focus on child welfare

By Teresa Markowitz

Small Moves Yield Big Results
Federal Policy Change Presages a Momentous Innovation Opportunity

Public human service agencies around the country recognize the opportunity that technology presents to enhance practice and promote data-driven policy. Unfortunately, these aspirations can be stymied by a range of challenges, from regulatory barriers to political infighting to procurement challenges.

Despite these roadblocks, real technology innovation in human services is possible—and within reach. A key example is in the field of child welfare, where a recent—and little discussed—regulatory change is not only unleashing new technology opportunities in that sector, but is also demonstrating the larger opportunity for state and local agencies to achieve their technology innovation goals and break status quo logjams.

The technology conundrum in human services is real, and the sector as a whole has not kept up with the advances seen in the private sector. Too often, agencies suffer from cumbersome, outdated information technology systems that can make it difficult for line staff, administrators, and other human service providers to effectively and efficiently manage and distribute their services.

Not only do outdated technology solutions stifle effectiveness, they also miss one of the single greatest policy advances in the 21st century—the ability to collect, aggregate, and analyze large volumes of data in real time. Modern technology is predicated on the power of real-time data and advanced analytics. Yet these capabilities are absent in far too many human service agencies.

This reality would be unacceptable in the business world and should not be tolerated in agencies with as vital a mission as human services.

The good news is that at least one part of the sector—child welfare—is beginning to point toward a new technology path for human services.

Made up of both private and public providers, child welfare agencies are responsible for making decisions that can be life-altering for a child. These decisions about whether to remove a child from his or her home are ones that we have to get right.

The federal government has long recognized that technology plays a role in helping this system operate effectively. In 1993, Congress enacted the State Automated Child Welfare Information System, or SACWIS. This program, administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), continues to provide financial incentives for states to build computerized information systems in child welfare. When SACWIS was first established, many state agencies were lagging far behind the times, relying on paper and pencil recordkeeping and failing to collect standardized data.

While SACWIS has been an enormous success in its initial goal of promoting automation, it has not been consistently updated, and many child welfare agencies have struggled to

keep up with the ever-changing technology environment.

To begin to address this situation, ACF issued a game-changing program instruction in June of 2013. This new guidance from ACF outlined, for the first time, a vital, expanded pathway for states to adopt modern, cloud-based and commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) solutions to support child welfare agencies. This opportunity comes in the form of a federal waiver that, with approval, waives limitations on federal funding for proprietary human service software. This waiver provides states with a pathway to use federal funds to implement cloud-based information technology systems, including SACWIS systems, and to procure modern COTS software.

and limiting the time spent entering data.

Third, this opportunity offers states the use of hosted or cloud-based software that is a mainstay in the business world and an increasing part of government efforts to modernize technology infrastructure. Hosted software is less expensive and makes system-wide updates far easier, allowing software to more effectively adapt and endure over time.

One of the first waivers under the path-breaking program instruction was granted on June 2, 2014, to the Indiana Department of Child Services in connection with Indiana's use of Casebook, as a core element of MaGIK—Management Gateway for Indiana's Kids. MaGIK is the system

for an assessment tool developed by Multi-Health Systems that integrates with the district's State Automated Child Welfare System (SACWIS).

While the opportunities being pursued in Indiana and the District of Columbia are exciting, other states now have the opportunity to leverage federal support in order to adopt innovative cloud-based and COTS technology for child welfare.

In addition, this development is emblematic of a key moment facing all human service sectors. Now is a critical time for the field to step back and reflect on how its needs and challenges could be solved by using 21st-century innovative technology. COTS and cloud-based software provide data for users, can easily integrate across

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This new opportunity promises at least three transformative advantages.

First, it will allow states to participate in a more competitive software market. The COTS market is much wider than the current landscape of child welfare solutions. States will be able to enjoy greater choice and selection, and will ultimately benefit from the positive effects of an open, competitive market, including lower costs and better solutions.

Second, these tools have the potential to improve the quality of casework and child welfare services. Some legacy case management systems are poorly equipped to help caseworkers carry out their important mandate, lacking user-friendly interfaces and advanced analytics. New COTS systems can allow states to access real-time, rich data that can help caseworkers, administrators, and policymakers make evidence-informed decisions. Additionally, many are designed to be intuitive and easy to navigate—improving data integrity

of record for the Indiana Department of Child Services. And, Casebook is a web-based, COTS information system for child welfare. Casebook was developed by Case Commons, a nonprofit organization that grew out of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Casebook uses 21st-century technology and a design inspired by social networking platforms to help caseworkers better understand a child's unique situation. The system tracks personal and social relationships and a child's prior interactions with the child welfare system, displaying and organizing information in an intuitive way. The system also employs unique data analytics tools, which provide caseworkers and administrators with the ability to spot trends, prompt key interventions, and make data-driven decisions about a child's future.

The District of Columbia has also received a waiver award under the year-old program instruction. Washington, D.C. submitted its request

departments, and are often cheaper and faster to deploy than their predecessors.

Change can come from many directions. In some cases, other federal human service offices could follow ACF's lead in ensuring their regulations incentivize—rather than discourage—the most up-to-date technology. In other cases, the onus is on state and local agencies to challenge themselves to adopt the same tools and approaches that have revolutionized business over the past decade.

This rule change—and its initial effects—are a great example of how small moves can yield big results. The reality is that human services has a path forward to adopt innovative technology. Now is the time for hope and action, not frustration and passivity. **P**

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