Let’s Get Together

Thirty-nine California counties implement an automated, integrated human services system that streamlines the management of multiple benefit programs for case-workers and customers.
Welfare caseworkers have a tough job. The programs they administer are varied and complex, involving vast amounts of information. Rules for eligibility change from year to year. Any kind of error—from misunderstanding a requirement to making a simple typo—can increase costs for the agency, require more time from caseworkers and delay benefits for customers.

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Those customers also have a tough job. To get enrolled in a program, they might need to make repeated trips to the welfare office, answer questions, fill out forms, present documents, and then redo parts of the process one or more times when information goes astray. If they’re applying to more than one program, they may have to go through the whole cycle again. And the agency may also be required to duplicate its efforts for processing applications for the various programs.

In 39 California counties, though, getting customers the right benefits is a much simpler process than it used to be. As members of a group called Consortium IV (C-IV), human services departments in those counties enjoy the use of a fully integrated welfare management system. The C-IV solution streamlines and automates many aspects of a caseworker’s job and also makes life easier for beneficiaries. “We’re able to manage greater volumes, and with improved accuracy,” said Ana Pagan, director of the Merced County Human Services Agency. Pagan is chair of the C-IV Joint Powers Authority (JPA), the legal entity that contracts for the C-IV automated system on behalf of member counties.

The history of C-IV goes back to 1995, when the California legislature asked county welfare departments to form consortia to design new welfare management systems. Each system would automate the administration of 11 social service programs, such as: California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs – California’s version of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF program); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Medi-Cal (California’s version of Medicaid); Foster Care; the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants; and emergency assistance.

In 1996, four counties—San Bernardino, Stanislaus, Riverside and Merced—formed C-IV, established the JPA and started planning to create their new management solution. In 2001, the JPA contracted with Accenture to help the counties build an integrated application to replace their patchwork of manual processes and legacy systems.

Goodbye to Calculators, Paper Forms

San Bernardino County, for instance, relied at the time on an old mainframe system to manage its welfare department. Caseworkers used printing calculators to compute eligibility and then copied the figures onto large paper forms, along with other information.

“Then the form would go to data entry, where they would key the information in, ” said June Hutchison, the C-IV regional project manager who represents San Bernardino County. “If it all went in fine, a couple of days later you’d get a printout back, and then the case was in the system.”

But if the form contained a mistake, the auditing department would send it back to the caseworker for correction. Auditors returned the form again and again as they found more errors, said Donna Gonzales, acting eligibility worker supervisor with the Ontario Transitional Assistance Department in San Bernardino County. “The customer might be waiting two or three weeks to get benefits,” she said.

County welfare departments used multiple software solutions to manage caseloads, calculate benefits, file reports to the state and handle other aspects of their work. Caseworkers who entered data into one system had to provide much of the same information to other systems as well, increasing the chance of data entry errors. Workers also spent hours hunting down the details of different programs in large paper binders.

With help from Accenture, the welfare departments streamlined their business practices, reducing 205 processes to 58 and creating common procedures for the four counties. Then, based on these improvements, they developed an integrated, Web-based solution to manage all of their functions, with a single database to house information for all four welfare departments.

“You collect the data one time, it’s housed one time, it’s maintained one time and it’s used to calculate across multiple programs,” said John Boule, the consortium’s C-IV project director. That makes it easier for caseworkers to manage customers’ data and easier for customers to get assistance.

The new system greatly decreased the time and effort required to
process an application for benefits, Gonzales said. “As long as you have the information correctly input into the system, you can issue the benefits instantaneously.”

Because the system contains all the rules used to calculate benefits for different programs, caseworkers no longer need to look up information in hard copy documents or make calculations by hand. Automation saves workers time and boosts accuracy, Pagan said. And the C-IV solution helps the welfare departments provide better service. “For clients, the system is far more responsive,” she said. “It’s quicker, and it’s user-friendly.”

C-IV Scales Up

From the outset, C-IV served the four counties so well that it caught the eye of welfare officials in another consortium, the Interim Statewide Automated Welfare System (ISAWS). In November 2004, those 35 counties voted unanimously to join the C-IV consortium and migrate from their own system to C-IV.

Before the new counties joined the consortium, C-IV supported 1 million customers and 6,800 end-users in 60 offices. The expansion would increase the size of the C-IV community to 2 million customers, 12,000 end-users and more than 200 offices. “That equates to about doubling the size of our production data center,” Boule said.

Accenture and the consortium brought the new counties onto the C-IV system in three waves, in November 2009, March 2010 and June 2010. “They did a fabulous job,” Pagan said. “We set out a project timeline, and those timelines were met.”

While expanding C-IV to accommodate 35 new counties required a significant technology effort, the work didn’t disrupt the work of employees who were already using the system. “There was almost no impact,” Pagan said. “In fact, with the expansion of the production data center, we’ve started to see better performance than we enjoyed prior to the migration of the 35 ISAWS counties.”

C-IV provides self-service capabilities, speeding up social service processes for citizens.

“C-IV has allowed us to become more customer focused and more personal in the way we do business.”
—June Hutchison, regional project manager, C-IV

Besides scaling the technology to accommodate many more users and transactions, C-IV needed to re-engineer its governance structure when the ISAWS counties came on board. Originally the welfare directors of the four member counties made up the JPA’s board of directors. But with 39 counties in the consortium, that one-county, one-vote structure was sure to prove unwieldy. So members of C-IV decided to create a new board based on regional representation.

In June of this year, members elected a JPA board consisting of seven county welfare directors, each representing a geographical region. The regions are defined based on location and population. For example, San Bernardino County, a populous county with a large caseload, makes up a region by itself. Another region consists of 10 small rural counties in northeastern California.

The expanded consortium gives all 39 counties a single database in which to house their welfare information. This cross-jurisdictional integration offers several advantages, including a simple way to detect fraud. “For instance, if someone is attempting to get food stamps in one county, and they’re already getting them in another county, you can catch that,” Pagan said.

Integration across jurisdictions also makes it easy to transfer records when a customer moves from one county to another. In the old days, the new county had to receive the customer’s documentation and enroll the individual in its programs from scratch. If documents didn’t arrive promptly, that could delay benefits.

Today, when a customer moves from one C-IV county to another, caseworkers find the data and images of the documents they need already in the system.

New Technology Opportunities

For smaller counties, another advantage C-IV provides is the chance to implement cutting-edge technologies they couldn’t have afforded on their own. One such innovation is C4Yourself,
a Web-based customer service portal. Currently, customers use C4Yourself to apply to the SNAP, CalWORKS and Medi-Cal programs.

The counties also plan to implement self-service kiosks. Merced County is piloting the use of these workstations, each housed in a ruggedized chassis along with a printer, document scanner, headset and webcam.

Installed in libraries, at nonprofit organizations and other community locations, the kiosks provide another option for accessing C4Yourself, with some additional functions. A click-to-chat button lets the user talk or text in real time with a customer service representative. The scanner lets customers transmit copies of rent receipts, bank statements or other documents. “So when they come in to do a face-to-face interview for a particular program, all of that documentation is already there,” Boule said. In the future, county employees might use the webcams to conduct some interviews via video conference, he said.

The counties also are using interactive voice response (IVR) technology. C-IV includes an inbound system that automates some self-service phone transactions. The consortium recently added an outbound automated system that calls customers to remind them of upcoming appointments.

Taken together, the technologies that make up C-IV not only have made the 39 county welfare offices more efficient, saving taxpayers money, but also have allowed caseworkers to better serve their customers. Gone are the days when caseworkers and customers interacted in sterile reception areas, and workers had to keep leaving to gather information and materials, Hutchison said. Today, customers sit in caseworkers’ offices, with C-IV running on a computer right there.

With all the tools and information they need at their fingertips, caseworkers can concentrate on customers’ needs, Hutchison said. “C-IV has allowed us to become more customer focused and more personal in the way we do business.” An automated, integrated system eases the job of managing welfare transactions for caseworkers and customers alike.