Child Support Enforcement Management Information Systems

Lessons Learned by State Officials

Office of Inspector General

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INTRODUCTION

CHILD SUPPORT DATA SYSTEMS

In November 1996, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a draft report on implementation of State child support certified data systems (OEI-04-96-00010). That report describes experiences of State IV-D child support agencies in implementing the automated data systems for child support required by the 1988 Family Support Act. The Act required States to implement certified automated data systems by October 1, 1996. However, only one State met the deadline.

Delays resulted from problems with various program elements, such as ACF's requirements that States share their technology, short timeframe for developing and implementing the systems, and ineffective State and contractor working relationships. Each of the major players in implementing the automated data systems (Federal and State agencies, and private contractors) shared responsibility for the delays.

Importantly, however, State child support enforcement agency staffs learned what they believe were valuable lessons for implementing future required automated data systems to support State welfare systems. This paper provides a listing of the lessons learned by State program offices. We are providing it to the Office of Child Support Enforcement for their use in planning and implementing future required automated data systems.

STATE SURVEY

This paper is a spin-off of the work we did for our formal report on State child support certified data systems. For that report, we used a standardized questionnaire to survey all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. As part of that effort we obtained information on State experiences and "lessons learned" in developing and implementing automated data systems for child support enforcement. However, we did not verify, validate, or interpret the significance of the lessons learned. Hence, we did not include that information in our report.

During our exit conference, however, some members of OCSE suggested that the opinions expressed by State program officers would be valuable in planning and implementing future automated systems. We are happy to provide this raw data for their use. We compiled from our survey instruments all the suggestions made by State child support enforcement officials, and present their advice exactly the way we received it. The "lessons" generally fall into three categories--working with (1) State Government, (2) Federal Government, and (3) State contractors.

LESSONS LEARNED

WORKING WITH STATE GOVERNMENT

▸ Take the time necessary to find the right solution versus one that satisfies the "Feds", but isn't useful to the front line worker.

▸ Develop an effective structure for project management and problem solving.

▸ Maintain total project oversight.

▸ Obtain sign-offs on all products from top management to project leader.

▸ Keep your scope of work in check. Remember that requirements are more important than extras. The more complex the system, the harder they are to implement. Keep it simple and enhance later.

▸ Be prepared to test deliverables before acceptance.

▸ Take adequate time to review and test deliverables.

▸ Determine expectations for deliverables up front.

▸ Give specific deliverables to vendor and insist on delivery. Monitor vendors (development) workplan as well as their progress.

▸ Establish measurable criteria for quality deliverables. Refuse to accept any deliverable that does not meet criteria.

▸ Review work with contractors on day-to-day basis.

▸ Be prepared to properly manage and monitor contractor.

▸ Hire a project coordinator, project monitor, and quality assurance contractor at earliest opportunity.

▸ Include more structured contract incentives and penalties, rather than sanctions.

▸ Try to keep the same project team members throughout the project.

▸ Start on conversion tasks as soon as possible.

▸ Do not generate letters to employers and postmasters from converted data. Wait until locate interfaces have run.

▸ Manually convert database. Do not attempt an automated database conversion.

▸ Data conversion is of utmost importance. Careful attention and planning must be given to this activity to ensure proper, accurate, and timely conversion--whether it be manual or automated conversion.

▸ Monitor implementation contractor closely.

▸ Formulate contingency plans.

▸ Require greater involvement with project staff so they may better understand the system impact with their performance on daily tasks. More sessions were needed in bringing administration and regional caseworkers together to understand what was going to direct their work.

▸ Make it a priority to reconcile the accounting processes on a daily basis, then weekly, monthly, etc.

▸ Plan for a mass reconciliation with participants, cases, and program types in the IV-A system. Problems with these interfaces mean adjustments to accounts which frustrate caseworkers and is very time consuming. Grant details need to be properly linked so rebates can be issued timely.

▸ Phase in ticklers/alerts when the locate interfaces run so workers are not overwhelmed with responses and stagger the participants submitted to the interfaces.

▸ Get use to programmers changing jobs frequently. We felt and still feel our project serves as a training ground for the contractor. The contractor then includes these trained and now experienced programmers on bids for similar projects. Turnover is high.

▸ Assure that the management control process is clearly understood before initiating project.

▸ Minimize collateral changes to the organizational and legal environment during development.

▸ Recognize at the beginning of any project that the line staff are the pros of the organization and they must be involved in its design, development, and implementation.

▸ Provide adequate "program side" State staff involvement in the review of the external and internal system designs.

▸ Have good detailed requirements and specifications.

▸ Follow good system development guidelines.

▸ Make evaluation of project a separate contract.

▸ Plan for follow-up training.

▸ Develop a strong contract with specifics (e.g., penalties for missed milestones, progress payments).

▸ Establish constant interaction between functional and technical staff.

▸ Plan for operational changes that result from automation.

▸ Develop and implement in discrete manageable modules. This significantly reduces risk, gets the product to the user on a more timely basis and reduces the impact on staff.

▸ Assure system is kept technologically and programmatically up-to-date. This provides a concrete foundation for systems development efforts.

▸ Build a unified team.

▸ Spend more time on the design than you think you can afford.

▸ Pay a great deal of attention to database design.

▸ Design the database first.

▸ Use as much new technology as possible.

▸ Cut out as much decision by committee as possible. We worked a lot of overtime.

▸ Get started earlier on project.

▸ Allow some flexibility in contracts so amendments can be made later.

▸ Develop and utilize a model system that allows user participation in every key area.

▸ Take as much time as you need for design document approval.

▸ Require proof of testing from contractors at all levels of development before acceptance begins.

▸ Keep focus of administrators on the deadline.

▸ Gain support from the IV-D Director's office and the agency of the project office. The user buy-in that was obtained through the early involvement of the IV-D staff in the design phase continued through monthly meetings of a User Acceptance Committee that reviewed the design of each module at various steps in the

development process. A User Acceptance Sub-Committee reviewed the system test results of each module as it was completed, and made invaluable comments and suggestions along the way. This enabled the project office to deliver the customer driven system that the project's mission statement called for.

▸ Obtain up-front commitment from all levels involved in project.

▸ Identify a team/group of staff that is dedicated to the system development and accountable/responsible to one project manager.

▸ Maintain project management of each task, from system requirements through implementation.

▸ Have adequate staff dedicated to project work only.

▸ Acquire the necessary State and contractor staff with appropriate expertise in large scale data system development.

▸ Establish staffing availability and priority if project goes over deadline.

▸ Provide adequate staff to clean up data converted to the new system.

▸ Identify the total number of full-time people needed to complete the project. Assure that the total number of full-time people is always maintained. If replacements need to be made, do so within a short timeframe.

▸ Develop a data unit that will be a part of child support.

▸ Provide adequate State training staff for initial and ongoing training of program staff.

▸ Be sure administrative and project staff are committed to a successful project.

▸ Develop a team approach during development and implementation phases of project.

▸ Do not compartmentalize development teams.

▸ Provide a forum for regular/ongoing communication between all players involved in project.

▸ Have more frequent questionnaires like "Implementation of State Child Support Certified Data Systems" to promote creative analysis of project status and factors which could enhance progress.

▸ Set realistic project schedules and budgets.

▸ Develop good project workplans.

▸ Set deadline and deliverables at a "phase" level. Any project phase that exceeds one year will normally fail. Reviews should be done at a "phase" level.
   a. Approve planning
   b. Approve design
   c. Approve functionality
   d. Approve implementation
   e. Approve post implementation

▸ Develop positive, proactive media and PR contacts.

▸ Involve county (front-line and administrators) in analysis and design.

▸ Meet periodically with IV-D Director.

▸ Obtain commitment to automation.

▸ Obtain commitment of State leadership and senior management.

▸ Maintain regular communication with and support from State legislature.

▸ Co-locate State with contractor. Contractor staff worked almost full-time on this project. (We let bidders know up front that we expected staff to be in on-site, not flying in and out as needed).

▸ Try to keep staff turnover at a minimal.

▸ Be sure you have dedicated staff who do "whatever it takes" to get the job done.

▸ Obtain available Data Processing Resources (i.e., access to Data Center equipment and personnel).

▸ Make sure the RFP requires that current functionality continue to be provided by the transfer system, thereby, ensuring the current level of automation is met With such a requirement in our RFP, our State would have had only the features/functions of the transfer system, which were not always as automated as the current system.

▸ Have all regulations/guidance in place before the clock starts ticking.

▸ Management support is critical to the success of the project.

▸ State technical data processing staff must review and approve all technical deliverables and products produced by vendor.

▸ Large scale system projects such as certified data systems require one single responsible party leading an independent project team. This responsible party should maintain budget control and have full support of Department leadership.

▸ Project Director should have full authority to control scope of project by freezing user agency requirements.

▸ Each State has a unique environment, IV-D structure and needs. Although a core of common IV-D denominators and regulations apply, unique factors and business practices must be recognized. States must recognize similar differences and needs at the local level.

▸ Regarding CSENet -- plan to do a mass reconciliation of case numbers when State goes full service with another State. Some of the biggest problems experienced were with cases in common--those cases where communications have existed for years using paper. Now a State will begin sending communications using CSENet where there is no initial CSENet electronic referral. This seems to be causing a mis-match and transactions error out. This requires a person to research the electronic transaction much in the same way a person would research a miscellaneous letter without enough information for easy identification.

▸ The "Design Freeze" is the key to why we were able to met the deadline.

▸ The project team allowed the system to come up in phases and never expected perfection. We wanted functions to work with reasonable consistency. When testers evaluated a screen or function, an evaluation was made to move or not move it to production. We determined if the associated problems were of sufficient magnitude to stop implementation or if there were workarounds we could live with it. By striving for a basis working system and delaying some of the "nice-to-have" items from the contract, we were able to get the work out and also meet the goal of having a certified system. The first phase brought up those screens and functions needed to support basic child support activities and distribute collections. The second phase brought up screens and functions required for certification.

▸ Contractual roles and responsibilities must include specific authority described for Project Executive and contractor. Corporate sign-off must include President of Board, etc.

▸ A fixed price contract must be adhered to and the contractor should provide written statement of understanding.

▸ Front-line users should be the critical staff to ensure a relevant system is in place.

▸ States must be very specific in describing the level of detail in the RFP to avoid contract disputes.

▸ State staff must be involved in all development processes. You cannot let the vendor take responsibility for this process.

▸ Management users must take an active involvement in any major data processing project.

▸ State administration needs to involve system development staff early on in the planning process to be able to provide a "big picture" of what is involved, which impacts the entire planning/development process.

▸ The more direct user involvement, the better the design.

▸ The user's role cannot be minimized. Informing them, involving them in the design, testing and implementation of system, and gaining their support and buy-in as early as possible is critical.

▸ States should insist on having the vendor on-site during the development phase.

▸ States should clearly delineate decision-making authority and keep it limited to a few persons.

▸ The consistent use of adequate schedule software from project beginning to end provides a basis for monitoring the progress of the project.

▸ Advanced planning for operational impacts/change is critical.

▸ When the contractor has the need to say "trust me", don't because there is some problem that makes them have to say this.

▸ The Project Manager for the State needs experience in large projects.

▸ IQA staff was invaluable. State staff do not have sufficient experience with today's technology.

▸ It is better to "grow" these systems in pieces rather than to have huge comprehensive projects.

▸ The child support program is very complex. In this light, there needs to be a Steering Committee of State and contractor experts who make decisions about how the system should perform specific functions. Both the State and contractor need to recognize the decisions made by this Committee and accept the resulting design.

▸ External, private sector consultation should be sought when developing RFP.

▸ Agency policy, even when that policy is current, is not written with the specificity needed for system development.

▸ Before you finish designing and implementing a project, it will change because either Federal or State law is changed.

▸ It is very difficult to transfer child support functional knowledge to State contractors.

▸ The people made this project successfully.

- ▸ Weekly meetings with project staff. Weekly meetings involved: Contractor staff (Project Director, Lead Programmer), State Staff (Project Manager, Head of Program, Policy and Systems), State IRM Staff (Data Center Manager of Application, Lead State CS Technical Staff). Weekly meetings held to review work accomplished, work planned for the week and to discuss problems. This was very helpful. Within a few months of the November 11, 1993 start date, everyone was convinced that we could do this (achieve certification under FSA-88 requirements).

- ▸ Getting everyone in one room is key. It makes getting acceptance easier and facilitates assignment of responsibility and resolution of programs. We also had support from the Governor, Cabinet Secretary, Division Director, Legislature, Budget Office, and Office of Information Systems.

- ▸ User buy-in and commitment at all levels is essential.

- ▸ Although people say they want to do things more efficiently through automation, if it means their job will change, don't believe them.

- ▸ It is most advantageous to co-locate State and contractor personnel assigned to a functional area. This arrangement expedited resolution of design issues.

- ▸ Highly trained full-time data processing staff, who are actually employees of the Child Support Program.

- ▸ The number of manhours a State anticipates for testing will always require more time due to staff turnover and other IV-D program priorities.

- ▸ You can never have too much training. Training should not just be concentrated at the front end, but should continue on a regular ongoing basis.

- ▸ The contractor should provide on-site technical training to State staff.

- ▸ If States are to automate, they should look at issues after automation that will be major factors in the budgeting process (i.e., maintenance agreements and support).

- ▸ State staff should be trained in project management.

- ▸ System design takes more time and more money than you ever anticipated.

WORKING WITH FEDERAL POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND STAFF

- ▸ Perform a detailed analysis of the transfer system to determine both State's processes are similar in nature and operations.

- ▸ Dedicate a staff of individuals to specifically work on the transferred system.

- ▸ Ask for compliance reviews from ACF as soon as possible after system development. The compliance review is very helpful.

▸ Allow more time to complete project.

▸ Do not set requirements for States where they have to "jump through hoops" (e.g., transfer systems).

▸ Streamline review and approval process.

▸ Simplify reporting process.

▸ Improve timeliness of everything.

▸ The transfer of another State's system was very ineffective. We had to modify the system before it could be implemented.

▸ The transfer concept helped us meet the new deadline, however, make sure the transfer concept does not lock you into old technology.

▸ Transfers do not work as well as new "ground-up" systems.

▸ ACF should issue a more general statement of "what" the system should do rather than this extensive laundry list of detailed requirements. ACF's best attempts to force "standardization" across the county are futile.

▸ There is nothing wrong with certification, as long as it is focused again, on the "what" rather than a particular solution or approach as to "how" the "what" is accomplished.

▸ ACF's mission should be to help the States in any or all aspects of the process that they can.

▸ All policy interpretations from ACF should be in writing.

▸ States should request from ACF an on-site review of the Certification Guide.

▸ All Federal certification requirements need to be fully defined, along with necessary State policy and procedures, prior to beginning the design and development of a data system.

▸ ACF's certification requirements must be more clearly delineated "up front" and further in advance of any planning process.

▸ ACF should establish solid requirements that States must meet, and these requirements should not be changed while the project is in progress.

▸ Corrective action visits are needed to emphasize Federal requirements and to assist the project in the maintenance and acceleration of momentum.

▸ ACF User Group meetings are very helpful.

WORKING WITH PRIVATE CONTRACTORS

▸   Hire a qualified contractor.

▸   Always include some type of penalty in your contract for noncompliance.

▸   Remember, contractors are trying to make as much profit as possible.

▸   Do not let contractor table important key issues. It is the State's responsibility to make sure all points are covered and addressed.

▸   Be prepared to manage your contractor.

▸   Set standards for contractor performance that ACF will help to enforce.

▸   Avoid using a contractor, if possible. It may take more time without this outside assistance, but you will really own your system, know how to run it, and change it when necessary.

▸   Know the financial stability of the contractor.

▸   Establish key contractor senior management commitment and responsibility.

▸   Develop a close and cooperative working relationship between State and contractor staff.

▸   Develop integrated design teams with State and contract staff combined. This method makes for the swift identification of any differences in opinions on how to design a piece of software, and make issue resolution at the lowest levels possible.

▸   Do everything you can to foster open communication between State and contractor staffs.

▸   Set liquidated damages at $5,000/day to send a clear message to contractor via late deliverables.

▸   States should have the necessary expertise to select contractor staff.

▸   Vendors must be made to adhere to all terms of the contract and RFP.

▸   Contractor staff wanted to do a good job. There were several exceptional programmers whose dedication saved this project. They went above and beyond what was expected by their management.

▸   Firm, fixed price contracts are usually underbidded and you always get what you pay for.

▸   Contractors should be located on-site.

- ▸ System development should be performed on-site. It should be a 50-50 effort between the State and the contractor.

- ▸ The requirements and expectations for contractors and State staff alike should be expressed in as much detail as possible and as early on in the process as possible.

- ▸ Much of the success to date can be contributed to the ability and willingness of both the contractor and State to remain flexible and adjust throughout the project.

- ▸ The State knows itself. The contractor needs to listen to State staff.