



Northstar Care for Children

State of Minnesota
Digital Government: Government-to-Citizen
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Executive Summary

Children do best in permanent, safe, and nurturing homes where there are lifelong relationships with caring adults. Unfortunately, some children are in need of protective services because they are abused or neglected, truant, runaway, or otherwise need protection or services. Children who cannot be safely returned to their parent's care need a permanent family that commits to nurture and care for them.

Northstar Care for Children is a unified program that supports foster children who are becoming part of a new permanent family through adoption or transfers of custody. Northstar Care for Children removes financial barriers to permanency and unifies the benefits and administration of several preexisting programs. It maximizes efficiencies and realigns funds to provide a single program that focuses on the needs of children, helping ensure that each child has a permanent family.

The project represents visionary and transformational use of technology in the manner in which the needs of children and the attributes of caregivers are evaluated through a new, automated tool, the Minnesota Assessment for Parenting Children and Youth (MAPCY), the results of which are used to generate an appropriate subsidy payment based on a complex matrix of business rules.

The system changes further support the public policy goals of state leaders and help in efficiently administering the program through complex changes in the manner and accounting for subsidy payments. Family foster care payments continue to be made by local agencies, while adoption assistance payments are being made from Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), but the legislation required kinship assistance payment to move from the local agencies to DHS. Beyond the significant change in practice this represented, the legislation required that the policy changes be revenue-neutral for the local agencies, requiring a complex cost-accounting methodology to be developed showing detailed cost breakdowns and comparisons to past subsidy costs.

The Minnesota Legislature enacted Northstar Care for Children in May 2013, with an implementation date in January, 2015, which was an extremely aggressive timeline. The substantial changes to child welfare financing in Minnesota required correspondingly sweeping changes to Minnesota's federally subsidized Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), known locally as the Social Service Information System (SSIS). The 19-month project was successfully developed and implemented through a collaboration between Minnesota's MN.IT Services, the DHS, and county and tribal social services agencies (a total of 80 agencies).

On-going and future development focuses on refining the various algorithms used to calculate subsidies, provide more self-service options for parents claiming subsidies, and providing administrative simplification for state staff responsible for managing Northstar.

Concept

This project provides the system supports for Minnesota's public policy change to increase the incentives for caregivers to enter into permanent relationships with children, either through Northstar Kinship Care or Northstar Adoption. The legacy programs replaced were a part of the in the MN.IT-developed and supported SSIS system. As a result of the legislative mandates, major updates to the system included:

- Creation of a new single assessment tool (Minnesota Assessment of Parenting for Children and Youth or MAPCY)
- Automating the process of calculating subsidy amounts based on the MAPCY
- Automating payments based on the MAPCY
- Incorporating the kinship and adoption assistance eligibility and benefit agreement creation processes into the SSIS applications
- Creation of a complex fiscal reconciliation process, crucial for the financing plan for this major overhaul of child welfare processes.

Development and collaboration principles used throughout the project included:

- Understand the needs of the businesses we support
- Operate with a statewide vision
- Be service-driven and accountable
- Think forward
- Plan carefully and make demonstrable progress
- Strengthen strategic alliances with key partners (counties and tribes) and internally (MN.IT, DHS Child Safety and Permanency (CSP), DHS Financial Operations Division (FOD))
- Promote and lead cross-boundary collaborations, solutions and relationships
- Educate and build consensus among members and stakeholders.

The legislation passed with extremely tight timelines for implementation, so the project team implemented collaborative strategies for the system design, development and implementation. Some of the strategies used were:

- Collaborative workgroup information-sharing meetings involving DHS CSP program staff, DHS FOD staff, county staff embedded within the project team, and MN.IT staff in order to develop a common understanding of policy and business needs in order to define tasks and build consensus.
- Stakeholder workgroups with representatives from counties, tribes, DHS CSP, DHS FOD, and MN.IT hammered out consensus where the boundaries of jurisdiction, policy, fiscal, and automation blur. This required extensive collaboration and planning together to create viable solutions that would meet all business requirements.

- Development of small, focused workgroups empowered to make decisions around specific topic areas.
- Agile development methodology was used for design, development, and quality assurance work, and development/implementation was phased. That meant limited functionality was initially introduced to the user community, then progressively built out in a more sophisticated manner. Users needed to be willing to change course as new requirements were identified or existing requirements were modified.
- Full transparency in communicating approach and project status, so executive management was fully informed regarding the aggressive timelines, phased approach, and attendant risks to the project. The executive sponsor support and buy-in was essential to the success.

The automated single assessment tool, MAPCY, is much less subjective than the previous assessment process, leading to greater accountability.

Automating the kinship and adoption assistance eligibility and benefit agreement processes increases accuracy and frees child protection workers to focus on child safety and stabilizing families rather than struggling with paperwork. The automation of the Fiscal Reconciliation process has been essential in gaining the support of counties and tribes. By building it into SSIS, counties and tribes can see the results of the complex calculations at the level of individual children. This remarkable transparency has been a crucial selling point for the legislatively-mandated changes. Northstar Care creates a fiscal partnership among the state, counties and tribes. Previously, counties and tribes were responsible to pay for children in Foster Care, while children who moved on to permanent families were paid for by the state. Northstar Care reduces the need for Foster Care, but the funds counties and tribes had been spending on Foster Care were required to make Northstar Care feasible fiscally. Northstar Care realigns previously existing county, tribal, and state funding, as well as managing state and federal funds.

Significance

The Northstar Care for Children project consisted of major changes to the SSIS Worker, SSIS Fiscal and SSIS DHS (Adoption) systems. These three systems assist in placing children into permanent homes, assessing the families' needs to determine financial benefits, storing documentation regarding eligibility and court orders, paying parents or relative custodians. There are also many reports that will allow DHS to monitor the fiscal balance of the state and local agency shares of the payments.

This project impacts the DHS Permanency Unit, the DHS Financial Operations Division, the local agency Social Workers, the families who are receiving benefits, and most importantly the children who are able to find permanent families.

Due to the tight timeline to meet the legislative deadline to begin placing children in Kinship homes by January 1, 2015, we needed to implement a phased approach to all stages in the system development life cycle. Multiple small groups of business and technical staff were empowered to meet and make decisions regarding the design and development of the different functions that were needed. We initially focused on the development of the MAPCY application to allow the business to start testing this with a small group of local agencies. This gave the business the ability to enhance the MAPCY questions and scoring to ensure the best assessment tool was created for the families.

The next sub-project focused on making the changes to the system to ensure was ready to track the children being placed into permanent homes, and to pay the families. We were able to meet the January 1, 2015 deadline by reusing the modules that were already in existence in SSIS.

The Northstar Care for Children project directly aligns with the following strategies from the State IT Master Plan for the State of Minnesota (<http://mn.gov/mnit/about-mnit/strategic-plans.jsp>)

- Improves the state's quality of life through better government service
- Promotes "smart" government
- Facilitates government reform

Impact

Northstar Care for Children simplifies the assessment process by using the new MAPCY tool to determine benefits. The assessment looks at the needs of the child and the parenting that is needed to meet the child's needs. Northstar also significantly increases the monthly benefits for more than 7,000 children across Minnesota who receive state adoption assistance. By giving foster care parents a financial incentive to adopt children who are unable to be cared for by their birthparents, children will have a permanent forever family. Prior to Northstar Care for Children, foster care children have seen their state benefits cut by up to 50 percent after they were adopted or legally moved in with relatives. Equalizing the payments for foster care and permanent care is a major victory for children, families and child advocates.

Throughout Minnesota, there are currently about 350 foster children ready for adoption; and at any one time, about 3,000 children have been in foster care longer than one year. Statewide, nearly two-thirds of children who have been in foster care for a year or longer

turn 18 years of age without finding a permanent home. Northstar will reduce the number of children in foster care and will reduce the length of time children are in foster care.

Metrics include:

- Number of children in Foster Care (reduction)
- Number of children waiting for a legally permanent caregiver (reduction)
- Length of stay in Foster Care (reduction)
- Wait time to permanency through adoption or transfer of custody after reunification with principle caregivers has been ruled out (reduction)
- Percentage of children adopted within 24 months of entry into Foster Care (increase)
- Budget forecasting process to compare Northstar Care costs to those that counties and tribes would have incurred in the absence of Northstar Care (fiscally neutral).