, executive director of the field center. “The goal is to improve safety, decision making, and efficiency.”

Wolfe says the initiative’s impetus came from the frustrations one colleague, Richard Gelles, PhD, dean of Penn’s School of Social Policy & Practice and one of the field center’s faculty directors, has been raising for years. Wolfe summarizes: “Why is it that FedEx knows where any package is at any given moment and eBay can track bids on millions of items in real time, yet we don’t know what children that have been reported to the child welfare system have been seen and can’t accurately track kids who are in foster care? That’s pretty scary.”

In 1993, the federal government responded to this concern by creating the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), which automates the collection of federally mandated child welfare data, providing support for the delivery and management of child welfare services. Yet Wolfe says this legacy information is hardly time sensitive and isn’t enough to keep children from harms’ way. “The SACWIS system does little to help child welfare systems do what they are mandated to do, which is to protect children,” she explains.

And as details of tragedies such as Danieal Kelly from Philadelphia and Nixmary Brown from New York, children whose suffering wasn’t stopped soon enough, were splashed across nationwide newspapers, “it became very clear that if there was technology available, perhaps tragedies like these may have been prevented,” says Wolfe.

What’s the Plan?

Through a grant from the Hite Foundation in New York, in 2006, the field center secured funding for a two-year project to see if this could be done. After extensive research, a nationwide survey, and a child welfare summit comprised not only of activists and experts but IT and business professionals, all involved came to the same conclusion: The real place a difference could be made was in bringing technology to child welfare.

The result was a commitment to design a new model of information sharing across human service agencies while also developing hand-held technology to provide child welfare workers with real-time access to information previously unavailable. At this point, Microsoft was brought on to work out a system where information could be shared across agencies, and Motorola agreed to design a handheld device for child welfare caseworkers.

Sharing Information

The project is currently working with Montgomery County to pilot the technology. “We chose Montgomery County because they’re the third largest county in Pennsylvania, and they are much more diverse [than other counties],” both socio-economically and ethnically, with urban, suburban, and rural areas, says Wolfe.

According to Daniel Stein, cofounder and managing director of Stewards of Change, the project’s multidisciplinary approach is central to its possibilities for success: “Montgomery County’s Portability Project represents

a unique opportunity to transform human services so that services are better integrated and coordinated. For a whole host of reasons, human service systems typically operate the silos rather than dealing with the complexity of overlapping service needs. We know that improving clinical outcomes and operational efficiency requires a multidisciplinary approach to address the complexity and uniqueness of every consumer.”

While the pilot won't put the technology in the workers' hands, it will provide a blueprint for the actual design of information sharing. Wolfe explains: “This is not software that someone designs and loads onto your computer; this is a customized system of sharing information for every single child welfare agency. So what happens in Montgomery County won't be the exact same thing that happens in Westchester County, NY, for example.”

Instead, the pilot will examine what information is currently available across other systems and through what technology, as well as determining the needs of those working in child welfare, to design an interoperable system. Wolfe notes that while many of the specifics are still being worked out, information she can verify that will be shared through this project includes families' behavioral health histories from the Department of Behavioral Health, health information, various services, and possibly a centralized intake for services for families so that families would no longer be required to give the same information to multiple agencies.

Speaking of her hopes for the project's future, Wolfe says, “Eventually, there are other systems that we hope will be involved – for example, real-time access to police information at a certain address.” Recounting memories from 30 years ago when she was working child abuse investigations, Wolfe expresses the fear that can encompass caseworkers when walking into a potentially dangerous situation with very little, if any, background information. “It's a very dangerous job, and caseworkers have been killed,” she says.

For the sake of workers' safety, Wolfe says this technology could not come soon enough. “We send caseworkers with nothing more than perhaps their own personal cell phone into situations where they have to deliver the news to families that they have the potential to remove their children. Caseworkers don't know what they're walking into; they could be walking into a situation that means life or death for the caseworker or the child.”

Handheld Technology

Motorola is currently developing the second part of the program: handheld technology that will give workers in the field and their supervisors back in the office access to information in real time.

While specific capabilities will be decided once more analysis is done, Wolfe says the technology will be able to take and upload photos and videos in real time during home visits. Other options that are still on the table include fingerprint or Iris scanning to verify that a child has been seen.

“The handhelds will be closer to a PDA, a super-PDA, with additional capabilities. The idea isn't to give caseworkers laptops, tablets, or computers to go out with. We want to make sure that the technology supports the interpersonal relationship between the caseworker and family and doesn't appear intrusive,” she adds.

The handheld units are also set to incorporate GPS tracking, which will be able to verify that the worker holding it has been to a particular home. “Some of the tragedies that have hit the headlines have resulted from caseworkers who have unfortunately been less than truthful about their visits. And while we know that this is the exception, those exceptions can result in children being killed,” explains Wolfe, adding that the GPS will also provide information on caseworkers' whereabouts.

Yet Wolfe is very aware that technology alone has its limitations, noting that Stewards of Change has been integral in explaining this concept: “[Stewards of Change] acknowledges that you can't just hand someone technology and have that change how you do things. Sharing information across systems is really a philosophical change and unless you do that piece first, the best technology in the world is not going to be successful.”

Additional Benefits

While real-time access to information will no doubt aid caseworkers in protecting children, Wolfe says supervisors will also benefit from this technology. "Supervision is one of the most important junctures in the child welfare system. Supervisors are the ones who provide the training, support, and supervision to the caseworkers in the field, who have the weight of the world on their shoulders. Caseworkers need good supervision both for support and to [provide] a set of more experienced eyes in their decision making," says Wolfe.

"This [technology] will allow supervisors to have more objective information by being able to actually see what a child or a home looks like to help caseworkers in making decisions," she continues. "It will also help supervisors ensure that caseworkers are implementing the policies of their agency."

But could an economy in crisis put social services such as the Information Portability Project at risk? While no one knows for sure, Wolfe says this: "One of the things that we do know is that in a recession, in times of economic crisis, families are placed under higher stress, and research shows us that child abuse reports increase in these times. So now is probably the most important time to look at doing things differently and – better. Simultaneously, the funding for services is being cut back. This is a double-edged sword, and it's placing children at higher risk. We know that out of the kids who are killed due to abuse, approximately half are already known to the child welfare system, and that says there's a crisis."