

What child welfare caseworkers need to go mobile



Caseworker overload

Child welfare professionals make important decisions about children and their families every day. Even a decision that might seem simple at first glance, such as whether to visit the home of a particular child on a certain day, can have significant implications. What makes the job even more challenging is that a single child welfare agency might be serving tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of individuals. Each person in a family might be receiving multiple services with varying eligibility requirements, and any child or family might have more than one caseworker from more than one government organization. Caseworkers are typically juggling caseloads of 20 or 30 or more children and families at any given time. However, according to the Child Welfare League of America, the recommended caseload standard for child protective services is between 10 and 17 cases or families per worker, depending on whether the case is ongoing or an initial investigation.¹

Caseworkers spend only 18 percent of their time with clients

In addition to these challenges, the average caseworker only spends about 18 percent of their time in face-to-face contact with children and families (Figure 1). Over 33 percent of their time is spent preparing documentation. Seven percent of their time is spent preparing for, appearing, or waiting to appear in court, and over 12 percent of their time is spent traveling.²

Mobility and access to mobile devices are part of our personal lives, but have not become a regular part of the caseworker's professional career. In fact, acceptance of mobile technology by social workers is slow.³ According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), child welfare agencies are about 10 years behind the private sector when it comes to the use of technology. 85 percent of younger caseworkers (35 years old and younger) and 75 percent of older caseworkers (36 years old and older) reported to the NASW that they had never used a tablet PC.

Mobile access to case management systems, data and information, assessment and referral capabilities and other tools could go a long way toward reducing caseloads and workload, and improving worker efficiency.

Mobile technology in social programs

Social programs can lag behind in the use of technology in general and mobile technology in particular. But a review of the literature indicates that some organizations are starting to take a serious look at ways they can use mobile devices:

- In the UK, Nottinghamshire County Council has equipped social workers with iPads that enable them to do paperwork digitally.⁵
- Ventura County, California, has developed a solution that uses a variety of software to provide child welfare workers with mobile technology to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of carrying out their tasks.⁶

- Bradford Metropolitan District Council, outside of Yorkshire, England, is exploring the use of laptops and tablet PCs as a way to increase the amount of time its 75 social workers spend assisting vulnerable children and adults.⁷
- In 2014, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts requested the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) to assess the organizational circumstances of the Department of Children and Families related to the death of Jeremiah Oliver and the overall safety of children in the care of the Department. Among other things, the CWLA noted the current Massachusetts SACWIS (Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System) “does not accommodate real-time access from hand-held devices.”⁸ The Commonwealth subsequently issued an RFQ for the acquisition of mobile communication services and mobile devices.

What are caseworkers looking for?

Caseworkers need to be able to prepare for client visits and then deliver quality care in the convenience of the home or wherever the family may be. To be fully prepared for a visit, caseworkers must have the ability to search for a registered client in a case management system and view all the information they need when they need it without having to collate and bring along paper files.

At a minimum, caseworkers should be able to view the following client information, if known prior to a visit:

- A summary with name, age, address and contact details
- A photo of the client (if one exists)
- Client’s location on a map along with directions to that location
- Any special cautions for the client
- Relationships with names and contact details for persons related to the client
- Current outcome plans
- Completed outcome plans

During a visit, the caseworker should be able to view, capture and update information about the client, the outcome plan and the environment to determine an appropriate course of action. They need to do this while staying focused and without losing vital information. The caseworker needs to capture and manage:

- Special cautions
 - Contact logs, which are the official narratives for previous client visits
 - Content log attachments
 - Photographs
 - Notes
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“I see this mobile app as a replacement for the desktop. I’m not sure caseworkers would use anything else. They would almost do 90 percent of their work off the mobile application, which is mind boggling, really.”

— Caseworker supervisor in Canada

The IBM point of view

IBM® is committed to the success of health and social program organizations and recognizes that new systems of engagement, including mobility for child welfare caseworkers, are critical for improved efficiency of workers. It is essential to empower professionals with highly functional, user-focused applications to drive successful outcomes.

In recognition of this need, IBM has made significant investments to bring critical capabilities that help improve service delivery and outcomes for child welfare caseworkers. A strategic partnership between IBM and Apple has already produced a collection of mobile solutions for professionals in the field.

A mobile caseworker application will only be as effective as the system to which it connects. This includes systems that house case files, child care plans, assessments, applications, eligibility and entitlement rules, provider information, and processes that support service delivery. In 2012, IBM acquired a provider of health and social program management solutions, Cúram Software, and continues to develop and expand their solutions. Designed around the individual to offer full lifecycle support from needs to outcomes, Cúram solutions enable providers to collaborate more effectively to help individuals achieve better outcomes.

“Caseworkers could actually go live out in the world instead of sitting in the office all day, and essentially manage their case work as they go along with tablet in hand, which would be... it would actually be revolutionary for the child welfare business!”

— Caseworker supervisor in Canada

IBM introduced IBM Cúram Mobile as a front-end to IBM Cúram Social Program Management solutions. It is accessible through Apple iPads for caseworkers on the go and enables them to be more focused on their clients than on paperwork. IBM Cúram Mobile empowers caseworkers by transforming the visitation process. Cúram Mobile not only offers real-time access to case files and the ability for dynamic updates, it helps caseworkers to engage in the full range of case management activities: client intake, assessments, referrals, outcome measurement and multidisciplinary collaboration. As a result, caseworkers can be more accurate, efficient and responsive to client needs.

Mobile development tools included in IBM Cúram Social Program Management further enable organizations to innovate new systems of engagement with new application programming interfaces (APIs). These APIs enable developers to independently build mobile solutions in their preferred development environments.

IBM Watson Health

Worldwide, health and human services systems are facing economic unsustainability and other serious challenges that threaten their efficacy. Existing systems of care, wellness and support must come together with technology, data and expertise in order to help people live healthier and more productive lives. An opportunity exists to address this need.

By utilizing a vast amount of untapped data from a variety of sources—clinical, genomic, behavioral and social factors—it is now possible to unlock insights for a holistic view of an individual. With advanced analytics, this data can help drive more informed decisions. To achieve optimal outcomes at the point of impact, cognitive systems can help create new knowledge ecosystems that unlock the full potential of data.

IBM Watson™ Health works to enhance, scale and accelerate expertise across the domains of health and human services, and to facilitate collaboration throughout the community of care. IBM Watson Health helps bring together individuals and organizations to provide access to tools and information that help everyone lead healthier and more productive lives.

For more information

To learn more about IBM Cúram solutions and IBM Cúram Mobile please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit: ibm.com/software/city-operations/smarter-social-programs/index

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