

Excerpts of the keynote speech by Wade Horn, assistant secretary, HHS Administration for Children and Families, at the 37th Annual Conference of APHSA's Information Systems Management on August 15-18, Portland, Oregon:

I am honored to serve in an administration that values the role technology plays in helping improve people's lives. As President Bush recently said, "The role of government is to create an environment in which the entrepreneur can flourish, in which minds can expand, in which technologies can reach new frontiers."

Why is information technology so important? As assistant secretary for children and families and as a child psychologist, the answer for me is simple: better outcomes for children and families. Information technology enables us to be successful at building effective IT programs, and it also will enable us to build effective delivery systems that enhance the lives of the children and families we serve.

When it comes to building effective IT systems, integration is the key.

Specifically, more effective integration of IT systems means:

Better service delivery – focusing more on clients and their needs, rather than on the needs of programs or bureaucracies.

More integrated case management – since so many of the clients we serve are eligible for multiple services, integrated IT systems will help us better manage the multiple services that our clients often need.

Better reporting capability – effective IT systems can help us capture and report better data on caseloads and programs.

Finally, **greater fiscal accountability** – effective IT systems help us manage the taxpayer's resources more effectively, making sure that the money Congress appropriates for programs actually goes to help the families it was intended to help.

The Bush administration has already undertaken many initiatives to support IT integration. One example of our efforts at IT integration is the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS).

PARIS is an information exchange system designed by ACF that uses the client's Social Security number to determine what benefits the client may be collecting from other states, as well as to ensure that the client correctly reported any benefits he or she is receiving from the Veterans Administration and/or any salary received as a federal or military employee. The resulting matches are used to help ensure that only those clients entitled to certain benefits are actually receiving those benefits.

Thus far, in just five states alone, the total annualized savings resulting from PARIS is \$85.7 million. In fact, PARIS has proven so successful to that the OMB included \$2 million in the president's FY 2005 budget to support federal and state PARIS activities.

PARIS not only can be used to fight erroneous payments, it also can be used to ensure that clients are receiving benefits to which they are entitled. For example, Washington state uses it to identify veterans who could be receiving benefits from the VA rather than from Medicaid. Many veterans, and especially those who never fought in a war, are unaware of their VA benefits, especially for prescription drugs. As a result, the veterans end up receiving Medicaid benefits.

Washington state uses PARIS to find instances where the VA could be providing medication as well as other benefits, such as home loans, counseling or money for training – some veterans were even found to be entitled to a pension but didn't know it.

In this way, PARIS is being used by Washington state to improve the circumstances of the veteran by suggesting available services.

A second example in which we are trying to encourage IT integration is in child welfare, where ACF is supporting the implementation of Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS).

A SACWIS is intended to support a social worker's case management and service delivery activities related to the administration of foster care and adoption assistance. In implementing a SACWIS, states were encouraged to add complementary functionality, such as those that support child protective and family preservation services, thereby providing a unified automated tool to support most, if not all, child welfare services.

With such an integrated system, social workers would be able to identify families and children in need of support services before the crisis rises to the level that a child needs to be removed from the home.

Moreover, states can choose to integrate information about services provided through other programs, such as TANF, juvenile justice, mental health, and child care under a comprehensive information system umbrella.

Indeed, a SACWIS is expected to have bi-directional interfaces with a state's IV-A (TANF) program, IV-D (child support) program, and Medicaid systems. To help states develop such an integrated system, in June of 2003, ACF sponsored a state consultation workshop to support state efforts to coordinate service delivery models across TANF and child welfare program areas.

Currently, 46 states and the District of Columbia are at some state of SACWIS planning, development or operations – and many are showing extraordinary creativity in how they are implementing their SACWIS system.

Wisconsin, for example, is using portable PCs to allow caseworkers to take important parts of a child's case record into the field. Kentucky is piloting an effort to provide social workers with digital cameras that incorporate GPS capabilities, allowing social workers to document the whereabouts of the children for whom they are responsible.

A final example of the ways we are working to integrate IT systems is from our Office of Child Support Enforcement (OSCE), headed by Dr. Sherri Heller.

Through the Federal Parent Locator Services (FPLS), states rely on OCSE to provide standardized and centralized communication and data exchanges with employers, multi-state financial institutions and other federal agencies. In addition, the FPLS data are used for cross-federal agency purposes to reduce erroneous payments and overall program costs.

These data sharing initiatives reduce redundant investments in federal IT resources, and provide a single source of data for multiple purposes. This also significantly reduces the burden on private and public data providers by eliminating the cost and resources involved in the requirement for multiple submissions.

- The FPLS, however, is not a single IT system, but rather an integration of a number of IT systems, including:
 - The National Directory of New Hires – which includes billions of new hire, quarterly wage and unemployment insurance records from state workforce agencies.
 - The Federal Case Registry – which includes millions of child support case and participant information from 54 states and territories.
 - The Multi-State Financial Institution Data Match – a centralized source of information on the financial accounts of over 4,500 multi-state financial institutions.
 - The Interstate Referral Guide and OCSEnet – both of which include information on the processing of interstate child support cases; and
 - The Federal Offset System – which interfaces with the Department of Treasury's Financial Management Service to offset tax refunds and other federal payments by the amount of a person's child support debt, as certified by the state.

More than 100 federal and state agencies – each with their own unique systems – provide data for the OCSE databases. These systems gather vast amounts of data, consolidate this information in a usable format, and then make these data available to ever growing numbers of government agencies. These databases, along with many other

IT advances, are one of the reasons that child support collections have risen 62.6 percent in the past eight years.

Despite this progress, there is still much more that needs to be accomplished in the area of IT integration. All too often, our information systems continue to work independently of one another and sometimes even at cross purposes.

I want to stress how important it is that we make integrating our information systems a priority. For without integration as a priority, we will fail at the goal of improving the lives of families and children.

Service/systems integration means bridging traditional program boundaries to provide more effective services for the purposes of improved outcomes. Currently, states face great difficulty in trying to work across the numerous existing federal programs, or “stovepipes,” as some say. These various stovepipes all have different rules, reporting requirements, eligibility standards, and definitions for the exact same terms.

Of course, no one meant it to be this way. No one sat down 40 years ago and said, “Gee, I think the best way for government to run is to have hundreds of different information systems that don’t talk to one another.” Rather, we are where we are because the federal government tends to be problem-focused. When we see a problem, we try to solve it. So when we see a need for information, the federal government mandates an information system to get it.

Even though human service systems have different systems, they share similar processes. For instance, all human service systems begin with an initial contact of some sort, preliminary information gathering and assessment, which may lead to an intake or enrollment. After that, more assessment can occur with case planning, service provision, case management and eventually, closure.

Given this, software systems can – and should – be built with sufficient flexibility to allow for their modification and reuse with other human service programs or systems. For example, states can build a SACWIS system with component-based modules that could be reused in their child care IT system. Developing modular systems that can be adapted for other uses makes a lot of sense. That’s why we at ACF will continue to promote software system development that leads to systems that are flexible, offer reuse potential and are consistent with international non-proprietary standards.

Systems that facilitate communication between case managers and service providers – ever mindful of protecting privacy – could lead to more coordinated case management; more informed planning; and more appropriate, more efficient, and less obtrusive service.

Ultimately, this will produce better outcomes for children and families. Indeed, I am aware that many states are already considering statewide “enterprise architecture.” Most state human service organizations have 40 to 50 different interfaces, and they are

struggling with developing common standards, not just a common hardware or software architecture. They are trying to do this to reduce the costs of managing diverse systems and facilitate the exchange of data between different programs.

Within my own agency, we have tried to do the same thing – to increase our programs’ ability to interface and communicate with one another. Now I know what you are thinking – all this IT integration sounds great and we all want to do that, but in fact the federal government is not the solution. It’s the problem. That’s because whenever a state tries to build an integrated system, the feds make the state cost-justify every cent charged to Food Stamps vs. Medicaid vs. TANF child support, etc., etc.

Why don’t the feds allocate money for IT systems that are integrated? Good question – and I really don’t have a good answer except to say this: help is on the way. Or at least we are trying to provide you, the states, with a vehicle to integrate our IT systems.

The vehicle is called the super waiver.

As important as our existing efforts have been, we are just as hamstrung as are the states by the laws that Congress writes. The Bush administration wants to provide states and local authorities with the flexibilities to coordinate the various programs – including IT systems – so that more families and children can be served and served more effectively.

Under President Bush’s proposal, states could request to coordinate two or more programs that they run that are federally run by HHS, Labor, Education, Agriculture, and Housing and Urban Development. Many current and former TANF recipients are also eligible for other programs, such as Food Stamps and housing assistance.

If these programs were better aligned, recipients could enjoy a vastly simpler system, especially when going to work. They would then face consistent rules and messages about expectations of work. Innovations could include coordination or program rules on the treatment of income and in order to remove disincentives for employment in current programs.

This also would fill existing gaps in existing programs and unify program links. States could integrate TANF, Child Care, Food Stamps, employment service, and vocational education programs into a comprehensive workforce assistance system. A combination of unified eligibility, applications, and program rules enabling any citizen needing help to find work or advancing in a career could make each program far more effective than if operated separately.

The potential for easing administrative burdens imposed by the federal government – particularly related to data reporting and cost allocation rules – also would be very worthwhile and could yield considerable efficiencies and taxpayer savings.

It's important to point out that the administration's super waiver proposal is significantly more inclusive than the ones being considered before the U.S. Congress. I cannot stress enough how vital the super waiver is. By providing the stimulus to explore innovation, the super waiver will allow states to think about results, as opposed to merely concentrating on compliance with federal rules. If we do so, the potential for program improvement is enormous.

Since services integration – and particularly information technology information – is so important, I have set up a small informal workgroup headed by a member of my senior staff, Associate Commissioner Shannon Christina, to work with staff from our major ACF programs and to look at ways ACF could promote greater systems and service integration.

The workgroup has identified a number of potential actions that would advance integration. These include two short-term ideas:

1. Distributing a “myth busters” document – to address false barriers and clarify how integration can be achieved under existing federal law, particularly issues of cost allocation and legal obstacles to data sharing.
2. Encouraging and providing templates for data exchange MOUs, stressing the importance of successful IT integration projects through either leadership awards or showcasing.

In all of these efforts, we need to be mindful of the issue of privacy. I am certain that many of you have struggled to address the same issue we face at the federal level:

1. How do you balance the need to share information with the duty to safeguard the privacy of that information?
2. How do you ensure that the downstream users of your data will apply the same level of protection to “your” data as you are required to apply?

Integrated IT systems must respect both individual rights and privacy. Therefore, it is critical that we do not overreact to data-sharing initiatives by adopting measures that will in fact reverse the progress we've made and prevent innovative solutions in the future.

There is no doubt that technology offers the promise of a better society and that it can help so many needy families and children. It's for this reason that I would like to challenge all of you here today, to live up to President Bush's call to create an environment in which minds can expand, in which technologies can reach new frontiers.” I invite your best ideas and pledge to work with you to obtain this end.

As Ghandhi said, “Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency. Man is a social thing.” The marriage of advanced information technology interfacing with HHS programs epitomizes this ideal.

With this in mind, we can make the future of America’s family and children brighter than ever.