



The Child Welfare Workforce Gets Wired

By Robin Anderson

In Texas, a child protective services (CPS) worker named Mitch is busy in his home office, answering e-mails, checking in with his supervisor, and phoning to confirm appointments as he begins a routine work day. At midmorning, he leaves for a court appearance for one case and a home visit for another, then stops by a local physician's office for a report on a child he brought in for a medical examination. Before the day is over, he's back in his home office updating his files.

Lucy, a Maryland foster care caseworker, grabs her Palm Pilot as she leaves her home to begin a full day of foster home visits. Because her personal digital assistant (PDA) carries all of her files, Lucy is able to go directly to the nearest foster home rather than first driving to her office 45 miles away. At her first stop, Lucy warmly greets the foster mother and the foster child, Michael. As Lucy takes her seat, she pulls out her PDA and expandable keyboard and prepares to take notes. Before leaving, she gets a smiling Michael to pose for a picture holding his pet rabbit.

Mitch is one of hundreds of staffers taking part in the teleworking program in urban Harris County (Houston), Texas, while Lucy is participating in the Social Worker Palm Pilot Program in rural Cecil County, Maryland. Each program helps public child welfare agencies make the most of technology to increase staff efficiency and create a more flexible, satisfying work environment.

The innovative use of new technology has altered work life and service delivery in both Cecil and Harrison Counties. These models demonstrate how public social service agencies have found ways to use time more efficiently and incorporate greater convenience and flexibility into the work environment.

For more information, contact Dephine Baldon, Program Coordinator, Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, Region 6, at 713/767-2703, or Nick Ricciuti, Director, Cecil County DSS, at 410/996-0100.

Robin Anderson is a former intern with CWLA's Research to Practice Initiative.



INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Case study, descriptive statistics only, treatment group only.*

DASH

Harris County's teleworking program began as a pilot project, Delivering Accountable Services from Home (DASH), in 1999, after the local CPS office sustained severe storm damage. By the time building repairs were complete, however, teleworking had become more than just a temporary solution to the loss of office space, but rather a way to increase job satisfaction and flexibility by allowing caseworkers to work from home.

CPS staff had the option of working from home or remaining in the office. Those who participated in DASH received a combination phone/fax/printer, a laptop computer, and training in maintaining a secure, functional home office. Teleworking caseworkers access information from home via computer, just as they would in the office. They also can use a telecenter at the Harris County Department of Social Services (DSS), with desks, phone lines, computer ports, and space for meetings, conferences, supervision, and messages.

On a typical day, a teleworker can wake up, grab a cup of coffee, turn on the computer, and begin working. Workers call the telecenter to report when they will be leaving their home offices for court appointments or client visits. An administrative assistant at the telecenter records caseworkers' schedules. Teleworkers notify the telecenter as soon as they return home, then use their laptops to complete the paperwork associated with their appointments.

"DASH provides workers with an opportunity for flexibility and decreased travel time," says CPS supervisor Evelyn Peters. "You have a lot of control." While other people are sitting in rush hour traffic twice a day, Peters sits comfortably in her home working on her laptop. Being home-based also provides workers with plenty of "protected" time for case recording, which may be more difficult with the interruptions of an office environment.

As a supervisor, Peters manages six caseworkers through daily telephone calls and monthly meetings. During the DASH pilot, 95% of caseworkers said the quality of supervision they received was exceptional or very good. In fact, 95% of DASH caseworkers and 100% of DASH supervisors said they worked well as a unit.

Evaluation showed DASH was associated with greater stability and job satisfaction. Job turnover for caseworkers decreased from 25% to 9% during the pilot, job satisfaction

increased from 38% to 76%, and caseworkers said they were better able to balance their work and personal lives. “I can now find a middle ground [between work and] being a mom,” says CPS investigator Cathy Stevenson. “I have the best of both worlds.”

The evaluation of the pilot program primarily addressed job satisfaction and peer support; Harris County DSS is now evaluating the impact on client outcomes. Based on the DASH evaluation’s positive findings, the agency replicated the teleworking model in its Adult Protective Services and Child Care Licensing sections in 2001. The newer programs are under evaluation, and the agency predicts positive results consistent with those found for DASH.



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Social Worker Palm Pilot Program

During a conversation in a parking lot, Cecil County (Maryland) Department of Social Services (DSS) Director Nick Ricciuti and Bill Duffy, the agency’s Chief of Information Management, contrived a way to improve case management using a computer. Neither expected the idea would have such positive results for workload management and service delivery.

Cecil County DSS purchased 40 PDAs and attachable keyboards in 2001, upgrading the equipment as the technology has improved. Each caseworker receives a PDA with a connected digital camera. Computers are linked to the agency’s central database.

Each PDA contains all the necessary case-specific data and forms for a social worker’s entire caseload. The information on the PDA can be downloaded at anytime to a desktop database accessible to the entire agency. Caseworkers use the PDAs to complete intake and assessment forms, take notes, and file reports. All information can be saved as part of the electronic client file.

The digital cameras allow workers to take photos of children they visit, documenting their contact and recording developments, and engaging the children as they pose for pictures and see the instant results. “The kids love to have their picture taken,” says caseworker Nancy Reasin. “They like to [pose] with their boyfriends or girlfriends, their cars, or their pets.” With a current photo, caseworkers also have an edge when searching for a child who may have run away.

The PDAs offer workers several benefits, including less time in the office and more time spent with children and



DSS Staff in Cecil County, Maryland, at work with their Palm Pilots.

families. At the start of the project, caseworkers spent 50% of their time completing paperwork in the office; by the end of the pilot, caseworkers had decreased office time to 23%. Caseworkers said PDAs made it easy to review case information and increased the accuracy of their notes.

Supervisors say the database system allows for better guidance and direction of social workers. Supervisors and upper management can quickly access cases from the database and easily find up-to-date material, rather than searching workers’ desks for written notes they may not have yet transferred to the case record. Another benefit, according to social work supervisor Kim Reisinger is that PDAs make case management mobile. Time spent waiting in court was time lost, but now caseworkers can use that time to catch up on case recording.

* Each program highlighted by the Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) is supported by research. For more information on the levels of research, visit the R2P website at www.cwla.org/programs/r2p, or e-mail R2P at R2P@cwla.org.