A Tale of Two Information Systems: Transitioning to a Data-Centric Information System for Child Welfare

Teresa M. Harrison
Dept. of Communication
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
tharrison@albany.edu

Donna Canestraro
Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
dcanestr@ctg.albany.edu

Theresa Pardo
Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
tpardo@albany.edu

Martha Avila-Marilla
Department of Information Science
CEHC
Albany, NY 12203
mavilamaravilla@albany.edu

Nicolas Soto
Dept. of Public Administration
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
nsoto@albany.edu

Megan Sutherland
Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
msutherland@ctg.albany.edu

Brian Burke
Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
bburke@ctg.albany.edu

Mila Gasco
Dept. of Public Administration
Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222
mgasco@ctg.albany.edu

ABSTRACT

We describe the experience of a sample of US state child welfare agencies currently deciding whether to transition to a new model of information system, now explicitly recommended by the US federal government. The new model is inspired by enterprise-level data intensive thinking and promises to enable states to design systems that complement state business needs and practices, as well as improve case-related and policy decision making.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied Computing~E-government Social and professional topics→Computing/technology policy • Government technology policy

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KEYWORDS

Information systems, enterprise data management, child welfare information systems

1 INTRODUCTION

In the waning days of the Obama Administration, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched an ambitious effort to modernize information system technology for state child-welfare agencies in a way that takes advantage of contemporary thinking about data-centric models. The new model is intended to replace the Statewide/Tribal Automated Child Welfare Information System (S/TACWIS). The federal standard since 1993, S/TACWIS has been the subject of persistent criticism since early in its implementation. By 2015, only 23 of the 50 states were able to implement systems certified as compliant with its standards. Imposing 90 functional requirements, the S/TACWIS model was envisioned as a single comprehensive system designed to help the states meet federal requirements to collect and report information about adoption, foster care, and child abuse to HHS. However, S/TACWIS has come to be regarded more negatively as "a means to pile up information and comply with federal reports," that neither accommodated child

welfare workers practices in the states nor was flexible enough to adjust to changes in federal requirements [3].

In contrast, the new model, the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS), is seen as "a bold policy initiative" that promises "to spur innovation across the country and stimulate creative solutions…" with a "laser" focus on data [1]. CCWIS draws inspiration from modern enterprise-style strategies because it requires data exchanges with other state and local agencies also concerned with child welfare, such as the courts, education, and health care agencies. CCWIS is viewed as a "game changer" and "an opportunity" [2] because agencies expect to be able to design systems that support case management in ways that complement their unique business needs and practices. HHS intends to support efforts to become compliant by contributing generously to the costs of developing an approved system design. However, states have been "gun-shy" about taking on a new system design [3], perhaps because, even with this support, the effort promises to cost tens, and in some cases hundreds, of millions of dollars.

New York State's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) recently contracted with the Center for Technology in Government to conduct an "environmental scan" focusing on the decision making processes of other states. Interviews were conducted with child welfare decision-makers in 12 states and guided by these research questions: RQ1: What are the benefits that state managers expect to achieve by adopting CCWIS? RQ2: How have interviewees responded to the data requirements for CCWIS? RQ3: What other issues have come up in decision making related to CCWIS adoption?

2 METHODS

We conducted semi-structured interviews with state child welfare and IT managers about their experiences in assessing and/or transitioning to the CCWIS model. The interviews were conducted by phone and ranged from 45- to 90-minutes.

We selected states that had begun the assessment process or that had made their decisions, and that were willing to share information about their child welfare system. Consulting the US Administration for Children and Families, we found that 23 states had decided to transition or had begun the process of CCWIS assessment. States with a county administered child welfare system similar to NY's were an important target for the study as was selecting states with more than five million in population in order to be roughly similar to the size/complexity of New York State's system. The final sample thus consisted of California, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Virginia, Arizona, Indiana, Maryland, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Texas.

Our interviews addressed the following topics: (a) the decision process, (b) costs and benefits, (c) relationship with the federal government, (d) CCWIS design, (e) data exchanges, and (f) data quality. Our data analysis used the constant comparative approach to (1) inductively derive categories used by respondents in answering the interview questions, and (2) identify themes that characterized the experience of all or some of the states.

3 RESULTS

RQ1 - Benefits: (a) States that had committed to CCWIS were those that had undertaken significant efforts to modernize their child welfare information systems prior to HHS's endorsement of the CCWIS model. (b) Helping child welfare caseworkers and improving the conditions of their work was the most frequently cited benefit of the transition. The benefit rests on the recognition that the technology can be a genuine partner to caseworkers in their work, rather than a record keeping system that prevents caseworkers from being in the field.

RQ2 – Responses to Data-Intensive Requirements: (a) Many states accept that CCWIS would enable better data reporting, support better business processes, avoid data redundancy, generate more accurate and timely information, support collaboration by data sharing between state and local, and improve outcomes for families and children as well as that related to business and policy questions. (b) States viewed data exchanges as technically feasible, but legally challenging, due to legal constraints on data sharing in many human service contexts. (c) No state had yet developed a data quality plan, which is a requirement of CCWIS compliance. (d) States reported being able to negotiate with federal representatives on technical issues related to system compliance.

RQ3 –Other issues: (a) Some states are incorporating mobile access by caseworkers into application development, hoping this would achieve a "quick win" for their projects and smooth the way for caseworkers' acceptance of other system. (b) Virginia and California anticipated building systems that could be used by clients as well as by child welfare employees, noting the interest by clients in accessing photographs and medical records. (c) Some states are using "agile" approaches to software development.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Our interviewees are fully aware of the limitations inherent in their current information systems, and are optimistic that CCWIS will improve child welfare in many ways. However, the transition is fraught with uncertainties. While HHS has mandated new data requirements and is advising states on how to create compliant systems, there is a noticeable absence of roadmaps to success. Indeed, there are no proven methods of success, no general criteria for workable structures or data exchanges, and, interestingly, very little scholarly attention to this topic.

5 REFERENCES

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