2011 NASCIO Recognition Award Nomination

New Jersey Department of Health & Senior Services
Division of Family Health Services
and
New Jersey Office of Information Technology

NJ Parent Link
NJ’s Early Childhood, Parenting, and Professional Resource Center
www.NJParentLink.nj.gov

Category: Digital Government – Government to Citizen (G to C)

State of New Jersey
B. Executive Summary
On June 1, 2010, the State of New Jersey unveiled its newest website, *NJ Parent Link*, *The Early Childhood, Parenting and Professional Resource Center*. *NJ Parent Link* is a broad based public/private initiative (10 state departments and 25 community partners) supported by the federal Health Resources & Services Administration’s, State Early Childhood Comprehensive System (ECCS) Program Grant (2009-2012). NJ Dept. of Health and Senior Services is the lead agency for the project, coordinating over 30 government service units participating on the website development team. The web development and other IT support was provided by the NJ Office of IT (OIT).

The focus of the website is to highlight NJ state services and resources. Federal, statewide, local, and nationally respected early childhood initiative partner resources are also included. The goals of *NJ Parent Link* are to improve the accessibility, coordination, and delivery of information and services to parents of young children; to improve the communication capabilities between the public and private sectors; and to provide the IT foundation for inter/intra agency service collaborations and policy development.

Website content includes early childhood health, development, early learning, parenting, and family support resources. All educational and promotional materials for the site are downloadable, including the *NJ Parent Link* homepage, designed as a teaching tool for new parents. Community-building website features include: interactive consumer content sections; tailored subscription services; a community calendar of events; continuing education and leadership postings; a children’s art gallery; an easy to navigate *en Espanol* feature; and a translation service for over 50 languages. Website linkages are quite comprehensive and are designed to facilitate parents’ and professionals’ ease of use of, and engagement with, government services and stakeholder resources.

The website’s breakout categories are designed to fulfill the federal ECCS grant’s twelve designated key requirements for Early Childhood Systems Building and provide the necessary framework for interdepartmental system building & collaboration.

Numerous data collection and quality assurance markers are weaved throughout the website’s features to maximize assessment capabilities and real-time opportunities for collaboration and coordination of shared goals and resources within the early childhood community.

In addition to the *NJ Parent Link* website, continuing Early Childhood Systems Building efforts are being facilitated via the work of the *NJ Parent Link* Team. In-person dialogue between Team members sustains the systems and communications linkages necessary to maintain NJ’s early childhood health, development, and learning goals. In light of the range and character of the numerous experiences and points of view of NJ’s early childhood community, the website development Team, originally comprising 44 agencies, is currently under expansion to represent a total of 150 stakeholders and to include agency, professional, and parent representatives. In addition, an *NJ Parent Link* Internship has been developed for interested college students.
C. Description of Business Problem and Solution

Prior to **NJ Parent Link, The Early Childhood, Parenting and Professional Resource Center**, the State of NJ did not have an easily accessible, coordinated IT information & resource delivery system for parents of young children & the professionals who support them; a streamlined communication tool between the public & private sectors; or an IT foundation for inter/intra agency service collaborations & policy development. The magnitude of the problem was compounded by statewide community, professional, government, & IT challenges as related to service delivery to NJ parents & early childhood professionals: NJ is the most urbanized & densely populated state in the nation (8.7 million residents). The NJ State gov’t infrastructure includes 21 counties, 566 municipalities, 593 school districts, & 111 local health depts. (each operating under principle of home rule). Nine depts. within State government are responsible for providing various types of early childhood & support services: Health & Senior Services, Human Services, Education, Children & Families, Community Affairs, Labor & Workforce Development, Agriculture, Environmental Protection, & Corrections. The shear size & scope of NJ gov’t is in itself both an advantage & disadvantage for service delivery & system development. An advantage, because due to the number of gov’t agencies & points of services, combined with the scope & parameters of home rule, we have a great potential for maximum points of distribution, true community outreach, & tailoring of community needs. A disadvantage, however, because, again, due to the vast size of our gov’t & established home rule at the local levels, it is quite cumbersome to “connect” the number of agency contacts, points of information distribution, and numerous communication channels & still have the time needed to build consensus & partnerships among agencies regarding coordination & prioritization of services & resources (data source: NJ ECCS Grant 2009-2010).

Of New Jersey residents, 7.6% are children between the ages of 0 through 6. The maternal & child health public/private point of service infrastructure includes: 73 acute care hospitals (9 are children’s hospitals); 54 delivery hospitals (includes 15 regional perinatal centers, and 34 Neonatal ICUs & Special Care Nurseries); 20 Federally Qualified Health Center sites providing prenatal/pediatric service; & 130 WIC clinic sites. NJ child care services infrastructure (public & private) includes 4,069 licensed child care centers & 2,928 registered family child care homes; 58% of NJ children (ages 0 to 6) are in child care. There are over 30,000 health, social service, early education, & child care professionals providing services to NJ’s expecting parents & children (ages 0-6) & their families each day, including: obstetricians, pediatricians, family practice physicians, certified nurse midwives, advance practice RNs, delivery hospital personnel, pediatric RN/LPNs, child care & early learning professionals, community-based organization professionals, and military & corrections family support personnel. NJ racial & ethnic diversity includes: 20% of NJ residents are foreign born & more than 20% of residents speak a language other than English in their homes (and of these homes, 50% speak Spanish). NJ is ranked third in the nation for children living in immigrant households, with nearly 33% of NJ children residing with at least one foreign-born family member (usually a parent). NJ economic challenges include 25% of households spending more than 50% of their income on rent, and 80% of low-income children living in families that spend more than 30% of their income on housing. More than 25% of children live in families where no parent has stable employment, and 25% of single-parent families live
below the poverty level. NJ’s share of early childhood medical, developmental, and mental health challenges include higher than national asthma & autism rates (data source: NJ ECCS Grant 2009-2010).

Information technology challenges included many disjointed existing public (state, county, & municipal) & private websites, and a handful of state/private partnership household screening systems (NJ Helps, an online eligibility screening service for 30 NJ health & social services & the United Way “211” phone- & web-based resource system).

The duration of these community, professional, government, & IT challenges were historic. The importance of developing a remedy for their improvement became paramount in light of the recent economic challenges and the resulting limits (with potentially more to come) on continued funding, staffing, & service availability to meet NJ’s early childhood population needs.

The solution for the problem, developed via consensus of an existing statewide early childhood committee (the NJ Early Childhood Comprehensive System [ECCS] Team), was the need for expedited development of an integrated IT package of services to provide a “One-Stop Service” (open 24 hours a day) for NJ parents & the early childhood professionals that support them. Previous strategies considered, & proven unsuccessful, were continued use of multiple outdated IT service-delivery models that did not include having a single point of contact or a consolidated way of presenting & targeting our services & resources to the early childhood community. The lack of coordination & consistency of early childhood health, development, learning, and child care messages created a cumbersome relationship between agencies, providers, & families. It was clear that families with young children were continually burdened by having to seek out & find services throughout multiple agency websites that offered no coordinated assistance in searching capabilities for finding the information they needed. It became clear that the overall result of the current status quo was sub-optimal service delivery, missed opportunities, and misaligned information & service continuity.

Maximizing federal resources available to NJ through a Health Resources & Services Administration, State ECCS Program Grant, the NJ Dept. of Health & Senior Services (DHSS) functioned as the lead agency for the project. As a broad-based public/private initiative, 10 state depts. (including 30 gov’t service units) & 13 community partners (since having grown to 25), participated on the website development team. The target audience: all NJ parents of children 0-6 & the early childhood professionals that support them. Barriers & challenges were minimal as the NJ ECCS grant, with in-kind administrative support from the DHHS, Division of Family Health Services, was able to provide the funding; DHHS & the NJ Office of IT (OIT) were able to provide the website development personnel; & the NJ ECCS Team was already in place to provide review & support. Project direction & management was built upon utilizing & maximizing the strengths of NJ State DHSS & OIT staff with the necessary experience & expertise to lead, coordinate, and build the product. Leadership, creative development, & coordination for the project was assigned to the NJ ECCS Coordinator (a health & efficiency DHSS professional with a lifetime of personal & professional experience in early childhood/parenting issues; proven website concept, feature development,
content architecture expertise; & statewide community-building experience). OIT web
development & design staff assigned to the project were energetic, talented, & genuine
in their belief about the value of the product’s concept, & highly motivated to succeed
with such a statewide endeavor.

Development of a website for NJ parents and early childhood professionals was
assigned to the NJ ECCS coordinator in June 2009. Eleven months later, NJ Parent
Link was launched on the WWW in May 2010. The 2009-2010 labor cost for the NJ
ECCS Coordinator for website development & project coordination was $44,000
(approximate, as she is a salaried employee); 2009-2010 project costs for 2 State IT
personnel for website development, $42,000; total costs first year, $86,000. In 2010-
2011, labor costs for the NJ ECCS Coordinator for website development, maintenance,
& project coordination was $44,000 (approximate, salaried employee); 2010-2011
project costs for 3 State IT personnel for website development & maintenance, & for
licensing, was $10,000; total costs second year, $54,000. Thus total costs for first two
years thru May 2011 will be $140,000. All NJ ECCS and NJ Parent Link Team
collaborative & review activities were in-kind. NJ Parent Link soon became the defining
foundation of the NJECCS initiative. The NJ Parent Link Team functioned primarily in a
review capacity during development stage & since launching the site, primarily in
marketing & promotional capacity. The NJ ECCS Coordinator (aka NJ Parent Link Site
Administrator) manages all aspects of the project.

Marketing and promotion of NJ Parent Link includes placement of the NJ Parent Link
logo on numerous and targeted State gov’t & community partner website homepages &
other relevant webpage locations, and utilizing electronic notification tools including e-
mail blasts by NJ Parent Link Team partners to their respective stakeholders &
consumers. NJ Parent Link tutorials and presentations are conducted throughout the
state to early childhood stakeholders. Every opportunity to distribute printed materials to
interested consumers & stakeholders is capitalized on. A statewide distribution of
printed materials to over 10,000 points of early childhood service locations is planned
for the summer of 2011. Statewide traditional/electronic media promotion is anticipated
to begin fall 2011.

No formal pilot projects were conducted in the development of NJ Parent Link. The
website is accessible to all WWW users and includes numerous links and resources for
parents & children with disabilities. Health literacy parameters were observed for
appropriate text usage, clarity, & organization. Coordination among the departments of
Health & Senior Services, Children & Families, Education, Human Services, &
Environmental Protection provides for additional in-kind IT administrative support.
Coordinated efforts among the aforementioned departments’ constituent services, as
well as Labor & Workforce Development, has been key in developing a timely feedback
loop for all “Contact Us” inquiries & responses.

Innovative website characteristics reflect the needs of the expected user. All
educational & promotional materials for the site are downloadable (including the NJ
Parent Link homepage, designed as a teaching tool for new parents) and community-
building features were developed to optimize interactive consumer participation,
including: tailored subscription services, a community calendar of events; continuing education/leadership postings, and a children’s art gallery. An easy-to-navigate en Espanol feature and a translation service with over 50 languages is also available. Website linkages are comprehensive and designed to facilitate parents’ & professionals' ease of use of, and engagement with, government services and stakeholder resources. Information security is in keeping with established NJ State OIT standards.

D. Significance of the Project
NJ Parent Link has improved the operation of government by facilitating & maintaining coordination of state services to more effectively & efficiently meet consumer needs. Beneficiaries of NJ parent Link include NJ expectant parents, parents & guardians of young children (0-6 years); NJ early childhood health, development, learning, & social service professionals; and community & government agencies that support & provide early childhood & family services. Linking to the NJ Executive, Legislative & Judicial Branches websites, NJ Parent Link has improved direct access & consequent usage of all relevant & potential services & resources throughout the state.

From NJ Parent Link’s inception, the scope of the project was clearly defined. Topical breakout categories & interactive features were designed to fulfill the federal ECCS grant’s 12 designated key requirements for early childhood system building, including: Access to Health Care, Insurance & Medical Homes, Mental Health & Social-Emotional Development, Early Care & Education/Child Care, Parent Education, Family Support, Financing, Governance, Family Leadership Development, Provider/Practitioner Support, Communication, Standards, Monitoring, & Accountability. Numerous data collection & quality assurance markers are weaved throughout the website’s features to maximize assessment capabilities & real-time opportunities for collaboration & coordination of shared goals & resources within the early childhood community.

E. Benefit of the Project
NJ Parent Link supports at least two of the NASCIO State CIO Priorities for 2011: (#1) Consolidation/Optimization – here of all services related to early childhood health, etc., consolidated in one website with optimized delivery of information; and (#4) Health Care -- here of our most vulnerable population, where early intervention and support can have huge positive impact on the health of our future adult citizens, our country’s most valuable resource.

Benefits of the NJ Parent Link website to NJ parents & early childhood professionals, truly outweigh the $140,000 development costs for the project (June 2009 to May 2011). Community building & improvements in networking & communication has occurred among all involved partners (30 gov’t units & 25 community agencies). Good will, enthusiasm, and pride in NJ Parent Link has been voiced & documented by numerous NJ government & community professionals, parents, & consumers as revealed through electronic & traditional communication routes & WWW searches regarding consumer & agency comments, feedback, and postings about the website. (Search on: www.state.nj.us/njparentlink/ or www.njparentlink.nj.gov.)
Website usage statistics exemplify growth in website traffic & linkages to State & community partners. Space precludes listing all the stats we have; below are some of the high-level ones (rounded).

**June 2010** (First month post-launch) 3,800 hits; 4,700 visits; 2,000 visitors (Note: The inability to track actual individuals likely significantly under-counts unique visitors, since on any given day most state employees using the site will show as one IP address; this also applies to many other government and community resource centers); 400 visitors who visited more than once; 36% visited for 0-1 minutes; 33% visited for >19 minutes;

**March 2011** (Heaviest traffic to date of any month since launch.) 149,000 hits; 9,500 visits; 3,650 visitors (same note above applies regarding tracking unique visitors).

Clearly the word has been spreading, and we expect continued growth as we roll-out our summer and fall marketing campaigns for 2011.

There is no point of comparison for this project, as this was the first of its kind for NJ. Benefits realized from *NJ Parent Link* include improved constituent services such as accessibility, availability, improved access, relevant content, complimentary channels for service, improved quality of service, single point of contact, speed, & value. Comprehensive parent advocacy & professional development features ensure improved communication channels with state, federal, & elected officials, thus increasing opportunities for involvement in the civic process & in transparency & accountability in government.

Qualitative & intangible benefits are numerous, including: increased efficiency by the consumer to access State, Federal, & community services & resources; tailored subscription services; community event announcements; & continuing education & leadership postings. Quantitative benefits include a reduction of duplicate efforts in processing consumer inquiries by state agencies & communication offices, along with NJ early childhood services being readily available in a timely & reproducible fashion -- easily, efficiently, & effectively.

Operational efficiency & effectiveness improvements include a new paradigm for inter/intra dept. collaboration & resource staff productivity. An increase in employee moral has been an added benefit. All project timelines & development parameters were completed on time & within budget.

*NJ Parent Link* has attained all its intended goals. *NJ Parent Link* is an easily accessible, coordinated IT information and resource delivery system for parents of young children and the professionals who support them, a streamlined communication tool between the public and private sectors, and an IT foundation for inter/intra agency service collaborations and policy development.