Breaking Barriers through Technology: Facilitating IHSS Clients' Experiences through More Sustainable Measures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Santa Clara County's Department of Social Services' new Guiding Principles emphasizes the need to be responsive, compassionate and innovative. This extension of the county's mission and vision requires us to be cognizant of progressive change, new ideas, and creative thinking as it relates to the services we provide to our clients. We can use the department's new Guiding Principles as inspiration to address the issues at the nexus where our clients' barriers in accessing technology and our county's sustainability goals meet.

The Department of Social Services has a great opportunity to put into practice our newly established Guiding Principles by incorporating a "Computer Donation Program." This innovative program has the potential of repurposing hundreds of surplus computers by the county's active participation in minimizing e-waste and help reach the county's sustainability goals. This would be a responsive and compassionate support to our clients as it would help those that we serve by giving them the essential tools needed to access information and technology.

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Introduction

In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) is a statewide program, which is administered by each county in the State of California and provides services to eligible individuals who are disabled, blind, or over the age of 65 and unable to care for themselves. The purpose of the program is to allow individuals to remain safely in their homes with the assistance of care providers rather than in an institutional placement. Once services are approved, the IHSS recipient is responsible for hiring an individual provider to perform authorized services. The recipient is considered the employer and is in charge of the hiring, training, and supervising of their provider. The provider can be a family member, friend, neighbor or a registered provider through the Public Authority (PA). The PA assists IHSS recipients with finding homecare providers and helps providers to find work with IHSS recipients. According IHSS CMIPS II Recipients Summary Characteristics Report from March of 2019, in Santa Clara County (SCC) there were 24,852 individuals receiving IHSS services and 25,318 providers enrolled. This large number of people reaching out to IHSS each day can create long call wait times. Out of an average of 18,000 calls and 1,600 lobby visits to SCC IHSS on a monthly basis, over 70% of them are timesheet-related inquiries. Once providers are linked to a recipient's case and services have been completed, providers complete their timesheets and have them approved by the recipient before submitting them for payment. This current process, coupled with mailing the approved timesheets to the Timesheet Processing Center to eventually receive a paycheck via the U.S. Postal Service, tends to create backlogs and duplicate efforts. This process is repeated biweekly, which multiplies the odds of errors and therefore exacerbates an already lengthy process. When a provider is not paid on time, the effects can be devastating. One common complaint from providers when they call IHSS is that their housing could be at risk when they don't get paid on time because IHSS is their only source of income. This also affects recipients who feel obligated to help resolve their providers' timesheet issues by also calling IHSS because in Santa Clara County, most recipients hire family members as their providers.

In 2017 the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) introduced the online Electronic Timesheet Service (ETS) option after years of work by the providers' union. IHSS recipients were excited about this option as it would help providers get paid on time. Eliminating paper timesheets requirements and having the ability to submit and approve them at the push of a button was a long-awaited solution for all involved. Electronic timesheets are now available via the Electronic Services Portal (ESP) and the State of California (CDSS) has recently announced that by 2020 there will no longer be the option of paper timesheets. This means that all counties are currently working on more aggressive and creative ways to entice IHSS clients to sign up for electronic timesheets. According to the Department of Technology Database from March 2019, in SCC only about 30% of recipients have signed up for this service. The basic requirements to enroll in this service

are that the IHSS recipients and providers must have an email address, internet access, and either a personal computer or mobile device.

Counties are researching the specific reasons for the low transitioning rate to ETS. Some counties have found that there are several barriers interfering with the transition including accessibility and familiarity with technology, particularly for individuals with lower incomes that are not able to afford a dependable computer or the cost of internet access. The majority of IHSS recipients receive full-scope Medi-Cal, meaning they meet specific low-income criteria and therefore buying a computer and paying for internet service are not feasible options. Tablet computer ownership is especially common among seniors with more education and those living in higher-income households. By comparison, fewer than one in five seniors in households earning less than $30,000 a year (16%) or who have high school diplomas or less (18%) own tablets (Pew Research Center, 2017). Having access to a personal computer would not only benefit IHSS recipients, but also their providers who may access ETS through their recipients. In Santa Clara County, 70% of providers are related to the recipients they serve and many of them are living in the same home and completing timecards together. Offering computers and internet service to those in need, including IHSS recipients, can be an initial step towards breaking down barriers that prevent them from accessing information and technology to help improve their quality of life including simplifying the timesheet and payment process.

Santa Clara County's Current Process for Disposal of Surplus Computers

For many years SCC SSA departments had different processes for the protection and disposal of surplus computers, but within the last three years SSA's Information Technology Department (ISD) created a new centralized process for the protection of data when disposing computers. SSA ISD decided that in order to maximize technology, they established the end of life for a computer at the four-year mark as the warranty and other issues tend to be reported after that point. With an average of 28,000 end-users, SSA disposes of hundreds of computer devices each year. In order to make this process secure, SSA maintains a Central Inventory of hardware where end-user devices are taken to separate the hard drive from each device. The hard drives are kept for a holding period of 60 days so that the information can be accessed later if needed. Eventually, a third-party vendor shreds the hard drive and provides a certificate of destruction. The rest of the device is disposed through a contractor via an environmentally-friendly process. Part of Santa Clara County's mission is to provide resources and opportunities to enhance the quality of life of our community. If SSA could adjust their current computer disposal process without incurring considerable costs, they would help break down barriers to those in need in our community, particularly our IHSS recipients who do not own a computer.

Contra Costa County's Personal Computer Equipment Donation Program Model: "Technology Works Program"

Contra Costa County's Personal Computer Equipment Donation Program was created in response to California's Assembly Bill 1998, County Surplus Property, which passed in 2012. This bill helped bridge the digital divide for needy county residents by allowing counties to donate surplus computers to aid in employment and assistance efforts. AB 1998 permits the donation of surplus property to a school, community college district, a county commission for children and families, or a non-profit organization. This bill additionally authorizes the Board of Supervisors of the County Welfare Department to donate surplus computer equipment directly to persons receiving public benefits under the CalFresh, CalWORKS, County Relief, General Relief, General Assistance, or Medi-Cal Program (https://www.leginfo.ca.gov).

In 2013, Contra Costa County Employment of Human Services Department (EHSD) reviewed different proposals from Bay Area contractors and chose OTX West, now Tech Exchange, a 501(c)3 charitable organization that strives to connect Bay Area residents with the technology resources they need to thrive. They offer free refurbished computers and digital literacy training to low-income families while also supporting the technology needs of schools and community centers. In order to reach more individuals, they offer community programs called Tech Nights, Tech Fairs, and Tech for Housing. In collaboration with schools, community organizations, and public agencies, Tech Exchange holds these events in the local community where large numbers of individuals convene to attend digital skills workshops and receive assistance in signing up for affordable internet and a free refurbished computer. Through their environmentally sustainable re-use model of refurbishing donated technology in the last 25 years, Tech Exchange has diverted over 850 tons of e-waste from landfills (https://www.techexchange.org/our-story.html). This organization, located in Oakland, offers their services primarily to the East Bay Area, but they have plans to expand to other parts of the Bay Area in the near future.

In 2016, the Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) implemented their Technology Works Personal Computer (PC) Equipment Donation Program to help bridge the digital divide for eligible residents of Contra Costa County who receive public benefits. In order to protect clients' sensitive information stored in county devices, they complete a government-approved 'data wipe' before donating to Tech Exchange. Once Tech Exchange receives the computers, they refurbish them by replacing the hard drive, load them with free software, and then issue them through different events or direct pick up. In order to inform their clients about the program, EHSD maintains program information on their website, sends targeted mailings, and has flyers available in all their district office lobbies. The internal

process to receive a free surplus PC starts by submitting a Technology Works referral form directly with their assigned EHSD case worker or by going online to the EHSD website. All referrals are sent to the Division Manager of the CalWIN Program and the clerical support staff for clearance and tracking purposes. Once eligibility is confirmed, the clerk sends out a congratulatory letter informing the recipient that they are eligible to receive a PC. An Eligible Referral list is sent to the Information Systems (IS) Manager about once a month, which usually contains an average of about 60 applicants. The IS manager sends the Eligible Referral list to Tech Exchange who is then responsible for contacting each recipient directly to schedule the PC distribution date and time. Tech Exchange is also responsible for providing the IS Manager and the CalWIN Division Manager with status updates regarding the distribution of PCs. Since inception of the Technology Works program in February 2016, a total of 1,715 eligible participants have been referred for a computer.

Recommendations

Implementing a PC Donation Program would be beneficial to Santa Clara County's eligible beneficiaries and county-wide sustainability goals. Our current process of disposing surplus computers is environmentally friendly, but there are more sustainable ways to complete this process while helping break down barriers that prevent our clients from accessing information and technology. Santa Clara County has an opportunity to improve its current process by implementing a PC Donation Program similar to that of Contra Costa County. The proposed recommended implementation choices are the following:

Choice 1: To join Contra Costa County in their already established PC Donation Program

Since its implementation approximately three years ago, Tech Exchange has increased their partnerships and received a continuous influx of surplus technology from different agencies and companies

in the Bay Area, exhausting Tech Exchange's ability to serve other agencies unless they are able to secure additional funding. Tech Exchange is currently funded by private organizations such as the Thomas J. Long Foundation. If Tech Exchange secures a sponsor as large as Santa Clara County, it would help them attain more funding for this program at a very minimal cost. Since Contra Costa County has already created all materials and processes for the program and they are willing to share them, Santa Clara County would only have to complete minor updates to the documents. The clearance and tracking process involve one staff taking an average of about 5-10 minutes to complete each application and communicate updates to Tech Exchange. This choice would require a minimal amount of resources from Santa Clara County as it is already an existing and well-established program in Contra Costa County. In addition, this choice would not only benefit IHSS clients, but all other qualifying individuals receiving government assistance through Santa Clara County.

Choice 2: To implement a version of Contra Costa County's PC Donation program to eligible IHSS recipients as a pilot program

This could be done via a Technology Fair in which a group of approximately 100 Santa Clara County IHSS recipients would receive a free refurbished PC. In turn, Tech Exchange would transport the refurbished computers to a facility in Santa Clara County and provide onsite training. Tech Exchange would tailor their presentation to the needs of the recipients including how to sign up for a free email address, how to access the IHSS ETS portal, and information on internet safety and best practices. Due to operational expenses, each Technology Fair would cost Santa Clara County a total of about $7,000. This choice would entice IHSS clients to sign up for ETS. It would also allow Santa Clara County to try the program for a short period before committing to a permanent option.

Choice 3: To donate all surplus devices to Tech Exchange without implementing a PC Donation Program

This option would be the simplest alternative with no cost to Santa Clara County. It would just require contacting Tech Exchange periodically to donate all surplus devices for them to disperse to the children and families they serve.

Santa Clara County Social Services Department recently incorporated Guiding Principles to the county's mission and vision, which include being responsive, compassionate, and innovative. Being innovative connotes that we embrace new ideas and creative thinking in promoting progress and improvement. This is a great opportunity for Santa Clara County to put into practice our newly established Guiding Principles. By incorporating a PC donation program, Santa Clara County would not only be responsive and compassionate in helping clients served by giving them access to much needed information and technology, but also be an innovative and active participant in reaching its sustainability goals. By repurposing potentially thousands of surplus computers and giving them a second life in the homes of families served, Santa Clara County would apply all of the Guiding Principles at once and become an example for others to follow.

Acknowledgements

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