



CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE:

How Tennessee Showed Up for Child Care Providers

Nov 2020 – October 2023

NASCIO Award Category: Digital Services – Government to Business

Submitting State: State of Tennessee

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child care plays a pivotal role in American society. It requires a robust and collaborative infrastructure that brings together families, providers, employers, and government. The Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) recognized the need for sustainable solutions that enable their child care providers to thrive. In response, TDHS partnered with the State's centralized IT organization, Strategic Technology Solutions (STS), and embarked on an ambitious modernization program to enhance the provider experience and improve operational efficiency.

Tennessee child care providers faced significant challenges including licensure complexities, unreliable revenue, and overwhelming administrative tasks. The pre-licensing process was paper-heavy, time-consuming, and deterred prospective providers. Monetary compensation was unpredictable and affected the quality of services. Moreover, providers were spending many hours managing regulations and necessary compliance requirements to stay open. This diverted their focus from their primary duty - providing safe, healthy, and educationally rich care.

To address these challenges, TDHS and STS launched a new Provider Portal, Worker Portal, and Billing and Payments system to replace their outdated legacy applications. They digitized and optimized over 30 key business processes. Their design, development, and implementation were strategically timed to coincide with significant policy changes. The modernization revolutionized the pre-licensing process - attracting over 1,500 new facilities to engage in pre-licensing, made regulations clearer, resulted in drastically improved quality rating scores, and ultimately paid providers faster by cutting the time from submission to payment in half.

By effectively bringing together a multitude of stakeholders to drive a profound and transformative shift in support of those who care, TDHS has successfully ushered child care services into the digital age and dramatically improved the child care landscape across the great state of Tennessee.



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

IDEA

Recognizing the financial struggles of child care providers, especially during the pandemic, the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) distributed substantial relief funds. While financially significant, this temporary relief was not enough. Instead, providers and parents needed sustainable solutions that would allow child care centers to remain open and thrive. Thus, TDHS laid out a plan for an ambitious modernization of its child care program to improve the provider experience and, ultimately, strengthen Tennessee families.

TDHS acknowledged providers' challenges, including the complexities of licensing, financial instability, and overwhelming administrative burdens. These issues diverted providers from their primary goal: providing safe, healthy, and educationally rich care. The need for provider-friendly processes that supported predictable earnings and reduced administrative overhead was imperative. Potential providers were often deterred by the intimidating complexities of the pre-licensing process; a multi-step, paperwork-intensive journey that lacked transparency, leaving them in the dark about their progress towards becoming a licensed provider. Additionally, unpredictable compensation posed a hurdle in an already low-margin industry. Providers needed predictability in their remuneration to maintain their operations and offer quality services. The existing system for submitting records and receiving payment for the child care assistance program was fraught with delays, a complex user interface, and a lack of transparency. The administrative processes for providers to remain in compliance often caused frustration, underscoring the need for a system that reduced administrative tasks and allowed providers to focus on children's development. Providers were expected to track important compliance dates manually, complete tedious and repetitive paperwork each year, and understand their rating status with limited information. This system left providers understaffed and overburdened with little time for their primary responsibility of providing quality child care services.

All of these processes were frustrating, leaving providers feeling more like clerical staff than valuable contributors to children's development. With these challenges in mind, TDHS planned a comprehensive modernization of its child care program services to improve the provider experience and strengthen families.

IMPLEMENTATION

NEW SYSTEM AND POLICIES

TDHS embarked on an ambitious project that brought together agency stakeholders from Child Care and Community Services, the Public Information and Legislative Office, and Strategic Technology Solutions (STS). Together, they revolutionized the way over 4,000 child and adult care providers interact with regulatory activities and the State's subsidized payment assistance program. The project was strategically timed to coincide with sweeping policy changes, including the establishment of a new pre-licensure unit and a new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

THE ROADMAP

The roadmap for the project was centered on the design, development, and implementation of three new systems that would significantly enhance efficiencies and the relationship between TDHS and providers across the State. These systems went live with a staged release plan that included two pilots that represented providers from all three grand regions of Tennessee: West, Middle, and East. At the conclusion of pilot, all three systems were launched into production for users statewide.

PROVIDER PORTAL

TDHS and STS leveraged ServiceNow, a cloud-based low-code/no-code platform, to automate provider tasks in this new web portal. The portal revolutionized how providers manage and track their child care payment assistance program participation and licensure maintenance tasks. The system features modules supporting processes from application to regulatory compliance, enabling providers to maintain licensure and facilitate real-time collaboration with licensing consultants within one consolidated platform.

WORKER PORTAL

The team also leveraged ServiceNow to revolutionize the TDHS legacy licensing system. The new system has significantly boosted staff capability to support the provider community. By retiring paperwork, the system has not only minimized time-consuming manual activities, but also streamlined regulatory guidance, allowing staff to promptly assist providers to maintain their compliance.



BILLING AND PAYMENTS

This system streamlines the billing process with a simplified user interface in the Provider Portal and automated processing of payments. The system improved payment delivery and transaction accuracy, enabling provider payments to be processed and paid within a week of submission.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND ROLLOUT

TDHS successfully transitioned over 4,000 providers as well as the entire Child Care workforce onto new platforms, all at once. A Change Champion Network was established, composed of 40 providers who were prepared for the new system and ready to advocate for their peers across the State. Additionally, TDHS facilitated monthly townhall sessions attended by providers from all three grand regions, where TDHS leadership conveyed critical system updates. TDHS simultaneously prepared their licensing staff by conducting 20 hours of hands-on training which married “how to do the job” with “how to use the system.” After rollout, TDHS continued to offer extensive support, assisting more than 1,500 providers through a virtual site support line. They also partnered with Child Care Resource and Referral, a statewide organization that offered in-person technical assistance to providers.

IMPACT

The modernization journey has gone beyond technology advancement to significantly improve the regulatory experience for child and adult care providers. This transformation has broadened the digital services available to providers, optimized their payment experience, and contributed to the growth of the provider community:

As part of this initiative 32 key processes were automated, digitized and optimized across the child care ecosystem:

- Time and attendance tracking
- Payment submissions and issuances
- Applications, orientations, and trainings for prospective providers
- Violation management, complaint tracking and corrective action plan issuance
- Safety and legal enforcement
- Regulatory monitoring and incident and injury reporting

RETIRED LEGACY SYSTEMS AND INCREASED DIGITAL SERVICES

This project enabled the State to retire two legacy systems that were over 20 years old each. This transition allowed TDHS to digitize 49 forms that were submitted by providers or completed by staff and sent to providers as part of their licensing and payment activities. More than just “breaking up with paper,” the Provider Portal has equipped the provider population with digital self-service tools to view, submit, and manage their activities with TDHS.

DEPLOYED A SCALABLE SYSTEM WITH COMPOUNDING BENEFITS

TDHS has leaped ahead and is now benefiting from an enhanced cloud-based platform. The solution bolsters collaboration, business continuity, and best-in-class security. It is seamlessly integrated with ForgeRock, TDHS’s

Identity and Access Management (IAM) platform, to administer secured and controlled access to the new portals with custom roles, enabling appropriate and confidential information-sharing with providers and TDHS staff alike. TDHS has further enhanced the system to collaborate with child care attorneys to complete Legal Enforcement notices issued for major offenses in child care agencies. This expansion has allowed both divisions to complete their legal documents 70% faster, thus ensuring prompt action and violation remediation leading to a safer care environment for children and families in Tennessee.

OPENED NEW CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

TDHS has transformed the process for potential providers with the introduction of the Provider Portal and a dedicated pre-licensure unit. This centralized platform and specialized support system streamlined procedures, making them more user-friendly and efficient for providers. The new pre-licensure unit can now leverage the brand-new digital inquiry and application processes, along with built-in orientation scheduling to track progress digitally. This functionality has empowered prospective providers as well, with nearly 50% of pre-licensing activities now self-directed through the Provider Portal. The improved experience has attracted over 1,500 facilities to start the pre-licensing process.

AFFORDED FINANCIAL STABILITY TO PROVIDERS

TDHS recognized the need for reliable compensation and put special emphasis on improving payment timing and accuracy for the Child Care payment assistance program. Weekly payments are now auto-approved, meaningfully reducing exceptions and discrepancies and enabling providers to count on more accurate payments. The Provider Portal has eased the payment request process. Providers, regardless of size, can save significant time managing attendance for children using the new features, such as individual attendance, bulk uploads, and automatic pre-filling based on check-ins and drop-offs through the mobile application. The portal also includes a payment calculator tool, promoting transparency by allowing providers to estimate payments for current or potential enrollees in the Child Care payment assistance program.

\$400M+
IN PROVIDER
PAYMENTS

SINCE AUTOMATION OF PAYMENTS AND
ENROLLMENTS, STAFF ARE NOW PERFORMING
UP TO 70% FEWER ADJUSTMENTS



IMPROVED REGULATORY OUTCOMES FOR PROVIDERS

The Provider Portal, equipped with user-friendly self-service tools, has transformed the regulatory experience for providers. The portal offers providers immediate access to their quality ratings, including detailed score explanations to encourage informed decision-making. New tools also simplify compliance management. Providers can directly address their compliance needs and report major incidents to their licensing consultant. These features have allowed them to swiftly resolve issues, preventing any interruption to their ability to provide services and return to normal business activities.

**PROVIDERS NOW maintain
an EXEMPLARY 97/100 VISIT
QUALITY RATING SCORE**

56% 
**IMPROVEMENT IN INCIDENT, INJURY,
AND COMPLAINT RESOLUTION TIME**

TDHS embarked on a complex and comprehensive undertaking and achieved tremendous success. They delivered a profound and transformative project that had substantial positive impact on the provider population in Tennessee. TDHS and child care providers have the tools, systems, and processes they need to enhance their services while promoting financial stability and responsibility. This modernization effort is now a gold standard for large-scale digital transformation in the State of Tennessee.

