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Case Study, VA:

Fairfax County Virginia, Department of Family Services (DFS)

Timeframe: August 2011 - Current

Project Overview

Fairfax County Virginia is the most populous jurisdiction in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area and Commonwealth of Virginia. Fairfax, one of the most culturally diverse communities in the country, is home to several federal agencies and half of the metropolitan area's Fortune 500 companies.

The current economic conditions facing our country are driving an ever-increasing number of families to seek access to much needed safety-net services (SNAP, Medicaid, Cash, Childcare, Energy Assistance, Employment & Training Services, etc) administered at the county-level in Virginia. These same economic challenges are also impacting local government revenues and forcing leaders to reduce staffing and funding for administrative costs. The principal challenge facing Fairfax County, like many other states and local governments across the nation, is one of capacity – having to withstand an unprecedented increasing demand for services with less staff and diminishing resources. Human service providers have experienced first-hand how families are struggling to make ends meet while feeling the impact from larger caseloads, less staff, and added stress. Fairfax County realized that the current business model for determining eligibility and managing public assistance caseloads was not designed to handle the pressures presented by double digit increases in workload and staffing reductions.

Challenges

- Staffing levels that do not match the caseload increases.
- Quality and timeliness that is adversely impacted by the workload increases
- Well intended technology projects that have not always delivered as promised
- Multiple customer contacts, either in person or over the phone, before completing an eligibility determination
- Large backlogs and unfinished determinations (pending cases), which in many circumstances represent cases that are ready to be worked because the customer turned in the required information – further increasing the number of unnecessary customer contacts.
- Large variance in how staff perform the work.

As one of the country's leading high-tech centers, Fairfax County recently embarked in effort to modernize the delivery of human services and public assistance programs. Their vision includes providing customers

with multiple access points throughout the county and the use of technology (telephony, online, imaging) to facilitate access. However, at the core of their modernization effort is a commitment to reengineer their processes and business practices prior to investing millions of dollars in technology projects that frequently fail to address the lack of administrate capacity. Their goal is to only automate a set of efficient and effective practices.

Tasks Performed

In the fall of 2011, Fairfax County and the Change & Innovation Agency (CIA) began to analyze DFS' most important eligibility practices to determine different strategies for processing the work. This business process reengineering (BPR) effort consisting of eligibility line staff, team supervisors, office managers, and administrative staff is following a structured approach for identifying opportunities and devising a new set of business practices. Every step and interaction is focused on evaluating the processes and systems in which staff do the eligibility work and developing/implementing a plan to bring improvements and increased efficiency. The major tasks performed during the life cycle of the project include:

• Assessment of local office operations and staff at all service centers.

• Strategy sessions with leadership to develop a plan of action and approach.

• Redesign Teams to create work processes that are faster, more accurate, flexible, and focused on using precious eligibility worker time only on value-added tasks.

• Pilot Planning and Preparation to implement the new processes and business model developed by the Redesign Team. This phase includes implementing service strategies needed to ensure a successful rollout of the full model at all the local service centers (currently underway)

• Full Implementation Planning and Support for Rollout to all service centers (scheduled to begin the summer of 2012).

• Implementation review and assessment.

Outcomes

Fairfax County started transitioning in February 2012 into their new service delivery model by implementing service improvements and strategies designed to ease the organization into a full-blown conversion scheduled to begin in the summer of 2012. These preliminary service strategies and outcomes includes:

• Provide customers with same-day service and on-demand interviewing/processing at all service centers – Fairfax County has successfully eliminated the practice of scheduling appointments to conduct interviews for all new/initial applications and renewals from existing customers (walk-in and telephone). Customers are seen, or interviewed over the phone, as they come-in. In most cases the applications and renewals are processed same day and the customers leave with a completed eligibility determination.

• Eliminated backlog of pending actions (applications, renewals, changes, interim reports). All service centers are processing work within a couple of days of receipt of verification and documents.

• Developed tools to bring consistency to the eligibility determination work.

• Developed standard operating procedures.

• Began the transition to manage their organization by process teams.

Next Steps

Fairfax County will complete a full transition and implementation of new model in the fall of 2012. The full transition will allow DFS to achieve consistency, leverage resources, and share workload countywide. They will also have the ability to measure the department's effectiveness at eliminating unnecessary/repeat customer visits, reducing rework, and achieving the administrative capacity needed to withstand the caseload increases while significantly improving timelines and payment accuracy.