



Nonprofit Improves Services to California Families with Collaboration Software

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Nonprofit—State and local services

Customer Profile

Aspiranet is a nonprofit organization headquartered in South San Francisco, California. Aspiranet provides an array of social and educational services to California children and families.

Business Situation

Because Aspiranet works with vulnerable children and families, it is imperative to carefully coordinate service delivery and keep meticulous record to remain compliant with regulations.

Solution

Aspiranet deployed Windows® SharePoint® Services to enhance collaboration among caseworkers, ensure the availability of data, and develop compliant business processes.

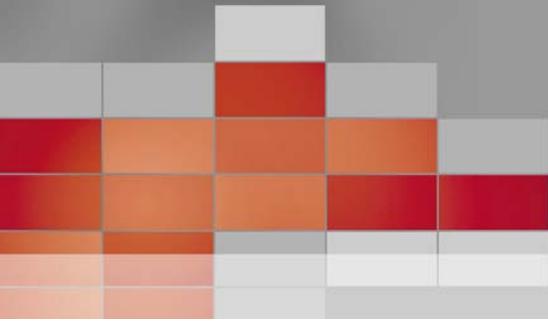
Benefits

- Improved collaboration
- Assured compliance
- Enhanced service delivery

“Our vision is to take collective action to support communities and families as they love and care for children.”

Vernon Brown, CEO, Aspiranet

When a child is abused or neglected—or when a child tries to stay out of trouble after school—access to services that respond to the immediacy of the need can be the difference between a positive or negative outcome. In California, extending services that provide care, support, guidance, and educational opportunity is the daily challenge that veteran social worker Vernon Brown, CEO of Aspiranet, focuses on every day. Founded in 1975 as a six-bed group home in Moss Beach, California, Aspiranet operates 35 core programs that deliver services to more than 10,000 California children and families a year. Accomplishing this mission requires caring, skillful caseworkers and integrated information technology. To remain effective, Aspiranet deployed Windows® SharePoint® Services, helping to improve collaboration among caseworkers and enhance the services the organization delivers to communities.



Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
Customer Solution Case Study



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Vernon Brown, CEO, Aspiranet

Situation

“Our vision is to take collective action to support communities and families as they love and care for children,” says Vernon Brown, CEO of Aspiranet, a nonprofit organization that provides social services to children and families in California.

When Brown joined Aspiranet in 1978, the organization’s business processes relied only on paper forms. Aspiranet’s first venture into technology began in 1982 when caseworkers started tracking information on an Apple IIc for 48 children. “Much has changed since those days,” Brown recalls. “Today our caseworkers must meet higher standards of compliance and documentation on thousands of cases.”

The organization’s caseworkers and administrative staff relied heavily on fax machines to communicate critical information. All information about children and their families was recorded on paper, and manual filing was standard. In parallel to its vast array of file cabinets and clerks, the five-person IT staff maintained several different databases on servers located at each of Aspiranet’s offices scattered across California. To maintain the IT infrastructure and synchronize data, the Aspiranet IT staff ran itself ragged servicing systems located in each of its three major operational regions, centered in the Los Angeles Basin, the Central Valley, and the San Francisco Bay Area. “Our IT staff logged over 100,000 miles per year in those days,” says Brown.

The old records systems were at their breaking point when Aspiranet dramatically expanded its foster care programs in the late 1990s. The organization began making investments in IT, in part to cope with its dramatically rising case load. The infusion of new technology made only marginal improvements in operations, which were dispersed over 25 separate locations at the

time. On average, three Aspiranet employees shared one computer. Further hampering the modernization effort was the absence of a strategic IT plan. A common, centralized e-mail deployment was not included.

Migration from the old paper-based and fax-based system took nine months, and during that time, individual users and field offices haphazardly adapted their old processes to their new equipment. Instead of faxing or manually routing documents and reports of their activities, Aspiranet caseworkers and administrative staff shared forms and documents using common drives with no consistency.

By the early 2000s, Aspiranet had grown to include new program areas and a burgeoning population of children and families receiving its services. “During this time, the practice of case management had undergone significant transformation, with greater expectations of compliance with specific standards for caseworker activity and record keeping,” says Miles Dapsauski, Executive Director of AltruIT, an IT support organization and Microsoft Registered Partner that grew out of Aspiranet to become a resource for the broader nonprofit community.

Aspiranet found itself with a tangle of records and procedures that were difficult to track and recall. On top of this complexity was a required layer of security, which was necessary to protect client confidentiality in accordance with a host of new privacy protection regulations.

“Our system had become unsustainable,” says Brown of Aspiranet’s 1990s-era foray into IT transformation.

Solution

With a grant from Microsoft in 2003, Aspiranet took its first bold step toward

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Miles Dapsauski, Executive Director, AltruIT

automating enterprise operations with the deployment of the Windows® 2000 Server and Windows XP operating system.

The grant, with licenses for several different Microsoft® products was valued at over U.S.\$750,000. The savings from the Microsoft donation allowed Aspiranet to invest resources into a centralized data center and private wide area network (WAN). The WAN addressed another critical shortfall in meeting new standards of care: protection of confidential data. During this period, Aspiranet also moved to an enterprisewide e-mail deployment, which greatly improved communications across program units.

“While these improvements in security and messaging were steps in the right direction, they did not address the core program processes essential to Aspiranet’s six major program areas: Family, Adoption, Foster Care, Education, After-School Care, and Community,” explains Dapsauski.

That is when the company’s part-time Forms Administrator, Kevin Rinker, discovered a low-cost solution that would harness the capabilities of Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server already embedded in the installed Windows 2000 Server infrastructure.

Rinker’s idea was to use Windows SharePoint Services, a feature of the Windows Server operating system, to rein in and standardize Aspiranet’s casework practices and workflow. Aspiranet also began to use Windows SharePoint Services to collect and store the detailed documentation required by state and local government agencies, as well as institutional donors.

Rinker discovered that Windows SharePoint Services could also be used to help improve Aspiranet’s relationships with its program participants and partners. Rinker looked outside of the nonprofit industry for examples

of companies that integrated Windows SharePoint Services into business processes, and found particular inspiration in the installation used by Hawaiian Airlines. As a result, Aspiranet developed a SharePoint Web portal for children and families who participate in its programs. Windows SharePoint Services also enabled Aspiranet to directly collaborate with its service delivery partners, other nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.

Benefits

Aspiranet’s installation of Windows SharePoint Services has allowed the nonprofit to extend its focus on services for California’s children and families by building upon SharePoint as a tool that supports its business practices. Caseworkers in the field no longer struggle with time-consuming faxing and filing, resulting in measurably improved and more uniform service quality.

Improved Collaboration

Initially, Aspiranet’s social workers were hesitant to start relying on the new SharePoint-based system. Getting buy-in from the nonprofit’s frontline was tough, Brown recalls. “At the time, caseworkers were not the most tech savvy bunch,” he says. “But a real-world incident early on changed a lot of minds about the new system.”

When a foster child under Aspiranet’s care suddenly became seriously ill and was air lifted to the nearest children’s hospital, emergency medical personnel and foster parents didn’t have the child’s medical records readily available. An Aspiranet social worker was able to instantly access the child’s medical records through the new system. The worker was able to share critical information with the team, which saved the child’s life.

Other Aspiranet programs have been streamlined by Windows SharePoint Services. "For example, the time span of a typical adoption case has been dramatically shortened, which is better for both the adopted child and for the adopting parents," says Dapsauski.

Assured Compliance

Managers at Aspiranet report that the installation of Windows SharePoint Services can be credited with improving the nonprofit's compliance and accountability. New statutory and regulatory requirements can now be promulgated quickly and uniformly throughout Aspiranet's network of practitioners and supervisors. Records are now authoritative and immediately available to Aspiranet managers and California state officials.

The installation is scalable, which ensures that all of Aspiranet's programs can be managed and reviewed in fine detail regardless of size or scope. For example, Aspiranet uses Windows SharePoint Services to administer daily after-school programs involving thousands of children by using a barcode-based identification system to validate participation. The SharePoint infrastructure also helps serve Aspiranet's adoption programs, which require intensive documentation and client interaction over long periods of time, often spanning years. Previously, programs of such disparate scale simply were not subjected to similarly thorough scrutiny by management, funders, or overseeing government agencies.

Enhanced Service Delivery

Brown is especially satisfied with the administrative savings that Aspiranet has been able to realize since adopting Windows SharePoint Services. "Case work is hard," says Brown, "so we have to be able to address staff turnover." But turnover-related costs have been minimized since Aspiranet

built SharePoint-based training and new-employee orientation online training. Automation has also reduced Aspiranet's human resources (HR) management costs.

"The implementation of an online claim system has reduced Aspiranet's worker's compensation costs," says Dapsauski. Indeed, Brown believes that his five-person HR and Payroll Department, overseeing the needs of more than 850 employees, sets a new standard for nonprofit overhead efficiency.

Management and funding have also reached a new level of efficiency and granular control. Because Aspiranet relies on a variety of different public and private sources for its funding, reporting requirements vary wildly. A recently implemented time and attendance accounting system even allows real-time monitoring of individual program performance, and an overall reduction in accounting and auditing costs.

Aspiranet is already looking to the future for new opportunities to incorporate technology into its vision of taking collective action to support communities and families as they love and care for children. A pilot project in conjunction with Motorola to provide Aspiranet caseworkers with mobile tools to help older foster youth make the transition to adulthood is set to begin in February 2009. Frontline social workers have played a leading role in designing the hardware and software for this innovative new program for this at-risk group, who often find those first years out of the foster care system especially difficult.

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