

Camellia Project Update: Alabama's HHS Departments Knock Down Silos

An interoperability program involving five state agencies and numerous community partners is under way in the Yellowhammer state, eliminating barriers to eligibility and improving client access to services.

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IN 2007, THE STATE OF ALABAMA COMMISSIONED a study by Microsoft and Systems Engineering to suggest a solution to improve the efficiency of Alabama's Health and Human Services agencies. Alabama wanted a fix that did not involve a major financial investment, a discontinuation of IT projects already under way or drastic changes in its various agencies' business processes. The resulting recommendation, "The Camellia Project—A Connected Health and Human Services Network," was authorized by Gov. Bob Riley in late 2007 with system planning and design kickoff in January 2008.

As state agencies face increasing federal reporting requirements with shrinking dollars for both client services and agency technological needs, Gov. Riley has made Camellia (named for the state flower) his top health and human services priority. The Governor's two primary expectations—and Camellia's ultimate goals—are:

- establishment of a "no wrong door" approach to improve service access; and
- establishment of a "lead case manager" function to improve case coordination.

Currently, residents who need state services not only have to know what services are available, but they must apply for each service separately, grossly impacting the efficiency of overall service delivery. Despite commonalities among the applications, clients must travel from office to office and program to program to fill out application packets, some as long as 30+ pages. Then they may be denied eligibility—if a required document (a salary verification form, for example) is unavailable or incomplete, more traveling and paperwork must be done, adding to transportation and child care costs and related obstacles for some clients.

Interoperability Pilot

Through various forms of interoperability, the Camellia Project is connecting families across five separate state agencies and six distinct programs: Department of Human Resources (Food Stamps and TANF), Medicaid (Medicaid for Low Income Families), Public Health (S-Chip insurance for children), Mental Health (Mental Retardation Services) and Rehabilitation Services (Children's Rehabilitation Services). The goal is to eliminate old stand-alone silo systems that are unfriendly to clients as well as increasingly complex eligibility processes through technological innovation and service delivery overhaul.

Camellia is designed to integrate with existing systems through the use of middleware technology (Microsoft's BizTalk) and an enterprise services bus, allowing agencies to improve client services via:

- Automated Web-based outreach screening and referral function directly linking referrals with and across state agencies;
- Automated sharing of eligibility information across agencies;
- Automated initial client and worker scheduling function to reduce number of office visits;
- Ability for clients to access screening, referral and eligibility information from any site with Internet access;
- Ability for case managers to fully coordinate case activities for families.

Community Partners

Community Partners is the non-state-agency partnership component of the Camellia Project. Modeled on a similar function in Florida's Access system, Alabama's Community Partners provides public access to and assistance with the Camellia online intake, screening and referral, and pre-eligibility processes from community-based organizations.

Partners include members of the Alabama Primary Health Care Association (clinics), Family Resource Centers, Community Action Committees and private service providers. Community-based organizations that wish to participate can be certified by the state at various levels, from simply providing clients with use of a computer and Internet access to assisting individuals with document scanning, data entry and other more advanced options. Alabama's Community Partners are invaluable assets to the state.

The University Connection

Alabama's HHS Departments are fortunate to have a connection to the state's Auburn University at Montgomery Center for Government. The Center functions as a partner with state agencies and local governments to support innovations and improvements in government processes. In addition, the Center leverages the many assets of the university staff and faculty, including research, training and education, to assist in this process.

For Camellia, this means an avenue to train state managers and executives in interoperability, as well as a means to educate graduate candidates in public administration and health-related fields. The Center has several graduate candidates working on the Camellia team. Learning to conduct business through interoperability of state agencies is integral to the state's succession planning process.

Governance, Status and Funding

Camellia is governed under the auspices of the Alabama Governor's Office. The Governor's Policy Office provides the direction necessary to function across the various state agency boundaries. The Governor's Health and Human Services cabinet members (commissioners of the various agencies) and the state's chief information officer comprise the project Steering Committee. Each agency has designated a technical lead and a subject matter expert to work with a selected vendor on the project's development and implementation over the next two years.

Camellia system planning and design was completed in August 2008, highlighting preliminary requirements for a Common Client Index to be used in cross-agency client identification and referral. In addition, the first phase resulted in a three-year "Roadmap for Completion" and an early spring 2009 target for a Request for Proposal to begin the development and implementation phase. Gov. Riley has targeted December 2010 for Camellia completion.

With little state money available, Alabama is actively pursuing funding assistance for the project from federal agencies, federal grants, demonstration project funding and foundations. Alabama officials have been encouraged by the enthusiasm for the project within both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Medicaid Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The partnership between state and federal agencies on funding approaches coupled with technical assistance on planning and implementation requirements has enabled Alabama to move rapidly to meet our 2010 completion goal.

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