

PRACTICE

## Roadmap to Change Services

The Children's Partnership proposes an electronic information exchange to improve the lives of children in foster care in California.

*By Stefanie Gluckman With Ashley Phelps*

**E**LECTRONIC EXCHANGE OF key information across sectors about the mobile, high-needs population of children in foster care can result in greater coordination of care between providers, which, in turn, can increase efficiency and reduce program costs at the state and local levels and significantly improve outcomes for foster youth.

Results from the few state and local efforts across the country that have built such electronic information exchanges for children in foster care indicate that the information management enabled by electronic information exchange results in improved preventive care, decreased hospital stays, improved clinical conditions and decreased cost of care.

Program officials attribute these improvements to the ability to provide an array of coordinated and individualized services—facilitated by electronic information exchange—to those they serve. (See “Improving Health Outcomes for Children in Foster Care: The Role of Electronic Record Systems” at <http://www.childrenspartnership.org/reports/fostercare> for more specifics.)

Thanks to recent legislative and technology developments that provide the guidance, tools and financial incentives to use information technology to increase coordination of care for foster youth, the time is ripe for progress in this area. With funding from the California Health-Care Foundation, The Children's Partnership (TCP) undertook an extensive analysis of the potential for California to improve outcomes for children in foster care across the state by devel-

oping and implementing a system—referred to in this document as the California Electronic Data System (CEDS)—that would allow for the electronic exchange of information. CEDS would be a collection of networks, computers, hardware, software applications and other technologies that facilitate data sharing efficiently and securely for the purposes of allowing authorized users to have access to a more comprehensive set of information about an individual, in order to enhance coordination of care and delivery of services.

Among the developments that make this a key moment for creating and implementing CEDS are the passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (PL 110-351) and the convening of the California Child Welfare Council. Specifically, there is a mandate in PL 110-351 that the state or tribal agency responsible for foster care services work with the state Medicaid agency to develop a plan for ongoing oversight and coordination of healthcare services for children in foster care, including how medical information for these children will be updated and shared. This requirement provides an impetus for developing CEDS.

Three technology initiatives recently under way in California represent opportunities that can be leveraged to develop CEDS: 1) the development of statewide health information exchange (HIE); 2) the modernization of California's Medicaid Management Information System (MMIS); and 3) the redesign of the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System

(CWS/CMS). These initiatives all deploy technology that allows information to be shared in an efficient and secure manner.

### **The New Electronic Data System**

The California Electronic Data System should be designed to meet the following goals:

- Give providers access to a more comprehensive base of information about a child
- Facilitate communication among providers so they can more effectively coordinate and deliver care to children
- Afford caretakers and older youth in foster care access to information
- Provide youth in foster care with a record of conditions and services received as they prepare for permanency or emancipation.

### **System Design**

Our “Roadmap” presents two Web-based models for CEDS. These models are meant to serve as the starting point for developing the system. One key distinction between these models relates to how information is stored. Much of the data that will be accessed through CEDS is already collected and stored in state-level department databases or is accessible through state-level portals/hubs/networks. In the first model, data is accessed through a hub, which does not store data. Rather, the hub is designed to allow for data simply to pass through it. In the second model, data is accessed through a warehouse, which actually stores data that has been pulled from existing databases.

In order to achieve all the desired functions of CEDS, it would be necessary to develop a hybrid of the hub and warehouse designs. This is because some components—such as locating data about a child—are better suited for the hub model, while others—such as longitu-

dinal records and allowing for population-level analysis—are better suited for the warehouse model.

### **Moving Forward: Recommendations for Action**

Following are steps we recommend state leaders take to develop and implement CEDS effectively.

#### ***Leadership at the highest levels of state government***

Strong leadership is critical to bring about the policy, technology and behavioral changes and financial commitments needed to create this information exchange. The role of leadership in this area is to clarify—and, in some cases, amend—policies (including those regarding privacy and security), and to develop and mandate technology standards. Leadership will also entail encouraging, if not requiring, agencies and organizations to share data and use electronic systems.

Finally, state leaders will need to seek funding dedicated to this effort. This funding could consist of federal, state, local and private dollars—most likely, a combination of all four sources will be required.

#### ***Development of a strategic plan***

This strategic plan should outline a phased approach that encompasses three realms of work:

- 1) connecting existing state-level electronic systems;
- 2) connecting existing county-level systems, leveraging state systems wherever possible; and
- 3) developing standards for local pilot efforts that can be replicated.

#### ***Leveraging of existing opportunities***

It is crucial that California leverage the concurrent development of CWS/Web, MMIS and HIE

to facilitate efficient exchange of information related to children in foster care so these reforms actually improve program planning and administration as well as service delivery and care coordination.

### ***Creation of standards for information technology***

The state, working with stakeholders, should develop and/or adapt existing policy and technical standards to meet the unique needs of the foster care population and the data systems of the agencies that serve them. This will require working with local, state and federal leaders to identify gaps in existing standards and proposing solutions to address them; ensuring that standards currently under development support appropriate information exchange for children in foster care; developing model interagency memorandum of understanding, contract language, and similar tools; and creating or adopting data and transactions standards.

### ***Clarification of privacy laws related to data sharing for children in foster care***

Confidentiality provisions regarding information sharing exist in both federal and state laws to protect the rights of children and families. However, specific provisions relating to children in foster care have not been stipulated consistently in the laws. Some provisions are contradictory, and regarding some key issues there are no policies addressing children in foster care.

The state, working with stakeholders, should examine and further interpret these laws and make clarifications or amendments as necessary. State leaders should continue the work they are doing currently on this subject with the California Privacy and Security Advisory Board and the California Administrative Office of the Courts.

### ***Establishment of a system of governance***

In order to be effective, the state, working with stakeholders, should establish a system of governance to enable decision-making regarding matters having to do with the structure, operation, control, financing and maintenance of a system of information exchange. These decisions will include what data will be accessible; who has access to what data; when and how access to the system is granted or revoked; how data will be secured in the system; how the system will be funded; how the system will be designed; and what data standards and data rules will be required and implemented. The goal of this body should be to ensure that cross-sector information exchange occurs and to prevent providers and agencies from working in silos.

### ***Designing a model***

A model should include specifications related to system architecture, functional components, data elements and which existing data systems will be connected. This model can serve as a guide for the governance body as it develops and releases a request for proposals, selects a vendor, and collaborates with the vendor to develop, test and implement the system.

### ***Establishment of local pilot efforts***

The state should encourage and support the development of local demonstrations through which information about children in foster care is electronically exchanged on a county level. These demonstrations will be extremely valuable as the statewide system is developed because they can inform the statewide effort with regard to issues of privacy, policy, technology standards, governance and data rules. These demonstrations should include a strong evaluation component; measurable, positive outcomes would encourage philanthropic and



governmental investors to take the model to scale across the state.

### ***Implementation of the strategic plan***

Implementation of the strategic plan will take action on multiple levels. Some of the modifications may require legislative changes; others will involve administrative changes along with training and education of providers, foster parents and youth.

### ***A word about costs***

At a time when California is facing severe financial constraints, it may seem counterintuitive to propose this new initiative. But, as detailed earlier in this report, similar efforts have consistently increased program efficiency and reduced program costs. In addition, it may be possible for the state to leverage funding for the development and implementation of CEDS from new HIT funding and from some of the data systems that ultimately connect to CEDS, such as HIE, MMIS and CWS/Web.

### **The Time to Act Is Now**

Enhanced access to information and communication between providers can strengthen the coordination of care and, in turn, increase the well-being of tens of thousands of children. Recent policy developments, financial opportunities and technology initiatives have created a uniquely opportune moment to develop such a system in California. Seizing this moment could improve the lives of the 75,000 foster youth in California while placing California at the forefront, nationally, in using information technology to benefit this particularly vulnerable group of children.

Download the full version of this report at <http://www.childrenspartnership.org/report/roadmap>.

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