



# Office of Information Technology Services

Innovation That Matters... For All New Yorkers



## Modernizing the NYS Mentoring Program To Better Serve Youth in New York State

**NASCIO 2019 State IT Recognition Awards**  
**Category: Business Process Innovations**

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Online Application Launch: August 10, 2018

Back Office System Launch/Project Completion: November 16, 2018

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2018, New York State embarked upon a project to build an information technology system to help support the NYS Mentoring Program, a statewide school-based one-to-one mentoring program that helps prevent school dropout. The program was first started by Governor Mario M. Cuomo in 1984, and was reinstated by his son, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, in 2015.

To help build the program and increase the number of volunteers, the NYS Mentoring Program requested the assistance of the New York State Office of Information Technology Services (ITS). ITS built a new solution that allows prospective adult mentor volunteers to sign up online. Mentors' information then populates a back-office system used by agency staff managing the program. By developing the system in-house, the system incorporates the required flexibility for agency staff to make updates and changes. Additionally, the ITS system eliminates ongoing costs of the previous vendor-provided system and circumvents the inevitability of constantly rising vendor costs. ITS designed and delivered the online sign up for volunteers and the back-office project to manage the NYS Mentoring Program in 2018.

The Mobile, Cloud, and Web Development teams within ITS built the system. The teams used their extensive experience building systems containing simple, easy-to-use interfaces to help state agencies manage the NYS Mentoring Program. When initiating the project and gathering requirements, the teams recognized the importance of assessing how technology could help facilitate the daily activities of agencies' staff, and accordingly prioritized engaging with agency leadership and meeting with agency staff who use the system to gain a complete understanding of their daily operations and requirements.

When the NYS Mentoring Program was reinstated in 2015, the NY Digital team launched a redesigned website to help interested participants find the program and, though the new website had a greatly improved design and disseminated information, potential mentor volunteers could not link to an online application. Instead, volunteers had to seek out the contact information for agency program managers and physically call or email the agency overseeing the program, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), to volunteer.

On August 10, 2018, the ITS team launched the essential improvement of an [online application](#) for prospective mentors. The easy four-page sign up was designed employing the most up-to-date user experience principles.

Thereafter, in November 16, 2018, the ITS teams completed and launched the back-office system for agency staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program, significantly improving program operations.

The launch of the online application and back-office program has greatly improved and simplified the process for recruiting and managing mentor volunteer data. Agency staff can access a mentor's profile and update requirements such as whether a mentor has been trained or fingerprinted. Using the new program, agency staff may also update mentor preferences, assign mentors to a mentoring site, update mentors' status to pause their participation or remove them from the program, and add new mentoring sites.

In 2018, ITS successfully implemented the **NYS Mentoring Program** project and the new and improved application and system are now **Better Serving Youth in New York State**.

## EXEMPLAR



### ENHANCING TECHNOLOGY TO REACH VOLUNTEERS

New York State recently took on a challenge of infusing technology into the [New York State Mentoring Program](#) to better recruit new volunteers and manage mentoring programs across the state. The new online sign up and back-office system ensures volunteers can register to participate and that programs operate smoothly and effectively.

First established by Governor Mario Cuomo in 1984, the NYS Mentoring Program operated until 1994 and provided school-aged child participants in need with structured, trusting relationships through which they were offered extra guidance, support and encouragement. In 2015, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo reinstated the important program, and directed that it be managed the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the Council on Children and Families (CCF). In early 2018, the New York State Office of Information Technology Services (ITS) worked with program managers and administrators to design an online application for potential adult mentors to sign up to volunteer in mentoring programs organized through New York State. ITS also designed a back-office system to manage the hundreds of programs held at mentoring

sites across the state.

### BUSINESS NEED

From a program management perspective, Governor Cuomo's reinstatement of the NYS Mentoring Program in 2015 triggered a requirement to provide agency staff with a reliable and easy-to-use system to manage adult mentor volunteers. The agency signed an 18-month contract with a vendor to provide a system to manage mentor profiles and mentoring sites. However, the vendor system failed to meet the needs of the program and required constant updates and modifications.

The vendor system did not allow for mentors to sign up online, requiring agency staff members to recruit volunteers in person or over the phone. Each person applying to be a mentor volunteer had to provide his or her personal information to agency staff, who then entered the information into the vendor's back-office system. Agency staff spent time working with mentoring applicants to complete required submissions before they could assign the volunteer to a specific mentoring site to help children. The vendor system also lacked any sophisticated search functionality. To remedy the problem, agency staff often found themselves keeping separate records outside of the system to fill the gaps. Finally, the vendor was unresponsive to requests from Agency staff to add new mentoring sites, and the vendor failed timely to update or modify the system to enable program management.

In summer 2017, agency staff abandoned the vendor system due to its shortcomings, leaving them without a single system of record with which to report program success. The staff began fully managing programs assigned to them on their own. Personal systems for managing programs ranged from spreadsheets to handwritten notes. When agency staff members reported on the success of the program, they consolidated these manual, personal notes, rendering inconsistent and not replicable results. Such a manual process was fraught with risk and not sustainable, including possible lack in continuity if even a single staff person retired or left the program.

### CRAFTING A MODERN SOLUTION

ITS determined that a new system to manage the NYS Mentoring Program must:

- leverage the existing website where potential adult mentors could find information about the program;
- enable potential adult mentors to apply to serve as mentors using an online application that populates a back-office system used by program staff;
- facilitate an auto-generated reference request and online reference form sent to those listed on adult mentoring applications;
- automatically populate mentor profiles with reference responses;
- create a back-office system with the required flexibility and capabilities needed by NYS Mentoring Program staff to allow them to successfully update/edit/maintain program operations without the aid of IT staff; and
- ensure the technology would be created with the framework to withstand updates in the future, allowing additional capabilities to be added to the system.

## CONCEPT

### ITS TEAM COLLABORATING TO DESIGN A LASTING SOLUTION

In early 2018, the program ownership shifted fully to the CCF, and CCF requested that ITS help build a system that would suit the needs of the staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program. By creating a state solution built and managed by ITS staff, the system could be better suited to management of the NYS Mentoring Program with the flexibility required for agency staff to make updates and changes. In addition, an ITS managed system eliminated ongoing costs paid to a vendor whose prices may continually increase year after year.

The ITS team brought to the table extensive experience building systems containing simple easy-to-use interfaces to help state agencies manage programs and daily operations. The team engaged agency leadership and potential end users of the system to understand business requirements and assess how technology could help facilitate daily activities and improve operations.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://nysmentoringprogram.ny.gov/signUp>. The page features the New York State logo and navigation links for Services, News, Government, and Local. The main heading is "Apply to be a Mentor (1 of 4)". A yellow informational box contains the following text:

Thank you for your interest in volunteering to mentor with the New York State Mentoring Program. When you join the NYS Mentoring Program, you are helping to make a real difference in a young person's life! The process to become a mentor is simple. There are just a few prerequisites and steps.

- All volunteers MUST be at least 18 years of age
- All volunteers MUST commit to one year of mentoring a youth for 4-6 hours a month
- All volunteers MUST pass a criminal background check
- All volunteers MUST attend a free training

If you meet these prerequisites and are interested in helping a young person, please submit an application on-line or by mail. Please note that the application requires two references, including an email address and phone number for both, and will be followed up by a phone interview. If you have any questions, please call 1-844-337-6304. Thank you.

Below the informational box are four required fields, each with a red asterisk:

- \* First Name
- \* Last Name
- \* Street
- \* City

### ONLINE VOLUNTEER APPLICATIONS

One of the most significant pieces missing from the vendor system was an online sign up. When the NYS Mentoring Program was reinstated in 2015, the NY Digital team launched a redesigned website to help interested participants find the program and, though the new website had a greatly improved design and disseminated information, potential mentor volunteers could not link to an online application. Instead, volunteers had to seek out the contact information for agency program managers and physically call or email to volunteer. Personal details and mentors could easily be lost in the shuffle.

After a few months of development, on August 10, 2018, the ITS team officially launched the [online application](#) for prospective mentors. The easy four-page sign up was designed employing the most up-to-date user experience principles and the information fed seamlessly into the backend database housing mentor profiles and mentor site details.

The beginning of the online application includes a list of what is needed to complete the application, so applicants know exactly what items they need to have on hand to successfully complete the form. As they progress through the application, applicants can easily track their progress as they complete each page, each character reference is contacted automatically by the system, and the design follows the NYS Branding Standards. Overall, the online application gives polish and credibility to this state initiative and, according to the CCF, mentors have been finding the application and signing up on their own. This improved application lifts significant and time-consuming manual burdens from busy agency staff.

**NYS Mentoring Program - Regional Directors**

Home Mentors Sites End of Year My Profile Useful Links Log Off

List of Sites in Capital District Region

New Site

EXPORT TO EXCEL

Drag a column header and drop it here to group by that column

District	Name	Address
ALBANY CITY SD	GIFFEN MEMORIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	274 S PEARL ST, ALBANY, NY 12202
ALBANY CITY SD	ARBOR HILL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	1 ARBOR DR, ALBANY, NY 12207
ALBANY CITY SD	EDMUND J O'NEAL MIDDLE SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE	50 N LARK AVE, ALBANY, NY 12210
COHOES CITY SD	COHOES HIGH SCHOOL- HOPE Program	1 TIGER WAY, COHOES, NY 12047

## BACK-OFFICE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

On November 16, 2018, the ITS team officially launched the back-office system to agency staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program, which has resulted in improved operational management of the program.

The new back-office system allows each agency staff member to access and edit mentor profiles and mentoring sites within their region(s). A simple global search allows agency staff to find a mentor profile from any mentoring site or with any status. Being able to quickly and easily locate information is game changing for staff who used to have to keep separate rosters and dig through emails when trying to find accurate contact information.

Managing mentor profile details and mentoring sites is now also much easier. Using the new program, agency staff may also update mentor preferences, assign mentors to a mentoring site, update mentors' status to pause their participation or remove them from the program, and add

new mentoring sites.

Agency staff can also add new mentoring sites on their own without ITS assistance, and without waiting for an unresponsive vendor to make the needed change.

## SIGNIFICANCE

### A SINGLE SYSTEM OF RECORD

Using the new system, all agency staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program have access to the same information and details. User privileges vary, but the information is reliable and kept safely within the system. The new system standardized how information is maintained and eliminates risk from departing employees separately keeping required information outside the system of record.

### CONSISTENT REPORTING

Necessary reports are now quick, easy, and accurate. Previously, individual agency staff members sent manual, inconsistently-maintained files to a single individual who would then compile a manual, non-repeatable report. Now, agency staff can simply filter and sort lists of mentoring sites or mentor details using the back-office system, and those lists can be exported effortlessly to Excel. CCF now has a complete up-to-date report without leveraging manual processes or valuable staff time.

### CREATING A MODEL FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS

Following the success of the online application and back-office system supporting the NYS Mentoring Program, other New York State groups have expressed interest in reusing elements of the technology with additional modifications to meet programmatic needs.

## IMPACT

### IMPROVING BUSINESS PROCESSES FOR STAFF

The screenshot displays the 'NYS Mentoring Program - Regional Directors' interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Mentors, Sites, End of Year, My Profile, Useful Links, and Log Off. Below this, the user profile for Holly Nelson is shown, indicating she is 'Active' and was created on 10/25/2018 at 11:26:59 AM. The profile is divided into two main sections: 'Personal Profile' and 'Mentoring Profile'. The 'Personal Profile' section includes fields for Status (Active), First Name (Holly), Last Name (Nelson), Email (email@its.ny.gov), Phone (555 555 5555), Home Address (123 Main Street), City (Loudonville), and State (New York). The 'Mentoring Profile' section includes Mentor Progress (Matched), Fingerprint Status (Fingerprints Approved), Reference Responded (checkbox), and Training Status (checkbox checked). Below these sections is a 'Site Assignment' section showing the 'Current Assigned Site' as VAN RENSSELAER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.

The ITS team spent hours working with agency staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program to ensure that the back-office would include all elements required to manage the program.

Through close collaboration with users, the ITS team developed the elements of a mentor's profile, including:

- automatic checkmarks to show whether or not a mentor's character references have responded;
- a drop-down menu to select the outcome of state-mandated fingerprinting for mentors;
- a checkmark that can be populated by agency staff after a mentor has been trained; and
- a system-generated mentor progress status, based on elements within the mentor's profile.

Once a mentor has completed the required steps to be assigned to a mentoring site, agency staff can successfully assign them to a site within the back-office system. Once assigned to a site, the agency staff can

download complete mentor rosters to contact all mentors in the case of a snow day or other information impacting the mentoring site to which they are assigned. Agency staff can attach a child's name to a specific mentor to track which mentor worked with which child during the academic year.

The NYS Mentoring Program back-office system has brought consistency in record keeping and program management to the agency staff overseeing hundreds of mentoring programs across New York State. Agency staff are only required to update and manage a single system of record, which is now done consistently across every region and mentoring site. If an agency staff member leaves his or her position, the information he or she collected regarding mentors and mentoring sites will remain intact and allow agency administrators to carry the program through to completion by simply transferring another staff member to cover the region the departing staff member covered. Agency administrative staff can also view and edit all mentor and mentoring site information and can filter mentor and mentoring site lists and then export those lists to Excel for reporting purposes.

### SERVING ADDITIONAL KIDS ACROSS NEW YORK

Previously, agency staff managing the NYS Mentoring Program recruited mentors at events and entered each mentor's name and contact details into a back-office system by hand. Agency staff relied on their own recruitment techniques and were required to keep track of paper sign-up lists, decipher handwriting accurately, and recall information received in one-off emails or notes written by administrative staff. Getting mentoring applicants into the system was time consuming and susceptible to human error.

The new system with the online application has greatly improved the process and eased the burden on agency staff to enter details and track information. Overall, the number of volunteers working with the program and students served by the NYS Mentoring Program has increased with the launch of the online application. The agency staff now have a uniform signup procedure and have access to the same back-office data while on the road traveling to mentoring sites. The system also allows program leadership to report on the number of active programs and mentors statewide. In addition, the data can be easily distilled down to the county, city, and/or specific school.

"It is so amazing that mentors actually find us now!" said Statewide Mentoring Program Director Brad DiPietro. "We can serve more children when we have more mentors and the online application has been a tremendous help getting more volunteers to actually apply and then get them into programs to help kids."