

When seeking funding for laptop use, almost all LDSS identified goals of catching up on case backlogs and being able to use the laptops in the field. But after deployment, most LDSS made no policies to govern laptop use. This led managers and supervisors to develop policies for their own staff that were inconsistent with the overall goals. Despite the policy inconsistencies, almost every CPS caseworker reported liking the laptop, indicated it was a new way of working, and did not want to work without it. However, a very small number did resist the use of technology in CPS work. Productivity gains were achieved across all three LDSS despite engaging in relatively unchanged policies for mobility and use, leaving room for improvement. This statewide investment could potentially see more substantial gains in caseworker satisfaction and productivity with the following recommendations:

Connectivity, Connectivity, Connectivity

Wireless connectivity is the cornerstone of laptop use in the field. It is clearly necessary for every LDSS to invest in wireless connectivity for each laptop user. Sharing broadband cards is not as efficient, nor effective. Even in counties that have overall poor wireless reception, there are still some areas where solid connections are present. Investment in connectivity is essential and absolutely lays the foundation for laptop use.

Supportive Policies and Management Practices

- **Flexible scheduling and laptop use in the field.** Flexibility is a fundamental benefit of mobility and provides the capability to increase opportunities to do work during the normal work day. It is counterproductive to give caseworkers a laptop but to discourage them from using it in the field. Districts should create flexible policies for scheduling visits, allow caseworkers to use laptops outside the office, and not require them to travel back to the office to document notes. One caseworker provided a good suggestion – to have locations in the field (i.e., libraries, police barracks, and community spaces) that are designated as appropriate areas to use laptops. Locations can be spread across the LDSS.
- **Compensation for laptop use after regular work hours.** Caseworkers use the laptops most often at home to document notes. Although working from home is a sensitive topic, this study and previous studies show that districts that present favorable conditions (such as overtime or compensatory time, and supportive mobility policies) see a higher percentage of cases closed within the first 60 days⁽¹⁾. Supportive policies may include a pre-approval process or a cap on time; however, some type of policy that acknowledges use while at home needs to be in place.

Standard Policies and Practices throughout District

Policies about laptop use must be districtwide. Divisions or units should strive to have a uniform set of rules or practices. The opposite can create inconsistent use, confusion, and likely resentment among units, which can lead to decreased or no laptop use. Supportive policies and clear procedures for compensation (for use after regular work hours) and laptop use in the field are the two most critical inconsistencies.

Management and Supervisory Awareness and Discussion Sessions

While written policies serve an important role, it is only one part of changing the culture. Sessions where managers and supervisors can review policies, share ideas and thoughts, and ask questions will help manage expectations and create a more consistent and positive environment. Changing the way caseworkers are supervised will require quite a shift in culture, but having open supervisory forums to learn about new and best practices may allow for more unity across districts around the state and a better informed approach to this change.

Cross-District Information Sharing

There are districts in NYS that have created policies and practices that support full use of the laptop computers. For districts with unclear policies about mobility, supervision, or compensation, a forum to promote information sharing across the districts would be helpful, so that districts feel that they are not alone in thinking about changes as a result of connected laptops.

Recommendations

(1) See http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/reports/assessing_mobile_demo.