# Technology Innovations in Social Services Agencies:
# A Review of Alameda County's Communications Systems

## Lenita Ellis

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines Alameda County Social Services Agency's approach to using technology to support programs and foster communication, both internal and external to the agency. It specifically reviews systems that help manage the copious amounts of information that flow through social services agencies.

### Project Description

This case study highlights three tools that have been developed by Alameda County over the past four years to enhance both their internal and external communications systems. The first is the bulletin board, an intranet feature that serves as a news and information center for Alameda County staff. The second tool is the WorkSite application which was created for document management, document repository and online collaboration. Finally, the Voice Response Systems allows automated exchange of public benefits, in-home supportive services and foster care information via the telephone or internet.

### Recommendations

My recommendations for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMCHSA) are the following:

- Reconfigure the intranet page to have a functionality that mirrors Alameda County's Bulletin Board;
- Purchase and implement a web-based document sharing application, such as the WorkSite with customized features to meet San Mateo County's specific needs.
- Perform a cost–benefit analysis of the feasibility of implementing the Customer Automated Response System (CARS);
- Realign the Business Systems Group (BSG) department staffing structure to accommodate the web and technology innovations, using Alameda County's Information Systems Department staffing structure as a model; and
- Enhance the existing communication systems with mandatory all-staff training in classic communication techniques, such as effective meeting facilitation and participation, email etiquette, including the proper use of the subject and carbon copy (cc:) lines, problem solving, nonverbal communication, and creating common understanding across different generations and cultures.

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## Introduction

Social services agencies are designed to be part of a community support system that aids individuals and families in achieving their life's goals. The agencies help individuals and families identify personal strengths and community resources that will provide structure and support the realization of their desired outcomes. The goal of this project was to explore the technological constructs and supports social services agencies put in place to provide structure to its day to day operations and influence the realization of their desired client outcomes.

My objective in the BASSC internship was to learn how Alameda County manages the large flow of information that is passed through its social services agency. I wanted to take an inside look into the roles and responsibilities of the Information Technology Department of a social services agency. I wanted to be exposed to the design and operations of another agency's program support department. Of particular interest were the tools and resources available to facilitate effective internal communication. I interviewed several key staff and examined various computer applications in order to better understand how the strategic use of technology aids staff in managing their time, their email inboxes and their client relationships.

## The Tools

### Bulletin Board

The bulletin board is a news and information center for Alameda County Social Services Agency (AC-SSA) staff.

**Features:** Each page on the ACSSA intranet has a bulletin board tool bar. The bulletin board uses the existing email system to notify all staff that there is new information posted for review. Within the bulletin board, you can link headlines to documents or websites. Sample types of bulletin board posts include: retirement announcements, training offerings and newsletters. For example, a headline may be titled, "Do you know what to do in a disaster?" The headline would contain a link that connects the viewer to the county's disaster preparedness homepage.

A key feature of the bulletin board is its requirement for very little server space. Prior to the bulletin board when an email with a document attachment was sent to all staff, several hundred copies of that document attachment were stored on the server. Since the bulletin board is hosted by a web page, posts with document attachments are only posting one copy of the document to the server. Another key feature of the bulletin board is its ability to indefinitely archive the information. ACSSA has four years of archived news and information within its bulletin board. It was the necessity for archive capability of its agency-wide news and information that prompted the design and implementation of ACSSA's bulletin board. The archives eliminate the need for staff to save agency-wide announcements in their email accounts, thereby freeing up much needed space within their email accounts. Archives are sorted by year and by month within the year. Unfortunately, there is no ability to search the archive for specific topics, but you can search the page for text in the same manner you would search for text on any webpage.

There are designated individuals who have the authority to post directly to the bulletin board. All other staff submits their bulletin board requests to their department's appropriate designee. The ACSSA web team reviews each post before final submission. When an authorized poster submits a request, an email is sent to the web team's bulletin board email account. The review mainly consists of verifying the proper operation of document and web page links. The bulletin board posts are subject to ACSSA internet and email policies and procedures with the exception of retirement announcements. These posts must be processed through the Human Resources Department.

**Impact and Costs:** The ACSSA web developer completed the design stages of the bulletin board in approximately two months. The maintenance of the bulletin board and post review consumes approximately 10% - 15% of the web team's time. Currently, there are two full-time staff members that make up the ACSSA web team. ACSSA purchased the Active Edit software package that allows the web team to customize the various sections within the post request template. The software cost $100 at the time of implementation; however, the software is now available at no cost. The ACSSA has not yet completed an impact evaluation on the bulletin board.

## Web Based Document Sharing

Web based document sharing are made up of software packages that serve as a document repository, perform document management, and allow online project collaboration. The ACSSA uses an application called, the WorkSite. The WorkSite has different workspaces within its system. Currently, the ACSSA uses the Worksite for two main functions.

**Online Collaboration:** The first function supports online collaboration and is called Emancipation Village. It is a portal that allows users from different agencies with conflicting operating systems and email providers to communicate with one another. Polls, surveys, message boards, calendars, meeting agendas and meeting reminders for a project, workgroup or initiative can be stored in a central place.

Each person within the workgroup subscribes to the application and can edit content within the page. The application is great for working with community partners, such as non-profits or individuals, because the only system requirement is that the users have internet access. Although the Emancipation Village was created to facilitate collaboration externally with those outside the agency, it can be used internally for workgroups as well.

**Document management:** A key WorkSite feature is that it allows users to view all of their project information in one place. Users do not have to toggle back and forth between different applications, such as an email account to read message threads or a calendar to review project dates for a full project overview.

The Emancipation Village also replaces the need to consume space on a server by use of a shared drive to manage project documents and eliminates the nightmare of the end user having to guess if the documents stored on the project shared drive are the most current versions. Emancipation Village has a document workflow functionality that prevents multiple users from editing the same document simultaneously. This functionality was created with the Board of Supervisors and contracts department in mind. It specifically addresses agenda and contracts reviews, which require several individuals to read, review and comment on a single document or packet of documents. The project administrator can assign the document review order to specific individuals. The administrator can also assign different review access levels to a document. For example, a county manager can be granted full document review access to the entire board packet, and a board clerk can be granted limited review access to the board agenda only. The document workflow function will also allow each reviewer to see the document discussion threads.

**Document repository:** The second function of ACSSA's WorkSite was created for the Children and Family Services Department. Social workers, school officials, counselors and attorneys all contribute documents to the court report for juvenile case review. The Alameda County juvenile court was experiencing significant numbers of court cases being con-

tinued due to the lack of a document management system that ensured all appropriate parties received a copy of the court documents in a timely manner. It is not uncommon for a child to be assigned several attorneys throughout a family court experience. The assignment of a new attorney to a child's case provided an additional challenge to the document management needs of the court. Child welfare worker clerks were manually distributing all court documents to the appropriate parties and would periodically omit the newly assigned attorney due to a delay of notification of the need to do so. Additionally, a revision of a court report or document would also present the challenge of ensuring that all interested parties had the most current version. This led to the development of the workflow feature known as the WorkSite. Each child has a folder within the WorkSite program. Within each child's folder there are additional subject matter folders. Individuals are granted security access only to the children they are responsible for and only to the folders within a child's section that pertains to them. For example, the child's attorney will have access to "Sue Smith's" folder and within Sue Smith's folder the attorney will also have security access to review her school progress reports, psychological evaluations and medical records. However, the school official would only have access to the school progress report section of Sue's folder. Each approved user is given a security code to access a child's folder. The WorkSite application is aligned with the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) database that tracks all youth in the child welfare system. The ACSSA contracted with the State of California's CWS/CMS vendor to perform daily downloads of information from the CWS/CMS database. All information pertaining to youth and their cases, such as change of attorney or change of address, are required to be documented in CMS/CWS. There are over 3,400 youth currently in the ACSSA CMS/CWS system. When an authorized user uploads a new document to the child's folder, an email is sent to the attorney listing the name of the child, the date of birth, court document number and a link to the actual document. The

attorney enters a user name and password and is able to review the document. Since the Worksite is a web based application, the only system requirement for the end user is internet access.

**Impact and Costs:** The ACSSA has significantly reduced the number of juvenile court case continuances due to the lack of timely document submission to the attorneys. The total web based document sharing application cost was $66,000. The application is enterprise level and able to support hundreds of users and, as such, is expensive. The cost includes the following: $20k for the software, $6k for two servers to implement the application, and $40k for implementation services from the State of California's CWS/CMS vendor. The ACSSA wrote an Advanced Planning Document (APD) to the State of California for claiming purposes.

### Voice Response System

The ACSSA has implemented three Voice Response Units (VRU). The VRU facilitates communication with the Alameda County community, improves customer service, reduces overpayments in the foster care unit, and reduces staff workload.

**Foster Care Automated Tracking System:** This VRU allows for change of placement notifications to be received and documented by a foster child's assigned social worker via telephone. This provides a consistent method of communicating when a child's placement status has changed. The system also stops foster care overpayments by communicating directly with the agency's computer system (CalWIN). The ACSSA contracted with American Telesource, Inc. (ATI), a communication systems integration and custom application development vendor with public sector expertise to design the system. ATI created a program that helps the agency's telephone system interact with CalWIN by putting an end date on payment eligibility. A foster care provider must log in on the internet and confirm that a child is still in its care in order to receive payments. In 1996, the ACSSA had nearly $3million in overpayments due to the inadvertent payment of services months after a child left a provider's care. The VRU was implemented in

2003 and in 2006; the foster care monthly reporting indicated a mere $330K in foster care overpayments.

**Customer Automated Response System (CARS):** This VRU interacts with all eligibility programs (CalWORKs, Medi-Cal, Food Stamps and General Assistance) on CalWIN. Benefit recipients can obtain automated information about their benefits through the internet. CARS VRU features include the ability to request duplicate forms, read FAQ's, request replacement benefits identification cards (BIC), receive benefit history and grant amount, and have the ability to send a message to a case worker. This VRU is available to benefit recipients via telephone or the internet. The system also supports internal staff who can log in to give recipients directions to local benefits offices or request a duplicate form on behalf of the benefits recipient.

**Adult and Aging Automated Response System (AARS):** This VRU supports the In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) Division of the agency. The VRU notifies IHSS clients via telephone or internet of the amount of their care costs, the authorized provider of care and the number of hours of care authorized. Through the AARS system, the care provider can request employment verifications, duplicate tax forms and can be informed of timecard receipt, processing and mailing from the State of California' Case Management, Information and Pay roll System (CMIPs).

**Impacts and Costs:** The availability of the voice response systems is dependent upon the functionality of CalWIN. All VRU's allow for basic customer questions to be answered via the telephone system or internet which frees up the workers in the call center to handle more complex calls. Prior to the CARS implementation, customer calls were getting disconnected for remaining in the call queue too long or calls were unable to get through. Each VRU has reporting capabilities that catalogue the number of calls and statistics on the various types of inquiries made on the systems.

The design and implementation stage for each VRU lasted for approximately one year. The ACSSA contracted with a vendor to develop a program that would connect the agency's telephone system to its CalWIN computer system. The implementation cost of all three VRU's was $400K and the ongoing yearly maintenance of the systems is $40k. The project was an extensive one which involved the coordination between several county departments—Children and Family Services, Finance, Information Systems Department (ISD), the county phone system and county ISD, the contracted vendors (CWS/CMS and ATI) and CalWIN. The ACSSA also used an APD to fund the project and has included the ongoing maintenance cost as a line item in the agency's annual budget.

## Implications and Recommendations for San Mateo County

**Bulletin Board:** I would like to see San Mateo County (SMC) invest in the staff time to reconfigure its current intranet system to have a functionality that mirrors the bulletin board. Given the current SMC challenges with server space and the intermittent unavailability of the intranet, the benefit of conserving server space by not having hundreds of document copies stored on it when an all-agency message is sent is worth the cost of the staff time to download the software program and reconfigure the intranet alone.

**Web based document sharing:** This type of application would benefit the County of San Mateo as a whole. The reason it is so expensive is because it is built to support hundreds of users. My recommendation is that the SMCHSA present the web based document sharing application concept at the county level so all agencies can benefit from its features and share in its cost in light of the current economic climate of restricted resources. Given the county's vision alignment goals and the recent SMCHSA strategic planning process identifying and developing new community partnerships and building upon existing partnerships as a goal, the Emancipation Village would support the SMCHSA in its community outreach efforts.

**Voice Response System:** The ACSSA is much larger than the SMCHSA and currently SMC does not have significant foster care overpayments or a

large IHSS population. Rather than invest in all three VRU's, SMC can research the feasibility of the CARS VRU to support its benefits programs.

## Conclusion

I began my BASSC 15-day internship frustrated with excessive emails and the challenge of not having web conference meetings. I entered this project with the belief that SMC communication challenges were due to technological deficiencies and that the challenges would be eliminated by merely upgrading the technology. I leave with the understanding that social services agencies have communication systems that can be just as complex and laden with limitations as the families they serve. Not only do communication systems have limitations, but technology has limitations as well. For instance, there is no computer application or automated voice response system that can replicate a tone of voice filled with compassion or the comfort that comes from human interaction. Sometimes the most effective communication is the simplest and doesn't require technology at all.

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