Imagine a family building a new house. Everyone agrees where they want to live, but they don’t agree on many of the specifics inside the new structure. Each person decides to build a home-within-the-home to suit his or her individual needs and preferences. The result is a house with multiple kitchens, multiple mechanical systems, an excessive number of bathrooms, and highly disjointed décor.

It sounds absurd, but that approach is akin to how most of human services departments have operated for decades. Each division in the “family” lives in its own space, with its own people, systems, and processes. What often results is unnecessary complexity, costly operations, and confusion for the individuals and families these agencies exist to serve.

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) is a pioneer in moving to a single “home” for programs and services. The department has articulated a unifying vision—and undertaken a unique transformation—to ensure that all parts of the organization are working in harmony and efficiency. Known as Oklahoma Benefits, the vision and roadmap take full advantage of modularity—not purely as an approach for developing systems but as a way of thinking and acting.
The goal is to enable programs and people to transform human services outcomes by redefining the DHS experience for customers, communities, and staff through comprehensive self-service and holistic case management. Oklahoma Benefits is leveraging technology to increase impact, ensuring that more Oklahomans are safe, healthy, independent, and productive.

It’s a large-scale transformation that’s being implemented as a series of smaller initiatives—and it’s demonstrating how modularity can be used to fuel partnership and collaboration, support customer-focused innovation and, ultimately, deliver services more quickly. Oklahoma is up for the challenge with a history as an established leader in human services innovation, becoming the first state in the nation to create a federally approved SACWIS (Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System).

**A Bold Vision**

Oklahoma DHS is not just unifying or simplifying back-end systems. The strategy is focused on transforming virtually every aspect of the way DHS delivers benefits and services. When fully implemented, DHS will be able to obtain a 360-degree view of every client to facilitate family-focused, outcome-driven decision-making.

Oklahoma Benefits will demonstrate that DHS values people over transactions—with access to the right services at the right time via multiple platforms. In fact, unless they want to, citizens will no longer need to set foot in a brick-and-mortar building. Meanwhile, DHS employees will be empowered with a more complete view of the children and families they are serving—and will feel more inspired by the outcomes they help deliver.

Oklahoma Benefits represents the culmination of many years of strategic commitment to enterprise architecture. It has taken time for federal, state, and agency stakeholders, as well as available technologies, to catch up with DHS’s vision. Today that vision is taking shape for three of the 22 divisions within DHS–Adult and Family Services, Child Support Services, and Child Welfare Services—with a detailed roadmap for the transformation. That roadmap reflects a fundamental principle: that modularity can—and should—extend beyond system development.

**The Modular Mindset**

Starting with Medicaid Enterprise Systems, the concept of modularity continues to gain traction within government. As a development approach, modularity provides a faster, more flexible way to create large, complex systems through a collection of parts that are self-contained yet interoperable. These modules make it possible to test, enhance, or replace each part without disrupting the entire system. Modules also obviate the need for a massive multイヤear program to modernize old systems or build new ones.

Oklahoma DHS recognized the value of modularity when developing systems, but the state also saw the need to extend modularity when transforming business functions and procurement processes. Indeed, modularity is taking shape as an entirely new mindset for managing human services programs and delivering support to individuals and families. The modularity mindset is reflected in the five “swim lanes” of the Oklahoma Benefits roadmap: Employee Involvement, Customer and Community Involvement, Organizational Change, Refined Data/Metrics, and Improved Technology.

What follows is a glimpse of progress to date, along with advice to other human services departments seeking to get their own “houses” in order.

**Lesson #1: Establish a “Decision Team”**

The Oklahoma Benefits transformation involves multiple organizations, including the three divisions within DHS, as well as the Oklahoma Office of Management and Enterprise Services, and other areas. Representative stakeholders from each group serve on a decision team that meets weekly to review progress. To be sure, a transformation of this scale and complexity will encounter a host of challenges. This team continually unpacks and works to resolve those challenges.

The executive sponsors of Oklahoma Benefits—DHS Director Ed Lake and State CIO James “Bo” Reese—have fully empowered the decision team, an approach that has proven critical to maintaining positive momentum.

**Lesson #2: Emphasize the Enterprise**

An enterprise view is the key to every phase and every aspect of the Oklahoma Benefits transformation as DHS works to eliminate the redundancies and inefficiencies of the “homes-within-a-home” model. One of the core building blocks of DHS’s enterprise approach is what it calls the Master Person Index—a single repository for identifying every person who interacts with DHS. It’s a concept that has received virtually no pushback across DHS stakeholders; the value is universally recognized.

With the Master Person Index and the other modules of Oklahoma Benefits, DHS is working to simplify and standardize the way processes are designed, systems are developed, and services are delivered. While there will no doubt be cases where some specialization is required, those should be rare exceptions. When questions and
needs arise, the goal should be a return to enterprise thinking, and having a dedicated “enterprise evangelist” is invaluable in that effort.

Lesson #3: Think Through Functional and Data Governance

Today, each division within DHS has its own dedicated information technology (IT) resources that can assist with requests for updates and enhancements. Under Oklahoma Benefits, the goal is to store each data element just once and to maintain a centralized set of IT skills—requiring silos to be replaced with enterprise governance and resources. To that end, the Oklahoma Benefits team is devoting significant effort to establishing clear functional and data governance so that IT resources receive and execute only approved requests.

The anticipated speed and efficiency benefits will be remarkable, as will the state’s ability to monitor cross-program indicators and generate family-centered insights. Rather than traversing multiple systems, DHS will have a common platform and shared data elements. A cross-program data point—such as identifying how many children are receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, support from a noncustodial parent, and a child care subsidy—will become faster and easier than ever.

Lesson #4: Forge New Paths for Contracting

Anyone with experience in state government contracting knows this: Breaking a transformation of this size into smaller modules doesn’t make the process easier. Longstanding funding models are designed for big-bang projects, and states are now challenged to make budgeting, procurement, and legal review more agile. With a firm commitment to modular procurement, Oklahoma is changing business processes to meet that need. The Oklahoma Benefits team is working with the legal department to create a template that will work for any component in any of “swim lanes” on the transformation roadmap. Oklahoma has also engaged with the federal government to reduce the quantity of reviews required, thereby accelerating the project schedule. Above all, the Oklahoma Benefits team has mastered the art of the streamlined request for proposal that focuses on the desired outcomes. Solution ideas now come from the responding vendors—not from the sponsoring agency.

Lesson #5: Take Change Seriously

For Oklahoma DHS, an investment in formal, expert change management needs arise, the goal should be a return to enterprise thinking, and having a dedicated “enterprise evangelist” is invaluable in that effort.

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support continues to pay significant dividends. It’s a decision that any state would be well-advised to make when undertaking a transformation of this scope and scale. From the beginning, an organizational change management consultancy has helped in assessing cultural needs, engaging the workforce, and continually communicating updates on the project. They have driven a consistent drumbeat of team-building exercises for the Decision Team, resulting in strong and cohesive collaboration. And there is an ongoing commitment to celebrating wins along the way, including the recent launch of the Oklahoma Benefits portal as a single point of access for staff and clients.

**Defining the Future**

With this modular approach to a major transformation, the State of Oklahoma is defining a bold new future for human services agencies. As progress continues to build—module by module—Oklahomans will benefit from better, more integrated support. The state will be positioned to drive down administrative and operational costs. And DHS will have access to unprecedented data-driven insights, positioning it to answer unprecedented questions about how best to understand and meet the needs of individuals and families.