

POLICY

HHS Interoperability: Forging Opportunity From Challenge

The economic recession could be the impetus we've needed to drive program integration forward.

By Tracy L. Wareing and Robert Ek

BUDGETS ARE A FACT OF LIFE for governments, companies and households, and, as in many countercyclical periods when there is less money coming in than going out, we're forced to make difficult choices on how to balance revenue with expenses. Managers must review expenses and target anything inessential. Much like a naturally occurring forest fire, this can be a good thing, clearing away old debris, making way for new growth. But after there is nothing left to burn, what then? You can either walk away or you can try to start over. For health and human services commissioners, walking away is not an option.

In the early years of the most recent recession, I served as director of Arizona's Department of Economic Security (its umbrella human services agency) and thought we had tough decisions to make then, but they pale in comparison to what most states face today. States confront grim budgetary prospects, and human services agencies are hit with a double whammy—higher case loads and less money. Little relief is in sight—state revenues are not expected to recover to prerecession levels until 2014, and the economic recovery for the lowest-earning Americans, our clients, most likely will take even longer.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided some fiscal triage, particularly through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) emergency contingency funds and the Child Care and Development Fund, but those dollars are not expected to

keep coming. Many human services agencies have already had to cut services and reduce staff through furloughs, hiring freezes and layoffs, and face further reductions this year. What's more, with significant numbers of new clients forced to turn to public assistance for the first time, we have more people who require extra attention from caseworkers as they learn to navigate our programs.

The numbers speak for themselves. In October 2010, more than 43 million Americans received nutrition assistance through SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service; more than one in seven Americans are enrolled in what has become the front line of economic assistance (see chart, next page). Anecdotally, I hear from TANF administrators throughout the country that their clients are fundamentally different from those in past economic downturns—they are people who have never been on assistance before and are confused and frustrated that they have been jobless so long. What's more, many of the lost jobs are not returning, leaving an intense retraining effort ahead and the critical need to support these families in the transition.

Breaking Down Longstanding Barriers

While we face difficult circumstances, these same conditions may have opened the door to a vision long held by the nation's human services commissioners—to fully integrate the



dozens of benefit and service programs we administer. Each of these programs, which comes down in its own “silo” from an array of separate congressional subcommittees and federal agencies, has its own set of eligibility rules, assistant unit definitions, funding stream restrictions, reporting mandates and auditing requirements. This fragmented system escalates administrative costs, contributes to needless errors and, above all, forces our clients to negotiate a confusing array of applications and offices. They come to us seeking help for a single individual or family, yet we answer them with thinly sliced bits of assistance that rarely add up to a holistic, person-centered solution. But there is hope for a new way forward. Increasing numbers of other stakeholders are joining administrators in realizing this jumble of ill-fitting pieces serves no one’s long-term interest, least of all taxpayers who foot the bill for the unnecessary duplication and inefficiency this framework causes. Further, automation has now advanced to the stage where programs can become truly interoperable—they can communicate with each other, have common application elements and even a single “electronic home” for each applicant that can be shared across what were once considered impenetrable boundaries.

Health and human services interoperability makes it possible for clients to truly find “no

wrong door” when they apply for help, whether employment assistance, cash benefits, nutrition assistance or healthcare. Today’s cloud computer technology and developments in enterprise architecture mean that systems can now allow full-spectrum treatment of families, targeting need and threading multiple programs together to provide assistance quickly and in a way that minimizes turmoil for the family. With these technological developments, many states are improving their ability to manage and cope with the complexities of legacy systems.

Of course, states have been working on this dilemma for many years, but until recently the public policy consensus and the technology simply weren’t there to let state agencies pool resources and address the programmatic barriers that stand between them and a comprehensive delivery framework. This is finally beginning to change as states see the effects of the economic crisis continuing well into the future and realize that programs cannot continue in isolation from each other.

We have seen this happen in specific cases over the past few years as state agencies have set joint goals and pooled resources out of necessity. For example, the TANF Emergency Contingency Fund (ECF) produced a broad array of discussions across agencies in 2009 and 2010 with the blessing of the U.S. departments of health and human services, labor and agri-

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (Data as of January 5, 2011)					
FISCAL	PARTICIPATION		BENEFIT	AVERAGE MONTHLY BENEFIT	
Year	Persons	Households	Costs	Per Person	Per Household
ANNUAL SUMMARY					
FY 2011*	43,200,878	20,183,148	5,778,387,682	133.76	286.30
FY 2010*	40,301,666	18,618,363	64,704,631,665	133.79	289.61
FY 2009	33,489,975	15,232,115	50,359,917,015	125.31	275.51
*FY 2010-2011 data preliminary; all data subject to revision. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service For a more detailed breakout, go to http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/34SNAPmonthly.htm .					

SNAP: More than one in seven Americans are enrolled in the front line of economic assistance.



culture. These agencies jointly encouraged their state counterparts to collaborate in taking advantage of the \$5 billion available in emergency TANF funding. Just over a quarter of a million jobs were generated through the ECF's subsidized employment provision—jobs that most likely would not have been available had subsidies not been provided. These were jobs for both TANF clients and individuals who had been unemployed for a significant period of time. Many were developed in conjunction with the Department of Labor through summer youth jobs programs, which were at risk of being drastically scaled back had they not received collaborative support from other agencies.

Similar collaboration is happening in the realm of system design and interoperability. Oklahoma, Minnesota and Oregon are just a few of the states designing computer systems that can “talk” across agencies, allow clients to undergo the intake and eligibility process just once and let caseworkers engage in more comprehensive case management—beginning at intake—to ensure that every applicant is matched with the appropriate services. Shared services across agencies and an emphasis on braiding funding streams ultimately can pave the way for programs to be made whole while simplifying a complex web of low-income policies.

With Stakeholder Support, Progress Is Within Reach

However, these advances cannot be made without the support of many stakeholders, starting with those at the federal level, and we are seeing increasing buy-in from our federal partners. Examples include significant shifts in thinking on such issues as Advance Planning Document reform, with new regulations that make the APD process easier for states by

lowering the threshold for detailed procurement review and other positive changes (see Federal Register Vol. 75, No. 208, p.66319 at <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-26727.pdf>).

Another major catalyst for change has been the Affordable Care Act (see <http://www.healthcare.gov/law/about/index.html>) and the new requirements for consumer-oriented technology systems for the healthcare exchanges expected to be up and running by 2014. State human services commissioners are all very well aware of what a potential game-changer the ACA can be, especially for the work being done in determining eligibility for means-tested programs.

One of the most hopeful developments on the federal side has been the Office of Management and Budget's Partnership Fund for Program Integrity Innovation. The Partnership Fund will begin underwriting a number of state pilots this year to test promising ideas for service integration and administrative efficiency, with the explicit aim of recommending adoption of the projects that prove most successful. Other federal funds with these general goals are already on the books, to be sure, but with rare exceptions they support only individual programs. The Partnership Fund breaks new ground by specifically encouraging cross-program initiatives and new ways of communicating information across silo walls. The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) has strongly supported the Partnership Fund from its inception and is actively involved in current Partnership Fund activities.

The desire for genuine program interoperability has hit the level of critical mass at both the federal and state levels. Things are changing—finally—because of determined and talented people in our field who are certain there has to be a better way.



State budgets are grim, but there are new opportunities to plant the seeds for a stronger system that, if given a chance, will comprise the future of fast and effective help for America's struggling low-income families.

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