New Jersey Department of Agriculture

"Direct Certification: A Transformational use of Technology"

Category: Information Communications Technology Innovations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

An innovative technology improvement to New Jersey's Direct Certification (DC) application process in 2015 enabled New Jersey to far exceed Congress' benchmark to directly certify at least 80 percent of students under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For the 2015 school year, New Jersey achieved 95% certification of students; a staggering improvement from the initial 58%.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture's (NJDA) IT team implemented advanced technology practices in matching algorithms in the DC IT application process. The DC application is an in-house application that is developed by the NJDA Information Technology Unit using Java and Oracle technologies. The initiative is a case study of transformational use of information technology in state government.

DC is a process made available to the Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for families to submit a school meals application. School districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program, use the DC process to automatically compare the School's Enrollment data with SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance (TANF), or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). The match is then used to automatically qualify students for free school meals which ensures that eligible students are not missed because their families have not submitted the free, reduced price meal application to apply for the benefits.

DC benefits students, parents, and school districts. Millions of eligible low income children receive free breakfast and lunch through direct certification. School districts process and verify fewer school meal applications, resulting in operational cost savings, improved accuracy and significant reduction of fraud.

By making the system's workflow completely user driven and interactive, the NJDA IT Solution was able to increase efficiency, reduce errors, and maintain data integrity across 800 school districts accounting to a total of 350,000 students qualified to receiving free meals across the state.

The IT initiative has gained national accolades by winning a 2016 Significant Achievement award from the Public Institute of Technology, and received an Exceptional Practices in Technology award during the 2015 Child Nutrition and Access and Accountability technology convention held in Atlanta by the United States Department of Agriculture.

CONCEPT:

Based on the goals set by the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010, all states were required to increase their Direct Certification percentage to achieve 95% matching rate across different school years.

DC requires a complex matching algorithm to determine if the student on the LEAs enrollment file matches with the SNAP data provided by New Jersey's Department of Human Services (DOH). There is no standardized matching algorithm available for conducting the computerized matching. The School Nutrition Programs are administered by the NJDA, and student information resides with the Department of Education (DOE) single source of student data which is not available for complete automation of the DC process.

The New Jersey IT team was able to identify the causes for the low DC rate, and improved it through collaboration with DOE, DHS, NJDA and the LEAs, as well as reviewing advancements in technology, and continuous LEA training.

The NJDA team also identified the causes of the low rate of enrollment by looking at systems implemented in different states and held discussions with a DC Consultant to review the existing system.

Sharing of information and cross-agency collaboration provided NJDA with a better insight of the issues and IT solutions.

Additionally, NJDA developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for data sharing with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF). By automating the transfer of Foster data from DCF to Agriculture through a nightly data warehouse upload process, NJDA was able to make the most recent data available to LEAs for their matches and human errors were reduced.

SIGNIFICANCE:

This application is a web based application and gives easy accessibility to the School districts to match the enrollment data with SNAP data from DHS and foster data from DCF. This application offers a central point for matching, and provides easy identification of students eligible for free lunches. Earlier school districts were using multiple methods and softwares to perform the matches which has been replaced by one application. The application also provides easy portability of data to their Point-of-Sale systems which are used for dispersing lunches.

Data generated by the application also is crucial to other federal programs such as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which allows eligible participating school districts to provide meals to all students free of cost. Improvement to the Direct Certification application has significantly impacted the number of school districts participating in the community eligibility program and the overall participation in the school nutrition program.

This being a central repository provides a great opportunity for easy data exchange between programs and departments, maintains data integrity, and helps program staff efficiently monitor and compare data across other federal programs.

IMPACT:

Enhancing the application has resulted in an increased number of students identified for receiving free lunches, from 270,000 in 2013 to 330,000 in 2015 resulting in a total of 60,000 additional children.

Additionally, the system provides a step-by-step interface with instructions and error messages reducing the need for the end users to call the helpdesk for assistance. Once the LEA directly certifies all students, they can check and delete any duplicates through the Duplicate Certified Students' screens. The duplicates within the LEA are identified based on local school identifications if they are available, or through a matching criterion. Duplicates across LEAs are also identified and displayed based on a matching criterion along with an email notification to the concerned LEAs for the duplicates.

Through partnerships and collaboration, the NJDA IT team has completed the following enhancements to improve performance and usability by using an interactive approach with the LEAs:

- Designing an enhanced user interface system to allow LEA's to perform matches more frequently. The improvement will help increase the number of eligible students to get free meals and will further enhance the system for better performance, accuracy and reusability
- Navigation changes to aide LEAs ability to easily navigate the on-line DC process without State Agency intervention
- User upload of data which will be processed automatically overnight. Larger LEAs with significantly higher enrollment data will upload their enrollment files nightly and obtain the matching results the next day; smaller LEAs can still perform same day processing. The design will reduce the overall time each LEA will spend on the system.
- Communicate with New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) regarding the utilization of their comprehensive data warehouse, student level data reporting, and unique Statewide Student Identification (SID) System.

- Collaborate with NJDOE and LEAs to incorporate the NJ SMART SID into the DC Data Matching Identifiers for improved matching

The performance improvements are available in the Report to Congress and also in the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) that is submitted to USDA yearly.

The Direct Certification IT initiative is the recipient of a 2016 Public Institute of Technology award for Significant Achievement. Additionally, the initiative received an ***Exceptional Practices in Technology*** award during the 2015 Child Nutrition and Access and Accountability at a technology convention held in Atlanta by USDA (United States Department of Agriculture).