Coastal Economic Development Corporation

4

Better Information System Improves Social Services

Visitors who enter the Coastal Economic Development Corporation (CEDC) just outside Bath, Maine, find themselves in a large lobby that serves as the hub for an assortment of social service programs. Arrayed in a rough semicircle around the lobby are a workforce development center where clients can get help landing jobs, an energy assistance program that helps poor families obtain home heating oil, and a program that provides food assistance and nutrition counseling to women with young children. Also within easy reach are caseworkers who assist families with housing problems, a team of counselors who help troubled families develop long-range strategies for achieving economic self-sufficiency, and a branch of the United Way.

None of these programs is new, but their placement within easy reach of the lobby reflects a potentially revolutionary idea. Instead of delivering services to needy families piecemeal, why not consolidate them in a way that might have a much more profound effect? Currently, when families seek help, they have to negotiate a maze of overlapping and duplicative application procedures, eligibility requirements, and rules. Worse yet is if the challenges these families face are interconnected. The existing system addresses each problem in isolation, preventing families from securing enough help to attain real permanent progress.

If the service bureaucracy could be streamlined and families could get help addressing their various problems simultaneously, service providers believe, families would stand a much better chance of achieving lasting improvement in their lives. What's more, administrative costs would go down and society would get more for the dollars it spends on categorical programs.

Such coordination of service programs could make an especially big difference in rural regions, where people and service agencies are widely dispersed. In Maine, for instance, nearly 85 percent of the people live in rural areas that have virtually no public transportation. For families, the sheer challenge of traveling from agency to agency enormously complicates the task of finding needed services. Agencies, meanwhile, have a harder time discerning families' needs and providing appropriate assistance when their clients are far-flung and difficult to contact.

Where to Begin?

Consolidation may sound like an excellent idea, but achieving it has proven to be very challenging. Individual social programs have grown up independently for many years, and now have well established rules, regulations and bureaucracies behind them. In 1999, CEDC, a non-profit community action agency, decided to tackle the issue by consolidating not agencies or programs, but the information they all need. Specifically, the agency used a three-year grant from the Technology Opportunities Program to develop computer software that ultimately will enable it to screen clients simultaneously for all the programs the agency operates, measure these people's progress in achieving basic life goals, and collect data that will help the agency better understand its community and evaluate its own effectiveness.

Known as ICAPS, or Integrated Community Action Program System, the software is the linchpin of a sweeping effort to provide more comprehensive — and hence, more effective — services to low-income families. "In the past, we were always dealing with pieces of families," explains Jessica Harnar, CEDC's executive director. For years, she watched needy families get help from one categorical program — perhaps getting desperately needed heating oil or food — only to show up later needing some other emergency assistance. Because their underlying problems were never addressed systematically, many families seemed to lurch from crisis to crisis. "If we really believe in our mission to help people achieve economic stability, we need to take a holistic approach," Harnar says.

Harnar and her staff know they face a difficult task. So far, they have only brought a few of CEDC's own programs into the ICAPS system. And while CEDC houses a number of different programs, many others are scattered among different agencies and different geographical locations—mental health agencies, shelters for the homeless and abused, rape crisis and suicide prevention centers, legal assistance offices, substance abuse programs, adult education facilities, special programs for the elderly, health care facilities and more. Moreover, even agencies that share the same geographic location can be held apart by their own distinct rules and procedures. Still, CEDC's efforts already have caught the attention of state officials seeking to overhaul Maine's social service system, and the lessons the agency is learning could prove useful to a host of similar projects around the country.

Start Small, But Think Big

One of the first lessons is that sponsors of information technology projects should start small, but think big. It is no easy task to review the information needs of countless individual programs, consolidate them into a single questionnaire, and then write software that will use that information to determine automatically whether an individual is eligible for separate programs. To make the task manageable, CEDC began by designing a set of questions that would enable it to gather basic demographic information about clients. Then, it developed a questionnaire that could be used to determine eligibility

for a single, relatively straightforward home-improvement lending program.

With that experience under its belt, the agency next developed a new questionnaire for its Family Development Case Management program, which will be key to the effort to create a unified service-delivery program. Unlike categorical programs that deliver specific services, the family-development program strives to view clients as whole people, assessing all of their needs and then helping them find a range of services that will improve their lives. Accordingly, the "family security assessment," as the questionnaire developed for the program is known, turns the typical client interview on its head. Instead of asking questions to determine whether the client meets a predetermined set of eligibility criteria, it begins by assessing clients' needs, and then it looks for services that might help meet them. "The [software] helps change our focus and how we approach people," says Catherine McConnell, manager of CEDC's community services program.

The family security questionnaire gauges clients' status in 15 different areas — shelter, nutrition, physical health, mental health, alcohol or substance abuse, employment, income and money management skills, adult education, children's education, parenting skills, family relationships, transportation, child-care, legal issues and spirituality. It then suggests steps counselors can take to address areas where clients are deemed at risk. Using the software, counselors work with clients to develop detailed "action plans," and they subsequently track clients' progress toward achieving the specific goals they set.

CEDC picked the programmers for its software carefully. "We needed programmers who could conceptualize the whole delivery system," says Harnar. "The job was a big challenge for them, but it enriched their work." Just as important as the ability of the programmers was where they worked. CEDC deliberately sought out programmers in Maine's Department of Labor, knowing they would be developing similar tools for the various programs that agency operates. Having the same programmers almost

guarantees that CEDC eventually will be able to screen its clients for Labor Department programs, moving the agency a step closer to its goal of creating a seamless service network. "We wanted to make sure that whatever we developed eventually could be linked with the state," says Harnar.

The strategy appears to be paying off: the Labor Department is looking at adopting ICAPS for the Women, Infants and Children food and nutrition program. Meanwhile, CEDC is slowly but surely expanding ICAPS to cover more of its own programs. This summer, it added the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program to the system, and it plans next to bring in the Head Start program that serves low-income pre-schoolers. Ultimately, says Harnar, clients will be able to come to any CEDC program and be screened and referred to any other service for which they qualify. "There will be no wrong doors," she says.

Signs of Progress

Although using the new software requires change, and change often arouses resistance, Harnar says different groups readily see the advantages of ICAPS once it is explained to them. Among the first to applaud the idea are clients themselves, for whom a common intake process could save time and streamline their visits.

The new system should increase efficiency. A spreadsheet prepared by CEDC when it first started planning ICAPS showed that the agency collected 55 percent of all its data on clients more than once. That suggests the agency can achieve substantial savings simply by eliminating redundant data-collection efforts. Moreover, because ICAPS creates mechanisms for tracking clients' progress through the social services system, it eventually will enable CEDC and its funders to determine far more accurately than is currently possible how effective various programs are. In addition, Harnar says, the system will increase general public understanding of the difficulties faced by low-income people. "Society and funding sources tend to assume that the prob-

lems people face can be taken care of in six months," she says. "We have to collect information that explains the complexity of the problem."

CEDC's own employees also are key stakeholders. Harnar believes they can be shown that the new system will make them more effective. Technology, she says, will allow employees to spend less time doing paperwork and more time working directly with clients. "If we didn't have this technology, the changes we want can't happen," she argues. "The system would collapse under the weight of paper and pencil."

Technology won't magically produce a unified service system all by itself, however. In Maine, a special task force spent more than two years looking at ways of bringing diverse agencies together to provide "integrated case management" for troubled children. Its final report, issued in December, 2000, recommended a system that closely resembles CEDC's own procedures: a lead case manager, it said, should be named to bring all relevant service providers together to work with a family on developing a comprehensive plan for improving its situation.

The task force initially intended to explore how to develop a unified data system like ICAPS. But it shied away from that goal. The effort would have drained too much of its energies from other concerns — including the need to develop a client consent form that would enable different agencies to share information about clients without violating their confidentiality obligations, and even more challenging, the need to teach caseworkers from different disciplines how to work together. Moreover, several government agencies that participated in the task force had recently spent substantial sums developing their own information systems, and thus were reluctant to consider developing a new one from scratch — especially since CEDC was well along in demonstrating the concept.

Still, it is generally agreed that future efforts to expand on the concept of integrated case management will require some effort to streamline and consolidate information systems. Members of the Maine task force, for instance, talked about a "federated system," in which separate agencies would be able to exchange data even if they don't merge their systems entirely. Whatever approach to consolidating or coordinating information systems is taken in the future, one thing is sure: lessons being learned at places like CEDC will come in handy.

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