Design is not only about making things look better. Good design makes them work better. That’s why Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI)—the state’s most comprehensive social service organization—used service design to address the health, mental, emotional, and social needs that factor into a person’s wellness in an entirely new way.

LSSI worked with service design pioneer Fjord to explore how design and digital innovation could transform care coordination across a network of health and human service providers. The team developed the Whole Person Care Journey tool through a highly collaborative, co-design process.

The groundbreaking tool is a visual representation of how LSSI serves clients. Case managers use the digital application to track clients’ care journeys between agencies in real time, gather analytics on overall network health, enable collaboration, communicate return on investment, and improve client compliance and accountability. Tim Sheehan from LSSI and Linda Pulik from Fjord reflect on this experience.
WHAT IS SERVICE DESIGN?

Linda Pulik: It’s an outlook and a way of applying creative thinking consistently and collaboratively across all the people who are part of the service. This can include providers, clients, patients, customers, decision-makers, and partners—even an entire community. Ultimately, service design puts people at the heart of the creative process. It’s human-centered, and because of that, the ideal outcomes happen when all people that depend on the service or product feel they are heard and that their world has been made better by the design process.

WHY ISN’T SERVICE DESIGN TYPICALLY A TOP-OF-MIND TRANSFORMATION TOOL IN SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE UNITED STATES?

Linda: I think it’s probably viewed by those who haven’t experienced the process as a luxury reserved for the private sector. When you run an organization that’s working with limited resources, it seems like an extra. There’s also the fact that our work product is not necessarily familiar to all organizations working in a social service environment, which can be volatile. When leaders are focused on putting fires out, it’s hard to prioritize unfamiliar approaches to manage a crisis.

However, my work within the social sector reveals an interesting dichotomy. Social service leaders are cost conscious because they need to be. But this sometimes makes them more receptive to creative approaches. For example, after I explained service design, an executive director of a non-profit organization told me, “I’m not sure what you do, but there is something about it that makes a lot of sense with how our organization delivers services.”

Tim Sheehan: I agree. In general, the challenge for this sector is a lack of orientation to the possibilities of service design. The reality is that client services, funding, clinical issues, and the like understandably dominate people’s thinking. There’s also the limitation of siloed funding. It’s not often that we can step back and think about what comprehensive integrated services should look like.

HAD LSSI PURSUED SERVICE DESIGN BEFORE? WHAT WAS THE BIGGEST IMPETUS FOR CHANGE?

Tim: No, but our CEO, Mark Stutrud, was clear when he came in that we were going to focus on strategy and development in the midst of making multiple cuts and a reorganization. The need to maintain a future focus set the context for us and we felt that service design was a good fit.

The impetus was to keep clients at the center of everything we do as health care transformation happens. We were looking to support client services amid changing funding and service models.

Linda: I have to disagree with Tim. He is being too modest by saying that his organization had not used service design before. Service design is not something that only designers practice. We wanted to work with LSSI because their human-centered focus shares the fundamental spirit of service design.

DESCRIBE THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE LSSI AND FJORD TEAMS ON THIS PROJECT.

Linda: It was a very tight-knit and effective collaboration the whole way. LSSI arranged to get us access to a broad swath of people so that we could develop a multifaceted understanding of how the organization delivers services and measures return on investment.

Tim: For us, it was also very seamless. What helped was that Fjord had the right attitude and approach. They were respectful, never presumptuous, and made good communication a priority. They understood that in social services issues like confidentiality and privacy have to be recognized. But together we set up rules from the outset. From there it just clicked.

WHAT ARE THE FEATURES OF THE WHOLE PERSON CARE JOURNEY TOOL?

Tim: Most important, it is a communication tool for multiple stakeholders. It includes information about how things are going well for clients and when they experience challenges. The tool enables communication between families, payers, service providers, and other stakeholders to enable them not only to be aware, but to intervene early. It also helps us, and our case managers, to communicate the value of the services provided and identify systemic challenges.

The tool does all of this as a visual representation of a journey that can be tremendously difficult to convey in words alone. We now have a literal picture of care coordination that provides clarity that we never had before. It’s the centerpiece of our view of client service and the care coordination process.

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING FROM THE CASE MANAGERS USING THIS TOOL?

Tim: They find it helpful. Particularly as we implement new initiatives, the tool is grounding and clarifying. They intuitively know this information but to actually see it and to be able...
to communicate from the perspective of what’s really happening for clients and services is validating and powerful.

We’re also thinking about the next phase. How much deeper can we go with this tool? As an example, the tool might reveal that there is a shortage of housing for people with mental health issues. Closing this gap then becomes the work. Having an overarching communication tool allows us to see trends through a common point of reference for clinical barriers that have to be addressed. It’s about recognizing parts of clients’ lives where we need to dig in and help correct our course if something is not working.

I think it’s also important to note that when you do this kind of work as a case manager, you can feel isolated or overwhelmed by the problems that people have. It’s great to see the progress we’re making and to have a diagnostic that shows us where we should be focusing our efforts to get needed outcomes. We can see what’s working and what needs to work better.

HOW IS THIS TOOL CHANGING THE WAY ORGANIZATIONS WITHIN THE NETWORK COORDINATE CARE?

Tim: We’re in the midst of figuring this out right now. We want to build on our success. We need to keep digging in deeper to discover how the tool can help us organize and communicate our own work. There’s great potential to assess how we work strategically with partners and how we can all communicate better to understand and address barriers in new ways, with new clarity.

HAVE YOU RECEIVED ANY FEEDBACK FROM LSSI CLIENTS ON HOW THEIR EXPERIENCES HAVE CHANGED?

Tim: Great question. We’re collecting client satisfaction data right now. This will help us look at the impact we’re having from their perspective to understand how it’s improving their care journey.

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE YOU THE MOST EXCITED ABOUT?

Linda: On the selfish side, I’m excited to see the impact this work has had on our studio. It’s gratifying to see designers extending themselves to remain involved in design work in the social sector. I’m also eager to see how service design continues to blossom in the LSSI organization and to learn more from them about how it serves people in the real world.

Tim: It’s true, in terms of outcomes, we also feel very good about the partnership that has happened with Fjord. I think the sector needs to be open to expertise from other areas that can help us recognize areas that we can improve.

In terms of outcomes from the product itself, the Whole Person Care Journey tool is at the center of our strategy as we look to the next three to five years at how we will integrate health and human services. We have had positive outcomes and we are excited to create more. The tool we developed is not ethereal. It’s fully grounded in a system of care. There’s a lot more we can explore.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED HERE FOR OTHER SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS?

Tim: It’s worth the risk. There’s always a downside with any initiative but the reward is much greater. The only way to find out is to try. Also, as Fjord did with us, be clear from the outset about how you’re going to work, assign point people to guide the process, and stay open to outside input. Always stay focused on your mission.

Linda: Designing from the heart can have tremendous outcomes.

For more information about this service design collaboration, visit https://www.fjordnet.com/workdetail/putting-design-at-the-heart-of-social-service-delivery/.