PRACTICE

Rethinking Delivery of Health and Human Services

As technology evolves, human services agencies can link good intentions with measured outcomes, to accomplish more with less for their clients. Programs in Massachusetts, California, Colorado and Connecticut are prime examples.

By Matt Schubert

DOING MORE WITH LESS is nothing new for state and local government human services agencies. The recent recession amplified this trend as budget shortfalls resulted in service and staff cutbacks. Grappling with deficits, states are drastically reducing vital human services programs in workforce development, mental health, family health and other transitional programs.

Despite the decline in resources, though, the need for human services increases as unemployment and poverty surge. Further complicating the situation is the thorny, redundant, and costly delivery of health and human services that consumes large swaths of annual government budgets. Agencies must identify innovative approaches to coordinating service delivery and improving outcomes while reducing overhead.

As scrutiny of HHS programs increases, decision-makers must maximize every dollar. This is not only an issue of accountability but also of effectiveness. Without a strong link to outcomes, metrics like "number of patients treated" obscure performance and misuse resources. Generic metrics also neglect the importance of outcomes related to recipient progress. Drilling deeper into recipient progress, providers get a clearer picture of how to change programs, staff and resources to improve performance.

However, the reality is that improving individual program impact alone does not necessarily mean better outcomes for those being served. Achieving long-term impact requires thoughtful coordination among multiple programs and providers, each committed to implementing performance management systems that can be connected for the benefit of those being served. A 360-degree view puts the client at the center of HHS programs. It shows HHS workers all the programs a client is participating in, so they can avoid duplicative services, avert crises and provide consistent top-level service.

Tools ill-suited to the task, outmoded technology and custom-built software solutions hamstring decision-makers by consuming resources, limiting staff system understanding and protracting the implementation of new approaches. State and local human services agencies need solutions that let them focus on a 360-degree view of recipient outcomes rather than maintenance of siloed systems.

It's Time to Meet the Unmet Needs of HHS

Generally speaking, conventional technology solutions do not satisfy today's complex human services needs. HHS providers require simplicity and flexibility—a cloud-based approach that links recipient efforts across programs, facilitates visibility and improves communication. To be effective as HHS delivery evolves, decision-makers need a platform that addresses the following capabilities:
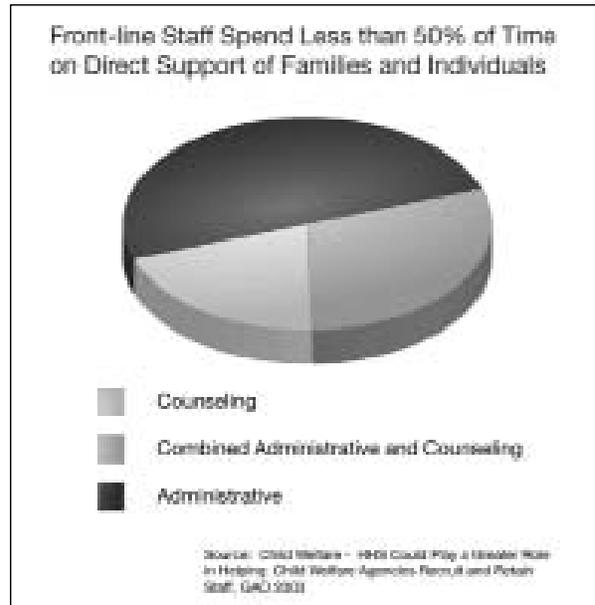
›› Qualitative metrics linking behavioral outcomes to quantitative assessments

›› Improved communication and coordination to help recipients get the right services at the right time

›› Enhanced visibility that allows decision-makers to make changes that link efforts to outcomes

›› Accurate and timely reports that can be generated easily in minutes, not months

›› Flexible configurations that keep pace with the rapid evolution of human services programs

›› Cost-effective solutions that save staff time and budgetary resources

HHS providers are challenged by outworn systems and custom-built software. These products limit the ability to quickly or cost-effectively make changes to reflect changing program needs. Furthermore, large-scale deployments of custom, open source or older software often prevent users from tailoring the system to meet local needs. A RAND Corp. study (*http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs /2006/RAND_MG505.pdf*) found that compliance-related tasks often consume as much as 11 percent of funds and 44 percent of staff time.

Older systems rarely provide HHS agencies with qualitative metrics, timely reporting or agility to change with the times. Highly customized systems take the other extreme, making it difficult for programs to communicate and providers to report to funders. These systems complicate data management, resulting in user frustration and limited adoption. The untenable maintenance of aging systems consumes resources without improving core functionality.

State-of-the-Art Tools Present Opportunity to Solve Problems

Recent advances in software technology pro-

Front-line Staff Spend Less than 50% of Time on Direct Support of Families and Individuals

Counseling

Combined Administrative and Counseling

Administrative

Source: Child Welfare – HHS Could Play a Greater Role in Helping Child Welfare Agencies Recruit and Retain Staff, GAO 2003

Ready to revamp? *Measuring outcomes is essential.*

vide state and local government agencies with effective and affordable cloud-based tools. Using these Web-based performance management platforms that the average user can configure, state and local human services agencies can:

›› Simultaneously track and communicate outcomes across programs and agencies

›› Increase outcome visibility by reducing data duplication

›› Make informed decisions via dashboards and ad hoc reports generated in minutes instead of months

›› Improve coordination of service delivery across programs and use a 360-degree view of recipients to improve care quality and outcomes

›› Reduce expenses via automation, outsourcing, shared development costs and reduced energy expenses

›› Rapidly implement changes based on evolving policy, best practices, new reporting requirements and management needs.

The Nurse Family Partnership, for example, adopted Social Solutions' Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) software platform to deploy its evidenced-based model across more than 600 state and local government and nonprofit providers. In addition to rapid program replication, the ETO platform enabled NFP to leverage cloud-based computing and IT resources as scalable services over the Internet and hosted in off-site data centers.

With the cloud, infrastructure and computing resources are shared seamlessly, regardless of geography, improving the cost of service delivery. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts identified the ETO platform as a way to reduce homeless continuum annual operating expenses by half while improving client outcomes and increasing user satisfaction. Reuse of a software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform, as a key component to a broad cloud strategy, produces substantial long-term savings by decreasing integration expenses and reducing costly maintenance and change management associated with self-managed software.

More Real-World Examples

The software platforms designed to support state and local HHS agencies are Web-based performance management systems that provide real-time reporting capabilities to ensure program efficiency. They can be deployed quickly and configured easily to suit specific needs.

In Boulder County, CO, enhanced coordination among county agencies increases program efficiency and flexibility. Flexibility in software means the county's agencies now have the tools to quickly implement changes to better reflect service delivery, and to continually evolve more effective approaches as needs and resources change. Previously, limited communication among agencies made it difficult to assess needs and deliver services appropriately. After implementing ETO software, multiple divisions in the county government are able to share participant data.

As a result, participants enjoy faster and more accurate referrals, service providers experience reduced overhead, and Boulder County has achieved a 360-degree view of its clients and has adopted an "Every Door Is the Right Door" model that allows agencies to make a single needs assessment at the first point of entry. "The Efforts to Outcomes platform has helped us to more efficiently allocate resources, and to more holistically address participant and family needs," says Robin Bohannan, Boulder County director of community services. "The wait time for one of our programs for families in crisis has gone from three weeks to the same day."

By using ETO performance management software, local governments like the City of Hartford, CT, broke down the silos among youth services programs and linked more than 15,000 participants across enterprises and agencies, including nonprofit providers, schools, funders and government. The coordinated effort created a "No Wrong Door" approach to case management, simplifying the referral process and ensuring that recipients receive the right resources at the right time. Eric Jackson, chief technology officer for the City of Hartford, says, "ETO software helps us better identify needs in our community, inconsistencies in our service and ways we can more effectively provide for our residents."

The scalable and adaptive nature of platforms like ETO provides agile solutions that can be configured on the fly. Daniel Bach, senior management analyst for the Monterey County Department of Social Services in California, says, "We reviewed many different tools and made a recommendation for ETO based on the flexibility of the platform and its open architec-

ture. It was important that we could customize the platform to suit the various needs of the organizations in the county."

As the need for and scrutiny of human services management increases, state and local human services agencies need cost-effective solutions that improve program performance. The right platform is more than software, and can transform good intentions into measured outcomes that enable organizations to improve program visibility and reporting, resulting in more effective service delivery and better stewardship of public funds.

Matt Schubert (*matt@SocialSolutions.com*) is the general manager of Public Sector at Social Solutions (*www.socialsolutions.com*). He is responsible for developing the vision and strategy to enable public sector agencies to leverage the ETO software platform to better connect those in need to the right services, with improved visibility and accountability to transform the delivery of human services. Prior to his role as GM, Matt served as CEO of Social Solutions, resulting in the adoption of ETO software by more than 10,000 human services programs in the U.S. and Canada. Previously, Matt worked for Microsoft Consulting Services, advising and engaging with federal HHS agencies to help them better leverage technology.