

INFORMATION @ THE SPEED OF LIFE: BRINGING THE WEB TO EMPLOYEES IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

Ellen Bucci*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to reduce paper, improve services to customers, and provide employees with up-to-date policies, procedures and forms on the web, Alameda County Social Services Agency's Information Technology (IT) Department implemented a web systems group in 2004. The agency now has over 25,000 pages of policies and procedures online.

The county's framework allows all of this content to be easily maintained by non-IT staff that have no knowledge of web site programming. This web site, which has a large public-facing web site, is all part of the county's effort to become a paperless system while enhancing services to customers.

FINDINGS

Currently, the Alameda County web has several key components. These include: the online practice guide (OPG); electronic time study and time sheets, electronic client files, and linkage to the foster care overpayment prevention system. The web site is managed by an MSW and there is at least one other MSW in the unit.

Due to its autonomy from the county's central tech unit, Alameda County's Social Services Agency is in an excellent place to be creative in tailoring utilization of their web-site to specific needs of the

agency, without having to compete with other departments for services.

Each of the current web-based programs has met with great success in the much more efficient use of staff time, the quality of staff work, fiscal savings, and greater participation by the community.

Currently, the team is working on their largest project to date in going to online client files, and is anticipating being 100% electronic by December, 2005.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) is currently working on developing and implementing many of these same programs. However, there are specific ideas that San Mateo may wish to consider. Having several MSWs actually part of the web-based group has created a unique and powerful team approach to the development of ideas as well as the practicality of implementation for many aspects of the technology programs.

In addition, although San Mateo is creating an OPG for Child Welfare Services, the OPG has been so successful in Alameda County, that San Mateo may wish to consider expanding it to other program areas.

Another recommendation is that San Mateo explore creating a joint effort with the community to

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BASSC Executive Development Training Program

develop additional ideas for greater web-based interactions between agency and community.

In summary, it appears that there are endless opportunities for collaboration with the community while improving the efficiency of county public services. This is only the beginning.

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INTRODUCTION

The human services field has always been a continually evolving area of public service. Across the county, legal mandates, federal requirements, state regulations, as well as the demand for measurable positive outcomes have escalated at an ever-increasing pace. Although it has been an administrative responsibility and sometimes near impossible task, to insure continual implementation of these changes, the advent of computer technology and the web has provided county government another tool in this critical responsibility. While most human service agencies have been utilizing computers for many years now, demand for web technology appears to be growing fast for human service agencies.

Most county governments have large centralized technology departments. This has led not only to county departments competing with each other for limited technology services, it has also limited the ability of human services agencies to be creative in exploring possibilities.

The subsequent move for many social service departments has been to create separate technology units, thereby being able to focus on their own specific needs. However, many of those department specific technology units are nevertheless closely linked or controlled by the centralized technology (tech) units.

Alameda County Social Services Agency has addressed this issue by creating a relatively

autonomous technology unit, ISD, separate and distinct from central. They went even further by appointing an MSW who has some expertise in technology as manager. The goal was to bridge the gap between service needs and the development of new processes and functions. Furthermore, they have concentrated focus on non-tech staff controlling the content of the programming.

With this unique staffing and autonomy, ISD is able to identify, assess, and provide the types of programming that are essential and specific, and move quickly to develop and implement them. In these efforts to reduce paper, improve services to customers, and provide employees with up-to-date policies, procedures, and forms on the web, Alameda County's ISD has implemented many innovative programs. For interested counties, Alameda has made several of these programs accessible by offering the technology at cost.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECTS

I. Online Practice Guide (OPG)

The OPG is a simple, quick and user-friendly web-based handbook system for Child Welfare Services (CWS). It is not, however, your average online handbook. It not only combines administrative, program, and court handbooks, it also provides inherent links with numerous critical knowledge sources. These include the legal code, rosters, resources and more. It was designed to move away from bulky handbooks, and endless paper policies and updates.

For example, social workers in many counties currently have between six to eight different handbooks, a book on juvenile codes and laws, a binder for new policies and procedures, a book of county phone numbers as well as specialized rosters, etc. While most of these are now available online, they are still located on separate sites with no linkages from one to another, and staff must complete a new search for each site. The Alameda County OPG provides those linkages. In this day of constantly changing and complicated laws, regulations and policies, it has become impossible for staff to stay informed via paper. Alameda County's user-friendly web system of policy and procedures not only brings the most updated information to them quickly and easily, but also allows non-tech, program staff to update the site as new information is generated. This eliminates wait time to access ISD's assistance.

ISD developed the OPG in a series of steps that, at the same time, began to bring program staff and ISD staff into a close working relationship. Since some ISD staff are also MSW's, there was a mutual understanding of content needs, program goals, and the realities of workflow that facilitated the process. They were able to brainstorm necessary and helpful links that would provide easy access to required and critical information.

II. Electronic Time Study

Alameda County has located their time study program entirely online. In most counties, time study is a complicated and multi-tiered system, which begins with quarterly dissemination, to hundreds of staff, of a 10-15 page time study instruction manual with updates and changes. The process goes on to include:

- Paper memo reminders to staff regarding completion of the time study;
- Collection of the time study coding;
- Review and corrections;
- Approval by the supervisor;
- Next stage collection and review by time study clerical persons;
- Data entry; and
- Report generation.

The obvious drawbacks to current procedures include not only the time expended in each of these steps, but also the need to physically transport the paper to supervisors, payroll clerks, data input staff, etc. Another drawback is the quantity of paper required to keep the program operational and also simply trying to get staff to wade through the quarterly instructions and to recognize the correct code changes. Once all these steps have been completed, data entry must then begin. Some counties estimate a lapse of between 6-8 weeks before each quarterly time study report is ready to be generated.

Alameda County has streamlined their online system to make it quick and easy for staff to complete and for supervisors to review and approve.

The online time study program automatically opens each time an individual's computer is started and reminds staff to complete the coding of their hours. The computer provides a drop down list of viable codes, which allows staff to avoid having to refer to time study manuals. This does away with the need for bulky instructions each quarter. The program then automatically completes all totaling, and at the end of the month, staff are able to electronically send the time study to their supervisors. Supervisors' reports are automatically completed based on the reports of their staff. They then review their staff's information and are able to edit them

and electronically send them on to the time study manager. Theoretically, the time study program can be ready to generate reports within 1-2 weeks at the end of the quarter.

III. Electronic Time Sheets

In some counties, time sheets are tied to the time study. In Alameda County, at this time, they are separate systems. However, once again, many of the aforementioned awkward steps in the process of completion and submittal are eliminated. Staff complete the time sheet online. There is no need for:

- Crossing out, whiting out, or other messy corrections;
- Checking staff's math;
- Totaling hours;
- Attaching additional sick leave or overtime slips;
- Physically transporting time sheets;
- Physically tracking down supervisors for signatures; or
- Tracking down lost time sheets.

As the online form is completed, staff produce an electronic signature / certification, and electronically send the sheet to their supervisors who review and send it along electronically to payroll. As stated, the benefits to saving staff time and distraction are numerous.

IV. Electronic Client Files

Alameda's intent to become a paperless system is making its greatest progress with their plan to be fully automated with an electronic client files system by December 2005. They have begun the process to convert existing, stored client files by contracting the conversion to an outside agency and

are hoping that process will be complete by August 2005. Once the conversion is complete, they will vacate the storage facility where the files are currently kept, which will result in savings of \$3.4 million dollars a year. Meanwhile, they are designing and implementing a system to input and retrieve all new documents.

V. Linkage to Voice Response Unit

Linkage to Voice Response Unit (VRU) is Alameda's voice-activated foster care overpayment system. As with most counties, Alameda was spending millions of dollars in non-retrievable foster care overpayments annually. VRU requires foster parents to report monthly about each child placed in their home. ISD has now developed a web linkage to that system for foster parents and staff in order to offer them the choice of going online to make their reports if they choose, rather than utilizing the phone-based system. They simply log on to the Alameda County website, visit the online VRU site, and enter data regarding placements in their homes. Currently, 50% of all information coming into VRU is via the web and their overpayment rate is almost non-existent.

BARRIERS AND OBSTACLES

Alameda has faced and overcome many barriers and obstacles in the development of its web-based programs. The largest barrier was the initial stage of developing the team and ensuring its autonomy from the central tech unit. They had the task of convincing agency administration that it would not duplicate services and would, in fact, provide a higher level of service to the community as well as staff.

Another obstacle was in putting together the team. They knew they wanted a team consisting of both program and tech professionals, to work together towards their mission and goals. Since they wanted to keep their main focus on improving service to the community, they decided to select an MSW, who also had an interest in web-based technology, to manage the unit.

Marketing to staff and obtaining high utilization were other areas that required diligence, both in developing as well as maintaining staff participation. This has been accomplished by having personnel linkages between ISD and program staff, who have input privileges and continual program contact.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SAN MATEO

Currently, San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) is working on many of these same aspects of a web system. HSA already has a separate tech unit although it is closely tied to the county central tech department. Currently, there are no professional program staff working within that unit. The addition to the unit of an MSW with program knowledge as well as tech interest might create a dynamic interaction between these two areas.

After seeing Alameda County's OPG, HSA decided to recruit one of their contractors, to develop a similar guide for CWS. The savings, in terms of staff time and frustration, as well as increasing the quality of work, such as court reports, can be evaluated after the OPG has been completed, staff have been trained, and a learning period has been observed. If successful, San Mateo may wish to consider expanding the OPG to other units, such as Medi-Cal, CalWORKs, etc.

Electronic client file conversion is at a similar stage of development in San Mateo. One difference is that HSA has chosen to complete the imaging of old client files in-house instead of contracting out this function. This may mean a longer time frame to complete the imaging process, but funds need not be located to contract this service.

San Mateo is also in the process of converting to an electronic time sheet and time study process that will combine the two functions in a program that will capture both sets of data.

FISCAL IMPACT

Many of these changes certainly have inherent costs. These have to be weighed in terms of fund expenditures versus staff time and distraction. However there is no doubt that there will be greater long-term savings to the county, not only in direct costs, such as rented building space for storage, but also in terms of increased productivity as well as better services to clients and the community.

For example, the OPG's have upfront costs, in terms of development, training and monitoring, but savings can be observed in terms of:

- Reduced staff time in completing court reports.
- Improved decision making due to easier access and familiarity with up to date policies and procedures.
- Staff engaged in verifying laws and regulations.
- Increased accuracy of court reports due to access to appropriate guidelines.
- Decreased supervisor time in correcting court reports and advising staff of policy, code, or regulation updates.
- Reduced administrative staff time lost due to decrease in generation and dissemination of updates.

The other programs related here will have similar upfront costs, but will also have savings in many of these same areas. Most of these savings will translate directly to better client services and more time for staff to work directly with those clients and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That San Mateo County HSA complete its Online Practice Guide and, if successful, expand it to include other program areas:
 - ✓ Have the OPG contractor meet with the various programs within CWS to design the OPG.
 - ✓ Work with current contractor to develop an OPG for each of the various programs.
 - ✓ Coordinate with staff development to train staff in the use of the OPG.
 - ✓ Work with the Business Systems Group (BSG) to train program staff to input, update and liaison.
- That San Mateo County adopt an electronic time sheet and time study program that includes both elements in one process for staff:
 - ✓ County Payroll, the Comptroller's Office and Central Tech, are currently seeking to contract with a software provider to develop and implement an online payroll/time study program.
- That San Mateo County utilize the web for greater foster parent and youth interaction with CWS, and other client subgroups in the program:
 - ✓ Create a development group, including staff and the community, to generate ideas for greater interaction between those groups via the web.

- That San Mateo County consider integrating all these programs through a web-based system rather than multiple program sites.
- That San Mateo County consider hiring at least one MSW into its BSG.
 - ✓ At this time, San Mateo's Central Tech support controls all of BSG's position titles and classifications. HSA would have to:
 - Request position control over BSG's classifications; or
 - Negotiate with Central Tech support for specific position alterations; or
 - Request additional positions within the budget unit and specify justification.

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