

## **ALAMEDA COUNTY'S FOSTER CARE TRACKING SYSTEM: INNOVATIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE PROGRAMS**

**Nancy Bliss\* and Shannon Speak\*\***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The issue of foster care provider overpayments concerns many counties. For Alameda County, the drain on resources prompted the development of the Foster Care Tracking System. The authors chose this topic as our BASSC case study hoping to learn how to save time and resources as well as money for our counties.

The Foster Care Tracking System (FCTS) is a collaborative effort involving program staff, information systems and labor. It was developed in three phases, starting in FY 1999-2000 and completed in FY 2003-2004. There were three goals: reduce overpayments, improve accuracy of payments, and better track children in the system.

The authors are impressed with the thought that has gone into the system and the successes to date. In FY 2003-2004, a 58% reduction in overpayments was realized by Alameda County. In addition, alerts sent to all workers involved in a placement change have increased accountability and reduced friction between child welfare workers and foster care eligibility workers.

Given the enormity of this project, very few significant challenges were noted, and systems are in place to address issues as they arise. The greatest concern is the ability of this system to interface with CalWIN. If Alameda County is successful in developing this interface, the authors recommend that both San Mateo County and the City & County of San Francisco take steps to develop similar systems.

While the authors note that foster care provider overpayments are significantly less in our counties than experienced by Alameda County prior to FCTS, we do feel that a similar system would be beneficial. Our recommendations include budgeting money in FY 06-07, convening a committee in early 2006 composed of Child Welfare, Eligibility, and Information Systems staff to establish goals and outcomes and to look beyond overpayments to programs such as those required by AB429. There is tremendous potential in the use of technology to improve efficiencies within our respective departments.

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*BASSC Executive Development Training Program*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, decreases in state-wide allocations have fueled a demand for increased accountability in governmental agencies. As a result, Alameda County recognized that foster care provider overpayments was an area where efficiencies could be realized. Not only were the dollar amounts staggering, but identifying and collecting overpayments was a burden on staff resources.

Both San Francisco and San Mateo County face some of the same challenges with regard to foster care provider overpayments. This paper provides an overview of the Alameda County Social Services Agency's efforts to bring accountability into the Foster Care program by utilizing innovative technology solutions. Recommendations for our respective counties are also provided.

### **BACKGROUND**

With mounting overpayments in the Foster Care program, Alameda County Social Services Agency developed and successfully implemented a Foster Care Tracking System (FCTS). The goal of the FCTS is to eliminate or drastically reduce overpayments, increase the accuracy of provider payments, and improve the tracking of children placed in foster care. This collaborative effort was led by the agency's Information Systems Department (ISD), working closely with a vendor, Children & Family Services staff, Eligibility staff, Labor staff, and the county's Information Technology Department.

For a four-year period, beginning with fiscal year 1999, foster care provider overpayments were averaging \$2,703,733 per year. In fiscal year (FY) 2003-04, foster care provider overpayments decreased by 58%. Two elements were crucial to the significant decrease in overpayments: the change in foster care provider payment dates and the implementation of a Voice Response Unit (VRU).

### **KEY ELEMENTS OF THE FOSTER CARE TRACKING SYSTEM**

Alameda County has developed and implemented three systems to address the goals outlined earlier. The three systems are RESPECT, Foster Care Reporting VRU and the Foster Care Provider VRU. These systems work independently while interfacing with legacy systems. They are all necessary to reach the goals of FCTS.

#### **Phase I**

The first system implemented, RESPECT, became operational in 1999-2000. This system provides an interface between the Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) and Case Data System (CDS). CWS/CMS is a state-wide case management system utilized by Children and Family Services, while CDS is a system used by Eligibility staff to issue benefits. Nightly, information is downloaded from CWS/CMS into RESPECT, which interfaces with CDS. When a foster care placement change is made in CWS/CMS, RESPECT generates an overnight alert via CDS to

the assigned Eligibility Worker. This system improves communication between the units by ensuring Eligibility Workers are alerted of changes in a timely fashion, and therefore foster care payments are delivered with increased accuracy. The interface also provides necessary tools and means of establishing accountability for both Child Welfare and Eligibility staff.

Before the second phase of FCTS became operational, a crucial adjustment in payment dates was made. In September 2003, Alameda County began paying foster care providers on the 15th of the month, instead of on the 1st, for the prior month of service. This change in payment allows the following systems to hold or cancel checks when there is the potential for overpayment.

## Phase II

Phase II of FCTS, the Foster Care Reporting VRU, was placed in operation on October 1, 2003. This system requires Child Welfare Workers (CWW) to report foster care placement changes via a telephone system (see Appendix 1). When a CWW places a call to the VRU, he/she is prompted to provide information pertinent to the change in placement. The informant can provide this information by using the keypad or speaking the information into the receiver. The Foster Care Reporting VRU system connects to RESPECT as well as CDS and automatically triggers a series of actions.

If RESPECT finds a complete match for the information entered, an alert is forwarded to the accounting unit to hold any pending payments to the provider, and at the same time future grant amounts are zeroed out in CDS. Since all payments to the provider for that child are held, no additional overpayments can occur. RESPECT also sends the

information, via e-mail, to the Child Welfare Clerical Processing Unit and sends an alert to the Eligibility Worker (EW) assigned to the case via CDS.

The e-mail containing the placement information change is sent to one of two in-boxes accessed by the Child Welfare Clerical Processing Unit Supervisor. Sorting is determined by RESPECT based upon the match it finds for the child information entered by the CWW.

The Clerical Processing Unit gives first priority to the in-box containing placement changes where the system cannot find a complete match. These receive priority status because the grants cannot be stopped until the child is positively identified. The clerk assigned to each e-mail must research using the typed and voice entries made by the CWW against information contained in CWS/CMS until a match is found. The clerk then makes the placement change in CWS/CMS.

Placement changes where the system has found the match go to the other in-box. Since these are the cases where payments have been automatically stopped by the system, they have a lower priority. The Clerical Processing Unit must still enter the change into CWS/CMS before the EW can complete the process by making the appropriate changes in provider payments.

Last of all, but certainly of equal importance, the system provides documentation via e-mail to the reporting CWW that the call was received. If the change was made by a CWW other than the assigned worker, the assigned worker also receives an alert so they can follow up on the case.

### Phase III

The third system, Foster Care Providers VRU is accessed by the provider via phone or a web- site. This two-part system went live in September 2004. With this system some responsibility is shifted to the providers by requiring them to report when a child is added, removed, or if the child runs away from their home.

The first process is simply an advisory to the county of changes in child placement. The only action taken from this notice is an alert to the CWW. In the case of a runaway, this alert might be the first notification a worker has that the child is missing. If the CWW is aware of the change but has failed to report the change, the alert from the provider's call is a reminder to do so.

The second process is the monthly reporting which is required of all providers before payments are released. The system generates a notice to providers listing all children by payee and location. This notice includes instructions and a one-time PIN number for the provider to call or access the web site after the first of the month. The provider verifies that each child was in the home on the last day of each month. If a child is not in the home on the last day of the month, the VRU sends an alert to accounting to cancel the current payment and automatically cancels future payments for that child in CDS. The CWW and EW are notified so they can make the changes in placement and recalculate the grant amount.

If a provider has not reported by the 12th of the month, the system alerts accounting to hold the payment. The provider is then sent a reminder notice regarding the need to complete her/his monthly reporting obligation. If no call is received

by the 25th of the month, a final notice is sent. As providers report, payments are automatically released. Any payments not released by the end of the month are automatically canceled, the CDS grant is zeroed out for future months, and the CWW is notified.

Once the CWW is alerted that the provider has not reported, the CWW must verify the location of the child. After the CWW has verified the child's whereabouts, the EW is notified so the appropriate changes for future provider payments can be made or the case can be discontinued.

### SUCCESSSES OF THE FCTS PROGRAM

The Foster Care VRU program is certainly a success when one looks at the reduction in foster care overpayments in Alameda County. The program was in operation only nine months during FY 03-04 yet overpayments dropped by 58% from the previous four year average. The most current statistics show total overpayments for March 2005 as \$26,808, down from \$61,279 in March 2004. Not only is this a significant savings for the program but also savings for the county in time and resources spent researching and collecting overpayments.

The state, in *Bass v. Anderson* 1997, ruled that Alameda County could not pursue individual providers for non-fraudulent overpayments. Since foster care payments may be several thousand dollars a month for a child, overpayments can cause a large financial drain on a county's resources. The Foster Care Provider VRU requires providers to verify the location of each child prior to payment. If the provider falsely reports a child is in the home, fraudulent claims are easily established.

Interviews were conducted with workers from Foster Care Eligibility, Child Welfare and the Child Welfare Clerical Processing Unit. All staff interviewed felt to varying degrees, that they were involved in designing the system. ISD was reported to be responsive to system improvement suggestions and has an ongoing committee to address system improvements and modifications.

The Child Welfare staff noted improved provider reporting, thereby assisting in tracking children placed in the care of the county. They also had a keen awareness that the system stopped the “bleeding of funds” from the county.

As with the Child Welfare staff, Eligibility staff acknowledged that savings were achieved through the FCTS. In fact, any initial reluctance was overcome based on the dramatic outcomes achieved. The ability to access real-time reports was seen as a great benefit. They also felt that the system achieved the goal of building accountability into the process, improved communication, and reduced frustrations between the two groups.

Based upon interviews, the system is also viewed as a success from the clerical point of view. The clerks appreciate that the information comes to them in a consistent format, is legible, and provides documentation of their response.

## CHALLENGES

Given the enormity of this project, insignificant challenges were noted. The innovative use of technology, as a way to improve tracking of children in foster care and reduce overpayments by interfacing with legacy systems was ambitious. Overall, Alameda County was very successful reaching their goals.

While the response from staff interviewed was positive, some challenges still remain. It should be noted that the staff interviews were limited and may not represent all points of view. Although CWWs reported that more time is necessary to call into the VRU, they also acknowledged that with modifications the system has become more efficient. Automated e-mails have dramatically increased and were reported to be a frustration to some workers. While some of these alerts inform them of runaways or of changes they need to report, other alerts only verify actions they have already taken. Although the increase of e-mail activity generated by the VRU alerts may be viewed as unnecessary, it must be acknowledged that some contain critical information requiring follow-up by the CWW.

Overall, EWs reported only minor glitches needing additional attention by ISD. One example given is that when the grant for one child in a family is zeroed out by RESPECT all siblings are zeroed out requiring additional work by the Eligibility staff. Another challenge involves the way the system handles twins, picking up the first alphabetically regardless of which child experienced a placement change. Some concern was expressed that there were occasional delays in the process. Grants zeroed out by RESPECT can cause frustration if CWS/CMS is not updated. The situation requires very little effort to correct and a process is in place to remedy the situation. Also, during this time no overpayments are being generated.

A further challenge, and one of great concern, is the interface between FCTS and CalWIN. Crucial to our recommendations is the requirement that this interface is established, and the same efficiencies are seen as currently experienced.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The upcoming implementation of CalWIN in San Francisco and San Mateo Counties influences the recommendations made by the authors. Both counties will convert to CalWIN prior to Alameda County's conversion. Therefore, it is recommended that both counties wait until after the CalWIN conversion in Alameda County before researching and implementing similar FCTS systems.

There are many positive aspects to using new technologies to improve the tracking and payment of foster care providers. For both counties these include:

- Improve tracking of children in the foster care system.
- Reducing overpayments.
- Creating accountability across departmental lines.
- Improving communication.
- Eliminating manual processes.
- Streamlining and building efficiencies into the processes.
- Closing gaps amongst staff working from various locations.
- Increasing efficiencies with departmental resources.

In conclusion, both authors recommend that their respective counties consider the use of technologies, similar to Alameda County's FCTS, in tracking children and payments in the foster care program.

We recommend the following steps be taken:

- Build funding into the FY 06-07 budget to conduct a feasibility study.
- Based on the results of the study, convene a committee in early 2006 consisting of program staff from Child Welfare, Foster Care Eligibility,

Information Systems, and representatives from the Foster Care Providers Community.

- Establish desired goals and outcomes.
- Provide recommendations derived from the committee to County Executive staff by September, 2006.
- Establish a development committee consisting Child Welfare, Eligibility and Information Systems staff with representation from the Foster Care Provider community.
- Ensure the development committee establishes a target date for implementation early in the process.
- Develop a communication tool to keep all Child Welfare, Foster Care Eligibility and appropriate Clerical staff informed of the progress and involved in the process.

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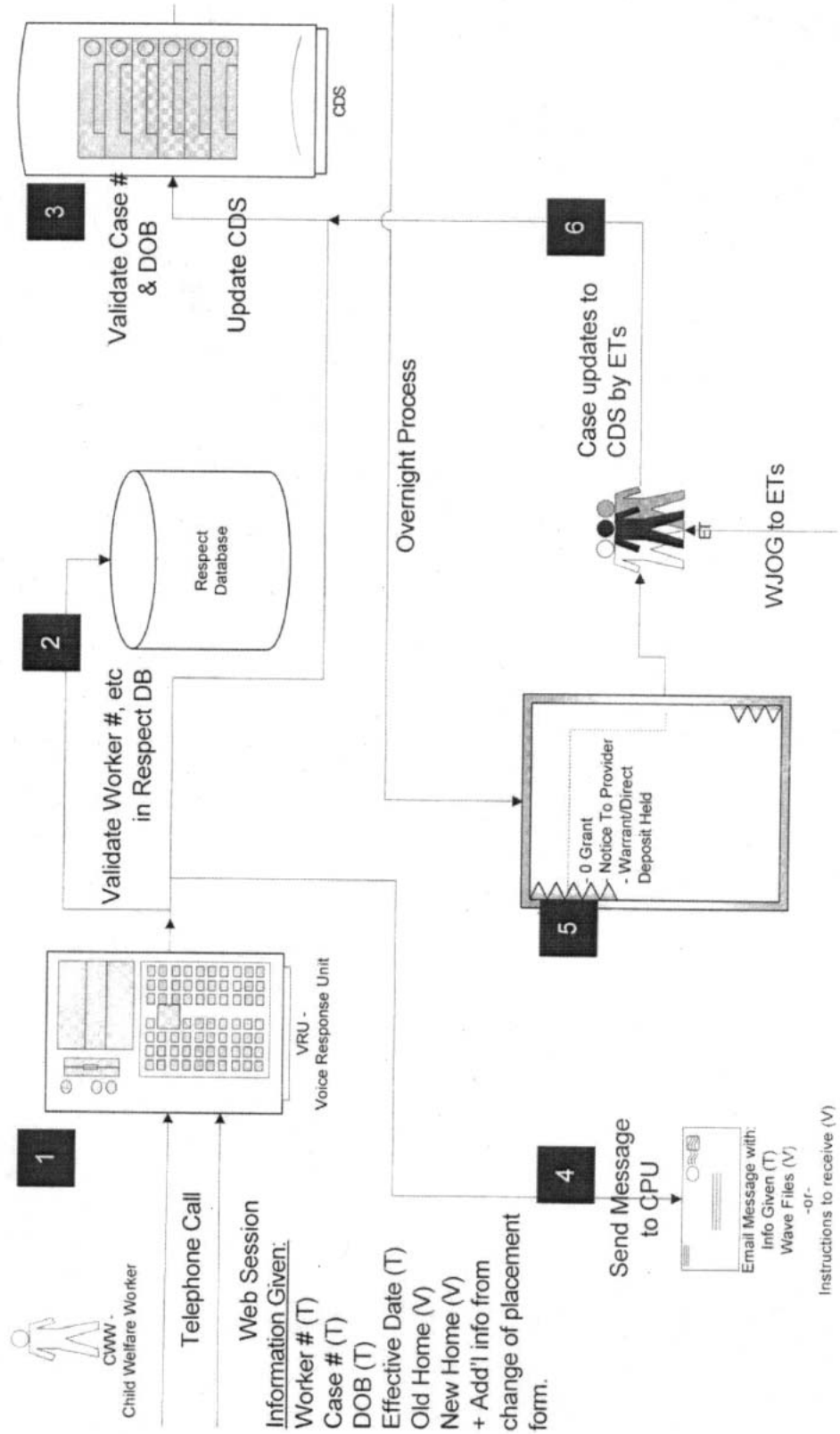
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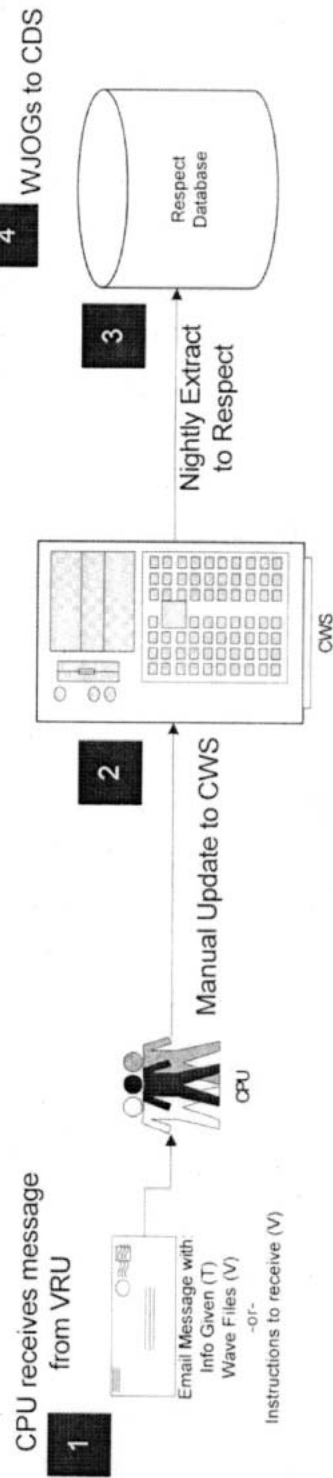


APPENDIX

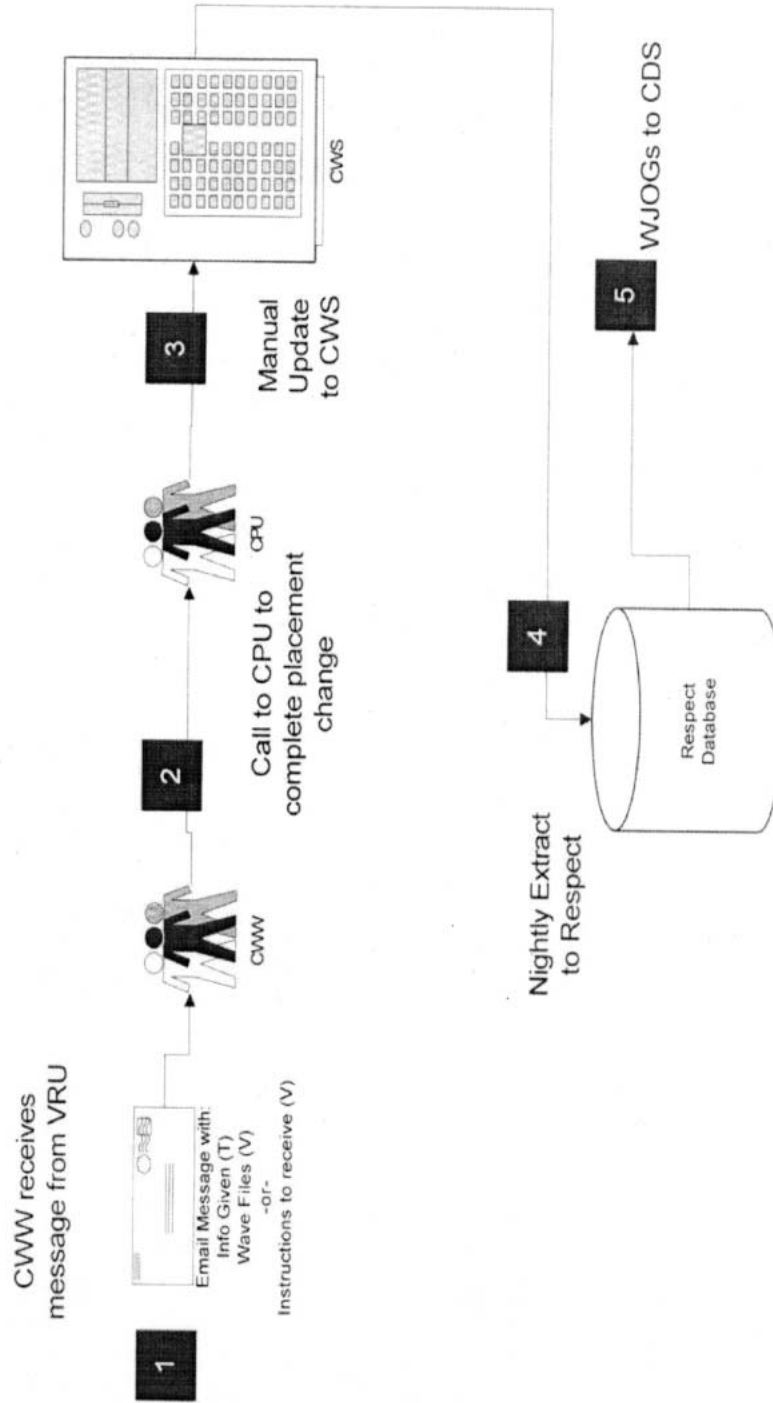
**Alameda County Social Services Agency**  
 CWW Initiated - Placement Change  
 Process Flow Diagram



**Alameda County Social Services Agency**  
CWW Initiated - Placement Change  
Process Flow Diagram



**Alameda County Social Services Agency**  
Provider Initiated - Placement Change  
Process Flow Diagram



**Alameda County Social Services Agency**  
 Provider Initiated - Placement Change  
 Process Flow Diagram

