Welfare to Work Report Automation: Santa Cruz County's WTW Alerts Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sonoma County's Human Services Department contracts with Exemplar Human Services (Exemplar) to provide daily caseload management reports, among them the Welfare to Work Alerts Report. Contracting this subscription service enabled the CalWORKs and Welfare to Work (WTW) staff to gain immediate benefit from utilizing the provided reports, as the department has limited resources to provide the service in-house. Like most counties, Sonoma County is continuously looking for cost savings while providing responsive services to clients. Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department also contracted with Exemplar's subscription service to provide caseload management reports. In an effort to reduce expenditures, Santa Cruz worked to develop an in-house replacement solution by utilizing their Business Analytics Division. A Senior Analyst assigned to the project worked with the program staff to analyze and develop Santa Cruz's Welfare to Work Alerts Report. The replacement report is hosted on My Portal, Santa Cruz HSD's intranet and is an interactive report that is available to all staff.

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Facing financial challenges due to the October 2017 firestorm as well as reduced funding streams and budget cuts, Sonoma County's Human Services Department (HSD) continues to look for cost savings with the least impact to client services. Sonoma HSD currently contracts with Exemplar Human Services (Exemplar) to develop case management reports not available within CalWIN. Exemplar is a vendor which "provides custom data reporting, across several program areas, delivering daily and weekly reports that support operations management and boost performance."[1] Exemplar provides performance management tools that assist Sonoma County in its efforts to improve client engagement, work participation and service effectiveness in the SonomaWORKs program, Sonoma County's Welfare to Work program. Exemplar's Analytic Service is a subscription service that enables agencies to access and utilize key performance management outcome data related to their operations at all levels of SonomaWORKs staff. Sonoma provides Exemplar access via a secure connection to servers residing on the county network for purposes of accessing data to produce daily reports.[2] Exemplar is a very responsive vendor and meets regularly with the Sonoma-WORKs team to modify the provided reports as requested to enhance usability. The SonomaWORKs staff that receive the Exemplar reports are 44.5 Cal-WORKs Employment and Training Specialists (ETS) and 23 Welfare to Work Employment and Training Counselors for a total of 67.5 Full-Time

Employees (FTE), which includes line staff, supervisors, analysts and managers.

The February 2018 CalWORKs and Welfare to Work population was approximately 4,200 unduplicated individuals.[3]

- CalWORKS Continuing
  - Cases: 1,731
  - Individuals: 3,921
- Welfare to Work
  - Enrollees: 381
  - Exempt Individuals: 482

Sonoma County HSD's 2017/2018 contract costs for Exemplar's services are $204,000 per year which is $17,000 per month. Sonoma and Santa Cruz Counties both utilize CalWIN as their automated eligibility system and Microsoft Structured Query Language (SQL) Server as their database platform. Knowing that Santa Cruz County also worked with Exemplar, but chose to not renew their contract, inspired the inquiry into the approach and solution that they developed.

Background

In December, 2016, executive management of Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (HSD) was beginning work on their 2017/2018 budget. Facing budget cuts and reduced funding streams, careful examination of line items in the budget revealed that the expense associated with the Exemplar contract was identified as a possible source of budget savings. Exemplar had been providing daily reports to Welfare to Work staff, among them the Welfare to Work

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1. Exemplar website home page. Exemplarhumanservices.com

2. FY 2017-2018 Exemplar contract with Sonoma County

3. March, 2018 Trendex: E&T Edition

Alerts Report (Alerts Report). The Business Analytics Division was asked if the report that Exemplar was providing could be created in-house and if it could be done by the end of the contract, which was six months away. The Business Analytics Division (originally created as the "Centralized Reporting Group"), part of the Planning and Evaluation Division, is currently comprised of three programmers and three analysts. Each analyst has a focus area and meets regularly with their program divisions to gain knowledge of the issues and strategic direction in order to provide effective support.

Process

With a six-month timeline, Senior Analyst David Beardsley began work on creating the Alerts Report. Without visibility of the vendor code, he was tasked with creating the report from scratch. Rather than reverse engineer the report, Mr. Beardsley worked with program staff to start from the beginning, identify and define each alert and what that information represented. Staff participated in the discussions via existing meetings and one-on-one time with Mr. Beardsley. Once everyone was in agreement with the report and data requirements, querying and coding began. The first two months (January and February) were spent analyzing the CalWIN databases, identifying the required data fields, and developing the core program code for the report.

March and April were focused on report development, designing the layout, and continued programming. Mr. Beardsley worked to replicate the format of Exemplar's report so that it was not too different for the users, to ensure acceptance and adoption. He received broad feedback from the workgroup and asked for volunteers to review the reports. Quality Control was largely derived from comparison with Exemplar's reports. Since the reports were delivered daily, it enabled Mr. Beardsley and staff to compare their results to those provided by Exemplar. A few of the users volunteered to do a deep dive into the differences between the reports and identify where cases should and should not be presented on the

report. This then enabled further refinement of the selection criteria in the code.

May and June were spent fine-tuning the look and feel of the report along with continued validation against Exemplar's version. Multiple user training sessions were held in early June before going live with the new report on July 1, 2017. There has been no negative feedback about the report itself, and positive feedback around the enhancements and flexibility that were implemented. This speaks to the success of the collaborative development and testing process. The new Alerts Report is more complex, and there was a learning period to allow staff to adjust to what was being presented. Mr. Beardsley's openness to questions and incorporation of many staff suggestions allowed for a fairly smooth transition into the final product. The end users reported that this new version was easier to navigate. The new report provides users the ability to customize as needed using filters. They can look at their entire caseload to see the status of each client. The new report includes definitions to ensure the purpose and logic of the report is clear.

The Alerts Report is hosted on the HSD intranet, which enables interactive functionality. For example, there are selection parameters that allow Supervisors to look at cases assigned to their entire unit, or select a particular worker's caseload, or an individual Employment and Training Specialist can select just their assigned cases. Individual alerts can be looked at or "ALL" can be displayed. The report format can be changed to an "export format" which removes all header formatting to allow a clean export to Excel. Additionally, there is a drop-down menu for several different report variations. There is the basic Alert Report, and a "detail" version which lists the specific activities, dates, and counts that trigger various alerts. There is also a full caseload list with timeclock counts and other data, a sanction report, and a few others.

The Alerts Report is displayed as a listing of individual participants and their associated cases. Across the top are the various alerts. When a participant

meets the criteria for a specific alert, a colored indicator box appears. Cases that do not qualify for any alerts would not appear on this report, but they will appear on the full caseload report.

Benefits

- Creating the report in-house allowed Santa Cruz County to re-design the report from the ground up in a way that was most useful to them, rather than having to make continuing modifications to an existing report.

- Once the report went live, future changes could be made more rapidly without having to go through an outside vendor. Santa Cruz County also retains complete control of how and when to implement a change.

- As Mr. Beardsley was developing the code for the report, he discovered that some of the more complex and subtle selection criteria were not entirely accurate. He realized that having visibility of exactly what was going on "behind the scenes" in the program code is important to ensure accuracy of the data. There was no way to know that a few situations were not being selected because of special circumstances not included in the selection criteria. This was a critical part of the development process. The programmers met with the WTW staff to fully understand and document exactly what each alert was to indicate and what each report was to display.

- The understanding of the CalWIN system and CalWIN Information System (CIS) data gained through the report development process has enabled Mr. Beardsley to leverage that enhanced knowledge to create additional reports. This internal knowledge base can ultimately be leveraged for other business units as well.

- Santa Cruz County HSD hosts the Alerts Report on "My Portal", their local intranet site. The "live" report can be accessed at any time and hosting it on the intranet allows staff to access it

on demand and export it into Excel or other formats as needed. Exemplar did not have access to Santa Cruz County's intranet and had to deliver a static report in Excel format via daily email. The selection parameters on the report allow it to display all caseload data, or only specific cases assigned at the supervisor or individual worker level. This was a significant improvement as the Exemplar report required sorting/filtering to get to a specific caseload.

Elimination of the Exemplar contract created significant financial savings which meant fewer budget reductions. Santa Cruz County was able to utilize existing resources without significant workload impact. At the time, Mr. Beardsley's daily workload and flexibility with other project assignments and deadlines allowed him to manage his daily tasks without impacting the development and timeline of this project. The success in developing and deploying the report is largely due to having the right people in place and the willingness of the department to direct their existing resources towards this development. It was, in the words of Director Ellen Timberlake, "the perfect storm" which enabled their success.

Recommendations

Sonoma County should adopt the same approach to developing an Alert Report in-house as did Santa Cruz County:

- It should assign a team for report development.

- It should identify a team of program staff that will define each alert and what that information represents.

- Resources and funding being limited, it would take Sonoma County more than the six months that Santa Cruz County allocated to create a viable replacement. The recommended time frame for replacement would be one year. Ideally, Sonoma County would leverage the work done in Santa Cruz County which would enable a shorter implementation timeline.

- If Sonoma County were to move forward with in-house report development, the recommendation would be to develop concurrently with Exemplar's contract in order to compare results.

- Assuming no increase to Exemplar's subscription cost, Sonoma would continue the contract for the year of concurrent in-house development.

- Dedicating a year to this project with no increase in staff would cost one year of Exemplar's contract of $204,000. Once the in-house developed report is live, there would not be any direct costs associated with maintaining and delivering the report. The alternative is to continue contracting with Exemplar at a cost of $204,000 per year, assuming no Exemplar subscription cost increases.

Bringing the report in-house versus continuing with a vendor subscription has brought numerous benefits to Santa Cruz County HSD. They have complete ownership, improved the product, created process improvements and saved money. Were Sonoma County HSD to bring this report in-house, the assumption is that the same benefits would be realized, in addition to improving data security and governance, as an outside vendor would no longer have access to the data. This strategy is also in alignment with Sonoma County HSD's initiative to automate existing department-wide management reports like Trendex.

Acknowledgements