

By Erin Dalton



Harnessing Technology to Improve Human Service Delivery and the Client Experience

In the past, when a human service provider agency offered services to a person involved with the Allegheny County (PA) Department of Human Services (DHS), that contracted provider had limited access to the client's information. The provider knew only what the client chose to share and had no easy way of identifying past or current service involvement. As a result, clients did not always receive the thoroughly integrated care for which DHS strives.

And so DHS, with support from provider agencies and input from information technology experts, legal counsel, and program staff, developed Client View, an application that builds on the strength of the county's data warehouse to give providers user-friendly access to vital client service data.

Previously, only staff within DHS were able to view these records, which they accessed through an application called DataVue. Using DataVue, approved DHS staff were able to see information compiled from all data sources about individual clients' demographics, past service involvement, and current services being received, allowing them a full-picture view of a client's situation. Such information was useful across DHS offices; for example, intake call center staff could see whether a caller had prior contact with DHS or its providers and child welfare staff could become familiar with a family prior to going on a home visit.

This integrated, client-level information was not available to the approximately 385 service providers with whom DHS contracts, however,



nor was it accessible to the clients themselves. And that's where Client View fills a gap.

Providing the Best Possible Services to Clients

Knowing a client's service history allows providers to offer the appropriate level and type of care, without duplicating or conflicting with services that the client might already be receiving from another agency. Adrienne Walnoha, executive director of Community Human Services, Inc. (CHS), a DHS-contracted agency that provides a range of

community programs in areas such as homeless assistance and mental health treatment, said "if we know what [challenges people] have, we have a better handle on what they need and how they could get it." She gives an example of a family coming to her organization for help while DHS is assisting the family with housing needs. With the information provided by Client View, staff at CHS would know about the services already being provided so that CHS, DHS, and other involved agencies could approach the family's challenges collaboratively. "[DHS] resources are maximized, ours

Illustration via Shutterstock

are maximized, and the family gets their needs met,” Walnoha said.

Sometimes the challenge is not one of service overlap, but of gathering information from clients. Before the rollout of Client View, providers relied on their clients to give them information about past and present DHS involvement, often receiving incomplete reports, sometimes as the result of clients not wishing to discuss sensitive past experiences.

“We re-traumatize people by making them tell and re-tell how they came to be in crisis,” said Walnoha. More information means better knowledge for providers and less stressful experiences for clients, resulting in a service plan that better meets the client’s needs.

A Legacy of Technological Innovation

Innovation through technology is not new to DHS. The formation and development over the past 16 years of a data warehouse, one of the first of its kind for such an organization, was the result of DHS’s firm belief in the importance of both integrating services for its clients and using data to drive decision-making. Currently, the data warehouse houses more than 1.2 billion records for more than one million distinct clients. Twenty-nine data sources (including child welfare, behavioral health, aging, public benefits, housing, criminal justice and school districts) feed into the data warehouse. By allowing for combined data analysis, predictive analytics, data sharing, and a range of data-driven planning and policy opportunities, the data warehouse has enabled DHS to accelerate internal and external integration and improve service delivery across program areas and systems.

Formed in 1997 by combining five previously disparate program offices into one department serving about 20 percent of Allegheny County’s residents, DHS had long recognized the need for service integration when it comes to serving clients with overlapping needs. A recent analysis showed that a large percentage of DHS clients are served by two or more program offices. Improving service coordination

through integrating and sharing data results in easier access to services, better-informed care plans, and lower costs as a result of reducing service duplication.

“With Client View, providers are our equal partners in using data for decision-making and quality improvement,” said Marc Cherna, DHS director. “This is a perfect example of the impact of DHS’s integration efforts.”

Client View Becomes a Reality

The Client View development process was jumpstarted by a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation. Through focus groups, site visits, and end-user prototyping sessions, feedback was sought from providers and DHS staff regarding how the portal would be used and what features would make it most functional. The design team, which included user-experience experts from Deloitte Consulting, tackled the technological challenges of making data available in a secure, intuitive, and user-friendly format. The team followed a mobile-first design philosophy as they confronted the obstacles of making the portal easily accessible for smartphone and tablet use in the field and compiling information from several independent sources into a single intuitive view. The portal was built on top of a responsive web framework using the following platforms: ASP.NET MVC5, HTML5, jQuery and bootstrap—or, as Ian Maverio, Deloitte Consulting manager, puts it for the less technology-savvy, “Client View uses some of the latest technologies in the market today, whether public or private sector.”

Through the portal, providers are able to search for clients using standard search criteria (name, approximate age) as well as more uncommon search criteria, such as address, which can be used to find clients associated with a specific location. Once granted access to a client’s records, the provider can access basic demographic information, service coordination and services-rendered activity, child welfare and juvenile probation out-of-home

placement information, service plans, and assessments.

As a result of the input from providers and other users, a number of highly valuable features were included in the portal’s design. First, users will be able to see a list of all of the service professionals involved with a client, allowing easier communication between programs. Second, by hovering over the “Program Areas” field on the search results screen, users can quickly see all program areas associated with a client (e.g., “Child Welfare and Mental Health”). Third, the client’s service involvement screen, which provides a holistic view of services provided to the client, can be easily filtered and searched so that the information shown on the screen is limited to only what is needed, whether it be type of service, specific date range, or provider. Finally, the portal allows documents to be shared; client-related documents such as service plans and assessments, which were not readily accessible to providers, can now be easily viewed and downloaded.

In DHS’s ongoing efforts to realize the vision of integrated service delivery, Client View was built in a way that allows seamless integration with the numerous systems used by various DHS program offices. Now, a user working on a client’s record in a program-specific system can simply click a link to display that client’s Client View information in a separate pop-up screen. Security and access validation occurs automatically behind the scenes, ultimately saving the user the time that would have been required to separately login to Client View and conduct a client search.

Upholding Clients’ Privacy Rights

Careful consideration was given to legal and privacy concerns. Any client may be marked as “confidential” by a portal administrator, with the option for privacy from DHS and or providers. Built into the functionality of the application is a streamlined administrator’s view, available only to select DHS staff, which allows oversight of the searches

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Name: Kerry Desjardins

Title: Policy Associate

Time at APHSA: I excitedly joined APHSA in mid-May.

Life Before APHSA: I am originally from a rural community on the outskirts of Northern Virginia. I earned a B.A. in Global Affairs with a concentration in International Development, as well as a B.A. in Latin American Studies, both from George Mason University (GMU). After working as a homelessness prevention case manager and a public benefits worker for a few years, I decided to return to GMU to pursue a master's degree in Social Work (MSW) with a Social Change concentration. During my MSW field practicums, I gained valuable experience in program development, public education, policy analysis, and advocacy. I graduated with my MSW in May 2015.

Priorities at APHSA: My work at APHSA will be focused mainly on the development and activities of the new Center for Workforce Engagement.

What I Can Do for Our Members: I bring my boots-on-the-ground human service experience to APHSA;

I have seen up close the ways in which human service systems ultimately affect many individuals, families, and communities. Just as important, having worked as a human service worker, I have an insider's understanding of the concerns of and challenges faced by human service administrators. My direct human service experience, combined with my social work background and my understanding of macro-level policy, give me a holistic view of human service systems and their interactions with other macro systems. My experience, knowledge, and perspective makes me an ideal intermediary between APHSA's members and policymakers and other stakeholders outside of the human service system.

Best Way to Reach Me:

You can reach me via e-mail at kdesjardins@aphsa.org.

When Not Working: Typically, when I'm not at work I'm relaxing at home with my family or catching up with friends. I work hard, so I need my downtime to recharge. I watch far too much TV, but generally on the weekends I enjoy doing low-key activities outdoors and occasionally hitting the powwow trail.

Motto to Live By:

Never talk small. 📌

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being performed in the portal and by whom. In addition, providers will only be able to access the information of clients whom they are currently serving; clients will be linked to providers either through billing records or at the time of the client's first service with that particular agency. Clients whose association with a provider is not confirmed through billing will have to be approved by an administrator in order for that provider to view the records.

With regard to HIPAA and the sharing of client information through Client View, DHS complies strictly with privacy regulations, and DHS's contracted agencies, as extensions of DHS, must maintain the same level of confidentiality as stipulated in their contracts. At the same time, DHS

believes fundamentally that sharing protected information—such as the data provided through the portal—is important, and at times critical, for care. The appropriate sharing of client information promotes good care, and is critical to the continuity and overall quality of care and services provided to DHS clients.

A Promising Future for Data Sharing

The portal was rolled out first to DHS staff and then to a pilot group of providers. In the coming months, Client View will be made available to all contracted providers.

Plans for expanding Client View don't stop there. Designs are underway to expand access to Client View to clients themselves; in the future, they

will have more influence over their own care by being able to access their own or their family's service plans and provide feedback on services through Client View. In this way, people involved with the human service system will gain increased empowerment through technology and information transparency, a goal for which DHS is constantly striving, for its clients, its providers, and for itself. 📌

Note: This article was prepared with assistance from Liz Zemruski and other DHS staff.

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