

Assessing Mobile Technologies in Child Protective ServicesA Demonstration Project

Summary of Information Gathered in the District Teleconferences

Introduction

During the week of December 10-14, 2007, CTG held separate teleconferences with project participants in ten Local Social Service Districts participating in the **Demonstration Project** to learn more about how they were using the laptops and tablets deployed for CPS work (see Appendix C for district information). All districts participating in the teleconferences are part of the NYS OCFS **Mobile Technology Demonstration Project** and were chosen by CTG and NYS OCFS liaisons. Criteria for choosing the districts included:

- How long they had the technologies in use (those with more time with the devices were given higher priority)
- A selection of districts that provided a full range of geographical representation across the state, in terms of rural and urban settings and overall size.

Each district participated in one teleconference with CTG interviewers. All participants were given sample questions before the teleconferences, which dealt with deployment, connectivity, use and location, changes in work, issues/concerns, policy implications, and overall benefits of laptop use.

Categories of Information

Deployment

The majority of the interviewed districts had deployed the mobile technologies by the second week in November, giving participants approximately one month of use prior to the interviews. Ulster County was the first to deploy their 30 laptops on October 17th, while Washington County was the last to deploy their 12 laptops on November 28th. Putnam County tried to acquire an additional three laptops for their remaining staff, but where unable to do so. Virtually all districts commented on the fact that setting up the laptops and tablet PCs took longer than they had originally anticipated. Delays resulted from the need for local IT administrators to install all necessary applications and test the wireless connections (if applicable) prior to deploying the devices to end-users. Distribution introduced additional delays. It was necessary for Niagara County to ship 35 laptops from the Niagara Falls office to their Lockport office after setup was complete.

Every interviewed district mentioned that each laptop was assigned to one user, rather than rotated among caseworkers and/or supervisors. Most of the CPS caseworkers and supervisors received a laptop. In the majority of the districts, caseworkers and supervisors that received a laptop also received a docking station, monitor, mouse, and keyboard to replace their existing desktop PCs.

Connectivity

Wireless connectivity arrangements varied considerably as shown in the table below. These connectivity solutions are as of their interview in December.

Users that were able to connect to the Internet, e-mail, CONNECTIONS and network drives, did so via one or more of the following four methods:

- Third-party telecommunications vendors (e.g. Verizon and Sprint).
- Scattered hot spots (e.g. county hot spots, free and public Wi-Fi zones such as the ones in cafés or other public spaces).
- Private ISP accounts from home.
- Through wired and wireless networks provided in the courthouses.

While some districts provided users with wireless connectivity through third-party telecommunications vendors, others were either testing its feasibility or awaiting the arrival of wireless cards. The costs associated with commercial wireless access providers was the main reason some districts decided not to provide users with wireless connectivity in the field. In addition, procurement of external broadband cards was problematic in one district. The top four problems associated with the wireless connections, as reported by the interviewees were:

Appendix D: Summary of District Teleconferences

1. Slow connections.
2. Freeze-ups while connected to the central data base (CONNECTIONS).
3. Uneven availability of the wireless network access in the field.
4. Lack of or poorly communicated understanding of how to connect through the VPN client.

Use by Location

Caseworkers identified four main locations where the mobile technologies were used – field, court, home, and office. The following statements are summaries of what was heard about each location.

Home: interviewees reported the highest use of mobile technology from their homes. This high use was attributed to:

- The ability for caseworkers to focus on their work due to the lack of distractions compared to other locations.
- The ability to immediately respond to cases and communicate with supervisors, as opposed to waiting until the next business day.
- Personal preferences such as the ability to smoke while working, taking care of the family, work in the comfort of one's own home...etc.

Field: The most common location used by the caseworkers were schools, cafés and food courts. The main reason given by interviewees for not taking the mobile technology into the field was because they did not have roaming wireless connectivity, but for those that were able to use it in the field, these locations were used most.

Virtually all caseworkers mentioned that they were unwilling to bring the mobile technology into clients' homes. They said using the device in a home would be distracting, could appear to be disrespectful, or interfere with establishing rapport. The majority of caseworkers said that carrying the mobile technology with them while in the field was contingent on:

- The amount of time waiting in court, hospitals, etc....
- The number of visits with professionals such as doctors and nurses in hospitals, and teachers in schools.

Court: Some interviewees reported that they do take the mobile technology with them when they need to appear in court. Those that do take them to court use the laptops and Tablet PCs in dedicated rooms. Privacy did not seem to be an issue, as caseworkers adapted to the environment (sitting with their back towards the wall, using private rooms...etc.). The main reasons users did not take their mobile technology to court were:

- Courthouses are overcrowded, noisy full of distractions.
- Lack of wireless connectivity.
- High risks of loss or damage of the mobile technology.

Office: Due to the removal of desktop PCs, caseworkers had to use the laptops in the office, but many were given screens and keyboards for use in the office.

Functions and Uses

The majority of the interviewees stated that the main use of the mobile technology was related to the interaction with CONNECTIONS. Caseworkers and Supervisors used the mobile technologies to:

- Enter notes into CONNECTIONS
- Read new cases
- Look up case history and all connected cases, giving them extra background information central to the case (especially when on-call)

Some caseworkers reported that the mobile technology facilitated better communication with their supervisors. Also, having the mobile technology allowed them to enter information as soon as possible as opposed to waiting until the next business day. Some of the other tasks performed using the mobile technology included:

- The use of a word processor (e.g. Microsoft Word) to document cases
- Accessing the WMS Child Support system
- Searching sex offender registries
- Accessing incarcerated lists

- The use of online Web mapping services for direction lookup

Overall Issues and Concerns

Interviewees' responses to major issues and/or concerns fall into the following categories:

- **Connectivity:** issues specifically related to the lack of connectivity previously mentioned.
- **Technical difficulties:** issues related to connecting to CONNECTIONS and network drives, and difficulties associated with password changes were mentioned.
- **Learning curve:** virtually all interviewees commented on the fact that having a laptop or tablet PC requires a bit of time to get used to.
- **Training:** a majority of the interviewed districts complained that they did not receive official training on how to use the laptop or tablet PC, connect using various methods, access files, and unlock the devices. The lack of technical support in the form of help desks was also raised.

Policy Implications

During the district interviews, participants were asked about four policy areas that could affect laptop use overtime pay, working from home, scheduling, and use of the laptops in home or other client situations. Comments about those policy areas are summarized below.

Overtime and Flextime Policies

- Virtually all districts reported that there hasn't been a change in the overtime/flextime payment policies but some said they were looking into it. Some districts also stated that their policies were very ambiguous.
- Caseworkers were encouraged to apply for flextime or other compensation, rather than overtime pay.
- A few districts grant overtime pay to caseworkers as long as it is pre-approved. There is no limit on the amount of overtime pay, as long as it is not abused. They believe the policy will remain unchanged.

Scheduling Field Visits and Reporting to the Office

- One district requires caseworkers to report to the office in the morning prior to attending their scheduled appointments. This policy continued even with laptop use.
- One district does not allow employees in the office during non-working hours.
- One district has a policy regarding "protected days" (to catch-up on progress notes...etc.), while another county has a policy setting the amount of time caseworkers spend in the field per week.

Use in Homes or Other Client Locations

- Two districts mentioned that their supervisors have set policies not allowing caseworkers to take mobile technologies into the clients' homes, and require them to use paper and pens to document their notes.

Working from Home

- Policies in about half of the interviewed districts prohibit caseworkers from working from home during business hours. In one district, caseworkers are not allowed to work from home except when on-call. Another district is thinking of experimenting with using the laptops from home once a week.
- Caseworkers from one district reported that pay for overtime work at home was not allowed. Despite not receiving compensation, however, caseworkers choose to do so to reduce stress levels and catch-up on their tasks. Another district allows caseworkers to submit overtime for work at home on the laptop as flex-time and repeated that this has been working really well.

Benefits from Laptop Use

Interviewed caseworkers and supervisors identified four major benefits of using mobile technology:

- The ability to access information while in the field at anytime, provided that wireless connectivity is available.

Appendix D: Summary of District Teleconferences

- Improved communications between caseworkers and supervisors; especially on weekends, holidays, and while on-call.
 - The ability to access information from home regardless of when a call is received.
 - Increased flexibility of caseworkers' and supervisors' schedules. A majority of the interviewees stated that they are able to manage their time more effectively, especially when they have multiple appointments. They also appreciate the flexibility of working from home.
 - A reduction in caseworkers' and supervisors' overall stress. The ability to enter notes on time, in the field, and at times that are convenient reduces overall stress levels.
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