

# **CONTRA COSTA COUNTY'S PROGRAM-TECHNOLOGY ADVISORY**

## **COUNCIL: BUILDING LEADERSHIP AND**

## **COLLABORATION IN IT'S PLANNING**

**Emily Gerth Gibbs**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

For county social service agencies, including those in both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties, information technology (IT) resources are now as critical as money and personnel for delivering services and accomplishing the organization's mission. But agency executives, program managers, and IT staff face a significant learning curve in communicating across their different languages and knowledge bases.

To address these challenges during a critical time in their IT planning, the executive team at Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services established the Program-Technology Advisory Council (PTAC). In its first year, the PTAC provided a space to address challenges in the agency's most important IT development initiatives, spread IT developments, and identified gaps in the agency's IT resources and processes.

Given its own challenges, the San Francisco Human Services Agency should consider adopting some of the PTAC's tools that improve relationships and communication between program and IT staff. These include publishing a tech queue with all current projects, creating a regular meeting for bridging communication gaps between program and IT, and finding new ways to support "IT-lite" innovation throughout the agency.

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#### **Introduction: IT as a Critical Resource in Human Services**

For county social service agencies, including those in both Contra Costa and San Francisco Counties, information technology (IT) resources are now as critical as money and personnel for delivering services and accomplishing the organization's mission. Clients now expect agencies to be IT-savvy and offer multiple ways for them to connect with staff via telephone, internet and even mobile phone applications. Lawmakers and other decision-makers expect sophisticated data analysis and detailed reporting to accompany budget and policy proposals. New software and the spread of mobile technology have the potential to make agency operations both more efficient, by automating routine processes, and more customer-friendly, by allowing customers and workers to complete tasks without coming into the office. Combined, these advances offer the potential for agencies to deliver more cost effective services with less staff time spent on processing paperwork.

At the same time, most agencies' IT departments have limited funding and personnel with which to both develop new technology and maintain existing infrastructure. Maximizing these limited resources requires executives and program managers to prioritize IT resources strategically. But agency executives, program managers, and IT staff face a significant learning curve in communicating across different languages and knowledge bases. Uneven knowledge, experience

and comfort with information technology across programs can result in a “squeakiest wheel gets the grease” mentality within the agency. IT resources may be devoted to the programs most comfortable with, or most demanding of, IT rather than the opportunities that offer the greatest value to the agency overall. Overcoming these communication and collaboration barriers requires a conscious effort to bridge the gaps between IT and program leaders.

### **Contra Costa’s Approach: Program-Technology Advisory Council**

To address these challenges in their IT planning, the executive team at Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services (EHSD) established the Program-Technology Advisory Council (PTAC) in early 2015. In creating the PTAC, the leadership team sought to ensure that executive staff time was regularly devoted to understanding IT issues and allocating the agency’s IT development resources to the highest priority initiatives. Director Kathy Gallagher, who arrived as a new leader in the county in late 2012, felt that this was a particularly important moment for executive leadership on IT issues in Contra Costa County. While other counties may have these discussions at a lower level, she saw that Contra Costa needed to make larger, more significant improvements to its IT as it recovered from the recent economic downturn, which had reduced its IT resources as well as the agency’s staff by one-third. The volume of IT issues, as well as their importance, necessitated more time than the executive team could devote at its regular meeting.

The PTAC is formally structured by a Governance Charter that outlines the goals for the group (see Figure A) along with the expectations around attendance, communication and voting. All members of EHSD’s executive leadership team – including Director Kathy Gallagher and all six

of the Bureau heads – sit on the PTAC along with two IT development leaders for the agency.<sup>1</sup>

This membership was consciously chosen to emphasize the central role of program staff in setting the agency's IT direction. The PTAC meets monthly for two hours, led by an outside facilitator.

**Figure A. Goals of the PTAC, according to the Governance Charter**

- Establish a vision for the future
- Actively monitor, identify and evaluate emerging technologies for applicability to our programs and systems
- Establish and monitor progress on a long-term Technology Plan
- Coordinate key program activities that have specific technology requirements
- Act as a gateway and approve new technology projects; address mandated projects as appropriate
- Set priorities, oversee and track progress on key technology initiatives
- Ensure appropriate allocation of resources to technology projects

A key portion of its meeting involves reviewing the Tech Queue. A robust project management document developed by the IT group, the Tech Queue details the status of all significant IT projects (those estimated as needing at least 40 hours of IT developer time) under development or planned for the future. It includes a brief description, a current status update, projected start and end dates, and key program and IT contacts for each project. The Tech Queue also includes a priority-ranking score, which accounts for the impact, need, cost, and benefit of each current or proposed initiative. Reviewing the Tech Queue each month allows the PTAC to see the full scope of IT's development work, to set direction for IT developer time, and to identify high priority projects facing challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Contra Costa EHS's IT group has several divisions. The PTAC is focused on the IT resources for developing and maintaining new technology.

The work of the PTAC is also fed by a number of sub-committees, which address critical projects and areas of collaboration between program and IT staff. Sub-committee members are drawn from a wider pool of staff in the IT division and across agency programs, unlike the PTAC. In the initial year, sub-committees tackled topics like Communications and IT (with a focus on how to communicate during the rollout of new projects), Telephony (for numerous, ongoing telephone-system projects), Workload Distribution (for a particularly critical IT tool under development), and Emerging Technology (for developing policy around new technologies). These groups have met monthly or bi-monthly, reporting back to the PTAC and dissolving once their work is complete. The mix of program and IT staff on the sub-committees has required both groups to build an understanding of each's other languages and deepen the collaboration across divisions.

### **Early Successes: PTAC Steps in to Address IT Project Challenges**

In its first year, the PTAC has provided a space to address challenges in the agency's most important IT initiatives. For example, over the last year, Contra Costa EHSD was developing a critical new workload management tool. As the developers gathered input, they heard from managers in district offices with different opinions and strategies. Lacking a clear decision-making process, the project fell behind schedule as the vendor and programmer grappled with the differing visions. The PTAC, which was receiving regular updates, intervened to reorganize the meeting structure for the project and define a decision-making process that respected staff input but gave the project the clarity to move forward. The project ultimately was able to get back on track and deliver a model tool in part because of the PTAC's oversight.

The PTAC also has spread IT developments across the agency by giving bureau directors the chance to learn about and from the technological innovations being implemented in other parts of the agency. This has helped ensure the successful adoption of new technologies. For example, when IT was rolling out a new application for texting clients' mobile phones, the rollout initially focused on the CalFresh Program, since the texting tool had been developed for CalFresh in San Francisco County. But EHSD's CalFresh program was slow to adopt it and the PTAC shifted the rollout to its CalWORKs program, where it met with more success. This, in turn, led to wider adoption across the agency, including CalFresh. The PTAC's agency-wide viewpoint sparked IT to shift gears and facilitated the spread of the innovation.

In addition, the PTAC has addressed gaps in the agency's IT resources and processes. The development of Contra Costa's workload distribution tool began when a program staff person departed the agency and left behind a complex, customized Excel tool that was sprawling and poorly documented. The Excel tool was critical to program operations but could not be supported by the IT group when the original creator left. To prevent a recurrence of this problem, the PTAC supported adding an IT position dedicated to developing IT-lite applications like complex Excel workbooks and small Access databases. This new position ensures that simple but effective IT tools within programs receive the thought, support and documentation they need to be sustainable going forward. The PTAC has similarly drawn attention to communication issues around the dissemination of new technology across the agency. Through its Communications Subcommittee, it has developed two templates for communicating around the rollout of new initiatives which will guide IT projects going forward.

## **Moving Forward: Refocusing on Strategic Decisions**

The PTAC has had some initial success in keeping key initiatives on track and on building improved communication – both at the committee and sub-committee level – between IT and program staff. Reflecting on their first year, PTAC’s members did recognize they had been devoting more attention to addressing pressing issues than longer-term strategic thinking. While addressing operational issues in IT development is important, the PTAC offers a unique space for executive leadership and vision around IT. In the next year, the members hope to focus on having more strategic, big picture discussions about the role of IT in their agency.

## **Lessons for San Francisco: Improving Communication between IT and Program Leaders**

Like Contra Costa EHSD, the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) has limited resources for developing all the IT tools it would like to have and struggles at times with program and IT staff speaking different languages. Contra Costa’s PTAC has provided a formal structure for addressing those challenges and for bringing executive leadership to these issues at a critical moment for IT in Contra Costa. For HSA, that structure may be both too formal for its culture and too time-intensive at the executive level for HSA’s current needs. But, given its own challenges, HSA can still adapt some of the PTAC’s tools that improve relationships and transparency between program and IT staff. The following recommendations highlight opportunities for HSA to encourage programs to see IT as a strategic resource in delivering their services and improve communication between IT and program staff:

- **HSA should develop a streamlined Tech Queue of IT projects to share periodically with its executive staff, program directors and managers to better showcase what new developments are in the works and to communicate project status.** Just as

Personnel and Fiscal provide regular reports on hiring and spending to program managers, IT could develop a report for program managers to help them understand what projects are under development and where they fall in IT's current workload. The report would display the current status of project (e.g., feasibility, development, testing), the projected completion date, and key project leads. Ideally, the Tech Queue would be accessible on the intranet so that HSA managers can see the status of their own initiatives as well as full scope of IT's work in a central location. More formally reporting out this information would encourage managers to view IT as key resource for accomplishing their goals. It would also facilitate cooperation in HSA's administrative division by encouraging coordination between new IT developments and the program's financial, hiring and training needs.

- **In developing a regular meeting between IT staff and program directors, HSA should structure the agenda to focus on building the basis for having strategic IT-planning conversations, rather than addressing operational issues.** HSA's new IT Director plans to begin convening program directors regularly to discuss IT issues. As the PTAC has found, it is easy to devote the whole conversation to the most pressing IT project needs. While that can be valuable when leadership is needed to place a struggling project back on track, there is also a need for building a more strategic vision of the role IT can play in service delivery – especially at this moment when clients and the public are expecting agencies to offer new mobile and web-based services. HSA can learn from PTAC's experience by focusing this new meeting on educating program managers on how to work with IT, building shared language between program and IT staff, and sharing tools across programs.

- **HSA should continue to invest resources in supporting IT innovation throughout the agency, including making an effort to publicize resources and provide support for available IT-lite efforts.** Among the gaps identified by the PTAC in Contra Costa was the lack of IT resources to support smaller applications and databases developed by program staff. As HSA's staff is increasingly comprised of people who arrive at the agency comfortable using technology in their personal and professional lives, HSA should similarly consider how it supports IT innovation throughout the agency. Through the potential expansion of the HSA Innovation Office as well as the efforts of its IT staff, HSA should continue to support the acquisition, building and use of IT-lite tools outside the IT group, promoting an IT-friendly culture. Done in a concerted way, this could free up scarce IT development resources for the complex projects that require custom programming and development.

### **Conclusion: Toward 21<sup>st</sup> Century Human Services**

Both Contra Costa and San Francisco County's human services agencies are poised for significant progress towards more customer-friendly, efficient service delivery with the increased use of information technology in their business processes. It is a significant culture shift, however, for "human" services agencies to move towards more automated, more technology-driven processes. Regular communication and collaborative relationships between program and IT – through avenues like the Program-Technology Advisory Council – can help agencies negotiate the culture shift alongside the technological change. It will be worth the investment, though, if technology allows agencies to focus their limited human resources on the complex challenges that require a human touch.

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